To Reach Without

by inwardtransience

Summary

He hadn't wanted to be Harry Potter anymore. Things would be simpler, he would be happier. He had been almost positive he would be happier if he were quite literally anybody else. At the moment, he couldn't think of a better demonstration of the warning "be careful what you wish for." ON INDEFINITE HIATUS.
July 1995 — The Girl in the Mirror

Chapter Summary

Harry learns what happens when you tempt Fate.

Chapter Notes

"Hello, there.
This is a repost of the fic by the same name at Fanfiction. It's not stolen, that's me. I'll try to post a chapter of both this and the other one I'm updating there once a day, until I catch up to where I've written up to. After that, this fic is updating about every other week. Which is roughly 350k words total I get to reformat, yay me. If you've read it there, there's no reason to read through the version here — other than slight formatting differences I'll probably add, they're identical.
By the way, this can be assumed to be more or less canon-compliant up until the graveyard scene — a number of worldbuilding details have been modified, but mostly canon plotwise. Starting from there, things go somewhat mad. A few lines of dialog from the Goblet of Fire have been copied in.
Let's do this nonsense"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One with the Power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches—
—born to Two who thrice defied Him, as the Seventh Month dies—
—the Dark Lord will Mark One as his Equal—
—One who will have Power the Dark Lord knows not—
—Both must fade at the Will of the Other—
—for Neither can endure while the Other lives—
—One will be born as the Seventh Month dies.

Harry didn't want to do it anymore. It was too much. It was far too much.

'Ah, what a story it is,' he said, he said, the most powerful, most evil of all wizards, back in physical form much, much earlier than Harry had thought he would have to deal with him. Not that it looked like he'd have to deal with him much longer. 'And it begins — and ends — with my young friend here.'

With all the force of all the concentration he had, he did his very, very best not to remember, not to think about that night in the graveyard. Not to remember his own paralysing dread he'd felt just being in his presence, how it'd torn open his head just to look at him, not to remember the agony in his ankle, the lesser injuries here and there, the cut on his arm where the traitor had taken his blood — his blood! — to resurrect him, not to think about it, no...
He crouched behind the tombstone, quivering from the aftereffects of quite possibly his most hated of the Unforgivables, trying to force off the panic, trying to get himself to think, dammit. There had to be something he could do, had to be a way to get out of this. But with his ankle like this, he would hardly be able to walk, really — it’d been an effort even to get himself behind this tombstone, temporarily shielded from Riddle’s casual attempts to curse him. He hadn’t a lot of time, he knew. He could hear Riddle and his disgusting little followers laughing to themselves, having themselves a hell of a good time. They’d stall as long as they could, playing with him, which gave him a little opportunity to maybe do something, but he didn’t know what. He could do an okay ioto, but he thought his ankle might be broken, and that one he didn’t—

Broken? Maybe he could just...

Shite, this was gonna hurt.

Gritting his teeth, he tapped his wand at his screaming ankle, muttering, 'Reparet.'

And his ankle wasn’t the only thing screaming.

Not for the first time, he wondered how many more times this sort of shite could happen. Just how much could a person take before they completely lost it? He figured he had to be halfway to mad at this point already. A person’s mind, a person’s soul, he thought, was much like a bone, like any other part of them. They could only withstand so much force before they crack, and only endure so many cracks before they shatter.

'Is this all you have, Harry Potter?' the hissing voice twisted, slithered into his ears. 'I'm not sure whether I should be amused or disappointed.' The comment drew laughs from the Death Eaters surrounding.

Harry grit his teeth, his hand clenched around his wand so tight he thought it might snap. He tried to force himself out of his instinctive curl that fucking curse had left him in, tried to push himself to his feet, but it hurt too damn much, his muscles weren’t obeying him, just twitching uselessly against themselves. He must have had other injuries, he knew he must have — Riddle's men had given him back worse than he’d given them, after all — but he couldn’t feel any of it above the world-whitening agony of the cruciātus. He managed to at least look up a little, glaring as steadily as he could at that snake-faced, vile little arsehole.

That look on his face. That look. Riddle was just so fucking pleased with himself, wasn’t he? For some reason, that amused, arrogant, self-congratulating look just made Harry furious. What did Riddle have to be so happy with himself about? Sure, he had a physical body again, whatever. But was beating the crap out of him like this really something to be so proud of? He was the self-proclaimed most powerful wizard in the world, surrounded by his closest followers, all full-grown men coming in various shades of deadly. Harry was an untrained, fourteen-year-old child. What was there to be so proud about?

The fury gave him strength, hardly any at all, but enough to force himself out of his fetal ball, push himself to his knees. He gave Riddle the most vicious, defiant look he could. He didn’t care how outmatched he was, he didn’t care that he’d be dying any second now. He would not give this piece of trash the satisfaction of seeing him surrender. He would never give up. He’d push himself to the very end out of spite alone, if need be.

Riddle, an almost bored look on his face, raised his wand. Harry mirrored the move, his hand so unsteady he doubted he’d be able to actually cast anything.
But it was at that very moment, the one he was sure was his last, from beyond the circle of Death Eaters, that the curses started to fall.

In an instant, everything around him was chaos. Riddle and his Death Eaters, temporarily trapped by their own defensive enchantments, were dancing around, interspersed with their attackers, some wearing faces he recognised, others the red and black figures of uniformed Aurors. The duels were too bright, too quick for him to follow, his eyes dazed with exhaustion and pain.

But he saw a silver hand, attached to the arm of a traitor, doing his best to creep up behind one of the multiple people crossing wands with Riddle. Harry pointed his wand at the disgusting excuse for a human being, keeping it as steady as possible. ‘Stupeat.’ Miraculously, his spell hit, and the traitor collapsed to the ground.

He didn’t know how many more times he could do this. And it would keep coming, he knew it would. He was Harry Potter, after all, the Boy-Who-Lived. It would keep coming, and it would never stop. Not just Riddle and his damn followers either. He had people coming from the other side now, too. He could see that. The way Fudge had looked at him and Dumbledore, surrounded by his Aurors telling him the incontrovertible truth. Harry suggesting he get a trial for Sirius, now that Pettigrew had been captured, obviously alive — carefully keeping himself from saying any variations on I told you so. Dumbledore had helped with that one. Fudge had been involved in the original capture of Sirius, yes, but he hadn’t been the man in charge at the time. It could be a political coup if he played his cards right, not only laying all wrongdoing at the feet of his predecessor, but emboldening his own supporters at the same time, rallying the nation around him to fight the resurgent Death Eater threat.

Fudge had drawn himself up with all the reluctant gravity of a leader in wartime, but Harry could see it in his eyes. So very plainly. Fudge was terrified. And why shouldn't he be? With Voldemort returned, the Death Eaters again on the rise, everyone had every reason to be terrified. This was very much not something Fudge was able to handle on his own. He wasn't that kind of man. He would be leaning, very heavily, on Dumbledore. And, of course, Harry himself. In what capacity he wasn't sure — likely as some kind of symbol to secure his political position and keep up morale, something like that. But he would definitely be used somehow. Dumbledore, he was sure, had plans for him too.

Because people just couldn't leave him alone.

_Dumbledore spoke with finality, the end of their dreadful conversation, his face and voice somehow grave, somehow gentle. 'You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight, Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers.' Was that supposed to make Harry, what, proud or something? Was he supposed to be pleased by that? 'You have shouldered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it — and you have now given us all that we have a right to expect.'_

By his reckoning, he'd given them more than they had any right to expect. Several times more. Just living with the Dursleys as long as he had was more torture than he felt most people should ask. But twice now, that he knew about, Dumbledore had maneuvered him into a potentially deadly situation for one reason or another. The first was in first year — he hadn't realised it at the time, but Hermione had since talked him through the logic suggesting he was supposed to have gone down there after Quirrel, that was exactly what Dumbledore had intended, for some inscrutable purpose only he could understand. And the second, of course, being the Tournament this year. He wasn't an idiot, he was sure there should have been a way to get him out of it, Dumbledore wasn't that stupid. Even weird magical contracts like that one required consent. But he'd kept him in, most likely in an attempt to catch whoever had entered his name in the first place, foil their plan — and hadn't that backfired on
Dumbledore spectacularly! This time Harry had been tortured in a way much more immediate than usual, and he had been seconds away from dying when the cavalry had arrived. And he still didn't know how they had managed to find him, and he wasn't really sure he wanted to.

Everyone kept doing this shite to him. He was fourteen years old.

He couldn't imagine how they could ask for any more.

At least he and Sirius were in agreement on that point.

Not that it mattered at the moment. He'd been keeping an eye on the Prophet, so he'd known immediately that Fudge had very well made good on his word to get Sirius a trial, a kangaroo court if he'd ever seen one, and Pettigrew was now in Azkaban, his godfather now a free man — though he'd apparently had to pay a fine for failure to comply with a writ of detainment, he thought the exact term was, the much more minor crime they'd negotiated down his escape from Azkaban to. But still, Harry was stuck at the Dursleys'. In the short term, because Sirius was being seen by a slew of Healers, for problems both physical and emotional. Apparently, though Sirius hadn't mentioned this and Harry hadn't noticed, his godfather had developed a bit of an alcohol problem over the last year, in reaction and addition to the problems he still had lingering from his time in Azkaban. Not really surprising, but Harry couldn't help feeling a little paranoid all of a sudden. And, well, in the long term...

There were still those blood wards, the protection his mother had given him, paid for with her very life. If Harry left, he would be down one layer of defense. It was safer, they all said, that Harry stay. In his letter, Sirius had obviously been beside himself with helpless fury at the idea, but even he had to admit they had a point.

Safety, of course, was relative.

If anything, the Dursleys were getting worse. Near as Harry could tell, even Vernon had been somewhat leery of striking a child. As Harry was getting older, less a boy and more a teenager, that reticence seemed to be fading. Not that Vernon had never hit him before, of course. The level of anger he needed to be at to resort to it was simply lesser than it once had been. It'd started getting bad enough a couple years ago that he'd spent as much time away from the house as he could — which had perhaps only made him less accustomed to it, just in time for that incident with Marge nearly two years ago now. Last summer and so far this one he'd managed to keep in the reactionary magic, no matter what Vernon did. Vernon hadn't seriously hurt him so far, but it still wasn't pleasant. It was better to be out, walking around.

Trying to ignore the person who always seemed to be following him. Never the same person twice, and they were discreet about it, but Harry had spent enough time hiding from Dudley and his gang around here that he knew the patterns intimately. An Auror, he thought. Keeping an eye on him, just in case some Death Eater decided to try something. He didn't actually mind. Which honestly surprised him — he'd have expected himself to be at least a bit annoyed — but he couldn't really summon the will to care. After the last two years, he hadn't had the most confidence in the Ministry. Largely due to their complete incompetence in catching Sirius — though how exactly he felt about that had changed rather significantly somewhere in the middle. Maybe, after their successful intervention in the graveyard, he'd developed perhaps a little appreciation for the Aurors, at the very least. Not a lot, sure, but a little. Maybe, he thought, he'd have a peaceful summer this time.

Fat chance.

He was alone in the house now, though. Lying in his bed, ignoring the sunlight streaming in, ignoring Hedwig staring at him — despite the fact that owls couldn't really make facial expressions
like humans could, she looked oddly concerned to him. Ignoring everything floating around in his own head best he could. He was, as he remembered Vernon ordering him a few years ago, trying to pretend he didn't exist.

The Dursleys had gone on vacation somewhere. He honestly didn't even know where, he didn't care. Somewhat to his surprise, they'd decided to leave him alone, in their house without them present, for right around a week. He didn't plan on doing anything to the place, but he was a little surprised they trusted that he wouldn't. Well, perhaps trust wasn't the most accurate word — he'd been threatened with severe retribution should he get up to any "funny business" resulting in damage to the house or their belongings. It'd gone on so long, Harry had gotten annoyed, and finally snapped something back. He didn't even remember what. He thought maybe something about how he wouldn't have anywhere to sleep if he burned the house down, so it wouldn't exactly be to his benefit. Something like that. Vernon hadn't been happy.

His face still hurt.

But at least they were gone, and he was left alone. Something he really wished people would do more often.

He just—

This was a hard thought to articulate, he wasn't sure what he was trying to think. Wasn't sure what words were most appropriate for the hard, tight, cold feeling in his chest, for how tired he was, so tired he doubted he'd be able to get out of bed.

He...

He just didn't want to do this anymore. He didn't know exactly what he meant. He knew that he couldn't not do this anymore. He didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. Riddle would chase him down wherever he went, he knew that. He wasn't entirely sure why, exactly what motivated him, but he knew Riddle would never give up until he was dead. And the further he fled, the longer he hid, the more people Riddle would kill. People Harry cared about. They weren't exactly close, but he knew Cedric would have died if dodging a curse from Pettigrew hadn't sent him accidentally stumbling onto the Triwizard Cup, porting him away to safety — if Cedric had died, Harry knew he'd just feel worse. But Riddle would kill people to get to him, he knew that. Just because of who he was.

At some level, he didn't really care. That was horrible, he knew that, but he couldn't help it. A part of him, a part steadily growing every day, would be perfectly willing to flee. No matter who ended up getting hurt, dying, because of it. Enough of him — the Hufflepuff part, he guessed — wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did, he knew. Even as the thought tempted him, he felt absolutely awful for thinking it.

This whole situation was just impossible. He was so completely helpless, so completely hopeless, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Suddenly, he put words to that thought, translating the unspoken emotion to language.

He didn't want to be Harry Potter anymore. He didn't want anything to do with it all.

He didn't want to be himself. Anyone else, really, would be better.

That was the whole crux of the matter, after all. Harry Potter's parents, who had died in the fight against Voldemort. Harry Potter who had miraculously survived when he shouldn't have. Harry
Potter who had become famous, quite nearly deified in absentia, turned legend for his assumed role in the downfall of Voldemort. Harry Potter who, he knew, people would turn to in the renewed fight.

He didn't want any of it. He didn't. He didn't want to be Harry Potter anymore.

What good was there in Harry Potter, anyway? He didn't mean himself, necessarily — or not strictly himself. He wasn't sure, this whole thought process was confusing. What benefit was there in being Harry Potter, specifically Harry Potter? For the purpose of having something to think about as long as he was lying here, if he were magically not Harry Potter tomorrow, what would he have lost?

The right to the inheritance his parents had left him, he guessed. But he honestly didn't care about that so much. It was nice to be able to buy things he needed for himself, he guessed, not having to rely on the charity of others, and he absolutely loved being able to buy things for other people just because he wanted to, and he could. But it wasn't that critically important. He could live without it.

Anything else? Well, Sirius wouldn't be his godfather in the strictest sense anymore, he guessed. But he sincerely doubted Sirius would just up and abandon him. They certainly weren't close by any means — they'd hardly known each other for a year, hadn't really spent any time together — but they'd at least established enough of a relationship Sirius wouldn't leave. Same went for his other friends. Hell, his relationship with his friends, or at least most of them, was less about who he was than what he was, if that made sense. If anything, not being Harry Potter anymore would make those relationships easier, simpler, smoother.

If he weren't Harry Potter, he would be free.

He didn't want to be Harry Potter anymore

Things would be simpler, he would be happier—

If anything, thinking about this seemed to be making him feel worse. The tightness got tighter, the hardness got harder. He felt the edge of tears scratching at his eyes and his throat, but he forced them down without even thinking. Crying was dangerous.

An elusive song of magic rose in the air, but he was not sensitive enough to such things, too distracted besides, to really notice.

He was almost positive he would be happier if he were quite literally anyone else.

He didn't want to be himself anymore. Very, very much.

Mind consumed with those very thoughts, power swirling in an unnoticed dance within and around him, Harry Potter slowly drifted off to sleep.

Hedwig, ever-vigilant and ever-loyal — but ultimately incapable of sensing the subtle crescendo around her — waited until she was sure her master was out before winging off to hunt.

The Auror outside, carefully concealed in the hedges, equally vigilant but a bit bored nonetheless, made a mental note of the same, before settling in to keep a metaphorical eye on her slew of monitoring charms overnight — monitoring charms which did not extend into the house proper, ensorcelled as it was with arcane wards laid by a woman long dead.

As night descended, there was calm on Privet Drive.

Harry wouldn't wake for over forty-eight hours.
The first thing Harry noticed was that it was still dark out. Normally, he'd assume that must have meant he hadn't slept for very long. But he didn't think that impression was accurate. He had a vague feeling he'd been asleep for a while, a series of all-but-forgotten dreams that, while all he could recall were blurry shapes and feelings mostly meaningless, still gave a sense of time having passed. It was a bit odd.

The second thing he noticed was that he really, really needed to get to the toilet. Immediately.

Feeling oddly numb and tingly, he nonetheless forced himself up to his feet, stumbled drunkenly into the hall, over to the bathroom. He felt much more uncoordinated than he should, clumsy. He was reminded of those practice sessions with Hermione, casting far too many spells in a row, for hours and hours, left both physically and magically drained. Those had left him feeling much like this — like his body weren't quite responding to him the way he wanted it to, like his nerves were shot, so badly he could barely walk straight, couldn't even feel his own skin. It seemed to be getting a little better with each step he took, the reverberations from his feet hitting the floor sending dull tingles up his legs and all the way to his head, but the process was very slow. If this were magical exhaustion, he knew, it would take hours, days even, to get back to normal.

But it couldn't be peripheral effects of magical exhaustion — he hadn't been doing any magic. Maybe his whole body had managed to fall asleep. The physical symptoms were pretty similar, sometimes.

He stepped into the bathroom, flicked on the light. He paused for a moment, temporarily blinded by the sudden brightness, before moving on. Glanced at the mirror quick on his way to—

He froze, his need to relieve himself instantly forgotten.

Something was very, very wrong here.

He took a slow breath, trying not to panic.

How the girl in the mirror took the breath with him was really, really not helping.

He took a step closer to the mirror, staring as hard as he could, forcing his still bleary eyes to focus. He'd managed to fall asleep with his glasses still on, so he didn't have to worry about that — though they were a little awkwardly bent from their ordeal, he'd have to fix that later. But what he saw in that reflective surface made absolutely zero sense. The walls of the bathroom, parts of the ceiling and floor, the shower over there, sections of the counter and a curve of the sink, all that was fine. But Harry didn't see himself in the mirror.

Instead there was a girl, maybe thirteen or fourteen, staring back at him.

He took a slow breath, trying not to panic.

How the girl in the mirror took the breath with him was really, really not helping.

He took a step closer to the mirror, staring at the girl on the other side of the glass — noting, with rising dread, that the girl moved with him. Every detail he gathered just made it worse. She was wearing the clothes he'd gone to sleep in, the same he was now wearing — just flannel pants and a tee shirt he'd bought one day, silver exchanged to pounds for the occasion. Complete with the same glasses. She was thin, perhaps unhealthily thin, which was probably why those clothes actually more or less fit her. Wavy black hair stretching down her back nearly to her elbows — or so he assumed from the strands he could see poking out from behind. There was something oddly familiar about her face, but he couldn't quite place it. He had the very distinct impression that—

Ah, he had it now. She looked a bit like someone he'd seen one of those moving magical photographs of before — Bellatrix Lestrange. Not exactly like her, which is why it'd taken him a moment to put it together. Of course, this girl was younger — in the photo he'd seen, Lestrange had
been maybe eighteen, but still, younger — but that wasn't all of it. They looked similar, but not identical. If he had to put words to it, he'd say she looked like maybe the daughter of Lestrange and Neville, of all people.

And if that wasn't one of the more disturbing thoughts he'd ever had the displeasure of thinking.

Except the eyes, of course. He recognised those instantly. She had—

It took all he had to keep standing, to stay in the moment, to not completely lose his head.

She had his mother's eyes.

*His* eyes.

Not just his eyes, either. She had his *bruise*. He'd gone to bed too soon after to see it, but that parting hit to the face Vernon had given him would surely have left a bruise. On his cheek, he would expect, just under his left eye. And there was a partially-faded bruise there, deep purple with sickly yellow around the edges, on the girl's right cheek, just under her very familiar eye.

This was—

He swallowed. It wasn't easy, his pounding heart quite nearly blocking his throat.

This was really starting to freak him out.

He shook his head a little, sending the girl's hair shuddering with the motion. He felt the barest sense of tickling against his upper arms — he was still rather numb, numb enough he barely felt it. He was more concerned with the fact that he'd felt it at all. *His* hair wasn't nearly that long.

This wasn't good.

He started lifting his left hand — the girl simultaneously followed with her right. He brought his fingers to his bruise, gently touching it, even as the girl did. He put a little pressure on it, winced as pain flared even through the numbness. The girl winced in unison.

This wasn't good at all.

He leaned a little closer to the mirror, lifted his left hand a little higher, pushing his bangs off his forehead — which felt completely wrong, his hair drooping in a way it shouldn't, as though it were heavier, longer. The girl obligingly did the same. Revealing a horridly familiar scar.

Dizziness hit him in a sudden wave, his vision turning grey, and Harry had to put both hands against the counter, one on either side of the sink, just to steady himself, stop himself from collapsing to the floor. He tried to keep his breaths slow and even, but it was harder than it'd been a moment ago, the all-too-familiar panic settling over him like a black, suffocating wave. Settling a bit faster than usual, actually. Shapes were already blurring into indistinction, the grey turning darker and darker, the dizziness becoming the sort of lightheadedness that shortly precedes unconsciousness. He settled down to the floor on shaky limbs, back against the wall, elbows on his knees, head in his hands.

Focused on nothing but breathing.

After a few minutes, he wasn't sure how long exactly, the colours were back, the dizziness was gone, and he was mostly back to normal. He knew what that had been, though only because Hermione had told him back in second year — panic attack. Or at least something rather like one. Hermione had doubted her own diagnosis a bit when Harry had failed to describe the usual emotional symptoms
along with the physical — he usually felt hardly anything at all during them, really — but she'd declared after a moment she was probably right anyway. But it'd been a while since he'd had one. Since second year, actually. The worst of his accidental magic incidents had been during such episodes, but they'd dropped precipitously in frequency with, well, not having to deal with the Dursleys nearly so much. Second year had just been...

Second year.

He guessed it made sense for them to come back now. This was only quite possibly the strangest thing that had ever happened to him in his life. And, for him, that was saying something.

Okay. Well. He was so far outside of his realm of experience, dealing with something like this. He hadn't even known this was possible, much less what to do about it. Well, okay, he supposed polyjuice could do this, but he'd just woken up, and hadn't drank anything...as far as he knew. Someone would have had to sneak past the Auror outside to force a potion down his—

The Auror! There was an Auror keeping an eye on him! Right, he'd go to the back door, call out to the Auror he needed help. They'd probably know what to do. Or at least be able to contact someone who would know what to do. What with being underage and all, even if he did know what to do, he'd need someone else to actually do the doing. Okay, that was a weird thing he just thought there, but he'd just come out of a panic attack, and he was still trying not to freak out too much, so maybe he was getting a little giddy. He should do that.

Except, he still hadn't done what he'd come here to do, and he really did need to—

He broke off the thought, lightly bopping his head against the wall behind him a couple times.

Yeah, he would really rather not.

He gradually made his way downstairs — still a little numb and disoriented, but slowly getting better. Before too long, he was standing at the back door, slid the big glass panel open, looking out into the back yard. He didn't see signs of anyone out there, the place empty and calm in the — he glanced at the microwave clock — early morning darkness. But he knew he wasn't alone. 'I know you're out there,' he called into the darkness. And then winced at the experience of the unfamiliar voice coming out of his own throat. Really reminding him of that ill-advised adventure with polyjuice. 'I could use some Aurorly assistance in here.'

He guessed it was the word *Auror* that had done it — he was the only one in the area who should know that word. In a flash, someone was standing in the yard, a few meters away, wearing the by now familiar black and red uniform of an Auror. She hadn't apparated in, Harry knew that instantly. Partially because it'd been almost completely silent, but partially because she'd moved into place in an odd blurring motion — like she'd come in from his left, but so fast his eyes couldn't follow the motion.

He hadn't met very many Aurors before, so it wasn't surprising he didn't recognise her. She was a bit taller than him and, as odd as a thought as it might seem, everything about her seemed to scream *adorable*. The softly round face, the slightly pouting lips, the tiny little nose, the eyes seeming just a little brighter and larger than he thought they should be, the short, messy hair an absolutely *flamboyant* pink.

Everything except the chilling glare and the fact that her wand was pointed unerringly at Harry's heart, that is. 'Who the hell are you?' she said, her voice frightfully cold and dangerously flat.

Right. Auror. Just because she was *cute* didn't mean she wasn't *deadly*. 
And this was just incredibly awkward. He took a breath in through his teeth, considering how to answer that question. 'Well, er, I don't...'

But the Auror had already dropped her wand arm, her eyes narrowing into a frown. 'Okay, Harry, how did that happen?'

For a couple seconds, all Harry could do was blink at her, his mouth working uselessly. Finally, he managed to hiss out, 'How did you know?'

The woman sighed, shaking her head to herself in what seemed oddly like patient exasperation. 'Please. It'd take more than looking different for me to not recognise you.' The Auror started walking toward the door, eyes flicking around the yard, so Harry stepped out of the way.

'But you've never even met me,' he said as she walked in, the door sliding closed behind her, seemingly by itself.

She shrugged. 'I pulled one of the Potter-watching shifts. I've watched you long enough to pick up what you move like.' He was really too distracted to be disturbed by the thought. 'That's a matter of habit and personality, not so easily altered as appearance.' As though to demonstrate her point, even as she spoke, the woman smoothly changed into a completely different person. Face turned a bit sharper, dark eyes shifted to a light blue, hair growing longer and switching colour to a deep, shining purple-blue. If he hadn't watched it happen, he'd never guess she was the same woman.

He just stared. He'd had no idea people could do that.

'So,' she said, smirking to herself a little, 'how did this happen?'

'I have no idea.'

She raised an eyebrow at that, stood silent for maybe two seconds. 'Alright, then. In here.' Dragging him by the wrist, the woman moved the both of them into the living room, plopped Harry down on the couch — he didn't bother wondering how she knew where it was. She didn't sit, just stood in front of Harry. After a second gathering herself, she again flicked her wand up to point at him.

Instantly, he felt a wave of magic crash over him. He recognised the feeling of it — a finiat, but a powerful one, more powerful than he could ever cast. It felt a bit like standing against a strong gust of wind, but striking him at all sides.

He knew immediately it hadn't worked. Partially from the slightly surprised expression on the Auror's face, and partially from... Well, feeling was gradually coming back, so he had started to notice that things didn't feel like they should around, erm, certain places. Which was something he was quite desperately trying to not pay attention to.

The Auror frowned at him for a moment, then paused, eyes closed. She took a long breath, slowly drawing in for what must have been over five seconds. Then she hit him with the same spell again. This one was even more powerful, probably several times more powerful, such an oncoming rush of magic he grit his teeth against the sudden headache, waiting for the spell to stop.

It finally did, the Auror now giving him an even deeper frown. She hummed to herself, then started casting more spells — by the way they pricked and tickled at him, he figured they were detection and diagnostic spells, one after another. With each one, the Auror's frown just grew deeper and harsher, until she looked rather worried herself.

Which really, really wasn't making him feel better.
The last spell, he wasn't even entirely sure what was going on. The way the Auror cast it was...strange. She flicked her wand in a quick series of delicate motions, little strands of glowing purple *something* trailing behind the tip, floating in the air. After a few more flicks, Harry started to notice they were runes — though he didn't know enough to decipher the spell just looking at it, especially backwards. When she was finished drawing the runes, she just sort of twitched her wand at Harry, and the runes flashed out of existence, the sensation of another detection spell crawling over him, not feeling particularly different from any of the others, for what little he could tell.

But when it was done, the Auror didn't look any more pleased. 'Well, I got nothing. Gonna call in help.'

Great. More people. That's just what he wanted right now. 'Ministry or Order?' Or, wait, was the Ministry supposed to know about the Order? Damn. This was what happened when Dumbledore didn't actually explain things.

The woman snorted out a laugh. 'Right, like I'm telling the Ministry about this one.'

Oh. Well. Good. The fewer people who knew, the better. He didn't trust the Ministry to not let this...whatever this was get out for two seconds. He could just imagine the campaign of scathing mockery Malfoy would assault him with should he ever learn about this. Not that he knew all that much about the Order — just that Dumbledore was in charge of it, his parents had been in it once upon a time, and Sirius was re-joining as soon as the Healers would leave him out of their sight for five minutes. That was pretty much it.

He watched as the woman silently cast a *patrōnus*. He barely caught a glimpse of the thing before, with two quick words from her — 'Fledgling. Yellow.' — the silvery rabbit-thing shot up through the ceiling and vanished. 'He'll be here in a minute,' she said, crossing her arms.

He didn't bother asking who would be here in a minute. He had a more pressing matter to attend to. 'Erm, sorry, but is there a spell you could do so I don't have to, erm...' The woman gave him a look, an eyebrow slightly raised. 'Don't have to what?'

God, this was awkward. Looking resolutely at the wall, he muttered, 'Use the toilet.' Even in his peripheral vision, he saw the woman's lips tighten, as though she were trying *very* hard not to laugh at him. Another gesture of her wand, and relief came to Harry so instantly and so powerfully it took all he had not to moan. He was pretty sure the Auror wouldn't be able to hold her amusement in if he had. 'Thanks.'

She shook her head to herself, a trace of a smile on her face. 'Still baffles me the things that bother other people.'

Harry had to wonder about that, and *almost* asked if she could make herself look like men as well as women — or...was she actually a man making himself look like a woman right now? — but decided at the last second he didn't really want to know. That would just open doors to all kinds of new thoughts he didn't want to dirty his brain with at the moment. Instead, he just asked, 'What's your name, anyway?'

'Still baffles me the things that bother other people.'

Harry had to wonder about that, and *almost* asked if she could make herself look like men as well as women — or...was she actually a man making himself look like a woman right now? — but decided at the last second he didn't really want to know. That would just open doors to all kinds of new thoughts he didn't want to dirty his brain with at the moment. Instead, he just asked, 'What's your name, anyway?'

'You can call me Tonks.' Harry had to wonder about that wording — did that mean that *wasn't* her name? But he didn't have long to wonder, because she said something even more distracting immediately afterward. 'I doubt you'd know, but we happen to be cousins.'

Harry just blinked at her. It took him maybe ten seconds just to find his voice again. 'Cousins.'
'Well, second cousins.'

'I have cousins?'

Tonks gave him something of a pained look at that, let out a little sigh. 'Don't bother asking me why we haven't been introduced — I have no idea either. Dumbledore would be the one to ask about that.'

He had no idea what to think about that. Absolutely no idea at all. He'd been told, repeatedly, that everyone on his father's side of the family was dead — and he assumed Tonks had to be related to him through his father, what with being a witch and all. He'd never really been given much reason to doubt that.

He should have learned not to take what people tell him for granted by now.

Only another fifteen seconds or so of awkward silence and he heard the front door opening. A short moment later, walking into the living room was...Professor Moody. What? Shouldn't he still be in bed or something? He still looked horrible — well, more horrible than usual, he meant, frail and weak from his time in captivity on top of the varied panoply of scars. He was even walking with a cane, which Harry hadn't seen him do before.

Although, now that Harry thought about it, he couldn't remember if he'd ever seen the real Moody walk before, so maybe that didn't actually mean anything.

Whatever Moody had been about to say, he'd been maybe two syllables into it when he suddenly snapped into motion, his wand instantly in his hand and pointed straight at Harry. But even as he moved, Tonks did too, stepping half in front of him, her hand out. 'Slow down, there, old man. It's Harry.'

Moody's real eye flicked to Tonks, but Harry noticed the always distressingly fake-looking blue one was moving around in a dizzying dance, seemingly trying to take in all directions at once — though still coming back to fix on him every second or so. 'Are you sure about that?'

'Yes,' Tonks said, the word coming out in a distinctly aggravated-sounding sigh.

Both eyes now turning to him, Moody asked, 'What's the first thing Alastor Moody ever said to Harry Potter?'

Harry took a moment, trying to think back to the beginning of the previous year at Hogwarts, before pausing with a slight frown. That hadn't been Moody — he'd just looked like him. He was pretty sure this was the first time he'd actually met the real person. 'Erm, "What's the first thing Alastor Moody ever said to Harry Potter?"'

Moody's wand arm dropped with a nod — though he didn't pocket it, Harry noticed. 'What happened to him?'

'Dunno,' Tonks said with a slight shake of her head. 'He's not a metamorphmagus, he hasn't taken polyjuice — or any other potion, for that matter — it's not any sort of glamour or illusion, and it's not a transfiguration. There isn't any magic on him at all, actually, or at least none that I could detect.'

Moody frowned at that. 'None at all?'

'Not that I—' Tonks broke off, her head snapping back over to Harry. 'The blood wards.'

'What?' Harry's first thought in reaction to the possibility of this supposedly all-important suite of
protective enchantments over him being gone, he had to admit to himself, was probably a bit silly. He knew this would mean he was in more danger. But mostly, all he could think was that he'd gone back to Privet Drive for nothing.

But Moody didn't seem concerned — or even surprised. 'Albus been wondering about that, ever since the boy first came to Hogwarts. Apparently said the wards weren't nearly as powerful as he'd expect them to be. Came up with all kinds of nonsense explanations, while ignoring the most obvious one.' He turned to Harry again. 'Do you like living here, boy?'

Harry blinked at him. 'What?'

'Do you like it here? Do you love these muggles? Do you get homesick when you're at school, counting the days until you can go home?'

'Erm.' Harry hesitated for a moment. The words that had immediately occurred to him weren't exactly a nice thing to say, but they were certainly true. Oh, well. Moody hardly seemed the type to judge him for it anyway. 'Not at all. If someone told me I never had to come back, it would be the best news I'd gotten in my entire life.'

Tonks looked a little sick at that, but Moody just nodded. 'The specific class of blood wards young Lily put on the boy are a form of emotionally-charged runic magic fueled by, as Albus is so sickeningly fond of explaining, love. But since Lily isn't around, that love has to come from somewhere, someone who shares her blood. If whatever the woman's name is doesn't care for the boy, and he her, the wards should gradually weaken until they vanish entirely. Can't tell you how many times I've tried to explain that to the old fool, but he never listens when he's already convinced he's right.'

'Sounds like another stubborn old man I know.'

Moody gave Tonks a withering look at that, but didn't respond. 'Potter, where are the muggles?'

'Vacation,' he said with a shrug. 'Dunno where.' He didn't miss Tonks give him another look at that — couldn't say exactly what kind, but definitely a look.

'Know when they're coming back?'

'Sunday.'

He nodded again. 'Dora, help the boy pack up.' Wait. What? 'I'll put the house in stasis after you leave, so Albus can come in here and pick over the trace magics like I know he'll want to. Hand him over to Black, make the man's bloody day.'

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He really couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was leaving Privet Drive? Already? But...it was still July! And he was going to live with Sirius? He couldn't believe it. No, he honestly couldn't believe it. The thought just didn't make sense in his head, sticking in an odd way, like one of those runic diagrams he couldn't quite figure out...

'No, Sirius can't take him,' Tonks said. With a glance at Harry, she said, 'At least not right away. He's still got Healers all over him, and a cleaning crew tearing his house apart. Two weeks, maybe, they'll be done, but until then he needs to go somewhere else.'

Moody considered that, but only for a fraction of a second. 'Alright. Got somewhere in mind?'

An uncertain look crossing her face, Tonks hesitated, glancing between Harry and Moody. 'Ah, my parents?'
Both Harry and Moody stared at Tonks for long seconds, Harry in disbelief — what the hell was going on today? — and Moody in simple calculation. Finally, he nodded. 'That'll work. Get moving, then.'

A moment later, Harry was up in his room again, Tonks at his shoulder, looking around with another peculiar look on her face. It didn't take long to pack up everything he owned. Most of his books had already been in his trunk — since he didn't have a bookshelf or anything, he'd been putting them back whenever he was done — but he did have some papers and clothes to get squared away and tetrisised into place. While Tonks shrunk Hedwig's (empty) cage, putting it in his trunk with everything else — Hedwig would catch up, wherever he went — he got down to the floor, prying open the loose board he'd found years ago. Out came everything he'd put in there — letters from friends and Sirius, mostly, but also a bit of homework he'd hidden away in case the Dursleys locked all his school stuff up again, along with his wand. That was all packed away too, though he hesitated a second before throwing his wand in with everything else. It wasn't like he could legally use it right now anyway.

When literally everything he owned had been packed away, Tonks tapped his trunk once with her wand, the whole thing immediately shrinking down to a size Tonks could easily pick up and slip into a pocket. For a moment, Harry almost felt like panicking again — precious few spells could actually be cast on a wand without completely ruining it, and his was inside there — but the Auror was far more knowledgeable than he was, and she didn't seem concerned, so he dropped it.

A moment later, the two of them were walking out of the house — the back door, not the front. Moody was already waiting out in the yard, leaning on his cane with a distinct impression of impatience. Tonks led him along until they were behind him, then held out a hand. Harry hesitated for a moment. He was pretty sure Tonks was intending to apparate the both of them out. Harry had never actually done that before and, to be completely honest, the thought of teleporting hundreds of miles in an instant through nothing but the focused will of a complete stranger — who was apparently his second cousin, not that he was entirely sure exactly how a second cousin differed from a normal cousin — was making him a bit uneasy.

He frowned at himself, shook the thought off. What was wrong with him? Here he was, unprotected by his mother's blood wards for the first time in his life, leaving the Dursleys' weeks earlier than he'd had any reason to expect, and also a girl for some inexplicable reason — and, from what he'd understood of Tonks and Moody talking to each other, it was possible it was permanent. He was really, really, really trying not to think about that last one, pretend it wasn't happening, but at least the first two were doing a...decent job of distracting him. What was he getting so worked up over a simple apparation for?

But before his own disturbingly unfamiliar hand got to hers, Moody said, 'Potter.' He blinked, looked over to Moody to find him staring down at him, a crooked sort of smirk on his face. But, then, Harry guessed all his expressions were crooked — a burn on one side of his marred face limited his expressions in such a way they all came out like that. 'Don't hold me to this, but I'm almost entirely sure you'll never have to come back.'

Later, looking back on that moment, he would concede it was probably a good thing Tonks had chosen just then to grab his wrist and apparate the both of them away.

He had no idea how Moody would have reacted to Harry unexpectedly hugging him.

Chapter End Notes
This is where my nerdy notes go.

ǐoto (roughly "yoh-toh") — slightly modified from an optative of an ancient Greek verb meaning "to heal". A basic healing charm students are taught in Charms class, used for small cuts and scrapes.

reparēt — subjunctive form of Latin verb meaning "to repair/recover" (where canon reparo comes from). Harry kinda cheated, using the non-healing spell to repair his broken bones by simply conceptualising them as solid, broken objects to be fixed. Not the smartest thing to do, so Pomfrey would have had to do some work on his ankle when he got back to Hogwarts.

stupeat — subjunctive form of Latin verb meaning "to be stunned/dazed." English "stupefy" is from stupēfacere — "to make/become stupid/numb" — but I figured the simpler stupēre was better.

About the graveyard scene — Yeah. It's always bothered me how much everyone, Dumbledore especially, completely failed to react to Harry mysteriously vanishing like that. The cavalry arriving, I feel, is a far more likely outcome to that confrontation. Though I can understand why JKR did it the way she did — heroic narrative focus and all that — it still annoys me.

Yes. It's one of those stories.

Part of my intention going into this is to make the portrayal of characters at least somewhat more emotionally believable. As far as Harry is concerned, that refers to the consequences of his upbringing, scarring from the multiple serious traumas he's gone through over the years, and then dealing with this little transformation of his. He is in something of a detached survival mode at the moment, something a number of trauma victims have been known to do, and will be for a while, so it won't be blatantly obvious for a few chapters. And there are other characters I've been considering too. But that is the intention.

So, if you're thinking this is going to be one of those stories where Harry Potter suddenly becomes a perfectly well-adjusted, sophisticated woman of grace and awesomeness... Yeah, that's not exactly how this is going to work. Not saying I'm going to go too heavy on the angst, but things will be more complicated than that. And not to say there won't be fun and fluff later either — it just might take a little bit to get there.

As is true in my other posted HP fanfic — and likely any I may post in the future — Dorea (Black) Potter is Harry's grandmother. Hence, he and Tonks are second cousins (second/third once removed, technically, but who cares).

There will be mild Dumbledore-bashing. Not to say he's evil or especially stupid or anything — canon Dumbledore has simply made a lot of very questionable decisions, and this Harry, along with a few other characters, are just far more willing to point out his mistakes.

Yes, how I changed the prophecy is plot-relevant.

I think I've rambled more than enough. Until next time,

~Wings
Harry stood where Tonks had left him, standing outside of an unfamiliar wood and brick house. She'd said she needed a moment to wake up her parents and give them a quick warning about what was going on, and it wasn't like it was cold or anything, so would he please wait outside for a moment. That was fine, he could wait.

Though, standing alone with nothing going on around him to distract him anymore wasn't exactly pleasant. He'd started leaning his back against the door, his arms crossed over his chest, but he'd had to stop that pretty quickly. Crossing his arms over his chest like that had just reminded him too explicitly that this wasn't his chest anymore. Then he'd just started pacing a little, trying to distract himself, but that wasn't doing him any good either. Now that he wasn't so numb anymore, walking around was making it very clear that his anatomy wasn't quite the same in a very particular location, and that was very, very, very, VERY much something he wanted to avoid directly acknowledging for as long as he could. This was, just, so very messed up.

He was starting to get dizzy again.

But he didn't have too long to wait. Just a couple minutes after arriving, the front door swung open again, this time letting soft, orange light out into the yard. 'You can come in now, Harry.' He turned to face the door, and started—

Harry froze, staring at the sharp-featured woman holding the door open, wrapped in a deep green dressing gown, black hair all ruffled. Since he'd already brought the picture he'd seen of Lestrange to mind earlier this morning, he instantly made the connection. This woman looked remarkably like Riddle's right hand — older than she'd been in the picture he'd seen, of course, but they could be twins. After a second of shock, he put a couple bits of information together. The girl in the mirror (he refused to use any self-referential terminology) looked much like a younger Lestrange. Tonks had said they were cousins. This woman was most likely Tonks's mother — his instinctual thought was she was too young to be, but magical people lived longer than the muggles he was still more used to, so he was well aware he wasn't great at estimating age by appearance. So if they were all related to each other, he guessed it made a bit of sense.

Oh god, he was related to Bellatrix Lestrange. He labeled that bit of information never let Neville know ever.

He managed to unstick his brain after a couple seconds, then continued on into the house. Unlike the Weasleys', this place had seemed perfectly normal from the outside, hardly magical at all. That impression of normalness vanished instantly the second he stepped inside. Signs of magic were everywhere — animated pictures and portraits on the walls, a small array of potion bottles on a table in a corner, little artifacts here and there he didn't recognise that glowed softly in various colours shifting at various frequencies, a couple brooms against a wall, across from the sofa a fireplace he
was now informed enough to recognise traces of the runes necessary to establish a stable connection
to the Floo Network sketched along the inside. Even the lighting came from a suspended collection
of five lamps overhead, radiating a warm, stable orange he immediately recognised as a flamelight
enchantment.

Yep. Definitely a magical household.

After introducing herself — 'Andromeda Tonks, but you can call me Andi' — the woman led him
over to the sofa, lighting the fire with a glance over her shoulder as he sat. No wand, no incantation
— just a look. That was a bit intimidating. Then she had her wand out, and Harry was again being
examined. Not the same sort of examination Tonks — which he now knew was her last name —
had done on him earlier, but definitely an examination. The gentle creeping vaguely reminded him of
his many stays under the care of Madam Pomfrey. A medical examination, then. After some seconds
of working in silence, she asked, 'Where'd you get that bruise?'

And there was yet another thing he definitely didn't want to talk about. 'I, er...'

In that instant, something crossed the woman's face, appeared and vanished so quickly Harry didn't
catch enough to interpret it. Then her wand flicked at his face, a warm, fuzzy sensation blossoming
across his cheek for a moment before vanishing. Before he could even respond, he saw a potion
bottle drift across the room from its table to Andromeda's waiting hand — again, without a word nor
a gesture from her wand. She did use her wand to simply vanish the stopper, then held the bottle out
to him.

A little hesitantly, Harry took the bottle, but didn't drink the contents. He didn't recognise the potion
inside — a slightly syrupy-looking purplish concoction. 'What's this for?' He somehow doubted
Andromeda had a potion to fix his little problem so conveniently lying around.

'Just something I came up with a few years ago, to treat malnourishment.' She fell into a seat next to
him, letting out a sigh. 'I can't make you take them, of course, but if I were you, I'd be taking one a
day for the next month or so. Which means I'll have to brew extra — I don't usually need them that
often.'

That seemed odd to Harry, that he would apparently need it so badly. He'd only left Hogwarts a
couple weeks ago, and he usually ate just fine there. Of course, he hadn't been eating as much as
usual recently, what with his anxiety over the final task and, afterward, Voldemort being back. Not
exactly great for the appetite. And, well, Hermione had commented before that even when he did eat,
he apparently didn't eat well — the right things, she meant. But, then, he didn't really know what the
right things were. But, whatever, he could just drink the potion. He threw the thing back, expecting it
to taste awful as such things usually did, but was pleasantly surprised when it didn't — almost
tasteless, really just a tinge of something he could only describe as purple. He knew purple wasn't a
taste, exactly, it's just the only word that came to him. 'Sorry.'

Taking and vanishing the bottle, Andromeda just raised a narrow eyebrow at him. 'What for?'

He wasn't really sure how to articulate the thought. He just felt vaguely bad about being here, using
up her potions, taking up space in their house, eating their food — as he assumed he would be doing
for at least a little while. Especially with his problem he would probably need some degree of help to
deal with, however that turned out. But he wasn't thinking about that. He didn't know what to say, so
he said nothing.

Andromeda sighed again, sinking further into the couch. After a moment, she said, 'As far as I'm
concerned, Harry, you staying here is simply overdue.'
He turned to frown at her. 'What?'

Now Andromeda suddenly looked uncomfortable, avoiding his eyes, staring at her hands in her lap. 'Not entirely sure I should be telling you this.'

He completely didn't care. People had been *not telling him things* for far too long. 'How about you tell me and we figure out?'

Andromeda's lips twitched a little at that. 'Well. This isn't exactly common knowledge — it was private to begin with, then kept private for the usual political reasons.' *That* didn't bode well. 'Sirius is your godfather, of course.' Okay, now this *really* didn't bode well. 'Not sure you know this, but your godmother is Alice Longbottom — though she's hardly in any condition for it to matter. But if neither of them were available, your guardianship was supposed to pass to us. Dumbledore sent you off to who-knows-where, said you were taken care of. Fighting him on it would have taken a legal battle we really wouldn't have been able to afford at the time. So we just...' She trailed off, shrugged to herself.

Harry could only blink at her.

Huh.

He had absolutely no idea what to think about that.

Pacing back and forth across the sitting room, Harry was trying to avoid being nervous.

Of course, these last couple days, he'd been trying to avoid a lot of things. There was simply that one, quite immediate fact he was doing his very, very best to avoid acknowledging. Spent most of his time shut up in the room they'd lent him — Tonks had apparently been setting the place up for him while he'd been being examined by Andi. Focusing as hard as he could on whatever book he could find in his trunk, no matter the subject, because as long as his head was consumed with transfiguration theory or runic diagrams or names and dates from centuries past that was *less* space he had to think about the thing he wasn't thinking about. Powering through his homework while he was at it too — he'd be done for the summer next week at this rate. He couldn't help thinking to himself Hermione would be proud, despite knowing for a fact she would disapprove of him using academics to distract himself from something personal that needed his attention. No matter how hypocritical he was sure that would be.

And, well, he still hadn't changed out of the clothes he'd woken up in some days ago now, had gotten one of the Tonkses to repeat that spell on him instead of going about things the usual way. He just didn't want to — That would just be — It would —

He wasn't thinking about it. That's all.

But this was going to be...he wasn't sure how this was going to be. Very soon now, could only be minutes, Sirius and Dumbledore would be showing up. Dumbledore, he was nervous to see for the obvious reason. He knew Dumbledore had been at the Dursleys', doing whatever it was, reading the lingering traces of whatever had happened to him floating in the air, to figure this whole mess out. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know what Dumbledore would tell him. The very, very few moments he allowed himself to think about it, he was starting to worry that, well. That this...*this* was permanent. That he'd be stuck this way. It'd been long enough most anything should have worn off by now. And *that* was a thought he definitely didn't want to think about. Really, really not.

Seeing Sirius, if anything, was just making him more anxious. The Tonkses were perfectly nice to
him, sure, but they'd never met before…before. They didn't know each other at all. The thought of someone he’d known before seeing him now was... It was different. It was terrifying. He kept flipping back to primary school, before he'd known there was such a thing as magic, jeers from the Dursleys and the other kids ringing in his head, he couldn't help it. He knew this was all flavours of fucked up. He knew all this was going to, he wasn't sure of the word, disgust Sirius, something like that. Sirius was going to take one look at him, then he'd be gone, and Harry would be alone, he couldn't help it, and it was terrifying.

So. He was trying not to be nervous, but he was completely failing.

Harry jumped nearly a foot in the air, his heart practically stopped, at the sound of a knock on the door. As Ted moved to open it, Harry tried his best to keep his breathing level, to keep the suffocating blanket of panic away, to not completely fall apart like he were mad as anything. He didn't want to do this. He really didn't want to do this. How he wished there were a way he wouldn't have to do this. But he didn't have a whole lot of choice, so he just tried to keep breathing, eyes fixed in dread on the opening door.

And Sirius walked in the room. Harry's first thought was that Sirius looked a lot better than the last time Harry had seen him — surprising, since that'd only been a few weeks ago. His hair, which Harry still thought was long enough to seem a little incongruous, shining clean and untangled, his face a little more coloured and fleshed out, the horrid depressions around his eyes ever since Azkaban almost completely vanished. He was even dressed better, in dark, glinting robes Harry instantly recognised as being rich person clothes. He belatedly remembered Sirius mentioning at one point his family had had some considerable wealth, which he'd inherited — now that he wasn't on the run, Harry guessed, he could actually use it.

Before he really registered what was happening, Sirius was across the room, his arms already wrapping around him. Harry jerked in surprise, before letting himself relax just a tiny bit. He returned the hug, sinking his face into Sirius's robes — he noticed a bit absently he was a couple inches shorter than he used to be — drawing in and out a long, slightly shuddering breath. 'It's okay, kitten,' Sirius muttered, the slight rumbling in his chest echoing in Harry's head. The fingers of one of his hands were running through Harry's hair, which was... Okay, he felt a bit ambivalent about that. On the one hand, it was girl hair, and it was weird, and he didn't want to think about that. He could have just cut it all off, he guessed, but he was a bit reticent to actually do it — what if it just grew back, as his hair often did, or he would need all of it to undo this mess? But on the other hand, Sirius stroking his hair felt oddly good in a way he couldn't really put words to, which was a bit weird in itself, but he couldn't really bring himself to care so much, he'd take anything at the moment that didn't make him feel like shite. 'We'll figure this out.'

'I just—' He instantly felt the tightness in his own voice — well, not his voice, but, whatever — so he cut off, gave himself a second to force it down, kill it off. Crying was dangerous. When he thought he could actually talk right, 'It's too much, Sirius. This on top of everything else…'

'I know, Harry, I know. We'll put everything right together, okay? I'm not leaving you alone again.'

God, what had Harry ever done to deserve Sirius being this nice to him? This was ridiculous. Almost suspiciously ridiculous, actually, but he was pretty sure that was just a random paranoid thought, so
he shoved it off as best he could. He didn't really know what to say, so he just nodded into Sirius's chest, doing the best he could to force it down.

Some seconds later, he had no idea how many, an arm still around his shoulders, Sirius led him over to that sofa again. After they'd barely sat down, they were joined by Dumbledore, who simply conjured a little stool for himself across from them. Harry couldn't look at him. His eyes danced around, staring at his lap, over to Sirius, the floor, the walls, the fireplace, yet another example of Dumbledore's absolutely ludicrous wardrobe — these robes a nauseating swirl of yellow and purple.

He knew exactly what expression would be on Dumbledore's face. He didn't want to see it. It would be his usual patient, kindly, open sort of thing, and Harry didn't want it. For one thing, he wasn't exactly pleased with Dumbledore at the moment. He was still a little angry over that whole mess that was fourth year. And now, now that he knew he should have grown up here, with Andi and Ted and Dora instead of Petunia and Vernon and Dudley — which, with as little as he knew of them so far, seemed like it would have been heaven by comparison — and Dumbledore was the reason he hadn't, well...

He wasn't exactly pleased, to say the least.

And that was without even considering the entire reason Dumbledore happened to be here.

'Well, Harry,' he said in that familiar soft, low voice, 'I feel safe in assuming you would appreciate getting directly to the heart of the matter, so we can skip the pleasantries.' Harry just nodded, not entirely sure what to say, and not fully trusting his throat anyway. 'I believe it would help if you would explain your state of mind before falling asleep that night.'

Harry blinked. He hadn't expected to actually have to talk about that. A flash of preemptive shame flared through him, but he shook it off the best he could, cleared his throat. 'Ah, I thought you would have figured out what happened. Professor.'

'Yes, Harry, I have.' The absolute confidence on Dumbledore's voice lit a little spark of hope in Harry's chest. 'I know the how of it, certainly, but I feel it would help best contextualise things for this conversation if you would provide the why of it.'

That sounded... Well, he wasn't sure how that sounded. It could only be a good thing that Dumbledore knew what had happened, right? He really didn't want to talk about this, that moment of disgraceful weakness he'd had that night. He didn't want to tell them how badly he'd wanted to give up, to just walk away from all of this. He really didn't want to disappoint them like that. But...but if it would help Dumbledore put this to rights, then fine.

He kept his voice remarkably level, if he did say so himself. It was the empty kind of level, though — not of calm but of forced deadness. While he didn't so much know the voice of the girl in the mirror, he definitely recognised that tone. It was, after all, the very one he'd used just a few weeks ago telling Sirius and Dumbledore about what had happened in the graveyard. But while then he'd been holding back the horror of what had just happened, now he was holding back shame, that he'd let himself think those selfish, surrendering thoughts, and fear, that either of the two of them would think less of him, that they would be disappointed, angry.

But Sirius's arm had just clenched tighter around his shoulders as he went on, and when he'd finally trailed off, Sirius spoke in a growl — but directed at Dumbledore, not Harry. 'Do you see what I mean now?' Harry blinked, glanced up at Sirius's face. He looked...rather angry, actually. Huh.

When Dumbledore didn't answer immediately, Harry risked glancing his way quick. Dumbledore wasn't wearing the kind smile he usually did, or the grimace of anger Harry had only really seen a
couple times, or even one of his more neutral expressions he wore when trying to not give something away. Harry couldn't really tell what that look on his long, wrinkled face was. If anything he just seemed...tired? It was weird. Harry didn't know what to think about it. 'You're right, of course. I apologise for not lending your opinion credence earlier.'

'What?' Harry glanced up at Sirius again. 'What opinion?'

'It seems,' Sirius forced through his teeth, 'Dumbledore has completely forgotten what it's like to be a child.' It took Harry maybe two seconds to put together what Sirius meant by that.

Harry pushed away from Sirius a little, sitting straighter on the sofa, glancing back and forth between the two of them. 'I still want to help! I didn't—' He broke off at that, not entirely sure what he didn't. 'I mean, I can't let him—' No, still not sure what he was trying to say.

'That's not what I meant, Harry. I'm not saying you shouldn't contribute to the fight against Voldemort at all. I wouldn't stop you even if I thought I could.' Yeah, Harry wasn't sure he believed that. Sirius was one of the few adults he knew who had actually been on his side about the whole stupid Tournament thing. He had the feeling Sirius would sideline him in a second if he could. 'But the way Albus has been leaving you in the dark alone, to figure everything out by yourself, that isn't acceptable. If he wants you with us, you're with us. No half measures.'

Now, that one...

Harry wasn't at all sure what to think about that. Had he ever heard someone who wasn't an evil git, or just an idiot, say anything negative about Dumbledore? Other than casually calling him mad, anyway — Harry was pretty sure Dumbledore let people form that impression on purpose. Not only that, but Sirius was criticising Dumbledore about something that Harry, or at least Hermione, had noticed before, that had made things much more complicated than there'd been any reason for.

How many things would have gone much more smoothly if Dumbledore had just told him what was going on? How he'd stumbled on the details of what had happened to his parents, the mess with Sirius and the traitor, that could have gone much better. That business with the Stone, certainly — if Harry had known Dumbledore had everything in hand how he knew, in retrospect, he must have, he never would have gone down there. The entirety of second year. Harry had been half-convincing he was somehow setting loose Slytherin's monster unconsciously or something — or, at the very least, that he had some dark powers that he would fully come into at some point in the future — concerns that Dumbledore could have put to rest immediately if he'd just been honest with him for two seconds. If the pattern held, he was sure he'd be able to find some ridiculous mistake Dumbledore had made this last year, once he was finally told enough so he actually knew what Dumbledore had failed to tell him. It was an obvious pattern, once Hermione had pointed it out to him. No way he would've noticed it as early as she had — second year — but that was why Hermione was Hermione and he wasn't.

The thought that Sirius had noticed the same pattern, and was angry about it on his behalf was...

Well, he wasn't entirely sure what that thought was. It was weird, but...nice, he guessed? He meant, he didn't know, having an adult around who actually gave a damn, it was almost like, er.

Having a parent or something? Or at least how he thought it might? It was weird.

He certainly wasn't about to complain, but it was weird.

'Yes,' Dumbledore said, sounding a little uncomfortable. Uncomfortable. 'I'll admit I might have been a little overly stingy with information, to your detriment. There are perhaps a few further matters about which you should be informed. However, before I share any of that, you will need to learn at
least a little occlumency.’ Learn what?

‘I can teach him that.’ With a shrug, Sirius added, ‘I’m not a master myself, but I should be good enough to learn from.’ Oh, well, fine, he guessed. Probably not important enough right this second to bother asking.

Dumbledore hesitated for a second, giving Sirius an odd, penetrating look, before finally nodding. ‘Alright. Before I get into the exposition I need to give today, I wonder, Harry, if you could say something in Parseltongue for me.’

Harry winced — he would really rather not. This was one magic thing he could do he really, really didn't like. He knew, intellectually, that the ability wasn't itself dark. Hell, in south Asian cultures, it was associated with Healers, of all things — he'd been shocked when Padma, Parvati’s twin Harry had hardly met by then on account of being in Ravenclaw, had first told him that. So, he knew the ability wasn't bad in itself, but despite his better knowledge he still associated it with the horribleness that had been second year. But he was sure Dumbledore had a point to this, so he might as well just get it over with.

Before Hermione had gone on another research-binge, he never would have been able to do this on command, but now he knew it was a simple matter of concentration. He closed his eyes, focused as hard as he could on the feeling of, for lack of a better word, snakeness — hard and smooth, creeping and coiling, observation cold and silent, the contained violence of a deadly strike to be released when needed. He took in a long breath, said, «This is me Speaking.» The words came out in that weird, hissing nonsense but, as usual, they made sense to him in a tacit, visceral way he'd never been able to explain coherently, no matter how many probing questions Hermione had asked about it.

When he opened his eyes again, he noticed the demonstration had made Sirius slightly uncomfortable, but Dumbledore still looked calm enough. ‘Hmm,’ he said, head cocked ever so slightly. ‘I must confess myself somewhat surprised. Though, I suppose, I perhaps shouldn't be. Anyone who claims to fully understand the functioning of mind and soul is either hopelessly arrogant or a liar.’

Okay. Harry would like the world to start making sense again right now, please.

Oh, who was he kidding, the world hadn't ever made sense.

‘Erm, Professor, why shouldn't I be able to speak Parseltongue anymore? I didn't think that could just, ah, be turned off.’

‘It is a gift carried on a person's very soul, Harry, inherited through direct descent from individuals unnamed who first gave themselves the ability through ritual unknown — several thousand years ago, among the archaic Melīx. It's simply something someone has or has not, part of who they are. With the exception of yourself.’ Here, with a casual flick of his wand, Dumbledore conjured a mirror, holding it with the reflective side against his robes. ‘You were not born with the ability, but acquired it, something I believe to be unique. You may remember, near the end of your second year, I told you I believed Voldemort left part of himself with you that autumn night, long ago. It is curious, then, that you retain the ability, even though—’ He turned the mirror around, holding it at a distance and height obviously intended for Harry to look at himself in. ‘—that which gave it to you is now gone.’

Harry jolted in place, then immediately turned his head to give himself a proper angle. It wasn't his own face he found in the mirror, still that of that unfamiliar girl, but the scar he found when he pushed her hair out of the way he recognised perfectly well. Except...except it was fading. That scar had remained a vicious, ropey mess, virtually unchanged his entire life — perhaps a little redder than
usual now and then, but the same in shape and clarity. But...it was... He could still see it, could still feel it as he rubbed his fingers over it, but the contrast was lesser, closer to the tone of the skin around it, the texture and elevation smoothed down to almost unnoticeable.

What the fuck was happening?

'But...' He frowned at his vanishing scar, ignoring the confused grimace on the girl in the mirror. 'What's going on?'

'I cannot tell you the whole story until you've developed some skill with occlumency, I'm afraid. Suffice to say, when I visited your room to attempt to decipher what exactly happened to you, I found magics I did not expect.' Harry glanced up at him, opened his mouth to ask, but Dumbledore firmly shook his head. 'No, Harry, I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you. Not until your mind is secure. Some things are not meant to be widely known. But I can assure you you are now free of any undue influence from Voldemort — with perhaps a couple gifts left behind. I have theories on exactly how that last part happened, but that must also keep for another time. The remains of the wound are vanishing faster than you might expect, of course, but I suspect Andromeda has long made a habit of spicing her cooking with certain herbs, which would likely do the trick.

'And as for the rest,' Dumbledore said, leaning back to his previous sitting position, the mirror vanishing, 'the answer is elegantly simple. There is no need to search for who did this to you, Harry, because you did it to yourself.'

He—

What? No. That— That made absolutely no sense. Even assuming for a second he wanted to— to turn himself into a girl, he wouldn't even know how! He could think of possible ways to do it — polyjuice, which he could theoretically do if he really wanted to, complete self-transfiguration, which was far and away beyond his current capabilities — but there was certainly no way he could do either of those unintentionally. The idea was just... it was nonsense!

Dumbledore seemed to realise he was having, to put it lightly, problems with that explanation, because he gave him something of a patient smile. Which was infuriating, but that wasn't important right now. 'Accidental magic, Harry. Fueled by your own power, motivated by your desire to be simply anyone else.'

Harry had to fight the silliest impulse to burst into laughter. Well, that had certainly worked, hadn't it?

At the moment, he couldn't think of a better demonstration of the warning be careful what you wish for.

'Er, Albus,' Sirius said from his side, sounding almost as baffled as Harry himself. 'I may not be an expert on such things, but as far as I know, this is a bit more, ah, intricate than the sort of thing that can usually be done through accidental magic.'

Dumbledore gave a little shrug at that, his long hair and disturbingly colourful robes shifting in a wave. 'Normally, yes. On rare occasions, however, individuals have accomplished great feats of magic unconsciously, some so subtle or instinctual that imitating them intentionally is all but impossible. Even this specific expression of accidental magic is not unheard of — Harry is hardly the first person to have done this. It's rare, certainly, but not unique.'

'It can be fixed, then,' he said. If this had happened before, it followed that someone would have maybe figured out a way to undo it, right?
In a slow, oddly hesitant voice, Dumbledore said, 'It can, yes. Though I would suggest you take the
time to consider whether you want to.' Before Harry could say anything to that — likely something
indignant, possibly littered with swear words — Dumbledore continued. 'A ritual exists to
permanently change someone's sex. It's blood magic — blood alchemy, specifically — but unlike
much blood magic, this specific ritual is on occasion necessary, so it is perfectly legal. I could
perform the ritual myself, if you want, though we would require the blood of a male relative —
which Sirius here would be all too happy to provide, I assume.

'This ritual is legal for a very simple reason,' Dumbledore said, cutting off an instant agreement from
Sirius. 'Men and women do not only differ physically — magic does not breathe through both sexes
in the exact same way. The distinction is very subtle, but it exists. Rarely, very rarely, an individual
will be born with the form of one sex, but the magic of another. Since the flesh is far more malleable
than the soul, this ritual is used whenever such a person is discovered, to alter their bodies to match.
It is considered to be cruelty to refuse someone the ritual who needs it — it has been found that such
people, left untreated, often develop difficulties both emotional and magical. Without going into too
much complicated detail, their magic simply doesn't flow right, which leads to all sorts of issues.'

This was perhaps the strangest thing Dumbledore had ever said to him before. At least, excluding the
times he had been being strange on purpose, but honestly maybe even then. He didn't even see how
that made any sense at all. That shouldn't be possible, so far as he could tell. But, well, Dumbledore
was the authority on obscure magical trivia here, so there was really no point in Harry arguing the
possibility of the thing. But, if Harry was understanding him correctly, 'You're...suggesting I might
be one of these people.'

'Little fact about accidental magic, Harry,' Dumbledore said, doing that thing he did sometimes
where he leaned in a little, as though sharing something in confidence. 'It is a visceral, instinctual
thing, and almost universally defensive. There have been incidences where people have indirectly
harmed themselves through accidental magic, but it is always as a secondary consequence, not a
direct effect of the magic itself. It is impossible for anyone to directly harm themselves with
accidental magic.

'So, it follows that, if your magic was capable of changing you as it has, it must be considered to be,
at some level, beneficial. This would not have happened if some part of you didn't feel you would be
happier like this.'

Harry collapsed back into the sofa, completely incapable of thought. Not for the first time,
Dumbledore had completely exploded his brain. He had absolutely no idea how to process this idea.
It was just...just too insane. An objection started gradually percolating in his head, but he was too
dazed to focus on it directly, so he simply waited, letting it develop into coherence on its own. Then
he got it. 'But, the stairs. In the Gryffindor dorms.'

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at him a little. I'm not entirely sure exactly how those enchantments
work — I've never checked — but I do know that, in Gryffindor, they are only secured one way.
Miss Granger has been up to your room, yes?

Sirius gave him a look at that, but Harry ignored it. 'Well, yes, but. I tried to go up to get her once,
but the stairs turned into a slide on us.'

For a second Dumbledore seemed to consider that — but only for a second. 'Us? Were you perhaps
with Mister Weasley at the time?'

Harry blinked, then frowned. Well, yes, he had been with Ron at the time, but he didn't think that
was really the point. This entire conversation was just completely ridiculous. He couldn't be a girl,
that just... It didn't make any sense. It was completely ludicrous, to the point he couldn't even really
think about it clearly. His brain just kept sticking, repeating the same thoughts over and over and over.

After a moment, Dumbledore's voice floated over to him across the haze, sounding oddly indistinct. 'My advice, Harry, is to take some time to consider this. Should you decide to do it, the ritual takes a few days to do properly, and should you decide not, I will need at least a week to arrange some parchmentwork so you can return to school normally. Don't worry about any potential reaction from your classmates — it would be wise, I think, for you to attend under a false identity, at least at first. Though you are obviously free to tell whomever you wish, I doubt this is something you want bandied about freely. These are tumultuous times, and there is no real need to make things more complicated than otherwise necessary. So, whatever you decide, I will need to know one way or the other by, let's say, the twenty-fifth of August. I strongly suggest you take as much of that time as you need to be absolutely certain.'

The twenty-fifth of August? Dumbledore wanted him to stay like this for, what, five, six weeks? Crazy old man... 'What if I'm absolutely certain now?'

If anything, that just seemed to amuse him. 'I'm sorry, Harry, but I must insist you take more time than that. You've had a difficult time these last few weeks, to say the least, and anyone in your situation would have great difficulty thinking clearly, certainly on something so intimate. I'll be asking Andromeda before I leave to find a Healer colleague she trusts you can talk to — discreetly, of course.

'But now,' he said, standing, 'I'm afraid I must be off. Very busy at the Ministry lately. I wish you nothing but the best Harry. Sirius.'

Dumbledore had almost already gone before Harry remembered there was something else he wanted to ask about. 'Wait!' The ancient wizard stopped, standing just before the door, turned to look back at him. 'Do I have to go back next summer? To the Dursleys', I mean.'

With a long sigh, Dumbledore said, 'No, there would no point to that. I'm afraid that, since the blood wards have dissipated completely, there is no way to recreate them. That is one safeguard we have now lost forever.'

Okay, he needed to give his brain a time out, here. There was just too much for him to process right now. All that ridiculousness about having to be a girl for a while now, soon getting to know more about what's going on with Riddle, and he never had to go back to that hellhole ever, ever again?

He had absolutely no idea how to feel right now. There was just too much going on.

But even so, he knew by feel he was smiling.

Chapter End Notes

[Dumbledore hesitated for a second, giving Sirius an odd, penetrating look, before finally nodding.] — Yes, Dumbledore was totally just testing Sirius's occlumency there.

Melīx (IPA: [mɐ.ˈlyːs] roughly "may-leeh") — fictional endonym for the Indus Valley Civilization, an advanced ancient culture, contemporary with early Egypt and Sumer, located in modern Pakistan and India. And I say it's a fictional endonym because well, we don't actually know what they called themselves — they're old enough we don't
know a whole lot of specific details like that. The name is adapted from the Sumerian
exonym Meluhha, believed to refer to the same culture.

Yes, Dumbledore's ramble is basically a magic explanation of transgenderism. No,
gender and sexuality stuff aren't nearly as big of a deal in my headcanon magical
culture as it is muggle. I've read a couple fics where magical Britain is even worse
when it comes to gender equality and sexual liberty and things like that than our society,
and I just never buy it at all. I just can't see Christianization penetrating magical society
very far, and the Church had a huge influence on the reinforcement of "proper" gender
roles, prudishness as a virtue. I really see the European magical moral framework
developing much differently than the Christian one, and I just can't imagine things like
homophobia, misogyny, or chastity having nearly as much of a place.
But that might just be me.

Until next time,
~Wings
Again. It had happened again. Something so strange, so unexpected he didn't even understand it, much less know how to feel about it.

A few days ago now, he'd left the Tonks house to move in with Sirius. Where he would now be living permanently — when he wasn't at Hogwarts, anyway. While the rest of his life might be completely insane right now, this was at least one thing he could be pleased about. Apparently, this was the very house Sirius had grown up in, until his mother had kicked him out back when he'd been seventeen. With the retraction of his old sentence to Azkaban, ownership of all assets belonging to House Black, which had been in some sort of procedural limbo, had reverted to him — along with, apparently, a noble title and a seat in something he gathered to be wizarding Parliament. That part, Harry'd had no clue about.

The house was, in a number of ways, rather peculiar. It was the first, so to speak, rich person magical house he had ever been in. There was a lot of shining dark wood everywhere, gilded surfaces and objects scintillating here and there. Most rooms and halls were tall and open, all together taking up several times more space than he thought could possibly fit in the size he knew the house to be, judging by the look of it from outside. A dozen people could easily live here, and even more could be accommodated without too much discomfort. There were more people than just the two of them living here at the moment, actually — Professor Lupin, to his surprise, seemed to be a semi-permanent resident, accompanied by a rotation of who Sirius briefly explained to be Order members.

Turned out, Sirius was playing host to Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix. Apparently, the wards on his old family home were so impressive, they'd decided it would be a prime location for a headquarters and safe house. Plans were apparently being made to relocate Hermione and all the Weasleys here for the rest of the summer, in about a week or so — Harry wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He also knew there was a house-elf slinking around somewhere — Kreacher, Sirius had called him — but Harry had hardly even caught sight of him.

Sirius had explained that, as the primary property of a Noble House, this place was designed with two functions in mind. The rooms intended to receive guests were open and severe, hard furniture arranged and exquisite decoration designed to impress onto the entreating visitor the wealth and power of the House of Black. Harry had said immediately, when being shown around one of them, that the room made him uncomfortable — Sirius had just laughed, saying that was exactly the point.
The rooms further in, intended only for the eyes of the House, were in warmer colours, filled with comfortable furniture under soft lighting, three of them packed from wall to wall with hundreds of books. This part of the house, he decided, was much better. Apparently, the entire house from one end to the other had been a complete disaster only weeks ago, filled with trashed furniture, magical pests, and curses gone haywire, but Sirius had just paid some people to take care of it. Which had set him back a considerable number of galleons, but Harry gathered Sirius wasn’t exactly wanting for money, to say the least.

The room Harry had been given was just across the hall from Sirius’s, and had come as a complete shock to him at first. The thing was several times larger than the one he’d had at the Dursleys’, everything black and silver, a mattress on a delicately carved wood frame he eyed to be at least the size of Petunia and Vernon’s, a ridiculously comfortable chair before a long, smooth writing desk, more dressers and wardrobes than he could possibly imagine enough uses for.

Seeing the place, he’d immediately felt vaguely guilty. This just seemed like more than he needed. He’d tried to say something to that effect to Sirius, but he’d just brushed it off, saying no one else was using it anyway, Harry might as well take it. Even when Harry was older and had moved out, Sirius said, he would keep the room waiting for him, somewhere he could always come back to if he had need or want — a sentiment he had no idea at all how to respond to. He knew it sounded depressing even thinking it in his own head, but someone saying they actually wanted him around like this was so foreign he didn’t know what to say.

Though, apparently, when Hermione and the Weasleys moved in, he’d have roommates for a little while. There was no way that was going to be not awkward.

Speaking of awkward, he was trying to get back into a normal way of doing certain things. He couldn’t use a spell instead of a toilet forever — well, he was pretty sure he technically could, but it’d just be weird — so he’d finally forced himself to just do that already. It had taken a lot of cajoling in his own head, even chickening out a couple times, but he’d managed to pull it off. So he’d had the opportunity to visually confirm that, yes, he was definitely a girl now, and yes, that had been the absolute strangest experience of his life, thanks for asking. He’d taken a moment to scream at Dumbledore in his head, which probably wasn’t the most healthy thing to be doing, but at least it was better than having another panic attack.

And he’d tried to get back into the habit of changing clothes every once in a while like a not-disgusting person but...he was having issues with that. His pyjamas he’d worn that night more or less fit him okay, fine, but most everything else didn’t. Well, his shirts were mostly fine — though, admittedly, a little awkward at times — but his jeans were simply uncomfortable. And his shoes were completely wrong, way too big. Dora, as family was apparently allowed to call the youngest Tonks (which also apparently included himself now, a novel thought), had said, with a crooked sort of smirk, that this obviously just meant they had to go shopping.

Harry had just glared at her.

But, it looked like Dora was going to win that one. It turned out the Ministry controls on underage magic weren’t as precise as he had thought they were. Ha ha, wow, he’d actually managed to think that with a straight face. Anyway, Sirius informed him that he could do as much magic as he wanted and no one would care — as long as he was in the house, the Ministry would assume Sirius, a fully-qualified and presumably responsible wizard, was taking care of it. Which seemed like a policy heavily weighted against muggleborn children, but he was positive no one in the Improper Use of Magic Office actually cared. Hell, he’d be completely unsurprised if that were intentional. Since practising transfiguration was a very good distraction — he was still taking any opportunity he could not to think about the insanity that was his life — he’d pulled out his wand and started playing
around transfiguring random little objects.

Or, at least, that was what he'd been intending to do. It turned out his wand wasn't obeying him at all. After a little bit of working at it, he'd managed to pull off a couple of extremely simple charms, but they were pathetically weak, and when he'd tried a little levitation he'd had practically no control over the path of the quill he'd been testing it on.

Apparently, accidentally turning himself into a girl had made his wand stop liking him.

The thought was oddly depressing.

When Sirius had gotten back home — he'd left on House Black business, Harry hadn't bothered asking — Harry had told him about it, suggested maybe it was time to call up Dumbledore, put an end to this nonsense and go back to normal. To his exasperation, Sirius hadn't instantly agreed. He'd explained that, sometimes, critical events in a person's life can change them enough quickly enough their wand doesn't agree with them anymore. Usually, a wand could adapt to the gradual change an individual's personality went through over their life, but too much of a shock between uses can destroy a person's bond with their wand pretty easily. As a personal example, after escaping from Azkaban Sirius had broken into the Ministry to steal back his wand (sounded suicidal, but okay), only to find the thing refused to work for him anymore. He'd managed to pick up one that somewhat agreed with him a couple months after leaving with Buckbeak, but it had hardly been a perfect match. It wasn't until only two weeks ago that Sirius had been able to just go to Ollivander's and buy one that actually felt right.

While it was possible his wand not liking him anymore was because the girl thing, and it would work again if he was put back to normal, it wasn't guaranteed. Sirius said it could just as easily have nothing to do with it at all. What happened in the graveyard, the few hours afterward, once the shock of it had faded, could easily have left enough of a mark on him to distance him from his wand. Leaving the Dursleys' could do it. Even the girl stuff, after being put back to normal, could leave him different enough his wand still wouldn't agree with him.

That thought was even more depressing. He hadn't any clue how to process this. He'd just stared at his wand in his hand as Sirius talked, feeling oddly like a piece of himself was slipping away.

Sirius had suggested they just go out to Ollivander's to see if a different wand would like him more. He could keep his old one, and, if he did decide to undo his accidental magic and his old wand went back to liking him better, he could just switch back. It would be a little more expensive, Sirius said — apparently, the cost of a student's first wand was largely subsidised by the Ministry, hence the frankly absurdly low price he'd paid for his — but not so expensive it wouldn't be potentially worth it. Especially since it was apparently rather common for certain sorts of people to have a backup wand. Dora, for example, had a second one, just in case.

Somehow, Harry had no idea how, Dora had discovered they were going out. She insisted Harry was going to be getting some properly fitting clothes as long as they were at it. Harry had protested, but Dora just wouldn't shut up about it, so he finally demanded absolute veto power on absolutely everything and anything. That had gotten Dora's manic grin to flicker for a second — Harry could practically see her plans to mercilessly tease him crumble apart — but she reluctantly agreed.

Shoes transfigured to be wearable without stumbling, a cloak borrowed from Dora — which, for some inexplicable reason she wouldn't explain why when he'd asked, smelled absurdly nice in an odd spicy-sweet way — to cover the fact that he was wearing pyjamas hardly appropriate to be walking around in in public, and he was at least a little presentable. Which didn't mean he was at all ready to be doing this. He really didn't want to be going out in public. At all. He was terrified someone would recognise him. Dora assured him that wasn't very likely. She'd only been able to do
it herself because she'd long made a habit of carefully cataloguing the body language and mannerisms peculiar to everyone around her. People with such a talent weren't exactly common on the street.

Harry had been halfway through asking why she'd started doing that in the first place, but had cut himself off at the sudden impish cast to her as-always unfamiliar face — he had the distinct feeling he didn't want to know.

So Dora said he'd be fine, and Sirius had contributed by saying he wouldn't be able to tell at all if he hadn't already known. Until Harry opened his mouth, anyway — he might hardly look like himself at all, but he still talked like himself. Sirius didn't say so, but Harry thought he might be referring to the swearing, the sarcasm, or both. But anyway, they both assured him no one would likely recognise him.

He...had mixed feelings about that.

After a moment to collect himself, they proceeded one by one through the Floo, and Harry was suddenly standing in the Leaky Cauldron. He whipped the hood of Dora's cloak over his head right away — paranoid, maybe, but if it lessened the chance someone would recognise him even a little bit he would take it. Thankfully, they didn't dawdle at all, moving straight out the back, from there making a beeline straight for Ollivander's. Dora did insist on dragging him by the arm the whole way, which was a little awkward, but not so much he couldn't put up with it, he guessed.

And at least he managed the whole walk down the crowded street without panicking.

Even as they walked into Ollivander's, though, he realised he had a problem. When he'd come here the first time, Ollivander had known who he was instantly, a feat he'd accomplished with everyone he'd ever witnessed interact with him — complete with perfectly reciting the details of exactly which wand they'd originally bought from him. Would he be just as transparent this time? How would Ollivander react? Would he tell anyone? Fuck, they really hadn't thought this through at all!

While the unsettling old man shuffled over to them, Harry forced his breathing as slow and level as he could, tried not to give too much away. If Ollivander could tell he was having problems, he might pay more attention, making it more likely he would figure out who he was. But the old wand-maker didn't speak to him right away, Sirius first — addressing him as Lord Black. Harry blinked at that.

Apparently, his godfather was legitimately nobility now. Interesting. Confirming there weren't any problems with the wand Sirius had bought hardly a couple weeks ago, sounded like. Then a similar ramble to Dora. Harry had to smirk a little when Ollivander called her Nymphadora — everyone who knew her knew she hated her full name.

And then Ollivander's peculiar, shining eyes were turned on him. 'And who is this young lady?'

Two things happened in rapid succession. First, Harry twitched at being referred to as a young lady, feeling indistinctly uncomfortable. Second, he realised they'd never actually arranged a name for him to use in the event someone didn't recognise him. They were such fucking professionals, weren't they, couldn't even think that far ahead. Shite, he should think of something, just pick a name, it wasn't that—

'Melaina Black.' Harry blinked, turned to look at Sirius. He didn't stop at just the name, either. He suddenly started spilling this long, complicated story about his great-aunt Cassiopeia, who everyone had thought had been childless when she'd died a couple years ago, but apparently she'd had an illegitimate child at some point, but because of some obscure political nonsense she'd had to squirrel her son away somewhere, he and his family living off somewhere in secret, a number of unlucky tragedies befalling them over the intervening years, until there was only Melaina here left, and since
Sirius was Lord of the House now, he was doing his best to track down all the scattered descendants of people inappropriately expelled from the House or otherwise lost to the family and bring them back into the fold (which Harry knew he was actually attempting), which was how he'd found Melaina here, whose parents had died some time ago, so Sirius had taken guardianship of her himself, and she also found herself in need of a wand, so here she was.

Which was all total shite, of course, but Harry had to admire him for whipping the story out so confidently. If he hadn't known it was a lie he probably wouldn't have picked up on it.

Ollivander seemed to accept it perfectly fine, proceeding straight to his nonsensical measurements. The second he turned around to start looking around for potential wands, Harry turned to Sirius, mouthed, Melaina? Sirius, trademark cocky smirk on his face, just shrugged.

It took far fewer tries for Ollivander to find a proper match for him this time. Last time it felt like he'd gone through the whole bloody store, but this time it was only the fifth wand he'd touched when he'd gotten a reaction. Despite himself, he felt himself smile at the eager warmth exploding up his arm into his chest and head. Not the exact same impression he'd gotten from his first wand — it had been a long time ago, but he thought this one might be a bit more measured, tempered than his old holly-and-phoenix — but it felt just as inexplicably right as that one had. It was even, he was pleased to know despite not being sure if it even mattered, also a phoenix feather wand, though the wood was different. Apple, which he thought might have meant something to Ollivander it didn't to him, judging by the steady stare he was getting.

Just because he could, Harry immediately started casting a few random spells, geminating — one of those fifth year spells Hermione had shoved down his throat last year for some reason — a little pyramidal paperweight on a nearby table, putting a little colour glamour over his copy so it was a dizzying kaleidoscope of twisting rainbows, transfiguring it into a little snake maybe ten inches long, animating it to send it slithering randomly across the table—

It was then that Sirius grabbed his wrist, cutting off the stream of spells, a flick from a completely stoic Ollivander vanishing his little rainbow snake. He glanced up at Sirius, who looked to be vacillating between exasperation and fighting off laughter. 'Sorry,' Harry said, his still-unfamiliar voice sounding sheepish even to his own ears.

'It's fine, Melantha.' Harry blinked — he was pretty sure that wasn't the name Sirius had randomly picked for his cover two minutes ago — but decided to ignore it. 'Just maybe hold in your excitement in public.'

'Right. Sorry.'

'It was good, that,' Dora said, sounding a little surprised. 'I didn't know you were doing conjuration already. Don't usually start that until fifth year Transfiguration.'

Now Harry was blinking again, at Dora this time. He ran through the spells he'd just cast in his head. 'Er, I didn't realise I did?'

Dora gave him an odd, amused sort of look. 'Yes, you did. Most people, gemination is the first bit of conjuring they do. It's probably the easiest to learn.'

'Oh.' He shrugged. 'I had no idea that counted as conjuration.'

Apparently, Dora just thought that made it even funnier.

A minute later, Sirius had paid Ollivander — over Harry's objections, which he'd just brushed off —
and they were back on the street. There were people around, but he figured no one was paying attention so it should be safe to ask. 'Melaina?'

Suddenly looking vaguely uncomfortable, Sirius shrugged. 'My grandmother's name. First thing that came to me. That was her real name, anyway, but no one ever used it — everyone called her Melantha, so that's where that came from, if you were wondering. Sorry about that, I panicked a little.'

'That was you panicking? You seemed so confident about it.'

'Yeah, well, I've had a lot of practice at lying. Thought I was laying it on too thick, honestly.'

'Well, I like it,' Dora squealed, grabbing onto his arm again. A flick of her opposite wrist pushed his hood back off his head with a minor wandless charm of some kind. 'Perfect for our adorable little black flower,' she said, ruffling Harry's hair with her free hand.

Fighting off a nauseating shudder, Harry twisted, shoved Dora off of him. 'Don't do that!'

'What?' she said, still grinning ear to ear. 'That's what it means! No reason to get all upset, little lady.'

He whipped his new wand out of his pocket — he'd insisted on keeping it on his person, not having it all wrapped up as Ollivander usually did — pointing it straight at Dora. 'I will hex you.'

Dora snorted. 'Please. I could kick your cute little arse without even drawing my wand.'

And she apparently meant that. Harry had been annoyed enough to decide to just go ahead and jinx his alternately sweet and infuriating new cousin, but before he'd even had the incantation half finished, Dora had already grabbed and twisted his wrist to point his wand up in the air, slipped around behind him, got an arm around his neck, pulling upward so his jaw was forced resolutely closed. In less than a second.

Right. Auror. He'd forgotten.

'Children, could you try not to do that in public?' His voice seemed chiding, but Harry somehow knew Sirius was laughing on the inside. He couldn't say how — he just knew it.

It didn't help that, the second Dora let go of him, so he could actually speak again, he said, 'She started it.'

Sirius turned away, but before he did Harry caught a glimpse of lips clenched in a tight, restrained line. Apparently, Harry was the only one who didn't think any of this was funny.

And now he was being led to his doom — shopping for clothes. God, he could just kill himself right now.

Or kill Dora, anyway. She was enjoying herself far too much.

Harry sat in the absurdly comfortable armchair, trying not to seem too immediately defensive. Which wasn't very easy, since this was quite likely the most uncomfortable thing he'd ever done.

He was in one of the smaller sitting rooms — just a couple chairs, more magical lighting floating just under the ceiling. Couldn't imagine what this room was for usually. But the door had just opened a second ago, letting in a delicate-looking blonde woman, probably right around Sirius's age, he thought. The colleague Dumbledore had told Andi to find. For him to talk to. He was sure magical
people had their own weird term for professionals like her, as they did for everything, but the word Harry knew was therapist. The woman smiled at Harry as she closed the door behind her, saying in a soft, easy voice, 'Hello, Harry.'

*God,* this was so unbelievably awkward. He mumbled out a reply, he wasn't even sure what.

The woman walked further into the room, settling into the armchair across from him. She didn't say anything. Harry was pretty sure she was watching him, but he wasn't really looking, so he could be wrong. He was just staring at his still-unfamiliar hands, playing absently at the weird black trousers he'd ended up getting yesterday. Magical people didn't seem to use cotton hardly at all, so he honestly had no idea what kind of fabric it was, but it still struck him as a bit weird, all light and thin and oddly smooth. *Uncomfortably* smooth, really. In a way that made him hyper-aware of every bit of him the peculiar cloth was touching, and since that *really* wasn't something he at all wanted to think about, yeah, that wasn't great for his peace of mind most of the time. The shirts were even *worse,* actually, so he was layering there a little bit — one of his old cotton vests under the weird wizarding clothing.

The *texture* of this stuff might be subtly unnerving, but at least it fit right. Mostly right. The woman at the story had said she would be leaving it a little loose for him to grow into it. And she hadn't meant *vertically.*

But anyway, was this Healer person stuck in here with him going to say anything or not? It'd been, what, a couple minutes already? Just staring at him, god, this was so awkward, why didn't she just say something? Probably pulling a Dumbledore, he guessed — waiting for him to talk. *F*uck. It was annoying enough when Dumbledore did it, now other people had to go copying him. Grumbling in his head, he decided to at least say *something,* so maybe it wouldn't be so suffocatingly awkward in here. 'What's your name, anyway?'

'Eleanor Abbott,' she said easily, like she hadn't been annoyed or uncomfortable at all. 'But "Ellie" is fine.'

Harry blinked. *Abbott?* He finally looked up at her, frowning. There was no way. There had to be tons of Abbots. Right? 'You're not...Hannah Abbott's mother.'

'Oh.' The round-faced woman was silent for a moment, her brow furrowed only slightly. 'I forgot you were in the same year. She hardly ever mentions you.'

Just his fucking luck. 'You're not gonna—' He broke off, his mouth working in silence. 'You can't tell her anything.'

She gave him a look, a single eyebrow raised. 'Now, Harry, do you really think anyone would tell people like me *anything* personal if they thought we could just turn around and spread it around? If I repeat to anyone anything you tell me, I would most certainly lose my certification. Depending on the details, I could even find myself in Azkaban. So, no, I won't be telling her anything. I won't be telling *anyone.*'

For a couple seconds, he just frowned at her. He wasn't sure if he could believe that. 'Not anyone? Not Sirius, not Dumbledore?'

'No one.' Then she shrugged, and said, 'Well, under certain situations, I might. Say, if I was reasonably sure either your life or the life of another were in imminent danger, then I would have to tell whoever I thought was best situated to prevent it. But that's the only exception. These rules apply the same to Sirius, despite him now being your proper legal guardian. Dumbledore doesn't have any right to know either. And I'm a passable occlumens as well, in case you're concerned about that.'
Harry did actually know what occlumency was now. He'd given the book Sirius had suggested a quick look-through, started on some of the exercises as he'd been asked. Apparently, the only way to actually test if he was doing it at all proper, for him to get a feel for it, would be for Sirius to try reading his mind, which was not something he was looking forward to. He liked Sirius just fine, but that didn't mean he wanted him in his head.

But the whole idea of this was leaving Harry a bit...conflicted. He really didn't like talking about the shite that kept happening to him, any of the nonsense going on in his head. Mostly, he just tried to avoid thinking about any of it. He wasn't really sure how just talking about anything would do any good. He had long ago learned that Hermione was an enormous fan of talking things out, Dumbledore had arranged this in the first place, Andi and Sirius and Remus — as Professor Lupin insisted Harry call him — and even Dora had all suggested he do it. With varying degrees of confidence, but still.

And Hannah Abbott's mother said she wasn't allowed to tell anyone anything. On pain of Azkaban.

That was—

That was interesting. He knew people talked about him all the time. Before this summer, he was rather confident there were very few secrets he even had anymore. How things were with the Dursleys — he thought that might be the only one he'd managed to keep, just through determined not talking about it. Hell, most of the time he didn't even tell Ron and Hermione what he was thinking. It just didn't feel like their business most of the time.

Maybe...

Maybe that wasn't such a good thing to be doing all the time?

Fuck, why did everything lately have to be so bloody confusing?

Chapter End Notes

Melaina — Because Greek, this is actually pronounced something like "meh-lay-nuh," but it doesn't really matter that much. It's the same name as Melanie, just with the native Greek pronunciation preserved, instead of being transmitted through Latin.

Melantha — I considered writing this with the thorn, as I like to do, but decided since it is a name normally used in English — though rarely — I wouldn't make you suffer my silliness.
Chapter Summary

Harry has no idea what's wrong with him. Hermione has ideas, but she's keeping them to herself.

Chapter Notes

Sorry. Did plan to post this yesterday, but I got distracted by my country electing a less intelligent Mussolini.

Harry was annoyed.

Early in the morning, just having woken up a few minutes ago, he stumbled down the stairs, heading all the way for the basement kitchen. When he finally made it there, he was completely unsurprised to find both Sirius and Remus, talking about something over newspapers and mugs of what was probably tea. As soon as he hit the bottom, they both looked up at him, giving him similar smiles, saying their good mornings almost in unison.

Harry just grumbled. He walked over to the table, pulled out a chair. The instant he sat down, his chair a bit further from the table than usual, he collapsed against the surface, his head hitting the wood a little harder than he'd intended.

Okay. Ow.

'I quite agree, Harry,' Sirius said, a grin clear on his voice. 'It is a beautiful morning. There's just something about the rising sun, the morning dew, that makes you feel so much more alive. It just makes you want to—'

With the slightest of sighs, Remus said, 'Is the teasing really necessary, Sirius?'

'How long have you known me?'

'Granted.'

'But fine, I can do the responsible thing. So, anything other than the usual that has you appearing to contemplate murder?'

Harry was never contemplating murder. Well, okay not never, but even when he was he was joking, didn't really mean it. Er, most of the time. But he just grunted back, lifted his head a couple inches only to drop it back against the table.

And managed to hit the same spot on his head again. Dammit, that hurt.

There was silence for a couple seconds — Sirius and Remus were probably giving each other looks, but he couldn't see with his face against the table. 'Well,' Remus said eventually, 'I can make up some
breakfast for you if you want.' Harry considered that for a moment before finally grunting again. A grunt he tried to make sound like assent, but since this wasn't his voice anymore, he wasn't entirely certain he'd actually gotten that across. By the light clanging he started hearing a few seconds later, he probably had.

But Sirius wasn't even quiet for a minute. 'Really, though. Not worrying too much about our visitors coming, are you?'

Oh, great, he'd managed to nearly forget about that. This house was a rather large place, true, but bringing in Hermione and the Weasleys on top of the Order members and allies they had rotating in and out was pushing capacity quite a bit. Which meant people would have to share bedrooms. Normally, Harry probably would have been put in a room with Ron, plus maybe the twins if they had too many guests, but they'd decided that might not be the best idea. Especially since Harry was leaning toward not telling anyone — should he decide to do that whole ritual thing, everything would be a lot simpler if, well, no one knew what had happened. There was no reason to freak Ron out over all this if he didn't have to. As far as anyone else would know, having "Melantha Black" sharing a room with Ronald Weasley would just be peculiar. So, the tentative plan involved Harry staying in the room he was currently in, plus two guests — Hermione and Ginny.

Yeah, that was most definitely going to be awkward.

But no, that wasn't what he'd been thinking about. He hesitated for a few moments — he wasn't really sure he wanted to say anything about this — but he was just so uncomfortable he decided to do it anyway. Maybe if he made Sirius uncomfortable enough, he would just stop asking potentially uncomfortable questions. 'You know. Andi said I'm really badly malnourished.'

For a moment, Sirius cursed under his breath — directed at the Dursleys, Harry knew, as he did every time Harry even obliquely mentioned them. 'Yeah?'

'And she's having me take these nutritional potions still.'

'Yeah?'

'She warned me ahead of time of some things that might start happening.'

'Err...'

Harry ground his teeth for a moment, pounded his head lightly against the table a few times, before he finally managed to force himself to say it. 'My boobs hurt.' Immediately, he heard a rapidly repressed snort of laughter from the direction he knew Sirius to be. 'No, Sirius, it's not funny. You don't get it. I have boobs, and they hurt.'

When Sirius spoke, it was very obvious he was trying not to laugh — there was a waviness to it, a slight tightness. Harry guessed he could at least appreciate Sirius was trying. 'Well, I have it on good authority there's something you can do about that.'

Okay. That was a peculiar thing for Sirius to say. The hell was he talking about? Harry lifted his head a bit, leaned in support against a hand. One look at the crooked, twitching grin on his face, though, and Harry was sure he didn't want to know. But Sirius would eventually say it whether he prompted him or not, so he just asked. 'And what's that?'

'It was Andi, actually, who mentioned it once, a long time ago. Can't remember why, honestly. She said that, when she was having problems with that, she would sneak off somewhere she could, you know, be alone, and—'
Harry already had his wand out and pointed, the gesture cutting Sirius off in mid-sentence. 'I will hex you if you finish that sentence.'

'Oh, come on, if I were in your position, I'm sure by now I would have at least—'

But that was as far as Sirius managed to get, because just then he suddenly burst into an uncontrollable fit of sneezing. Harry just set his head back down on the table, ignoring his godfather's choking protests.

'Harry, I really think you need to stop, well, **thinking** so much. Stop automatically shifting to considering what you **think** you **should** feel, getting all worked up about that, and just let yourself **feel** whatever comes, as it comes.'

That's what Ellie had said, just yesterday. She'd been getting a little exasperated with him, and over something he hadn't even really realised he was doing. But then, it hadn't taken Ellie very long to start doing things like that. Which was more than a little creepy.

*Apparently*, being abused as a child did all sorts of weird things to people. He'd never really thought about it, personally, but Ellie kept turning around practically everything he ever said to that, and while it was confusing a lot of the time, in a *how is this relevant?* sort of way, it was also starting to make an odd kind of sense. People were programmed as they were growing up, after all, little adjustments to how they felt and thought, what they were trained to see as normal, how the world worked, how people interacted. How people were raised had a very direct effect on who they ended up being later in life — perhaps greater than anything else, Ellie said.

In Harry's case, he apparently had a very certain problem. Ellie said regularly being punished for doing or saying anything considered the slightest bit **unusual** — and wow, had it ever been fun even mentioning that — hadn't left him completely unaffected. Ellie had all kinds of weird terminology for what she was talking about, but she was pretty sure Harry was having an instant negative reaction to certain things because, at some level, he thought they were **unusual**, and thus he **should** — if he understood correctly, as a sort of self-defence, so he wouldn't end up getting punished for it later. But Ellie kept insisting that being concerned with what he **should** be thinking and feeling was entirely unhelpful. That he wouldn't figure any of this out if he didn't just sit back and let be.

Hence, today's little experiment.

It was Ellie's idea, actually. She knew he hadn't been bathing properly, just using a couple charms so he didn't really have to — though his hair was getting gradually more snarly no matter what he did. So she suggested he have a bath. She'd specifically said a **bath**, not a shower. She wanted him to take off his clothes, get in the water, and **relax** for two seconds. Which was something of a daunting prospect, honestly. Being naked was something he'd been very carefully avoiding. It was just...uncomfortable. Made it much harder to ignore what had happened to him, raised thoughts he didn't want to have. He'd almost started panicking right there in front of her. Which was very silly, but this was him he was talking about.

And she'd done one of those very confusing things she did — randomly changed the subject. She'd asked him why he hadn't cut his hair. He couldn't be **used** to having hair that long, and it would be a simple matter, make things a little easier on him, to get rid of it. So why hadn't he?

He hadn't been entirely sure how to answer that question. Shortly after it'd happened, he hadn't known if cutting it off wouldn't, he didn't know, screw up any magic to turn him back or anything — now he knew a little more, knew that wouldn't matter. He'd also thought, maybe, that if he cut it it would just grow back — his magic had done that more than once growing up, so it was definitely
possible. So, there was that.

But Ellie had pointed out that accidental magic was instinctual, and intrinsically defensive — it would only grow his hair if he wanted it to. When he’d been a child, he’d been anxious about being taunted and bullied for his ridiculous Petunia-designed haircut — and he himself had thought it looked awful, hated it himself — so it’d grown back to prevent all that. But, if he had known his hair growing back would have made him more uncomfortable, his magic wouldn’t have done it. In fact, Harry had been told all that several times recently, so he must know that now. So, stop automatically thinking about how he should feel about it, what he should want, and just think about what he did feel, what he did want.

She’d waited for him to answer, but he hadn’t been able to. At first, because, well, he hadn’t been entirely sure she had a point at the time. It had seemed like such a silly thing to ask. But now, that he’d had a little time to think about it, he thought he actually did have an answer. He doubted he’d actually be able to tell Ellie, doubted he’d be able to get the words out. Because even when he admitted it in his own head, he sounded defensive to himself, and it was so messed up that it made his head hurt, and he was confused, and he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on anymore.

He thought it was pretty, okay? That’s why he hadn’t cut it. He didn’t want to. Because he thought his hair was pretty. He liked it.

Jesus, this was so fucking insane.

He’d gotten Sirius to get the bath ready for him — he didn’t actually know how to use the fixtures anyway. The second he could start smelling it, though, he’d turned on Sirius, quite ready to start yelling at him. He must have put something scented in the water — Harry hadn’t been watching, standing silent in a corner, doing his best to force off a panic attack — because the air suddenly smelled all sweet and flowery. But Sirius had said he hadn’t done it just to mess with him, this was what he always did. He’d actually bought the stuff he’d put in for himself. Harry had given him a look at that, not entirely sure whether he could believe him, but by the completely, ah, serious expression on his face, he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Fine.

And then Harry was alone in the room. He triple-checked that the door was locked, then put a locking charm and then a sealing charm on it just in case. Just as he was about to put his wand down a thought occurred to him, and he turned to the mirror dominating almost an entire wall, forcing the whole length to black with a third charm. There.

Yes, he realised he was being a bit silly. He couldn’t really help it.

And he just kept being silly. It was getting steadily harder to breathe, and by the time he got his weird wizarding shirt and trousers off he was already getting dizzy, his vision turning grey around the edges. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He sat himself down in that all-too-familiar pose — back against the wall, elbows against his knees, head in his hands — and forced himself to breathe, breathe, breathe.

He was being so stupid. There was nothing to freak out about so bad. Really, what did he think was going to happen? This was so ridiculous. He was in here by himself, nothing was going to happen, it was all perfectly fine, so just calm the fuck down.

Before too long, the dizziness faded, colour returned to the world. He took in and out one last, long breath, then pushed himself back up to his feet. He instinctively reached to take off his glasses before remembering he didn’t wear glasses anymore. For some reason, his vision had improved even as his scar faded. Andi had suggested that wasn’t at all a coincidence, though she couldn’t say exactly what would cause that. Trying to keep the shaking out of his fingers by mental force of will — because
this was ridiculous, what was wrong with him — he shucked his vest off over his head, forced his mind blank as he slipped out of his underpants. Peculiarly aware of how he was very much not wearing anything right now, he made straight for the bath, and — What was this thing made out of, anyway? The deep, greenish-black material seemed by touch to be something other than porcelain, but he had no idea what. It was weird.

A moment later and he was sitting, partially immersed in the water — which Sirius had drawn almost too hot, really — that weird, sweet floweriness penetrating far further into his head than before, hands firmly on his knees, trying not to shake too much, trying to keep his breathing even. Because he was being ridiculous, there was no reason to be acting like this, he was fine. So silly, honestly.

He suddenly realised he had no idea what he was doing. He couldn't remember ever having a bath before.

Well, once. Thankfully, he was rather sure the chances of Myrtle dropping in on him were significantly lower this time.

But, well, sitting keeping himself ramrod-straight like this was already starting to make his back ache, so...maybe he could just lie down a little? The tub was certainly long enough for that, why not. He started shifting, turning around, almost had himself in the right spot to start settling in when his foot slipped on the smooth surface of the tub. The water splashed around him as he flailed for a second, his face almost dipping below the surface before he managed to get a hand on the edge to hold himself up. Drawn from deep in his chest, bouncing its way up, he was suddenly laughing uncontrollably. The frantic, girlish giggles echoing off the walls sounded entirely unfamiliar, but he knew that had to be him, and he couldn't stop, after what had to be minutes he was dizzy from not getting enough air, his throat annoyingly sore.

Wow, what was wrong with him?

After minutes he had finally calmed down, partially suspended lying on his back in the sweet, nearly too-warm water, arms unconsciously hugging his stomach — he had laughed so much he hurt a little, it was weird — his hair fanning around him through the water, his toes curling into fists as he tried to get the last little bit of control over his breathing back. And he let out a long sigh, relaxing out of his weird little episode, just letting himself float there for a while.

It was some moments later when he consciously realised that he was perfectly comfortable for the first time in...well, he wasn't sure how long. A long time, anyway.

Huh.

The day came. Thursday, July twenty-seventh. The day he'd been looking toward to for weeks with a combination of anticipation and dread.

Today, Hermione and the Weasleys were being moved to Grimmauld Place. And, yes, they were some of his favourite people in the world, and in any other situation he'd probably be so excited to see them and spend the rest of the summer with them that he'd hardly be able to sit still. But there were, well, complications. Most particularly, that they wouldn't know he was here. They'd be introduced to "Melantha Black", of course, but Harry wasn't entirely sure he was comfortable telling them the whole story yet. He wasn't sure how they would react. To be completely honest, he was absolutely petrified they would react negatively, with the disgust and mockery he was still surprised he hadn't seemed to have gotten from anyone else yet.

Sirius had told him more than once that he had nothing at all to worry about, but Harry just couldn't
trust that. How calm and supportive Sirius and Remus and the Tonkses had been about this whole situation was just completely baffling to him, he couldn't imagine anyone reacting so well. It was weird.

He was actually starting to suspect it was one of those cultural things that he'd just never thought about.

They were going to be arriving any minute now, all of them together. Apparently, Hermione had gone to the Weasleys’ the night before, her parents moved to an entirely different Order safehouse — because of their connection to himself, the Order thought the Grangers could be a potential target for Riddle and his cronies, but the wards here were powerful enough Hermione's parents likely wouldn't be able to step through the door. And, yes, he did feel a bit guilty about his friendship with Hermione completely uprooting their lives, thanks for asking. And, yes, that he wouldn't even be telling Hermione he was here was only making him feel even worse.

Yeah, this was gonna be fun.

'Hey, kitten,' Sirius said, wrapping his arm around his shoulders. The three of them (Remus included) were standing just past the front door, waiting for the new guests to arrive — because they were due pretty much now. 'You doing okay?'

Wow, had he really been nervous enough Sirius could tell? He hadn't thought it was that bad. He took a long breath, trying to force the anxiety away, stop being so ridiculous all the time. 'Yeah, I'll be fine.'

'You know, if you're this uncomfortable about it—' Sirius hesitated, just for a quick second. '—we could send you off to Andi's. Call Dumbledore, for the thing.'

Harry knew immediately what Sirius was asking. He hadn't said anything about it, after all, how he'd been doing lately. The occasional complaining, but nothing really more than that. He'd just been...not entirely sure what to say. Partially because he just wasn't sure anymore he wanted the ritual — everything had gotten more confusing than it had been already, and he didn't know anymore. Which he guessed was kind of enormous all by itself, but that wasn't the point. Maybe he should just say that? 'No. I'm, er, not sure yet.'

From this angle, he couldn't see Sirius's face, but Remus from where he was standing a couple feet away was much more visible. So Harry could see perfectly well the absolute shock that suddenly sprouted on his face. From the way his eyes flicked up to where Sirius's must be above and to his side, and the quick silent exchange he guessed they were having, Sirius was just as surprised. After a second of confusion, Harry figured it out.

They'd both been positive he was going to reverse it.

Harry couldn't help wondering if he'd maybe missed something.

But the moment quickly passed, Sirius giving his shoulders another squeeze. 'Just remember they're all still your friends, kitten. They're not going to ditch you, no matter what happens.' Harry caught the unspoken. His voice as he'd said it, all soft and peculiarly tender, made explicitly including himself in the statement completely unnecessary.

Despite the tightness in his chest, the roiling in his stomach, Harry felt his lips twitch a little in approximation of a smile.

It all started only a few seconds later. In a disorganised rush, nine people stepped through the front
door at Sirius's urging — Mister and Missus Weasley, of course, who almost got ran over by the
twins as they barrelled in, then Ron, and Hermione (who looked upon the rabble in a vaguely
disapproving manner), then Ginny, and finally, bringing in the rear with Dora (probably their escort),
to Harry's complete surprise, was Bill. Harry hadn't expected him to be coming at all. Wasn't he still
working in Egypt?

For a while the air was filled with chattering from all corners, the Weasley parents thanking Lord
Black — Sirius playfully balked at the title — for providing them secure room and board, Hermione
asking after Remus's health and then launching into a ramble about all the fascinating books she'd
read with even the flimsiest relation to his area of expertise since they'd last spoken, the twins off on
one of their sarcastic dialogues about, by what he heard of it, what the feel of this room said about
the owner of the house (nothing flattering), Dora and Ginny and Bill laughing after a rather, erm,
indecent joke, Ron standing in the middle of the chaos as though he weren't entirely sure which of
the conversations he wanted to be in.

And then it got weird, when Sirius "introduced" him to them. There was a lot of people he'd known
for years telling him their names, a lot of uncomfortable questions he wasn't entirely sure how to
answer, a narrow-eyed look from Hermione that made him feel like she were performing some sort
deep examination charm with the force of her gaze alone. This was all just so uncomfortable, and
he had absolutely no idea what he was doing.

The exaggerated flirtatiousness from the twins wasn't at all helping, but at least he was pretty sure it
had nothing to do with him — each syllable seemed to be making their mother progressively more
mortified, which he was sure by their cocky grins was the whole point.

Oh fuck, what was he going to do if some bloke started honestly flirting with him?

Nope. Don't think about that.

But at least then they were distracted by dinner. Down in the kitchen, Harry sat between Sirius and
Ginny. Eating in silence, most of the time, really just listening to everyone chatter around him.
Honestly, even if he weren't all anxious he probably wouldn't have talked much. Even in normal
situations with the Weasleys there was usually a bit too much going on for him to keep up with.

At some point, Ginny had asked, sounding distinctly uncomfortable, if he played quidditch. Which
had temporarily confused him. Of course he played quidditch, Ginny already knew that. But then he
had to remind himself that, er, no, Ginny didn't know that, she didn't know who he was talking to.
But at least the subsequent quidditch conversation he could mostly follow, so that was something.

It seemed like it was way too soon — he'd come to suspect before that putting so much Weasley-
energy in one room at once somehow accelerated the passage of time — that it was getting late, and
everyone started dividing up to get to bed. Oh, god, this was going to be so very awkward. Pointedly
ignoring a playful wink from Dora, he led the younger portion of the crowd up the stairs, stopping at
a landing to point Ron and the twins to their room. And then they were on the right floor, and going
down the right hall, and just getting to the right door, and his vision was starting to go grey around
the edges—

He paused, holding the door handle, and took a long breath. He was being so ridiculous again.
Seriously, he'd slept in the same room with Hermione before! And Sirius had brought in a couple
extra beds, obviously, so it wasn't like there was anything that weird going on. Calm the fuck down
already. And he opened the door.

Hermione and Ginny made for their things at their respective little cots, started sorting through. As
long as they were at it, Harry pointed out the closets and dressers he wasn't using anyway, in case
they wanted to unpack a little — honestly, he had no idea how anyone would need this much space for their things, it was weird. But then, he was aware he'd definitely been on the light side as far as possessions went, so maybe his reckoning of such things was completely off.

With a start, he realised Hermione and Ginny were starting to change for bed. Looking away immediately, trying to ignore the blush on his own face, he grabbed his own pyjamas and set off for the bathroom, resolutely closing the door of his room behind him.

Fuck.

A couple minutes later, having changed in solitude, he hesitantly pulled the door open, noticed Hermione and Ginny were done changing, wearing the nightdress and flannel respectively he recognised from the World Cup trip last year, sitting on one of the cots muttering to each other. Perfect. He walked back in, putting his clothes away, avoiding their eyes. 'Sorry,' Hermione said a bit louder, sounding slightly sheepish. 'Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.'

'It's okay, I'm just not—' He broke off, not entirely sure how to finish that sentence. 'Er, I used to live alone.' Not entirely accurate, but close enough to the problem it should work. And, if he remembered the cover story Sirius had made up on the spot a couple days ago, it would actually be a correct statement for "Melantha" or whatever.

God, this was confusing.

Ginny let out a short groan of envy. 'Lucky. I'd take living here in a second. I grew up with six older brothers, impossible to get a moment to myself. Especially back when they were all home during the summer. And then there's Luna, who has no concept of personal space.' Harry did his best to hold back an uncomfortable grimace. He'd only met the strange little Ravenclaw on a handful of brief occasions, but even he knew that was accurate.

He didn't generally like strangers running up and grabbing him.

'I'm an only child,' Hermione said, shrugging, 'but after a couple months at Hogwarts I stopped being shy about some things.'

Harry froze. Hogwarts. The Gryffindor dorms. He'd totally forgotten that, if he didn't do the ritual thing and went to school like this, he'd be sharing a room with the girls in his year — Hermione, Lavender, Parvati, Fay, and, er...he thought there might be another one, he wasn't sure. Honestly, he'd hardly ever talked to Lavender and Parvati, and he only knew Fay because she'd tried out for the quidditch team in third year — if the beaters were anyone but the Weasley twins, she probably would have gotten in — and had been in a couple of the pick-up games he'd joined. That...shite, that was going to be unbelievably awkward.

But anyway, Ginny was saying something again. 'Ah, give it a couple weeks and Tonks will wear you down, I bet. That woman doesn't have privacy in her vocabulary.'

'That's for sure,' Harry said, plopping down to sitting on his bed. 'I only even met her a few weeks ago, but she's been all over her cute baby cousin from day one. At this point, if I woke up one morning to find her in my bed I wouldn't even be able to pretend to be surprised.'

For some reason, Ginny giggled at that.

Just a couple minutes later — Harry got the impression Hermione and Ginny had been up really late the previous night — they were all settled in, the lights dismissed with a wave of Harry's wand, silence taking over the room. But not even for very long. Harry had hardly been lying there for
maybe three minutes, trying to ignore the fact that he wasn't alone in here, when he heard the sheets rustling from Hermione's side of the room. By the sound of it, she was slipping out of bed. Then Harry felt the mattress depress a little, as though a knee had come down on the side of it. Before he could say or do anything, a silencing charm suddenly sprung into existence over his bed, the texture of the thing, and the fact that it'd been cast silently, intimately familiar — he must have felt Hermione do that a thousand times. And then Harry felt the sheets lift a bit, the bed shifting further as Hermione slipped in.

Harry whispered, 'Erm, what are you—'

'Relax, Harry,' Hermione said at full volume, since they were behind a silencing charm anyway, 'I just wanted to talk.' And then he heard an incantation, followed by the sensation of another paling slipping into place — this one, he knew, blocking any magically-created light from leaving the area of effect.

But Harry wasn't really paying attention to that. He stared in the direction he knew Hermione to be, struggling for a few seconds to remember how to speak. 'How did you know it was me?'

'Please, Harry.' He blinked as Hermione's wand suddenly burst into soft, reddish brilliance, the light temporarily dazzling his dark-adjusted eyes. After a second, Harry saw she was giving him a look, one of those deeply exasperated expressions Hermione wore whenever he or Ron did or said something stupid. 'You've been my best friend for almost four years now. Did you really think I wouldn't notice it was you?'

'It was the cursing, wasn't it? That was the theory he was operating on at the moment, the thing that implied to certain people who he was.

'Erm, no. Body language, mostly. I figured it out almost right away.'

He let out a long sigh. Great. He had hoped inexplicably being the opposite sex would at least throw people off for a few seconds. 'Well, then, shite.'

'I don't think most people would be able to tell. Most people don't spend as much time around you as I do. Though, Ron didn't notice, but he's Ron.' Harry wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that. 'But anyway,' Hermione said with that voice of tense curiosity she used whenever she was trying to figure something out, 'what's going on? This seems like a rather extreme length to go to just for a disguise or something, especially since it's just us here. And how'd you do it in the first place? If you're going to bed like this, I can only guess it's at least somewhat permanent.'

Harry hesitated. This was just going to be uncomfortable. But Hermione was staring at him with that open, anticipating look, one she was well aware he was entirely incapable of resisting, and he hardly held out for a few seconds before he groaned. 'It's completely permanent, actually. I mean, Dumbledore said he can put me back to normal pretty easily—'

'Blood alchemy,' Hermione said easily enough, nodding, but with something of an odd look on her face.

'Right. But, er. Apparently I did this myself. Dumbledore says it was accidental magic.'

'Acci— But—' When Hermione broke off the second time she didn't bother trying to speak again. She just lay there, staring at Harry in the wandlight, an intense, concentrated sort of frown on her face.

And that was all it took. Harry felt the familiar creeping sensation start crawling up his chest and into
his throat, a tingling starting in his head and intensifying so quickly that before long it came as a
buzzing in his ears. His mouth started moving without him really realising he was doing it. 'At least
that's what Dumbledore says, I mean, it came out of nowhere for me, it wasn't like I tried to do it,
and he's making me stay like this at least for a little while for weird Dumbledore reasons, and it's all
been really fucking weird, and I know it's weird, so if you—'

Hermione cut him off about there. Not that she'd said or done anything directly to stop his terrified
little rant. But his words were quite suddenly surprised out of him when he found his face buried in a
mass of tickling hair, Hermione's arms wrapped almost painfully tight around him, one of his arms
cought and squeezed against his side — he wasn't sure how she'd managed hugging him like that,
since they were lying in bed right now. For some seconds she said nothing, just slowly constricted all
the air out of his lungs. Not that he minded all that much, honestly. As far as he was concerned, she
could keep doing that as long as she wanted. Especially since the creeping and buzzing had abruptly
vanished.

Hermione was quite literally the first person he could remember hugging him. Ever. The first time
had honestly almost thrown him into an episode, but he'd long ago stopped being bothered by it. And
even for a while after that, she had been the only person he was even a little comfortable letting touch
him — with the occasional exception of Ron, depending on what happened to be going on at the
time. Actually, it'd been a few years now and both those lists were still only populated with a few
names.

He did kinda regret admitting those two little tidbits to her. The heartbroken expression that had
crossed her face before she had managed to lock it away somewhere as she always did when she
didn't want to bother other people with what was going on in her head had just made him feel
horribly guilty.

So, if she really felt like hugging him right now, she could just go right ahead. He certainly wouldn't
stop her.

'I'm sorry,' she muttered into his hair, the warmth of her breath crossing the side of his head and
wrapping all the way over to the back of his neck.

'Er.' He blinked to himself for a few seconds in silence before finally finding words again. 'What
for?'

'...Hermione's grip on him loosened, and she gradually let go, sliding a few inches away. Harry
noticed the slightest glittering around her eyes in the reddish wandlight. 'It's just, for accidental magic
to do something like this...' She broke off again, shaking her head to herself for a moment. The
contorted expression on her face, the wavering harshness on her voice, seemed almost...guilty? 'You
must have been feeling really, really awful, and I simply had no idea at all.'

Harry had to sigh at that. He wasn't even really sure why — it wasn't a conscious decision, the urge
came over so powerfully he just couldn't stop it. 'That's really not your fault, Hermione. You can't be
expected to know what's going on in my head if I don't tell you.'

The weird expression shifting to a sad sort of smile, Hermione said, 'Harry, you never tell me
anything.'

Letting out a little groan, Harry let himself flop over to his back, his arms crossing over his chest
without any real direction from him. Yes, fine, that was true. He never told Hermione anything. Or at
least nothing personal, anyway. Hermione used to ask, all kinds of annoying questions about what he
thought or felt about this or that. If Ron was around, Harry would just let him go off on one of his
rants — he could really be seriously and noisily opinionated about almost anything. But if Ron
wasn't around he'd just...kind of ignore it. Say something neutral at best, pretend not to hear her at worst.

And that really was worst. He was well aware other people had had and sometimes still did have a nasty habit of pretending she didn't exist, so doing that always made him feel like complete shite, but he never knew what to say when she was asking questions like that. It wasn't out of malice, but that sounded like a pathetic excuse, really. *Oh, I didn't mean it when I was an insufferable arsehole to one of my best friends, so it's fine!* Yeah, no.

It was obvious to him Hermione had just given up on ever getting answers for anything like that some time ago now. It was also obvious she hadn't given up on figuring him out — she just didn't ask directly. Sometimes she would say something, or just give him peculiar looks, that implied to him she knew more than he'd told her, and was just tactful enough not to make a big thing about it. At the very least, she'd figured out enough that by now she would at least avoid certain topics entirely, something he really wished Ron would take notes on. Sometimes it seemed like Ron lived his entire existence gagging on his own foot.

But, anyway, he was supposed to be having a conversation here. *'Yeah, I know. That's on me. So don't go beating yourself up about it.'*

There was silence for a long moment, Hermione staring at him in the red-tinged darkness. At least, he assumed she was staring at him — he was facing the ceiling toward the opposite side of the room, so he actually wasn't entirely sure. After a little while, she said, *'Can I ask you something?'*

Again, he felt himself sighing without really meaning to. *'You can ask, but I can't guarantee I'll answer.'*

'What's the plan?'

He turned his head over toward her again, feeling his eyebrows track up his face. She was still lying there on her side, staring back at him with one of those politely curious expressions that seemed to come to her so easily. *'The plan?'*

'Yes. The plan. You said Dumbledore is *making* you stay like this for a little while — for reasons I can infer well enough on my own, so you don't have to explain.' Well, that was one small mercy, at least. *'I'm just wondering what the plan is. I mean, for when you reach his deadline, and afterward.'*

Okay. No, that wasn't something Harry really felt like talking about. Ellie had to *drag* that kind of thing out of him, like he'd tell anything willingly to anyone, least of all Hermione. He just, no. He sighed yet again — really seemed to be doing that a lot — uncrossed his arms to bury his fingers in his hair. There had to be a polite way to tell Hermione to bugger off, but he really wasn't coming up with anything right—

'I'm not trying to make this harder on you, Harry.' Her voice had turned a bit softer, which surprised him a little, to be honest — withholding information of any sort almost universally led to one very aggravated Hermione. And an aggravated Hermione was a scary Hermione. *'In fact, that's the exact opposite of what I'm trying to do. I don't want to make all this more difficult than it has to be on my account. If I don't know what the plan is, if I don't know what's going on, I might say or do the wrong things, and I really don't want to do that. You're my best friend, Harry, and I don't want to hurt you, even by accident.'*

Fuck. Just...fuck. There was a hidden talent of Hermione's people who weren't close to her probably never found out about: she was really good at making people feel terrible about themselves in a way they couldn't reasonably get angry at her for. Or maybe that was just him, he wasn't sure. He had a
feeling Ron wouldn't be quite as susceptible to that sort of subtle guilt trip as he was himself. When she put it like that, he really couldn't refuse. Not without hating himself a little, anyway.

But it took a little bit to collect himself. His lungs didn't seem to be cooperating. He lay there for long seconds, rubbing his face in silence, trying to force himself to keep breathing and not collapse like a total lunatic. He was sure he'd already crossed the line into partial lunatic territory, fine, but dammit if he wasn't going to keep himself from going full-on Lovegood for as long as he could.

And by Lovegood he meant Xeno. He'd only met Luna's father three times, all while staying at the Burrow one summer or another — he'd probably spoken to Luna more over those few weeks with the Weasleys than three years at the same school, honestly. But, while Luna's unapologetic eccentricities had always struck him as vaguely adorable, her father just made him uncomfortable.

'Alright.' He lifted his hands from his face, crossed his arms over his chest again, but kept staring up at the ceiling rather than actually meet Hermione's eyes for this conversation. Would make it easier, he hoped. 'The answer for what the plan is is I don't know what the plan is.'

A few seconds passed in silence. Harry imagined Hermione was blinking at him, but he couldn't see her surely confused expression from this angle. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean I don't know!' He realised after the fact that had been a little more harsh than he'd meant it to be. Clearing his throat, he shifted against the bed slightly, even though he was perfectly aware the stupid thing had nothing to do with his sudden discomfort. 'I mean, I thought I knew. I was really annoyed with Dumbledore at first for making me wait, would have done it in a second if he'd just let me.'

He was entirely aware that sentence was a little bit tangled, but apparently it made enough sense to Hermione. 'And now?'

'Now everything has just gotten so confusing! I have no idea anymore, I just don't. I mean...' And there he went sighing some more. He buried his fingers in his hair again, resisting the urge to start yanking at it, because, really, that was utterly pointless and would only hurt, he was such a nutcase. 'I'm not going to say I've been doing well, because, honestly, I'm not really sure what doing well feels like.' It occurred to him even as the sentence was passing his lips that he probably shouldn't be saying something that depressing to Hermione, but it was too late now, so, whoops. 'But it's been, I don't know. It's like, when you had a really fucking long day, and you finally get to go to bed, and there's that instant of relief there, like that. If that makes any sense at all.

'But the problem is, so many things are different I don't know which thing did it! I actually live here now, you know,' he said, turning over to look at her. He wasn't entirely sure what to make of the look on her face — she was entirely blank of expression, simply staring at him with wide eyes. So he just looked away to the ceiling again. 'Permanently, I mean. This is my room, will be for as long as I want it. Sirius is my legal guardian now, paperwork signed and everything. I never have to go back. And that's just... I don't...'

'And the other thing! I mean, I've only left the house a couple times. But when I'm not completely freaking out over whether people will figure out it's me and completely freak out, it's actually rather nice. No one knows who I am! I can walk right down the middle of Diagon Alley, and nobody gives me a second glance! Even my scar is gone! You have no idea how many times I've prayed just for that much!

'And I'm not gonna lie, the being a girl now part was really, really awful at first. But now, I just— I just don't know. It doesn't bother me so much anymore. At least not since Ellie made me—' Actually, no, he wasn't going to finish that sentence. Hermione didn't need to know the details about that bath.
Ellie had suggested he have, which still topped the list of the most disorienting experiences of his entire life. 'I honestly hardly notice most of the time.

'So, that's really the only answer I have. This is all so extremely confusing, and I simply just don't know. And even just the fact that I don't know confuses the fuck out of me. So, sorry, I got nothing.'

For a long moment, there was nothing. Harry lay in silence, doing his best to keep his breathing regular, to ignore the impulse of his twitching limbs to jump to his feet and run out of the room. Which really wasn't so easy, to be honest. He had no idea why he wanted to flee so badly. It was stupid. So he crossed his arms over his chest, his legs at the ankles, forcing himself to stay still, to not act like quite so much of a complete crazy person. And try not to think about what Hermione was thinking. Which was easier to do if he wasn't looking at her, so he was also trying not to do that. He thought he'd probably memorised that upper corner of his room pretty well by now.

He jumped when Hermione spoke again. 'Well.' For a second longer she hesitated, then shrugged, exaggerated enough Harry could feel the mattress dip. 'I think I should probably start calling you Melantha, then.'

He jerked back around to stare at her, feeling the sharp frown on his own face. 'What?'

That smile. That same, soft, self-confident smile Hermione always wore when she was sure she was right about something and he was wrong, but was trying to be nice about it. Sometimes he really hated that smile. 'If you do decide not to do the ritual then you'll have to get used to hearing it. Unless you have another name you'd prefer, anyway.'

'But...'

'Besides, until you tell everyone else, you wouldn't want someone to overhear us and figure out that way, right?'

'I guess not...'

'Anyway.' Hermione's smile turned a bit brighter, but there was something slightly off. He wasn't sure exactly what it was about it. But he knew Hermione was about to tease him. 'This should be fun.'

Oh, yes, this whole situation was definitely his idea of fun. Hermione had hit that one right on the mark. Giving her a heavy frown — or at least what he hoped was one — Harry growled, 'Fun?'

'Yes. I've never had a girl best friend before, you know.'

Some hidden, traitorous part of him really, really wanted to laugh at that. But instead he forced out a groan. 'Oh, piss off.'

A wide grin on her face, Hermione removed both privacy charms with a quick wave of her wand. A few seconds later, the wandlight was gone, and Hermione had returned to her own bed. And Harry was finally left more or less alone.

He must have lain in bed for over an hour before finally falling asleep.
Chapter Summary

Harry doesn't even know what he's doing anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This wasn't going to be any fun at all.

One of the things that Harry had noticed before about certain sorts of magic is that just knowing the theory often wasn't enough. Take the *patrōnus*, for example. Knowing the incantation and the emotional component and the wand movements, all the vagaries of exactly how the charm functioned, exactly what it did, *just knowing* it didn't necessarily mean someone could cast it. Hermione, who certainly knew the theory behind the charm better than he did, still hadn't yet managed a corporeal *patrōnus*, even after months of practice. Which wasn't to say knowing the theory didn't *help* — Hermione almost always managed a spell before he or Ron did, simply because she understood them better — and it was often impossible to cast many spells *without* knowing the mechanics involved. But it wasn't *everything*. Sometimes, acquiring a new spell just required practice.

Harry had, more or less, picked up the *theory* behind occlumency. In its very simplest form, anyway — occlumency was an entire branch in a larger field of magics dealing with thought and memory, and he'd just been focusing on the most basic technique. The idea was, basically, to prevent a practitioner of such magics from entering his mind, seeing things he shouldn't. With practice he should be able to both detect and maybe expel such intrusions. With even greater practice, he might be able to learn more complicated techniques — it was possible for a master of occlumency to order their mind in such a way to protect only certain information from an invader without showing any signs of duplicity, or, in extreme cases, even project to the invader a completely fictional identity — but it was unlikely he'd ever learn to do any of that. Keeping people out long enough to get away would have to be good enough.

But, even if he knew the theory far better than he realistically could have learnt in such a short time with so many distractions, that wouldn't be good enough to actually keep anyone out. He had to *practise* to be able to feel an intrusion, *practise* to resist it.

Which meant, today, Sirius was going to be reading his mind.

Yeah, Harry wasn't so comfortable with the thought.

They were in one of the libraries — he still thought it was a bit weird for a single house to have multiple libraries, but that's just rich people, he guessed — sitting in a pair of overwide, comfortable armchairs before a hearth, warm in the flickering firelight. Sirius was leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, wand in his hand. Harry was sitting back, trying to force himself to be as relaxed as possible. The more relaxed he was, the less distracted he would be, and the easier it would be to detect Sirius slipping into his head. Sirius had been awkwardly listing off what they would be doing, promises not to repeat anything he learned to anyone, but Harry had honestly only been half listening. He was trying to focus, on literally nothing at all. That was the trick, see, to think nothing,
to feel nothing. When his mind was as even and still as a lake on a calm day, he'd be able to feel the ripples of Sirius wading through, track the movement to find him and force him out.

In theory, anyway.

'You ready, Harry?' Sirius sounded just as uncomfortable with the idea of reading Harry's mind as Harry was. Which, in a way, did make him feel a bit better.

But he still said, 'I don't think I'll ever be ready, so you may as well just do it.'

Sirius nodded, a hesitant smile on his face. Then his eyes locked on Harry's, his gaze suddenly intense. And did nothing. Which confused Harry a little bit. Sirius still hadn't done anything with his wand, the dark wood still held loosely pointed toward the ground. That Sirius had needed to pull out his wand at all implied that he needed it — the book he'd been given said it was much harder to attack wandlessly than it was to defend, and it was a skill Sirius didn't have — but he hadn't actually done anything with it. Harry wondered wh—

It was perhaps the most peculiar thing Harry had ever felt. It was an odd, soft, tingling sort of sensation, reminding him of the cloth of his father's cloak passing over his skin. But this weird feeling wasn't exactly physical. The tingling was crossing over his mind instead — a sensation so odd he wasn't entirely sure how to put words to it. He hadn't even been aware of his mind a second ago, but the ethereal touch made him shudder, reflexively pull away. He tore his eyes away from Sirius's, staring at the fire instead.

And winced a second later when he was struck with a stinging headache out of nowhere.

'You could feel that?' Sirius asked, his voice low and noticeably apologetic.

Harry nodded, watched the fire for a moment. 'It felt really weird, but yeah. Kind of have a headache now.'

Sirius flashed something of a sympathetic wince. 'Yes, that can happen. Believe it or not, that's actually something of a good thing. It's sort of like how your muscles will ache if you use them more than they're used to — that pain means you actually were pushing back. Though you broke contact before I even really felt it, even that's an accomplishment.'

'Did you see anything?' He was a bit uncomfortable asking the question, but he'd rather know for a fact if Sirius had seen something embarrassing then have to worry about it in private later.

'Not really. I wasn't exactly trying. I was just sort of prodding at the edge over and over to see how long it would take you to notice, if you get my meaning. When your headache goes down, we'll do it again, and I'll actually push in proper this time.'

Minds really didn't have edges in the literal sense — like any magical field, intensity was proportional to the inverse square of the distance from the center, until the field was simply too weak to detect — but he more or less got the idea. Harry didn't really have anything to say to that, so he just nodded, passing the minutes trying not to think at all.

Before too long, once his headache had mostly cleared, he was drawn back to meet his godfather's eyes.

*The blunt, awkward little rant had left Harry utterly speechless, blinking at Ron like an idiot. So it was Hermione who spoke, as soon as she was done with another of those little huffs she did so often. 'Honestly, Ronald, sometimes I think you have to be the most ludicrously thick person I've ever met. She's still the same person. Just because she's a girl now doesn't mean everything else is going to*
Harry was pulled out of the memory by a sharp bark of laughter, followed by a long string of muffled, breathless chuckling. Sirius had leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling, a hand covering his mouth as he tried to regain control of himself. The whole thing left Harry feeling unaccountably annoyed. He guessed the stinging in his head probably wasn't helping. 'I don't really think it was that funny.' Sirius kept laughing, waving a hand in his general direction.

Earlier today, he had decided to just tell the Weasleys who he was. Not that he had any pressing desire to talk to any of them about any of this, but he'd already tired of trying to hide it from them after only a day. Besides, lately he'd been increasingly toying with the idea of staying like this until at least winter break — if only so he could have a single term at Hogwarts pass in relative peace — so he would have to tell them anyway. Might as well do it now before things get more awkward and confusing later. Not that things weren't already plenty awkward and confusing now, shite, but that wasn't the point.

Most everyone had reacted more or less how he'd have thought. Missus Weasley with noisy tears and another rib-cracking hug — he really wished she would stop fucking doing that. Mister Weasley with a few questions on what exactly his plans were, before nodding to himself and moving on as though it were nothing of consequence. The devious duo's response came in two parts: a simultaneous, drawn-out, dazed-sounding muttering of, 'wicked,' accompanied by a few moments of thoughtful silence, then followed by the teasing he'd anticipated and dreaded. Bill he didn't know as well as the others — he'd honestly been a bit uncomfortable with the near-stranger even being there — but the academic questions on exactly what sort of magic was involved weren't too out of nowhere.

Two very similar reactions weren't quite what he'd expected. Ron and Ginny had both descended into grim, moody silence, staring at everyone else with nearly identical downcast expressions. Ginny's funk he still had no idea what to think about. He didn't really know her very well. At all. But Ron's had been enough of a concern he and Hermione had later taken him into another room to talk about it privately.

And, wow, Ron had serious issues. And this was coming from Harry. Mister I've-Been-Seriously-Neglected-All-My-Life-Then-Went-Through-a-Few-Major-Physical-and-Emotional-Traumas-in-Rapid-Succession-and-Whoops-I'm-Magically-a-Girl-Now-and-Maybe-That's-Not-a-Bad-Thing-but-Don't-Tell-Anyone-That-Because-It-Feels-Weird. Okay, that maybe went on a little long. But, still, coming from him, "that bloke's got problems" gained whole new meaning. Ron apparently thought Harry being a girl now meant he was going to be the girliest girl who ever did girl with a bunch of girly girls, and they suddenly wouldn't get along with each other anymore. Not that they'd been getting along with each other that well for some months now anyway. The point was, he was a prat.

Harry had still taken the effort to reassure him. Ron was the first friend he had ever had. He wasn't going to be too much of an arse for no good reason.

'I'm sorry,' Sirius said, when he'd finally gotten enough control of himself to speak again. 'It's just, that Hermione girl really reminds me of someone, and the comparison is unspeakably hilarious.'

Harry felt himself frown. 'Who?'

Suddenly looking a bit uncomfortable, Sirius hesitated for a moment. 'Ah, my cousin Narcissa.'

Harry couldn't help it. He let out a short giggle before cutting it off with a hand over his mouth, only removing it once he was sure he could open his mouth without making more embarrassing noises. The way Sirius was smirking at him kind of made him want to punch the big idiot in the face.
'Narcissa Malfoy? I get the feeling neither of them would be at all pleased with that comparison.'

With a huge, slightly feral grin on his face, Sirius said, 'That's why it's funny!'

He just rolled his eyes.

It took a little longer for Harry to recover from his legilimency-induced headache this time. Sirius said he’d pushed a little bit harder this time, so Harry had had to push back harder, hence the worse headache. He hadn’t really been conscious of pushing back, but Sirius said he had been. While waiting for him to recover, Sirius gave a bit more advice about how to focus away from whatever memory came to him, to clear his mind, detect the intrusion more effectively. Next time, Sirius said, he’d be using a fully-powered attack, which would be even more disorienting, but would supposedly help him learn quicker — apparently, he only hadn’t started at full blast immediately to give Harry a chance to feel what it was like. After some minutes, Harry was more or less prepared to try again.

Later, he’d find out Sirius had still been holding back a little. But at the time, he could hardly believe that was possible. The spell hit him as a lance of fire, and the room around him was—

—the leaves of the bushes tickled at his neck and arms, hopefully dense enough to hide him here. Dudley and his friends were around. He could run away from them just fine, usually, Harry was fast and Dudley was an opportunist — great word, learnt it from a library book a couple days ago — but Aunt Petunia had taken another casual swing at him with a pan and he hadn’t seen it coming in time. It had just been a glancing blow, but it had been hard enough he was still dizzy hours later. He didn’t think he could evade them right now, and it never turned out well when they caught—

—it was starting to smell really bad in here, but he didn’t know what else he could do. He’d knocked on the door for minutes, yelling he had to use the toilet, but Uncle Vernon had just shut the grate and left. Luckily, he had an old glass jar in here he’d been using to store bits of quartz he’d found lying around, but he didn’t have the lid, and that was only a temporary solution. He was getting really hungry, and it was getting hard to breathe again, but he had to be careful, Uncle Vernon hated it when he cried. Next term he’d have to start doing badly in class on purpose, getting better grades than stupid Dudley was clearly a bad idea if—

—apparently he had a name. He realised he obviously must have, but no one had ever used it, and over the years he’d never really thought to ask. Rather silly name, he’d thought the teacher lady had been saying he was hairy for a second, but what could you do—

—she hugged her legs closer against her chest, eyes flickering around uselessly against the dark. Aunt Petunia said she had to sleep in here now, Uncle Vernon had locked her in a bit ago. She didn’t like it in here, it was tiny and it was dark and she couldn’t breathe, but she forced it down, Uncle Vernon didn’t like it when she cried—

—Harry paced around his tiny room, trying not to pull his hair out. That fucking elf had somehow used magic and blamed it all on him. He hadn’t gotten expelled at least, but the Dursleys knew he couldn’t do magic away from school now, they weren’t scared of him anymore. They weren’t letting him out of his room, feeding him even less than usual, had poor Hedwig all locked up. They kept saying he was going to stay here, that they weren’t going to let him go back in September. The thought made him hurt so badly he couldn’t think. And he couldn’t do anything about it — they’d taken his wand, even if he’d been able to use it without getting expelled anyway. He was stuck, this was worse than the cupboard, it was harder to breathe than ever, he didn’t know how much longer he could stay like this, certainly not forever, he almost hoped they would forget to feed him completely, just so it would be over—

—it smelled horribly of paint fumes in here, making him dizzy. He’d tried to force open the grate
from this side with a paper clip, but it hadn't worked. He didn't know why Uncle Vernon had gotten so angry. They'd been having drawing time in class, between the more serious stuff, and they'd all been given a box of crayons to keep — which was amazing to Harry, he'd never had his own before. Harry had decided his workbooks were too blank and boring, so he'd filled the margins with random doodling. He'd realised before too long he couldn't draw very much too well, but the flowers at least looked nice, so he'd mainly stayed with those. Then he'd decided his cupboard was too blank and boring too, so he'd filled the walls with more doodlings. He'd had to get another box of crayons from school for it, since his first was wearing down. A few trees with a couple deer wandering between them in one spot, a couple black dogs added because it just felt right, then dozens and dozens of flowers all over — he remembered his mother's name was Lily, and knew that was a flower, so he'd looked up what those looked like so he could add some red and white ones to the mix. It had all looked rather nice to him, even if it was dark enough in here he couldn't see it often. But when Uncle Vernon found out, he'd actually hit him, which he never did, and more than once. He still hurt a bit, but he was too busy not crying to pay much attention to that. He'd been forced to paint over the walls, and Uncle Vernon had burned his workbooks in the fireplace, in a long rant about abnormality and not having any of it in the house. Harry hoped his teachers didn't get too mad at him for losing his workbooks—

—he felt like he was on fire, his skin peeling off, the water pouring down on his naked skin so hot he felt the stinging and the burning more than the wetness. He screamed at his uncle that he didn't know what happened, he hadn't done anything, but he didn't let up, holding Harry under the shower head mercilessly by the hair, screaming right back at him about unnaturalness and freakishness and he'd do whatever it took to make Harry passably normal and respectable, so help him—

Before Harry could even try to gather the concentration necessary to do anything at all, the stream of memories came to an abrupt halt. It took a while for everything to start making sense again, for the room around him to sharpen from the undifferentiated blur it started as, for him to really remember where he was, what was going on. When he came back to himself, he found he had retreated further into the chair, legs drawn close enough against him — arms wrapped tightly around, mirroring himself from ten years earlier — his bare feet were on the lip. His throat and chest hurt, and he was breathing harder and faster than usual, but he still felt like it wasn't enough. And Sirius was out of his chair, crouching in front of him. He looked away, couldn't meet his eyes, too terrified to know what the closest person he'd ever had to family thought about what he must have seen, his stomach twisting in shame as he forced himself not to—

And then Sirius's arms were around him, pressing his curled-up form a bit awkwardly into his chest. For an instant, four-year-old Harry tried to shrink away from the physical contact, before fourteen-year-old Harry caught up and fractionally relaxed. 'I'm sorry.' Harry blinked — he could tell from the husky shakiness on his voice that Sirius was on the edge of tears himself. 'If I hadn't run off after the rat like a bloody idiot— Myrðin, it's all my fault. I hate you had to go through that, kitten, I'm so, so...'

There was a sudden, startling loosening in Harry's chest, like something deep within him drawn far too tight for far too long, so long he hadn't even noticed it was there, released with violent force. And it forced its way up so quickly and so powerfully Harry, with all his long experience suppressing it, couldn't even slow it down.

And Harry was crying.

He tried to choke it back, he really did, and it honestly terrified him that he couldn't, that he'd lost control so completely. But there was just too much. Those memories he always did his best not to think about, Sirius of all people seeing them, Sirius having his own little breakdown, not running away, not mocking him for all the awfulness, not punishing him for cracking. On top of all the other
shite that was always floating around in his head these days, that was just far too much, and he couldn't hold it back.

He didn't know how long he sat there, crying his eyes out like a fucking pathetic lunatic, Sirius's arms around him, hands running down his hair. After what felt like hours, his throat hurt so badly he couldn't breathe close to steadily, but he still thought he was seconds from drifting off to sleep. Everything seemed oddly distant, and soft, and warm, and he felt inexplicably at ease here in this armchair with his godfather, more comfortable than he thought he could remember ever being.

Even as sleep overtook him, he wondered to himself if this was what being at home felt like to normal people.

When Harry woke up, he immediately realised two things: it was still very early in the morning, but there was no way he'd be able to get back to sleep. He'd passed out absurdly early in the evening yesterday, so this was probably just when his body had decided it was time to wake up.

A moment later, he realised a third thing: it was his birthday. Normally, this would be cause for absolutely no excitement at all — how other people seemed to feel about their birthdays honestly still struck him as a little alien, but he was aware that was only because the Dursleys were awful, so he tried not to think about it. Not to say he actually was excited. If he had to put a word to it, he thought he'd pick apprehensive. Everyone was going to do a whole big thing about it, which was something he wasn't too keen on in the first place, and it really didn't help that things were still painfully awkward with half of the people in the house. It hadn't been all that long since everyone had been told Harry was Melantha — Melantha was Harry? — and it seemed he was far from the only person who needed some time to adjust to the idea.

Normally, he only really noted his birthdays so far as to count off one more year before he could leave Privet Drive. But he'd already left Privet Drive, so this was entirely new territory for him.

After a few minutes lying around, he got bored of just sitting in bed. But what the hell was he going to do with himself at — he dimly lit his wand quick to check his watch — three thirty in the morning? Actually, no, that was a stupid question. He was going to grab a book from the library and sit with Hedwig until everyone else woke up. Sirius usually had his mail redirected, and didn't have an owl himself, so he'd managed to forget to tweak the wards to let Hedwig in until just a couple days ago. Said it hadn't occurred to him he would have to. Hedwig had been very much not happy with him. Thankfully, Hedwig didn't seem to be annoyed with Harry, but he still felt a bit guilty about it, especially for not noticing she was missing in the first place for so long, so he'd been trying to spend more time with her than usual, to hopefully make up for it a little, he guessed?

Though, actually, she had been a little annoyed with him for just a couple seconds. But he was pretty sure that was only because she'd been a little offended at how surprised he'd been when she hadn't been fooled by his altered appearance for an instant. Which, when he thought about it, was pretty stupid of him, but by now he was just getting really annoyed that anyone had managed to figure it out themselves.

Also a little worried about what would happen if he returned to Hogwarts like this, but he was trying not to think about that too much.

Making as little noise as possible, Harry slipped out of his bed, carefully counted his paces through his room so as not to bump into Ginny's. He'd found his way in the darkness well enough it only took him a couple seconds to find the doorknob, and then he was out in the softly-lit hall, heading toward one of the Black libraries. After a few moments of searching, he slipped a book on runic magic off the shelf. He suspected it might be a bit above his level, but he'd always found runic magic
interesting, so might as well.

Another walk down the hall, up a flight of stairs, down another hall, and Harry was in a very much quintessentially magical room. This room had exactly one purpose, one which would be entirely unneeded in a non-magical house: writing and sending letters by owl. It was one of the smaller rooms in the house, with a long desk with a couple chairs at one end, filled with parchment of various sizes and types and a few kinds of ink, and a single sofa against the opposite wall. One of the corners was, in fact, the corner of the entire building, shaped into a cylinder of pale wood with a number of owl-sized openings. There were owl-sized openings on the outside face of the cylinder as well, though they were always skewed, so it was impossible to see the sky through the inside face. Harry assumed that had been done for complicated defensive reasons, but he'd never thought to ask.

He hadn't even closed the door before Hedwig popped up, one of the openings in the wood filled with fluttering white and black, giving him a soft warbling sound he recognised as a greeting. 'Hey, girl. I was just gonna read until everyone else wakes up, if you wanted a softer perch for the morning.'

Hedwig stared at him for a moment with her flat, avian gaze — he knew Hedwig's habit of glaring at people tended to make others uneasy, but he was long used to it by now. Harry almost got the impression Hedwig was a little disappointed he didn't have anything for her to do. But then she clearly made up her mind, lifting into the air with almost silent grace, settling on his shoulder so softly he hardly even felt the brush of wind twitching at his hair. He did notice her talons, of course, but she couldn't really help that. It was a little awkward settling onto the sofa with a huge bird on his shoulder — Hedwig had to be two feet long from beak to tail — but he managed it without getting Hedwig too annoyed at him. Sitting against the armrest with his feet on the sofa, he propped the book open against his legs, and settled in to read.

And completely failed at it. For some reason, his brain apparently didn't much agree with him right now. It only took a few minutes of trying to force himself to focus before he started getting really annoyed. Hedwig seemed to realise something was bothering him, making her oddly cat-like mewling almost right into his ear while she gently pulled at his hair. After a while, he wasn't sure how long, he gave up the book as a bad job.

Which meant he was stuck with very little to occupy himself. Never a good idea, these days. He turned his face into the smooth warmth of Hedwig's feathers, running fingers absently along her back. That peculiar little breakdown of his last night was still too fresh in his mind, still a little oddly raw from it, and he didn't want to think about that. No, he didn't want to think about that at all. Kinda afraid he would start crying his eyes out again like a crazy person, even though he still wasn't entirely sure what the fuck had been going on in his head to get him crying in the first place. So he would have to force himself to think about something else.

He found himself going along one of the weirder tangents he'd ever had: he started thinking about Melantha.

Not himself, obviously. That wouldn't make any sense, Melantha wasn't a real person to be thought about. Instead, he found himself creating a fictional person that could have been a Melantha Black who had never existed and never would.

She was Sirius's daughter, he decided. He wasn't really sure who her mother should be — he hadn't heard if Sirius had been seriously involved with anyone before, nor had Sirius mentioned anyone himself. He could probably count on one hand the witches he knew around Sirius's age who weren't already married to someone else. Talking about the Order, he'd gotten the impression Sirius had taken the death of someone named Marlene particularly badly, and Remus had twice teased him
about an Amelia, but Harry didn't know enough about either of them to fill the blank. Maybe Melantha's mother had died when she'd been really young. Kind of a depressing thing to be randomly deciding, he guessed, but he knew better than most that sometimes depressing things just happen.

They would have lived somewhere else, at least until Sirius's mother died and he inherited this place — if Harry had his maths right, that would have been when Melantha was only five or six. Some flat somewhere in the middle of London, he decided. Yes, with what Sirius had been like before Azkaban, he figured being in the middle of things was very much how he would prefer to live. He'd bring Melantha out into the city all the time, of course, to all the... Honestly, he wasn't entirely sure what normal parents did with their normal children. He tended to tune out other kids when they talked about it. Just...things, lots of things.

Not that they only went wandering around London, of course. With how much Sirius loved quidditch, there was absolutely no way at all Melantha would first touch a broom in Hogwarts at eleven years of age. As soon as she was physically capable, Harry was sure Sirius would have his daughter on a broom. Because obviously.

Once Sirius did inherit this place, he doubted he would put up with it being so big and empty. So he was sure he'd invite all the cousins to come live with them. The Tonkses, of course, and all those others Harry hadn't met yet — apparently, they were going to be over in a few days to be pseudo-officially welcomed into the House of Black (back in, for some of them), but Harry hardly even knew any names. So Melantha would be surrounded growing up with aunts and uncles and cousins. They didn't always get along, of course. He guessed some familial tension was inevitable when the family was so diversified in opinion your father was Sirius Black and your cousin was Draco Malfoy. But Harry still thought that had to be about a billion times nicer than, well.

Oh, wow, Melantha would have grown up with Dora always around. He kinda hoped Dora wasn't so, erm, unsettling if you were used to her. She was a bit much for — Oh, wait, Harry's discomfort with Dora was mostly from that whole...not liking being touched...thing. That's not a problem Melantha would have. For obvious reasons. So Dora probably wouldn't bother Melantha too much. Right. Good.

Oh, and, obviously, Remus would be around all the time, too. And, ah, the Potters. Because they'd still be alive, because Voldemort obviously never existed. If Harry was making up some fictional reality here, well, he could just make it whatever he felt like. Melantha would naturally be friends with whatever kids James and Lily had — he felt a little peculiar with the idea of referring to himself there, considering the rest of the thought exercise he was doing here, that'd just be weird — carrying the Potter–Black friendship into a second generation. They could join the cousins in their pick-up quidditch games. Yes.

He felt vaguely guilty in retrospect that he wasn't making Melantha a Potter — so, his sister, sort of? — but he'd started with the name "Melantha Black" already in his head, so, whoops.

When she got to Hogwarts, Melantha would be in Gryffindor, of course. Or maybe not of course — did it really matter which House someone was in as much as he'd been led to believe? With Voldemort around, Slytherin had sort of turned into treacherous mire, but he'd heard it hadn't always been like that, and neither of the others seemed that bad to him. Whatever, not the point. Probably Gryffindor, though, so she'd be friends with Hermione. Because Hermione was great, not enough people realised this.

Hogwarts for Melantha would be nothing like Hogwarts for Harry. Less stressful more fun, basically. It would help that Melantha actually knew how to have fun. She'd have a lot more
experience, what with having Sirius for a father. From what Harry knew, pre-Azkaban Sirius was all about the outrageous shenanigans. Which would probably get her into trouble occasionally, but detention wasn't so bad every once in a while.

Melantha would be really nice. She was just one of those incomprehensible people who were just happy and friendly to everyone. Though, she could be a total bitch when she was pissed off, but really only to people who deserved it. Bullies, mostly. She wouldn't like bullies any more than Harry did, but she would actually have the temerity to do something about it. He was sure Fred and George would be willing to provide some assistance in correcting people, no doubt.

(Speaking of which, he should find some way to help Luna this year. He knew people were regularly awful to her, but he'd never had the time or motivation to do much about it. It helped that he barely knew her, he guessed — it was easy to ignore a problem that wasn't slapping you in the face regularly.)

Melantha would be pretty, it kind of ran in the family, but she wouldn't make a thing about it. Not like some girls did, all obsessing over all that junk that he just really didn't care about. But also not making a thing about it in that... Okay, he didn't know how to say this coherently, he wasn't sure what he meant. Vainglorious, maybe? Yes, that was a good word, the opposite of that. Sort of like Hermione, he guessed — hardly anyone ever noticed how pretty she was, since she just never made it a thing.

He was not used to thinking along these lines, it was very confusing.

Melantha would be way more consistent in how well she did in class, since she didn't have all of Harry's shite to deal with. And she'd probably have Hermione kicking her arse, so there's that. Excluding a few things she was abnormally good at, she wouldn't be any sort of crazy genius or anything. Despite what Sirius would incessantly claim to anyone who would listen — he'd be a bit like Cedric's father in that. Which Melantha would find just as annoying as Cedric did.

She wouldn't make prefect because, of course, Hermione would. If the badge didn't come with Hermione's letter this year, Harry would have no idea what to think. But that would be fine, Melantha didn't really want to be a prefect anyway. Far too much work, far too much responsibility. There were far better things to do with her time.

What was he even...

This was very strange. Harry didn't even know what he was doing anymore. This had started as a weird thing to do in the first place, and he'd entirely lost his train of thought since. It'd accomplished his goal of distracting himself at least, for a little while. But he was having one last, very odd thought. More than a thought, really. Or maybe something else came with the thought, something that made his lungs feel inside out, his throat uncomfortably tight, his head all fuzzy.

This girl's life didn't sound so bad at all. For a moment, he thought he would much rather be Melantha Black than Harry Potter.

_Shit_, would everyone else just wake up already?

Chapter End Notes

_This chapter brought to you by insomnia._
[he slipped a book on runic magic off the shelf. He suspected it might be a bit above his level] — Thought I mentioned this in an earlier chapter, but apparently not. In this version of events, when signing up for classes at the end of second year, Hermione managed to convince Harry to sign up for Arithmancy and Runes instead of Divination and CoMC. The Arithmancy was a hard sell, and she tried to talk him into taking CoMC as well, but she'd used up her persuasion points by then. Ron only half-caved, taking Runes and CoMC, mostly just to get her to shut up. All assertions that Runes is now Ron and Harry's favorite class are wild accusations.

Myrðin — Uh. Have I already said this is Merlin? Well, anyway, that's Merlin. Pronounced something like "murr-thin".
July 1995 — Things Given

Chapter Summary

Harry gets the best gift anyone has given him ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'This whole thing is ridiculous.'

'How so?' Hermione said, leading the way with a smile on her face.

'What was the point of locking me out until everything was ready? I know what's going on. It's just so stupid.' Harry had spent what felt like hours, sitting in a library alone, tapping his foot in a combination of nerves and impatience. Trying to occupy his thoughts with something, anything that would distract him from that tense, raw, fragile feeling in the back of his head that had been sticking around ever since that disastrous occlumency session with Sirius last night. It made him feel uncomfortable, unbalanced, and he didn't want to even be aware of it if he could help it.

'Hmm.' Hermione shrugged, as though she thought it didn't really matter. 'You'd have to ask Sirius. It was his idea.'

Harry sighed.

After a little bit more walking, Hermione was leading him into one of the larger sitting rooms. Harry was immediately met by a chorus of Happy birthday, loud enough and across enough voices speaking over each other he really only guessed what they were saying from context. The room was crammed full with more people than he was really comfortable with being around at the same time. Sirius and Remus, the Weasleys, the Tonkses, a few people he vaguely recognised as members of the Order. Thankfully, Snape was not among the Order members — he hadn't actually seen the singularly unpleasant man since this whole being a girl now situation started happening, and he just knew Snape was going to be even more of an arse than usual about it, so he really wasn't looking forward to that. Seconds later he was being suffocated by various people hugging him one after the other, doing his best not to look like it was bothering him.

Most people hadn't yet seemed to notice he didn't really like it when they kept touching him. Hermione, he knew, had figured it out, and he was pretty sure Dora had too — not that Dora really seemed to care, mind, the clingy lunatic.

When he was done being manhandled, he noticed the room had been decorated in his absence. Strips of colourful paper and floating balls of magical light, mostly. When he saw a banner over one corner, where stood a table piled with platters of food and bottles of drink, with HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY emblazoned across in flashing red and gold he felt inexplicably embarrassed. It didn't help when, with the characteristic twisting of a cosmetic transfiguration, the HARRY changed to MELANTHA. He glanced to his side quickly enough to catch a smiling Hermione returning her wand to her sleeve with a self-satisfied nod.

Harry rolled his eyes. Ever since he'd told everyone what was going on, Hermione had been very
insistent about everyone continuing to use the new name — they had been using it earlier, of course, but now that they knew who he was people kept slipping. And since this was Hermione, she usually wasn't exactly subtle about it. She and Ron were arguing over it practically constantly. Sometimes she even annoyed him.

It didn't take very long for Harry to just start feeling...really uncomfortable. It didn't exactly help that he was in a room with way too many people all at once, but that wasn't the main problem. He was pretty sure it was just one of those things he was weird about. He knew other people would find it a rather depressing thing to say, so he was careful not to mention it out loud, but he couldn't remember having ever done anything for his birthday before. The Dursleys usually never acknowledged it at all, and even when they did it was only so they could draw attention to how little they cared (which was a little contradictory, really). He honestly didn't understand how other people felt about their birthday. It was just one random day on the calendar, he really didn't see how it should matter. He honestly didn't understand how other people felt about their birthday. It was just one random day on the calendar, he really didn't see how it should matter. He had no idea what he should be feeling or thinking, no idea how everyone expected him to act, no idea if he should be responding in any particular way to how especially nice to him everyone was being. Well, mostly nice — the twins and Dora particularly were still getting in their usual ribbing — but still, it was uncomfortable.

When they all insisted on him opening presents in front of everyone — mostly books, which didn't surprise him at all considering the company he mostly kept, though Sirius had gotten him quidditch gloves that actually fit his newly-proportioned hands — it just made him more uncomfortable. It really, really didn't help when he opened a box from Dora to find it filled with several articles of what he realised after a few seconds was wizarding lingerie. In two seconds Harry had jumped to his feet, the embarrassing contents of the box spilling all over the floor, pulled out his wand, and started chasing Dora around the room, firing hex after hex at her, ignoring quite nearly everyone else in the room laughing at them between blocking his wayward spells, as well as just how red his own damn face was. Following a minute or two of trying to hit his infuriating cousin with something, Dora produced her own wand and, after slapping his latest hex into the wall with the back of her off hand — Harry hadn't even known that was possible — smoothly and silently nailed him full in the chest with a tickling jinx.

After what felt like hours, Dora finally released him from his torture, left kneeling on the ground, desperately trying to breathe while clutching his aching sides, tears in his eyes. Still smiling like the irredeemable weirdo she was, Dora helped him up to his shaky feet, then pulled him into a hug that seemed oddly gentle for her. He guessed she was trying to apologise. Yes, apologising by doing something that annoyed him anyway, that was going to help. And the way she whispered into his ear, hardly audible over everyone else in the room — some talking with each other, some asking if he was all right, others still laughing at him — really didn't make him less uncomfortable. Especially considering what she said: 'Not just trying to tease you. I figure you'll be wanting some of that stuff in a few months. Just ask me if you need anything, 'kay?' Then she leaned away, a cocky grin on her face. 'Anything for our adorable little flower!' she simpered, ruffling at his hair.

Harry just shoved her, but she somehow ended up tripping over her own feet and falling to the floor. Oddly uncoordinated all of a sudden, especially considering how she'd just darted around the room smooth and silent as a ghost a minute ago. He had absolutely no idea how she could alternate between graceful and clumsy like this all the time. But even that just made her giggle up at him like a complete crazy person.

He was seriously starting to think this whole family was just insane. And, yes, he was including himself, thanks for asking.

It was only a couple minutes later that, drawing everyone's attention to him like some sort of weird magical magnet, Dumbledore walked in. Well, almost everyone — Dora and the twins were giggling
raucously at each other about something, who knew what. Bill standing with them wearing an exasperated-but-amused sort of look. The strange old man, dressed as flamboyantly as usual, hardly even seemed to notice, striking up a casual conversation with some woman in the Order whose name Harry couldn't remember. Also as usual.

But Harry had been waiting for him to show up. Swallowing down his nervousness, he walked right up to the eternally quirky old Professor, wondering if he should say something to announce himself, interrupt the conversation. But hardly a couple seconds later, Dumbledore turned to speak him with those familiar twinkling blue eyes. 'Good afternoon, Mister Potter,' he said, sounding as calm and cheerful as ever — and seeming completely unphased by the juxtaposition of calling someone visibly a girl mister. 'And how are you faring, this the first day of your sixteenth year?'

For a second, Harry was confused — first by the strange wording, second by the number sixteen. It was his fifteenth birthday, not sixteenth. After a moment thinking about it, he realised the way Dumbledore had phrased it changed the meaning. When someone was just born, they were, well, zero years old, but were in their first year, when they were one year old in their second year. So, when Harry was fifteen years old, he would be in his sixteenth year. That was needlessly confusing. But, then, it had come out of Dumbledore's mouth, so he shouldn't be surprised, really. 'Ah, fine, thanks, Professor. I was actually hoping I could talk to you for a moment. In private.'

Dumbledore just gave him a pleasant nod, and then Sirius, who had obviously noted Harry's approach and drifted over just for this purpose, led them out into the hall, then a room a few doors down. This was one of those rooms filled with books, this the smallest one, just a few shelves and some chairs. After giving him an encouraging little smile, Sirius nodded at Dumbledore, then closed the door behind them. Trying not to wring his hands like the nervous wreck he still managed most of the time to pretend he wasn't, Harry walked for one of the chairs, flopped himself down. Dumbledore followed a moment later in one across from him, though much more sedately. 'What did you have on your mind, Harry?' he asked immediately, in that soft, gentle voice of his.

Harry found himself wondering for a moment if Dumbledore had intentionally practiced his I'm-being-nice-to-you-right-now voice, how long it must have taken him to perfect. Then he shook his head a little, refocusing himself. 'You said a few weeks ago, you said I should take some time to consider what to do about, you know. This,' he finished vaguely, gesturing to himself with a hand. 'Ah, yes,' Dumbledore said, leaning back into his puffy little armchair and steepling his fingers in front of him. 'If I remember correctly, I gave you until the twenty-fifth of August to come to a decision. I take it you feel that unnecessary.'

'Yeah.' Harry bit his lip, staring down at the thick, dark carpet. This was so uncomfortable. Especially since, when Dumbledore had first floated the idea, Harry had been very much tempted to yell at him. He did his best to squeeze the squirming awkwardness down, force himself to keep talking, hopefully in a way that would be at least half-coherent. 'I was thinking I would, er, you know. Stay, ah, like this, for a while. I'm not saying forever, but, I thought I'd try maybe the, ah, fall term. At Hogwarts.' Well, that was almost half.

And Dumbledore just kept smiling placidly at him, as though what they were talking about weren't, at some level, completely fucking insane. 'I see, then. That will not be particularly difficult to arrange. I suggest you attend under the name Black. There are no other Potters left, so if you wish to keep your identity secret for the time being, using the name would draw far too much unwanted attention.' He'd figured that part already, and it wasn't like he particularly cared too much. He'd never felt quite as attached to the name as everyone seemed to assume he would be anyway. 'If you recall, transfer students are Sorted that first evening, just after the first-years.' Harry nodded — there had been a total of three transfers he'd seen so far, one his first and and two fourth year. 'The Sorting Hat will
recognise who you are immediately, and that you were already Sorted into Gryffindor—' Harry opened his mouth to say something to that, but before he could get anything out Dumbledore stopped him with a single raised hand. 'Do not worry about the Hat — it is bound not to reveal what it finds in students' minds to anyone, even myself. You need not fear that intrusion.

'Anyway, as it has done in similar situations in the past, the Hat will pretend to sort you into Gryffindor for the first time. You will not be the only Black transferring into Hogwarts this year — Sirius rebuilding the House has made our school newly accessible to a few of his younger cousins. There will be at least three standing there with you. Maybe one more, but I believe he would be in his seventh year, and I suspect he will rather stay where he is to prepare for his NEWTs. Plus one first-year, but he will be Sorted with the rest. So, your Sorting at the end will not attract too much additional scrutiny, if you were worried about that.'

That was a little bit of a surprise — he hadn't thought to ask if there were members of the House around his age. He knew Sirius had been tracking down relatives expelled from the family and their descendants, and was inviting everyone over in a few days, a sort of official welcome back into the House of Black, but he hadn't offered any details. Sirius had mentioned his favorite uncle — Harry thought his name might be Alphard — would be there, but he didn't know much more than that. That was a weird thought. He had enough trouble with Dora, he didn't know how he would handle more new cousins. But he just nodded back to Dumbledore.

'With a little input from your godfather, I can handle all the parchmentwork, don't worry about that either. I assume you've settled on a name you'll be using?'

Harry nodded again. 'Melantha Black.'

'No middle name?' he asked, a fluffy white eyebrow tracking upward a little.

He just blinked down at the carpet for a second. 'Do I need one?'

Dumbledore gave a minute little shrug. 'I will admit the usage of multiple names is gradually vanishing among the Common Houses — even back in my day, a Common House such as Dumbledore giving a child four names such as my brother and I have was unusual.' Harry started with surprise, eyes jumping from the carpet up to look straight at the old Professor, only to find him staring absently up at the ceiling. He'd had no idea Dumbledore had a brother. He'd even used present tense, so he must still be alive. Interesting. 'It would be peculiar, however, for a member of a Noble House such as Black to only have one. I understand the practice of most people having two given names is exceptionally common among English-speaking muggles as well. It would not be necessary, so to speak, for Melantha Black to have a middle name, but it would be unusual if she didn't.'

Well, that was just annoying. He had no idea what to pick, and he honestly didn't care that much. This was completely pointless. He opened his mouth to say as much, but hadn't even gotten as far as forming the first syllable when a thought came to him. Well. That would just be the obvious thing to do, wouldn't it? It wasn't like it actually made a difference to him either way — it wasn't even real, just a fiction on probably illegal documents — so he might as well. Besides, it actually felt completely appropriate, in a rather twisted way like so many things these days did. 'Would "Lily" work?'

His smile twitching a little wider across his face, Dumbledore's eyes dropped from the ceiling to meet his, somehow twinkling even more than usual. 'Yes, I do believe it would. Sirius tells me you've been making progress with your occlumency.'

It took Harry a moment to shift his thoughts along with the sudden change of topic. 'Ah, I guess so.
The first time against real legilimency, erm.’ He wondered if he should say anything about that. Not in any detail, of course — he was still trying to ignore himself that whole unpleasant business, especially that embarrassing little episode he’d had at the end. How peculiarly fragile he still felt when all was quiet and he was alone with his thoughts. So he just said, ‘It didn't go so well.’

But Dumbledore just shrugged a little at that. ‘I'm afraid that's how it must be at the beginning. It is a very difficult skill to learn and, as is true with most any skill, it cannot be acquired without some amount of discomfort. I regret it is necessary at all, but Sirius demands you be fully informed in everything directly involving you — to be completely honest, I find it hard to fault his reasoning — which means you must be aware of things most aren’t. Secrets that must be kept at all costs. When the time comes, and you know, I hope you will understand the precautions I've been making.’

Harry could only nod again at that. Like he really knew enough about what was going on to judge whether it was necessary or not.

‘Now,’ he said, the bright grin that had dimmed a bit with the talk of occlumency returning with full force, ‘unless there was anything else you needed, I’m afraid I must be going. I’m quite busy these days, and I only managed to allot myself a few minutes for my appearance.’

He guessed he should appreciate Dumbledore had decided to make time in his schedule to show up for his birthday, but honestly he didn't care enough about his birthday one way or the other for it to really mean anything to him. ‘No, Professor, that was all I had. Thank you,’ he decided to add anyway.

Pushing himself to his feet, he said, 'My pleasure, Mister Potter.' He paused a moment, his hand on the doorknob, smiling back at him. 'Or, as I suppose I should be saying now, Miss Black.'

Harry just rolled his eyes. Which only made Dumbledore chuckle at him.

A moment later, once Dumbledore had left the room, Harry was a little surprised to the hear the door click shut again. He glanced in that direction to see Sirius now in the room with him, pacing to the chair Dumbledore had abandoned with an oddly uncomfortable-looking smile on his face. ‘Everything go alright, then?’

Even though he felt immediately suspicious, Harry just nodded. Something was going on. He didn't know what. It had always struck him as a little strange how much Sirius seemed to not care about the whole situation Harry was in. Over the last few weeks, Harry had been gradually building the understanding that it didn't matter to Sirius the tiniest bit who or what he was — as long as Harry was safe and happy, the other details made no real difference to Sirius at all. Which was a weird thought. He’d left the Dursleys' quickly enough afterward he honestly wasn't sure if they knew what was happening or not, but he was certain they wouldn't have reacted to it as calmly as Sirius had. Sirius wasn't the only one, either — it still astounded him how completely...supportive Hermione was being about the whole thing. So, he knew the conversation Sirius knew he'd just had with Dumbledore couldn't have anything to do with the awkward, hesitant sort of bearing he carried at the moment. Something else was going on.

‘Well,’ Sirius said as he sat, 'that's one less thing to worry about.' Harry wasn't entirely sure if he should be responding to that, but Sirius continued before the silence became too awkward. 'Anyway, I had something else to give you, but I thought it best I give it to you away from everyone else. I figured you might want a moment alone.’

‘Erm.' Okay. Once again, Sirius had gone and said something weird. Not quite his usual sort of weird, but definitely weird. 'Okay?"
Still with that odd look on his face, Sirius pulled something out of a pocket in his robes and, with a
tap of his wand, it expanded. Harry was a little surprised when he realised what it was — one of
those plain, brown cardboard boxes, the flaps at the top neatly folded closed. It wasn't a very large
one, he could fit a few of them in his school trunk. The box had a large number five drawn on each
side with what looked to be permanent marker. Sirius handed it over to him, still looking oddly
cautious. 'Go ahead.'

Raising an eyebrow at him, Harry nonetheless peeled apart the flaps — being a little more gentle
about it than he would usually be, unconsciously matching the almost reverent way Sirius had been
holding the thing. Inside the box were...notebooks. A dozen or two of them, in a couple different
colours. He noticed after a moment, with some measure of surprise, that they were muggle
notebooks, the sort sewn and glued together by the thousands in some factory somewhere. Shooting
Sirius an uncertain glance, he picked up one of the notebooks. He felt the traces of some sort of
magic lingering on it — if he had to guess, some sort of stasis spell, to preserve the pages over years.
Written on the cover of this one in clearly-legible block letters was Fifth Year, and just under it
Transfiguration (II). He guessed there was probably a Transfiguration (I) in here somewhere too. He
cracked the cover open, his lips twitching into a smile when he saw what was obviously a detailed
table of contents on the first page, written in a smoother, curvier sort of script. It reminded him so
suddenly and so strongly of Hermione he couldn't help it.

After a second, he noticed something was written on the left, the inside of the front cover. Property
of Lily—

Harry stopped before he could even finish reading the name. He'd known what it was about to say.
He took a long, shuddering breath, gathering himself, before opening his eyes again.

Property of Lily Evans
NO SNOOPING!
(I mean it this time, Alice.)

His eyes lingered on his mother's name long enough — processing the fact that she must have kept
this notebook, all these notebooks, while she'd been in her fifth year at Hogwarts — he didn't notice
there was more underneath for some seconds. In a slightly harsher, sloppier script was scrawled, You
misspelled "dissipate" on page 43.

Under that, again in what he knew must be his mother's handwriting, Alice Prewett, you are
completely insufferable.

And a last reply, I love you too, Lily dearest.

It was a long moment before Harry could get the question out — his throat didn't seem to be working
properly. 'Alice Prewett?'

Sounding distinctly uncomfortable, Sirius said, 'It's been Alice Longbottom for a while now.'

Harry glanced up at him, but could only maintain eye contact for a second or two before his eyes
drifted downward again, staring at his mother's name written in her own handwriting. 'Neville's
mother?'

'Yeah, the same. She was a Gryffindor in our year too. She and Lily were inseparable from quite
nearly the day they met. Which isn't to say they got along perfectly all the time. Alice was something
of a troublemaker in her school days, nearly as bad as we were, and Lily apparently didn't like that
very much. So I'm told, anyway — Remus knew Lily far better than I did.'
'He did?' That was news to him. He'd been told a couple stories about his father — not very many, but a couple — but he'd hardly been told anything about his mother at all.

'She was friendly with him long before she was with the rest of us, yes. Actually, Remus was friends with her before he was with us — apparently, she put together he was a werewolf before the end of our first year, came to him with a couple polite questions about it, which nearly put him in a dead panic.' Sirius was almost chuckling with the thought. 'James and I didn't really start getting to know him until second year. A few years later, when James started getting it for Lily really bad, he kept trying to get Remus to talk to her for him — which he refused every time, the honest kind of person he's always been.

'But anyway,' Sirius said, refocusing with audible effort, 'Lily started keeping these organised little notebooks in second year. There's dozens of the things, all in little boxes like these, stacked in a corner of the Potter vault. Since I'm your guardian now, I was allowed to go check, but I'm technically not supposed to take anything out. Had to bribe the goblin there to look the other way. But, you know, Lily was top of our class every year, and I know you've never had anything of your mother's, so, well, I thought you might appreciate it.'

Harry had absolutely no idea how he felt about it. All he could do was stare blankly at the book, reading Property of Lily Evans over and over again in his head, lost in the knowledge that his mother he couldn't even remember had touched this, had written page after page in it, that there were dozens of others. It didn't even really make a difference that it was all academic, stuff he would probably read and hear himself over and over in the coming year. Just the thought that it was hers was so enormous he couldn't even process the whole thing at once.

But he felt that odd, fragile feeling he'd been doing his best to ignore drawn further toward the surface. Felt the tightness in his own throat, the stinging in his eyes, his mother's handwriting growing gradually harder to read as his vision blurred. After a little while, he wasn't sure how long, he felt Sirius pull him into a hug, hand running almost absently down his hair. Which didn't really seem to help make all that annoying shite go away in the least.

Yet, for once, someone touching him, hugging him, didn't seem to bother him at all, not even a little bit.

'Shit up, Kreacher, and just listen to me.'

Harry froze at his godfather's voice, standing in the middle of the hallway. He'd been walking to what he thought of as Hedwig's room after another meeting with Ellie — their first since he started practising against actual legilimency, and the subtly unstable sense of himself that had been lingering since that evening made talking to her somehow even more uncomfortable. Sirius sounded half aggravated and half exasperated, but Harry guessed that really wasn't so surprising, if he was in there talking to Kreacher.

He hadn't known very many house-elves, so he always found himself semi-unconsciously comparing each new one he ran into to Dobby, the first he'd ever met. He knew Dobby was comparatively young, he thought the equivalent of his late teens, early twenties. (He didn't actually know what a house-elf lifespan was like, so his best guess was necessarily relative.) When they'd first met, Dobby had been a fearful and skittish sort of creature, probably the most pathetic person Harry had ever seen. He'd tricked Malfoy into freeing him mostly out of pity. By the time Harry ran into him again last year, he'd been quite nearly a completely different person, all cheerful and energetic, with a level of self-assurance that certainly hadn't been there before — though still with a tinge of self-deprecation and an overwhelming need to be helpful to someone somehow that, as near as Harry could tell, was simply a house-elf thing.
Kreacher was different from Dobby in almost every way. For one thing, he was a lot older — Harry got the impression more of someone in late middle age, even old age. Most of the time, the wrinkly little thing plodded drearily around the house, seeming almost impossibly heavy for his size. Not that he was exactly infirm. Harry had seen him react and move with startling speed a few times, but it was rare. And while Dobby hadn't adopted the prejudices of his old masters the slightest bit, it was plainly clear Kreacher had, always muttering insults under his breath that would sound perfectly appropriate coming from the mouth of the vilest of Death Eaters. Hermione was convinced Kreacher didn't really mean to say those things out loud, wasn't entirely aware they could hear him; Harry didn't think it mattered so much either way, it was still awful. Inexplicably, Kreacher was less awful to Harry than he was to Sirius. He had made a couple infuriating comments about his less-than-pure blood, and a few simply uncomfortable ones referring to the Dark Lord, but, for the most part, he'd been...not nice, exactly, but not actively horrible either. He certainly didn't look at Harry with the same constant, undisguised hatred he did Sirius.

Harry had the sneaking suspicion this had something to do with what — or, rather, who — he looked like now. Sirius had mentioned at one point that Kreacher had had an enormous soft spot when he'd been growing up for Bellatrix and Narcissa (and Andi, before she was kicked out). The thought made him uncomfortable, so he just added it to his list of things to avoid thinking about.

Far as he could tell, Sirius and Kreacher had been doing their level best to simply avoid each other. Considering the size of this place, that wasn't even difficult. That Sirius was willingly talking to him now was curious. Harry couldn't help himself — as quiet as he could, he slunk over to the door Sirius's voice had come from, pushing down the flare of guilt at his eavesdropping.

'There are a few facts you have obviously not yet put together. So, I'm going to spell them out for you, and hope we can come to an understanding. First, tell me: who is the greatest enemy of the purebloods of Britain? You can speak, by the way.'

The response was instant, the peculiarly deep, croaking voice thick with venom. 'It is the blood-traitor, Dumbledore, and his—'

'No, no, you're wrong. It's really quite simple when you think about it. It's Voldemort.'

For a moment, there was only a furious hissing from the house-elf. 'The blood-traitor dares to—'

' Shut up, Kreacher.' The nascent tirade cut off immediately. 'It's really quite obvious when you think about it. In his war against the Ministry, a war he started, do you have any idea how many purebloods died? How many entire families were eliminated completely, how many pureblooded lines stretching back to the time of the Founders finally saw their end? Including, in case you hadn't noticed, this one — Voldemort turned my dear cousin Bellatrix against her own family, ordering her to personally kill her father, her sister, my father and myself. Because of him, she'll be in Azkaban the rest of her life. And with Voldemort killing my brother by his own wand, that puts the blame for the near-extinction of the House of Black entirely on his shoulders.

'You didn't know about that, did you?' There was a somewhat softer note on Sirius's voice, more gentle than he had ever heard him with Kreacher. 'I suppose the Circle did operate entirely in secret. I don't suppose you've heard of the Circle of Agastya? You can speak.'

'The n-name is familiar, but Kreacher is not knowing it.' Was... Was the bitter old house-elf crying?

'Yes, well. Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix wasn't the only group fighting the Death Eaters. My father and my uncle may have played in public like they were neutral, but they lead the British Circle of Agastya in those years. Did you ever notice my father and uncle disappearing for periods of time with little explanation, quietly meeting with people they normally wouldn't deign to look at twice?'
For a moment there was silence. Then Kreacher said, 'The Lord Black did as he wish. Kreacher did not question.'

'Not surprised, but perhaps you should have. You might have realised all this sooner. I'm not going to bore you with the details so, long story short, the Circle is a bunch of dark wizards and witches who are opposed to the idea of Dark Lords on principle. They get too many people killed, you see. My father actually reformed the British Circle specifically to fight Voldemort even before Dumbledore got the Order together, and they are almost entirely responsible for most of Voldemort's attempts at recruitment overseas failing. A British Dark Lord of his renown failing to secure an alliance with the more unsavory elements of Scandinavian society? Unheard of. I wasn't told this until recently, but my brother was also a member of the Circle. He volunteered to join the Death Eaters as their spy. I'm almost certain that's why he died — Voldemort eventually found out, and killed him for it.'

There was a momentary whimper, Harry assumed from Kreacher, but the elf didn't say anything, so Sirius kept going. 'The murderous psychopath calling himself Lord Voldemort has made himself an enemy of the House of Black a hundred times over. I'm just the first person to call him on it. But this isn't about that. Voldemort lost last time, and he will lose this time. It's inevitable, the way of all tyrants. He is a short-term problem, one will be rid of again before too long.

'No, this is about the House of Black. Voldemort isn't the only one responsible for nearly killing our House — much of the blame rests with my mother's own foolishness.' Harry was a little surprised when Kreacher, who was perfectly capable of speech at the moment, didn't even respond to that. 'Tomorrow, most of the people my mother expelled from the House will be coming, along with their own families, children and grandchildren. I will be reinstating them all back into the House — for the first time for some of them, actually. Most of them are halfbloods. I don't care about that, and I expect you to do your best to ignore it as well.

'See, Kreacher, the world is a different place than it was two, three centuries ago. My mother, many of the purebloods in her generation and before, were playing the game by the old rules. Those made sense in a time when most mages were purebloods, some halfbloods here and there. But that isn't the way things are anymore. The vast majority of British mages are halfbloods, and muggleborns are growing more and more common each year. It's a different world, and the old rules don't work anymore. If we want the House of Black to survive, we have to play by the new rules.

'These people coming tomorrow, they are the future of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It is through them that the world will heed the name Black again. Not in the same way as before — the world is different, now, and we will have to adapt to the new circumstances if we want to prosper. But, believe me, Kreacher, I will do everything in my power, by any means I feel necessary, to return my House to its proper position of respect and influence. All I ask is you not get in my way, make it harder than it needs to be. So, what do you say? Do we have a truce?'

Harry was pretty sure Sirius was playing into Kreacher's expectations a little bit there. He was halfway sure Sirius didn't really care so much about the House being in any position of respect and influence, only so far as he could use it to help people he cared about — Sirius was pretty good about doing that, at least, evidenced by him taking in Remus and hosting the Order. The wording was a little awkward, but he figured Sirius wasn't used to talking like that, and had probably been making it up as he went. Honestly, Harry was a little surprised Sirius was trying to turn Kreacher around at all. He'd gotten the impression Sirius really didn't like having the bitter old house-elf around, probably enmity preserved from his childhood. But he knew Sirius was still gradually recovering from his long stint in Azkaban. Maybe this was a sign he was doing better. Harry wouldn't know — he wasn't the best judge of what would be a normal way to deal with this sort of thing. Maybe he should ask for Hermione's opinion.
After a few seconds of silence, Harry heard Kreacher mutter, 'Kreacher will think about Master's words.' Harry raised an eyebrow at the wood of the door in front of his face. It wasn't so much the words themselves that were surprising — though he guessed the fact that Kreacher had spoken a full sentence to Sirius without insulting him was unusual. It was the complete lack of any hatred on his voice, sounding more...thoughtful. If possible. It was weird. An instant later there was the characteristic snap of house-elf teleportation, Kreacher leaving Sirius alone in the room.

Not wanting to be discovered standing at the door, Harry suddenly jumped away, continuing his walk down the hall to go see Hedwig, thoughts of house-elves and Houses and family whirling confusingly in his head.

Chapter End Notes

[He had absolutely no idea how she could alternate between graceful and clumsy like this all the time.] — In my head, Dora's characteristic clumsiness is a matter of attention. If she's paying attention to what she's doing, she's as coordinated and light on her feet as anyone — which is only appropriate, considering she's an Auror and all, you know, supposed to be a crazy-good duellist and everything. But if she's distracted by something, or just letting her mind wander, she could trip on flat pavement.
Harry has absolutely no idea what's wrong with Dora. But that's fine — he doesn't know what's wrong with himself either.

Harry was starting to get really tired of feeling nervous all the time.

The five of them were standing in a place Sirius had referred to as the informal reception hall. Deep in the back of the ground floor, a wide, high-ceilinged room made up in soft greens and oranges, fading to white granite tile around the large, rather ornate stone and silver fireplace at one end. A Floo-connected fireplace, actually — this room was designed to be where members of the House of Black who didn't actually live here were supposed to be welcomed into the building. Sirius didn't usually enforce what Harry gathered used to be something of a strict rule, letting the Tonkses floo or even apparate in wherever — there was an anti-apparation ward over the property, but people who were specifically keyed into the wards could just pop through wherever they felt like — but he'd decided to stick with the minor bit of tradition for this particular occasion.

Today, a slew of Sirius's cousins — and Harry's too, he guessed — had been invited over to be officially admitted (in some cases, readmitted) into the House of Black. In the span of a single day, the official population of House Black would expand from just Sirius and the Tonkses to he thought a couple dozen, he wasn't sure. Well, plus Harry himself, but that was difficult: Melantha Black was a member, but Harry Potter wasn't — mostly because he was already Lord of House Potter, and wow if that wasn't a huge fucking surprise when Sirius had explained that — and since the legal person of Melantha Black was only a semi-legitimate fiction and didn't actually exist, he...technically wasn't? He didn't know, it was complicated.

And, come to think of it, he wasn't sure if it was technically appropriate to call the Tonkses the Tonkses anymore. Since Sirius had signed the paperwork to bring them into House Black a couple weeks ago, he was pretty sure that meant their legal last name was now Black. Dora still insisted everyone (excluding family) call her Tonks, and he was pretty sure Ted was still using the name professionally — he thought Uncle Ted was a solicitor or something — but he'd more than once caught Andi telling people to use Black instead. It was confusing.

And he was, again, nervous. He had never been all that great with meeting new people, for quite nearly as long as he could remember. He thought he might have been more open to it when he'd been very young, but any real enthusiasm he might have had for it must have been beaten out of him years ago. Blame that one on Dudley. Anyway. He guessed it probably didn't help that there was the whole being a girl situation that was still going on, and was still unspeakably uncomfortable on a level he couldn't really put words to. Like, his internal commentary just got really confusing. Oh, hey, nice to meet you! Except, you're not actually meeting me, just this random girl I'm pretending to be right now for some insane reason. But also kind of not pretending a little maybe? I don't know! Isn't this confusing?

Yeah, it was really fucking weird to be inside his own head sometimes.
He'd been out a couple times recently, mostly to Diagon Alley — though Hermione had dragged him down the street one day to have lunch in a nearby muggle restaurant, no idea what had been up with that. And he'd been noticing something lately that gave him a whole new reason to be nervous. He wasn't even really sure if it entirely made sense, if it was even a reasonable thing to be nervous about? See, he expected to still be incredibly uncomfortable all the time. And, yes, he still did have very uncomfortable moments. Whenever he was undistracted from his own thoughts for more than a couple seconds, or explicitly talking about this whole suddenly being a girl now thing with anyone — Hermione was getting really good at making him uncomfortable these days — or whenever he had to take off any of his clothes for any length of time for any reason. But he'd thought being out in ordinary situations, with people who had no clue who he was, treating him like he was a girl, talking to him like he was a girl, he'd thought all of that would make him dreadfully awkward. But it really didn't. At least, not any additional awkward on top of just being in public where people were looking at him, or could be looking at him, just the baseline awkwardness. And just that that didn't make him uncomfortable made him inexplicably nervous. He really wasn't sure why. It was just so weird. It wasn't all bad, though. For one thing, the way nobody instantly searched his forehead for a scar that was no longer there the moment they first met him was very nice, he thought he might enjoy even that small bit of normality to a degree that was frankly silly. He honestly loved it how people entirely failed to react to his name in any of those ridiculously overdramatic ways he'd been tolerating to the best of his ability over the last few years. He was used to it with normal people, but now sometimes even mages hardly gave him a second glance. It was very nice. Honestly, even if should the time come he decided he completely hated being a girl, he'd probably consider staying this way just so he wouldn't have to deal with all that shite anymore.

Though, now that he thought about it, it would most likely have to come out eventually, so this anonymity was probably temporary anyway. Might as well enjoy it while it lasted then, he guessed.

What had he been thinking about again? This was happening far too often recently. Ever since right around his birthday last week he'd been more scrambled in the brain than usual. Made it rather hard to concentrate on anything. He blamed the occlumency practice sessions he'd been having with Sirius. It was his godfather's fault, yes.

At least his scrambled thoughts being all scrambly had managed to distract him from how nervous he was. So. That was something.

Before he could really gather himself again, the floo was spitting green fire, and one person after another was stumbling into existence. They all gradually came up to introduce (or reintroduce) themselves to Sirius one by one, while Harry felt himself retreat further inward. Sure, he was still standing right there. Even nodding and attempting to smile at people talking to him as appropriate — he wasn't sure exactly how well he was doing at the smiling part, but he was trying, at least. Just too many people in here, people he didn't know, but people he was technically related to, and he wasn't used to being related to people, so, yeah, it made him a little awkward. And he didn't like being awkward. He doubted he was even remembering anyone's names, hardly paying attention.

It had only been a few minutes, but he was already hoping this would just be over with already.

He thought it was maybe fifteen people later or so — he wasn't really counting — when he suddenly heard Sirius, who he was still standing right next to, let out a stream of muttered curses. He glanced over at him to find his godfather covering his face with his own hand. 'What is it?'

'It's nothing.' Sirius dropped his hand, shaking his head a little, and straightened back to his full height from where he'd slumped a little. 'I forgot until just this second my cousin had triplets, is all. This should be interesting.'
Frowning to himself a little, Harry turned to the newly-arrived group of people approaching them. Leading the family was an older man — Harry was complete shite at guessing the ages of magical people from their physical appearance, but he thought maybe sixties? He looked much like Sirius, actually, with the same dark hair and same grey eyes and even same face, only with a few more lines. But, then, most everyone here looked pretty similar. Just at his side was a younger woman, he thought probably in her thirties, maybe a little older. She mostly looked like everyone else again but, to his surprise, he thought he saw hints of freckles on her face. He hadn't seen a Black with freckles yet — at least, excluding Dora giving herself some for fun. Trailing behind the two of them were three girls, right around his own age. They had the same shining black hair as practically everyone in this family, but they seemed to have hazel eyes instead of grey, their completely identical faces, wearing completely identical grins, a bit softer and more rounded than usual.

He guessed he was about to find out if how frustratingly confusing the Weasley twins were was typical of multiple births with mages. By how Sirius had reacted, he was hedging yes.

The older man was just getting up to him, and Harry prepared himself for yet another repetition of the same conversation — people all humbly thanking Lord Black for inviting them back, Sirius awkwardly asking they not use the titles, a few more moments of discomfort while everyone gets used to everyone. And was instead surprised when he said, 'Sirius, my boy!' in a cheerful voice and with a huge grin on his face, and abruptly yanked his godfather into a tight-looking hug.

Huh. Maybe they'd run into Blacks who had actually met Sirius before. Finally.

Hugging the man back, chuckling under his breath, Sirius managed, 'I missed you too, Uncle.' He couldn't see it from this angle, but Harry could hear the smile on his voice perfectly fine.

'I about assaulted Azkaban single-handed when they dragged you off.' The man pulled away, and Harry could see his smile had turned a bit crooked. 'Probably would have if Terri hadn't talked me out of it.'

Harry could see Sirius's posture tighten at the mention of Azkaban, but he replied easily enough. 'Well, she always was smarter than you. And is she not coming? Did— Oh, damn, I completely forgot she wouldn't be able to get through the wards, I'm sorry, I should have—'

'No.' The smile on the man's face was still there, but all the cheer had suddenly vanished, the expression looking very much forced. 'She passed three years ago, I'm afraid.'

'Oh.' There was a short, awkward silence between them as Sirius processed this — if Harry was following correctly, the death of an aunt he'd actually liked, which he didn't think there'd been very many of — Harry trying to ignore all the while how the three girls were staring at him with open curiosity. 'I'm sorry to hear that. I always did like her.'

'Yes, well.' The man shrugged a little. 'Life goes on.' Harry could tell the man was trying to act like it wasn't a big deal. Trying, and completely failing.

Silence for a few seconds — Harry could practically feel Sirius holding himself back from saying something, probably an attempt to offer comfort the man obviously didn't want. Eventually, he said, 'Anyway,' turning to look at Harry. 'Mel—' Sirius had picked up the nickname Hermione had started using recently almost instantly. '—this is my Uncle Alphard, who I think I told you about. He was expelled from the House before I was even born, I think. Aunt Terri's a muggle, you see. When I got expelled myself, I stayed with them for a few weeks before moving in with your, ah, uncle James instead.'

Harry was pretty sure Sirius had been about to say your father before catching himself at the last
second. He'd already heard the story. Right around the same time Sirius had been expelled from House Black, during winter break his sixth year at Hogwarts, Harry's father's parents had both been found dead. Most suspected Death Eaters had killed them — Harry's grandfather had been a vicious opponent of their people in the Wizengamot, and Harry's grandmother had been considered to be something of a blood traitor in certain unpleasant circles — but there had been no solid evidence one way or the other. If James hadn't been visiting Remus that night, Sirius had said, he probably would have been killed as well, and Harry wouldn't even exist. As Sirius had told it, he'd gotten along perfectly fine with the uncle and aunt he'd spent the rest of winter break with, but got in frequent fights with his cousin — who Harry guessed was this woman right here. So, when summer came around, he'd gone home with James instead, to keep his newly orphaned best friend company.

Sometimes he thought it seemed like this family just got all the bad luck.

But anyway, Sirius was talking to Alphard again, reciting the abbreviated version of their little cover story. 'And this here is Melantha. Aunt Cassie's granddaughter, tracked her down shortly after I was released. She, ah, didn't have anyone, so Andi and I have been looking after her since.'

Alphard had been giving her a warm sort of smile, but had immediately broken off to give Sirius a look when he mentioned Aunt Cassie. When Sirius finally petered to a stop, the older man said, frowning to himself. 'I was under the impression Aunt Cassie was, ah, not exactly partial to the menfolk, so to speak.'

She was a lesbian. Just say she was a lesbian. Sirius had said at one point that it was well known his great-aunt Cassiopeia had had no interest in men at all. In fact, negative interest — she'd been so vehement in her disgust with the idea that the Lord Black of the time had eventually relented, and cancelled all plans to marry off his already infamous granddaughter. When Harry had pointed out this was an obvious problem with their cover story, Sirius had disagreed. While he didn't think it likely, it was possible Cassiopeia had had a male lover at the time she knew her family wouldn't approve of, and the whole thing had been an act. Of course, it was also possible that it hadn't been an act, but she'd still had children. While marriage between two people of the same sex was not legal in magical Britain — though apparently it was in some other magical nations, which had come as a complete surprise to Harry — the very same magicks to induce pregnancy used by couples having trouble conceiving still worked just fine if the couple were both women. That nobody had known about it was the bigger problem than anything. The story wouldn't hold to close scrutiny but, should Harry decide to stay Melantha in the end, they would be coming out with the truth anyway, long before anyone should care enough to put that much effort into it. So they were fine.

This was the first time someone had actually pointed the problem out, though. Sirius was having trouble stringing a sentence together, so Harry decided to take care of it. 'I don't really know much about it,' Harry said, keeping his voice smooth and casual. 'My father never really liked to talk about his family. But I think I had three grandmothers.'

Sometimes, Harry wondered if it was a bad thing how good he could be at lying when he really tried. But, then, the Hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin.

Understanding visibly came over Alphard, the frown vansihing as he nodded to himself, then he again took up his smile from before. 'Well, it's nice to meet you, Melantha.' After a couple more pleasantries back and forth, the introductions went on. Harry was introduced to Sirius's cousin Ailís, who seemed nice enough, he guessed. And then they moved on to introducing her daughters to both of them — the triplets had been barely a year old when Sirius had been sent to Azkaban, so they'd never met.

It almost immediately got weird. Ailís had pointed out the one wearing wizarding-style trousers and
tunic (similar to what Harry was wearing, actually) as Artemis easily enough, but then had hesitated over the other two. They were both wearing knee-length, sleeveless dresses in that shimmering cloth magical people seemed to like — though in different colours, one green and gold and the other black and silver — and that was apparently enough for Ailís to forget which of her daughters was which.

They didn't seem to mind at all, identical faces splitting into simultaneous grins. The girl in green pointed to the girl in black, saying, 'Selene.'

A second later, the girl in black mirrored her, saying, 'Persephone.'

A finger tapping at her chin in a picture of thoughtfulness, the one named Artemis said, 'Or was it—'

The girl in black again pointed at the girl in green, saying, '—Selene—'

The girl in green mirrored her, with, '—and Persephone?'

With a playful sort of grin on all their faces, the three girls gave a helpless shrug in perfect unison.

With a similar shrug, Ailís said, 'It doesn't really matter so much, to be honest.' Her daughters didn't seem to mind that comment at all, just kept smiling.

Harry guessed that was an answer to his question — yes, Fred and George were typical of multiple births with magic involved. Or, he supposed it was possible the two Weasleys and the three Blacks were all just weird. They were technically related, after all — he'd been mostly confused to learn Sirius and Missus Weasley were first cousins — so these weren't exactly isolated samples. Still.

Then Sirius and the three of them were talking — mostly about what Ailís had told them about him, by the sound of it. Apparently, Ailís hadn't believed for a second Sirius was actually guilty either. The girls claimed their mother had said something to the effect of, "Yes, your uncle Siri may be an enormous prat—" (They traded who was speaking.) "—the word insufferable seems a bit light, really—" (Switch again.) "—but I doubt he'd ever kill someone who didn't bloody deserve it." Which really got Harry thinking: most everyone he'd heard mention it who actually knew Sirius at all hadn't believed the Ministry's claim that he'd betrayed Harry's parents and killed all those people. From what he'd heard, even a fair number of perfect strangers hadn't either — he hadn't been aware of this at the time, but when Sirius had been on the run there had been hundreds of letters sent to both the Ministry and The Prophet demanding they stop being such arseholes to a probably innocent man. So...why had he ever gone to Azkaban?

Oh, right. Because magical Britain was a third-world country. That was why. Obviously.

The girls and Sirius were still bantering back and forth — their mother seemed to be growing progressively more annoyed, and their grandfather progressively more amused — when Harry spotted Dora over Persephone/Selene's shoulder, staring at the triplets with wide eyes, head slightly cocked. She pulled out her wand, tapped the drink in her hand a couple times before letting it go, the glass floating on its own in the air. Even as her features started shifting, she gave her wand a sharp flourish. And suddenly he could see four completely identical girls, Dora now in a dress much like Persephone and Selene's, save for the different colouring — unsurprisingly, she'd chosen shades of red and black with silver accents perfectly matching the Auror uniform.

For a moment, Harry wondered why she'd needed to use her wand at all. She could do all sorts of crazy things with her own appearance without even touching the thing. He felt a little stupid when he figured it out — her shapeshifting abilities obviously didn't affect her clothes. Good job, genius.

Then Dora was darting forward and, with a little leap, threw her arms around Persephone and
Selene's shoulders from behind. Even though Artemis hadn't been touched, she started with surprise suspiciously quickly. Dora didn't even look at them, though. Instead, she looked off toward the side of the room, where most everyone was gathered in little conversation clumps talking. 'Mum!' she shouted in the triplets' voice, far too loudly for the volume level in here. 'Look how adorable we are!' 'Yes, honey, I see that.' Aunt Andi didn't seem at all phased by her daughter's strange behaviour. But, then, she should be used to it by now.

The triplets were giving Dora odd, confused looks — which was rather awkward for two of them, what with how Dora's grip was nearly forcing their foreheads into her chin — but the expressions all cleared with three, simultaneous nods. Since she was probably the only one at the moment with an unconstricted airway, Artemis spoke for them. 'You'd be Cousin Dora, then.'

Dora pulled on an exaggerated pout. 'Aww,' she said in a long, drawn-out whine, 'how did you know who I was?'

Harry noticed Sirius silently waving to Alphard and Ailís, then gesturing they leave to join the rest of the House. For a second, he was tempted to follow them, but he ultimately decided to stay where he was. There were less people this side of the room, for one thing, less annoying that way. For another, he had to admit he got a little bit of perverse pleasure watching Dora bother people who weren't him.

'I really think that should be a bit—'

'—obvious, don't you think?'

'Also?' either Selene or Persephone said, raising one finger at something of an awkward angle. 'Maybe let go?'

'No fun.' Dora lifted her arms, both of the girls immediately set to rubbing at the back and sides of their necks. Must have grabbed them pretty hard. Harry knew from experience Dora could get a bit rough when she was excited. Weirdo didn't know her own strength at all. Which wasn't surprising when he thought about it — the way she kept changing her body at such a fundamental level all the time it'd be almost impossible for her to. 'Nobody ever likes it when I look like them,' she said, sounding almost grumpy.

Still giving her something of an odd look, Persephone/Selene said, 'It was more the grabbing that bothered us, honestly.'

'But,' Artemis said, shrugging a little, 'now that you mention it—'

'—that was a bit of an odd thing to do. Not surprising, I guess—'

'—pretty sure oddness is genetic around here.'

Dora seemed to be following the skipping sentence easier than Harry was. He'd even had a fair amount of practice with Fred and George, and it was still leaving him a bit unsettled. 'I just like looking like people.' Suddenly Dora's wand was in her hand again, her features were shifting again, and she transfigured her clothes again with another sharp flourish, and—

For a couple seconds, Harry could only stare. Dora had turned herself into...well, he wasn't entirely sure how to word that. He still sort of thought of that particular set of increasingly familiar features as the girl in the mirror, which was kind of a silly thing to do, because it was himself. Obviously. But at some level it was still kinda, you know, really fucking weird to think of that girl as himself, weird enough that until about a week ago he'd still been having quick moments of confusion catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror before finally realising, Oh, right, that's me. By now, he thought he
was mostly used to seeing it. Mostly. When it was himself. Looking at someone else looking like him was...weird.

And for a couple seconds after that, he was still stuck staring, but because of an entirely different thought. Dora — well, both of them, he guessed — they were...well...

_Fuck_ , he couldn't believe he was honestly thinking this thought right now. This was so insane.

He heard Ellie's chiding voice in his head almost instantly. _'Harry, I really think you need to stop, well, thinking so much. Stop automatically shifting to considering what you think you should feel, getting all worked up about that, and just let yourself feel whatever comes, as it comes.'_

Ergh, fine! They were _really fucking cute_! He somehow hadn't realised until this very moment that he actually looked sort of nice and that thought was weird and confusing in one of those _what-is-wrong-with-me_ ways but also sort of he thought maybe gratifying was the right word maybe but that was such an odd thought that this whole situation more than anything was just making him feel uncomfortable! There! _Happy?_

He was perfectly aware he'd just shouted in his head at someone who wasn't even present at the moment.

_Jesus Christ_ , this was, just, so very, _very_ fucked up.

He'd managed to distract himself long enough that, when he finally dragged himself back to reality, it was to find his suddenly identical cousin was standing at his side now, linking one of her arms with his. 'See?' she said, grinning at the triplets. 'Aren't we _adorable_?'

Yes. Yes, they were.

Not entirely conscious of the decision to do it, he started rubbing at his face with the hand unclaimed by an eternally hyperactive metamorphmaga.

_God._

Within a couple minutes, he was standing alone, Dora and the triplets faded off to go talk to other Blacks around the room. Harry just floated around for a while — sipping at a drink he'd swiped from the table, mostly standing off Sirius's shoulder, saying nothing and listening only intermittently. He was just too distracted. His brain was a weird, jittery mess right now. It certainly didn't help his concentration that he didn't really know most of these people, had very little interest in most of the things they were talking about. It all seemed to be mostly people he didn't know catching up on the last couple decades with each other, a little gossip about even more people he didn't know, a bit about current events and politics that was mostly boring. He didn't care.

His brain kept flicking back to what Dora had looked like a few minutes ago.

And the knowledge that that was _exactly_ what _he_ looked like _right now_.

It was quite literally impossible to focus on anything else.

Before too long, an idea crossed his mind. A rather strange idea. He managed to convince himself it was a terrible idea, he definitely shouldn't do that, but it just wouldn't leave him alone, continually niggling at the back of his mind. He couldn't make it go away. He kept unconsciously scanning the room for Dora — _most_ of the time, she was wearing that familiar pink-haired form of hers, so she wasn't hard to spot. After a couple more minutes, he had quite effectively _untalked_ himself out of it. Not that he'd convinced himself to do it yet. It was _such_ a ridiculously stupid idea, really another
insane moment of his, and he just shouldn't be indulging these weird sort of impulses whenever—

Yeah, he was doing it.

Before he'd even entirely made up his mind, he'd already walked across the room to Dora, tapped her shoulder to draw her attention from...some cousin, he couldn't remember which. 'Can I talk to you for a second?' She gave him a weird look, but followed him without protest off into a corner of the room, as far removed as he could get from the rest of the Blacks hanging around. Which wasn't very private at all, but he guessed it would do for now. He stared at her for a moment, his arms crossed under his chest. And now he had to actually say this crazy idea he'd had. Aloud. Great.

Giving him a little crooked grin, Dora just said, 'There a reason you dragged me away, now? Cause, just so you know, if you're planning on snogging me, everyone can still see us here.'

And now Harry was completely speechless for a different reason. Dora was really good at doing that. He finally managed to get his mouth working again, but all he managed for a second was, 'What?' A moment later, 'We are cousins, you know.'

Dora shrugged. 'Second cousins. I can't even count all the married—' He was pretty sure that sound came from his own throat. '—second cousins I know of. Relax,' Dora said, suddenly sounding a bit exasperated, 'I'm only teasing. You really need to loosen up a bit. You're far too easy to tease.'

Maybe Dora had a point there. She'd had him halfway between fleeing — he'd actually already taken a few steps back away from her — and breaking down in an abrupt panic attack. Colours hadn't started leaking out of the world quite yet, but it had suddenly gotten quite hard to breathe, his heart jammed rather far up his throat. He took some long seconds to try to force his breath normal, to get his brain to stop being such a fucking piece of trash. When he was finally mostly calm, he snarled, 'Was that really necessary?' At least, he tried to say it in a snarl — it ended up sounding just tired.

Dora smirked at him.

'Right, of course it was.' Well. At least she'd managed to make his crazy idea seem not really that crazy at all anymore. Dora was pretty good at doing that, too. 'I was just wondering if you could, er. Look like me again.'

The smirk twisted into a confused sort of look for a moment, a single eyebrow tracking up her face, but after a moment she just shrugged. 'All right.' An instant later, her wand again appearing from nowhere, Dora had again taken on the appearance of Melantha Black, her clothes transfigured to match Harry's. 'Was that it? I can do that any time, you know. I don't mind looking like you. Don't much mind who I look like at all, to be honest. Mostly just play around with it like I do because it's fun, and I can.'

And because she was quite possibly insane, but never mind that right now. Harry took another moment, a couple breaths, to gather himself — which wasn't easy, because looking at someone who looked like how he knew he did now was still making him feel really weird. After a couple seconds, he'd gotten himself level enough he was sure his voice wouldn't be wavery. 'Could you, ah—' Well, not too wavery, anyway. Get it out, stupid, just say it, god. —put us in something, erm, pretty?'

Dora gave him another weird look — with Melantha's face now, and that was strange to look at — both eyebrows drawing up this time. 'Something pretty?' she repeated, her voice thick with blank confusion.

His eyes sliding away and to the ceiling, Harry said, 'You know what, never mind. I'm just being crazy here. Forget it, I'll just—'
'No, no.' He glanced back to see Dora was still staring at him, her head slightly tilted to the side. 'Not crazy. Just give me a second to pick something.' For a moment, Dora stood there, eyes closed, wand pointed toward the ceiling, drawing little absent circles in the air. Then, with a sharp downward flourish, her clothes shifted in a rapid wave.

She'd put herself in a dress. Black cloth of some smooth-looking diaphanous substance making up a skirt falling to her ankles, above the waist a thicker, more solid-looking cloth hugging close along her stomach and chest, this part more a deep purple with patterns of black lace splayed across. Looked a bit corset-like, but he didn't think that's what was actually going on up there — not that he was an expert or anything — and the neck curved low enough to make Harry almost positive Dora had added a little, ah, around there. Though he guessed he'd probably be a bit creeped out if she managed to copy him with perfect accuracy everywhere. Thin straps over her bare shoulders were partially hidden by her hair, but Harry thought it looked like the lace-like bunches along it were stitched into the shapes of little black flowers.

Fingers absently running downward from her sides to her hips, Dora said, 'Used to have one just like this, back when I actually wore dresses. Now that I'm an Auror, I could be called in at any time, so my clothing options are a little limited. But, anyway—' She made a sarcastic little curtsy, pulling her skirt out to the sides, letting Harry notice the skirt was actually semi-transparent, multiple layers of the sheer fabric forming an illusion of depth. '—how do we look?' Complete with a little, cocky smirk on Melantha's face.

Harry barely even noticed the question. He was having other problems. 'I, er, I have to go.' Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked away. And since he managed to forget his back had been facing the wall, that involved an awkward moment of stuttering to a halt, then turning a direction he could actually go more than a few steps. He aimlessly wandered over to a table in the corner, covered in little glasses filled with drink, platters bearing weird wizarding finger-food things, both of which Sirius had insisted the occasion called for. His breath unusually harsh in his throat, loud in his ears, he planted his hands against the surface of the table, bowed his head, struggled for long moments to not go completely crazy surrounded by people he'd barely just met and happened to be related to.

Okay. That had been a bad idea. He shouldn't have done that. There were all these new people he'd just met. He'd already come to the distracting, uncomfortable realisation that, yeah, he looked kinda rather nice now, okay. That should have been enough for him to deal with for one day. He already had enough things to be getting on with, he didn't need to keep piling more onto himself like an idiot. It wasn't helping.

Yes, that had been a rather pretty dress. And, yes, Melantha-Dora had looked rather nice in it. But that wasn't what he was having a crazy person moment here about. At least, not directly. This was another one of his oh-my-god-what-is-wrong-with-me-I'm-such-a-fucking-freak moments, inspired by what his own initial reaction had been to seeing Dora like that.

It wasn't at all a mystery that he wasn't exactly comfortable in his own skin right now — not that he'd really ever been, honestly. He hardly had the self-assurance to just have an ordinary conversation with someone he didn't know already — again, not that he'd ever been that great with that kind of thing, not the point. He knew, he'd known right away the instant he'd seen it, that he'd never be able to actually wear that. Not as he was now. At least, not where other people could see him. He'd known that, and his first reaction to that realisation, looking at Dora looking like him, the first thing he'd felt had been—

_Fucking hell, this was so messed up!_
He felt jealous. He recognised it instantly, it was a feeling he was very much familiar with. He felt jealous of Dora, because she could walk around wearing that kind of thing without a second thought. He felt jealous of Dora, because she'd probably done exactly that dozens and dozens of times. He felt jealous of Dora, for being a perfectly ordinary person — other than the shapeshifting and related personality quirks, anyway — with her perfectly ordinary life, her perfectly ordinary un-fucked-up childhood, her lack of a constant enemy in the form of her own brain.

He felt jealous of Dora for girly things.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Jesus Christ...

He was starting to get tired of thinking that to himself, having these stupid, stupid moments in reaction to involuntary thoughts and feelings. But he just couldn't stop himself. It kept happening before he could even try to head it off. Though, he guessed at least now he was aware he was doing it, and that it was stupid, and he should stop. So, that was progress.

Right?

Maybe. Ellie would probably say so, and she was the closest he had around to an expert on this brain stuff, so he'd go with that.

But, anyway, he should stop standing here staring at the table like a crazy person. He was starting to suspect from things Ellie said and the way his own brain worked that crazy people never actually got better, the more functional ones just learned to manage their neuroses to the point that few noticed. But that depressing thought wasn't important right now. Trying his best to give off an air like this had been the whole point all along, he swiped a drink from the table, and then a random thing from a random plate and popped it in his mouth. And immediately pulled his face into a half-involuntary grimace, forced himself to keep chewing — he didn't think he'd ever get used to how sweet so much wizarding food was. He was pretty sure even straight honey wasn't this sickening. Blech.

A few minutes later, he found himself standing at Sirius's shoulder again, listening to him talk with a couple cousins whose names Harry couldn't remember at all. Not that he was participating, or even really listening all that much. If he were, he probably would have picked up at least one of their names by this point. Maybe partially so he could find a moment to unobtrusively ask Sirius if it was okay if he left, but it was mostly an effort to, he didn't know, be less obvious in how much he wasn't enjoying himself. He figured if he was standing alone against a wall somewhere it'd be really obvious he didn't want to be here, and he guessed he didn't want to make too bad of an impression? He was related to most everyone in this room, after all, they'd presumably be around a lot in future. Of course, if he ended up going through with that ritual thing, they'd probably never know this was him right now anyway.

But then, lately he'd been seriously considering, well, not, so.

Maybe it was better not to even casually think of what he might or might not be doing months or years from now. It was weird and confusing.

But he'd hardly been standing here for a few moments before someone had walked up to him, trying to get his attention. Definitely Dora — she'd gone back to that same tall, pink-haired form she liked so much. 'Hey, can I talk to you for a second?'

Harry could only blink at first. Dora sounded almost...awkward? A little uncomfortable at the very least. That was...odd. Had he ever seen Dora the least bit uncomfortable? He managed to shake the thought off after a moment. And then hesitated for another second, considering whether whatever Dora had to say was something he'd want to hear. 'Ah, sure.' He'd actually settled on probably not,
but that it would be unnecessarily mean to say no, so he kinda had to. After giving Sirius something between a shrug and a wince, getting a smirking shrug in return, Harry let Dora lead him off, far enough away from the others they wouldn't be easily overheard. Actually, Harry thought they might be standing exactly where they'd been when he'd pulled her away and—

Yeah, never mind, don't think about that.

The second they were alone, Dora came to a sudden stop, spinning around to face him. What was this, now she even looked uncomfortable, arms all awkwardly crossed over her chest, eyes down at the floor rather than his own. This was very strange, starting to give him an odd feeling. 'Yeah, er, I think I kinda have to apologise here.'

Ah...

Now Harry was entirely lost. Nope, too many weird things had happened in just the last hour. He had no idea anymore.

Dora kept talking while reality left him completely behind. 'I guess I haven't really been making this whole situation of yours easier. But, like, it's not my fault exactly. I'm pretty sure it's just one of those things about normal people I don't really get.'

Well. At least Dora was acknowledging she wasn't exactly a normal person. That was something. But she wasn't making a whole lot of sense, so he had to ask, 'What do you mean?'

'Ah...' Her voice trailed off for a moment, while she kept staring at the floor, shifting slightly in place. 'Okay,' she said, voice suddenly more like herself, arms unfolding to plant her hands on her hips, 'let me put it this way. I can be a woman or a man or any combination of the two whenever I want, ever since I was, er, I think six is when I figured that out. I prefer being a woman, sure, but it doesn't particularly bother me to be a man for, really, any length of time.' Her lips twisting into a playful smirk, 'I've actually gone out as an intentionally handsome young fellow a few times to pick up muggle women just for fun.'

Harry stared at her. He wasn't sure if he should be touching that one. All he could think to say was, 'Er...'

'Off-topic a bit there. What I mean to say is—' She shrugged. '—I really don't understand most of the time how people make such a big deal about gender. They're like, say, wearing two different styles of clothes to me. One might be more comfortable, but I can wear the other if the situation calls for it, or if I'm in the mood.

'So,' she said with a long nod, 'that's why I've been I guess not as gentle with this stuff as I maybe should be. It just doesn't click for me why you should be having any difficulty with this at all.' Wow, if that wasn't the strangest thing he'd ever heard his very strange new cousin say. 'But, why I'm doing this whole apology thing is because that's not really an excuse to be a bitch or anything. So I'm, er, resolving to be nicer. And sorry about all that.'

Harry couldn't help but let out a short sigh. He really hadn't expected her to apologise. Partially because he wouldn't have thought she had it in her — that was probably a really mean thing to think just there — but also because, to be honest, it hadn't really bothered him that much? Well, her teasing did bother him, but no more than nearly anything else these days. Anything related to the suddenly-a-girl-now thing, anyway. He didn't think she was really adding anything. All the buttons she kept pushing were things he'd have to get used to eventually one way or the other. So, no, it wasn't that big of a deal. But it was nice of her, so he decided to say, 'Apology not entirely necessary, but thanks.'
'Ah, good, then.' She nodded inwardly. All of a sudden, she looked quite a bit inordinately pleased with herself. But, really, most everything she did was inordinate in one way or another, so he should be getting used to it by now. 'Anyway, I'm supposed to be telling you that Mum wants to talk to you.'

'Oh. Okay.' He was about to turn around to look for her when a thought suddenly occurred to him. He said it before he could second-guess himself. 'That whole apology thing was because she yelled at you, wasn't it?'

Dora's face scrunched into an almost comically exaggerated pout. 'I wouldn't use the word yell.'

Before he even realised what was happening, Harry was already laughing.

It turned out the something Andi had to talk with him about wasn’t just for him, but also the Black triplets. The topic of discussion was an invitation to what Dora called proper prissy pureblood princess bootcamp — she mispronounced the first sound of the last word to preserve the alliteration. Basically, a crash course in high society culture and manners. The four of them would spend two of the few remaining weeks before the next term started at Andi's house, where she said she'd work day and night to try to make proper young ladies out of them (odd thought, there) as well as she could in so short a time, so they hopefully wouldn't embarrass the newly-restored House of Black too badly (she said somewhat sarcastically).

Which definitely sounded like something Harry had vanishingly little interest in participating in. But, while the language Andi used suggested the whole thing was voluntary, Harry was half-positive she was just being polite. He had the distinct feeling that, if he didn't consent, she'd talk Sirius into requesting he go, which would probably be good enough to guilt him into it, or shanghai Dora into straight kidnapping him or something. No, it'd probably be safer to just agree. So he had.

So here he was back in the Tonks house. Actually, back in the same guest room he'd used when he'd temporarily been living here. He was sharing it with Artemis now, since the place really wasn't meant to hold this many people. The triplets had told Andi they'd be perfectly comfortable sharing Dora's old bed — which had been a very weird thing to say, since the thing certainly wasn't meant to fit three people, but the triplets were rather consistently weird, like most of this goddamn family — but Andi had vetoed the idea instantly, putting two of them in each room. He'd quickly decided he found Artemis, for as little as their personalities seemed to differ, the most agreeable of the three, so he didn't mind so much. The specifics of the arrangement were a little awkward. Instead of bringing up an extra bed from somewhere as Sirius had for Hermione and Ginny, the two of them had just been told to share the bed, which had been extremely uncomfortable the first couple nights, but there was enough room for them to both lie there without actually touching — if only barely — so he grudgingly got used to it.

Honestly, after a couple days, he thought the whole routine before bed was more awkward than the actual trying to sleep part. Once his partially-undressed state was concealed by sheets, though, he mostly stopped caring.

Many of Andi's lessons were awful and boring. A lot of it involved things like proper etiquette — how and when to address who, the proper phrasing in certain formulaic exchanges, what were and weren't appropriate topics for conversation in what contexts. Or noble family politics — everything from which Houses historically got along with which and general rules about how they went along that business, to the proper forms for honour duels when called for, which was apparently a thing people still did. Even down to table manners. It was just terrible.

To be completely honest, he didn't think he had it in him to care about most of that.
Even the things that were less awful he ended up feeling mostly conflicted about. One of those was the dancing. Yes, Andi took the time to teach them how to dance, those fancy archaic ones mostly only the rich people still did. Apparently, she felt that was important. Maybe she did have a point — he probably would have made less of a fool of himself if he'd had lessons much like these before the Yule Ball — but still. The dances she taught came in two basic styles, which she called formal and intimate. The formal ones, their partner could be absolutely anybody — relatives, friends, acquaintances, complete strangers, anyone. As an example, most of these insufferable high society parties he’d probably start being dragged to started with one of these, and it was something of a tradition for girls around their age to be led out by their father or other appropriate relation. The ones Andi called intimate, however, were only supposed to be done between two people who were involved, or were on the way to becoming so. Or sometimes just flirting, but generally speaking.

Somewhat to Harry's surprise, Andi taught them multiple dances of both kinds, practising leading and following for each. Apparently, they would most likely have to know how to do both. The leading dynamic was in principle the same as Harry understood it was with the muggle equivalent, complete with slightly different steps between the parts — though exactly how different varied dance to dance — but deciding who led was a bit more complicated. It wasn't as simple as man leads, woman follows. For one thing, it wasn't at all uncommon for a dancing pair to be the same sex — usually the formal dances, but sometimes the intimate ones too. But even when they were opposite sexes the man didn't automatically lead. It varied depending on the individual personalities of the two people involved, and how the two of them meshed. Far as he understood from Andi’s explanation, it mostly came down to who was more comfortable doing which with that specific person. Or even how they felt that particular day — apparently, Ted and Andi switched off according to their moods.

He suddenly had the thought that, back at the Yule Ball, Hermione probably should have been leading. He was, well, himself, and she was Hermione, after all. He had to smile a little at that.

At least at first, the whole dancing lessons thing was unspeakably awkward. For one thing, he still wasn't at all comfortable with people touching him, which this required. For another, it just made him feel oddly...exposed. Until one time he was dancing with Ted — Andi had recruited her husband for the formal dances, she said mostly so they'd have someone taller to practise with — listening to him muttering sarcastic little responses to Andi's instructions, low enough she couldn't hear. Each one slowly broke down his barriers of awkwardness, until he was quite suddenly giggling so breathlessly he was pretty sure he would have collapsed to the floor if Ted hadn't been holding onto him. After that, he wasn't so uncomfortable anymore, and he...well, he wasn't having fun, exactly, but it wasn't horrible either.

Though even by the end, he still felt a little weird practising the couple's dances with one of the triplets — usually, Selene. Not that he could visually tell Selene apart from Persephone without being told, and could only identify them by minor personality differences very inconsistently, but not the point. Holding a rather cute girl dressed all pretty, complete with the knowledge that what they were doing was a dance intended for couples, would be awkward enough without the added bit that she was his cousin — second cousin, but still. And he still wasn't used to the idea of having cousins in the first place. It was all just so weird.

And, yes, dressed all pretty. Because Andi’s ridiculous lessons on how to be a proper lady — please — included how to dress like it. Andi had taken a moment before they left Grimmauld Place to warn him about this part. She'd known from the time he'd spent at her place and the clothes shopping they'd done shortly afterward — though she'd had to ask to confirm if it were still true — that Harry had been wearing the same underthings he had before. That had been an awkward conversation. She'd said continuing to do that for those two weeks would likely lead to some uncomfortable questions, so it'd probably be best to switch to women's under- and sleepwear, preferably of wizarding make. Not too dissimilar from what he'd been wearing before in some ways — cut slightly
different, but same basic idea — but they were, ah, definitely not made from cotton. That same soft and smooth cloth they seemed to use for nearly everything, though they apparently made it a bit thinner, almost sheer, when purposed for, ah, undergarments. Which felt, erm, weird. Not bad, exactly. Just...weird.

To be completely honest, even a couple weeks before it probably would have been a bad sort of weird, but by now he'd mostly gotten used to the idea that, yeah, he was a girl under here now, so it didn't bother him to be slightly more conscious of it anymore.

But that led to a whole new awkward experience. Multiple awkward experiences, really. For one thing, these lessons in proper dress involved how to put all this shit on. Which ended up being something of a, erm, group activity. Which meant Andi and the triplets — and Dora, when she randomly decided to drop by — ended up seeing him in that partially-undressed state a fair bit. He'd nearly had another fucking panic attack the first time Andi had told the four of them that they'd be changing, so just go ahead and strip down to their underwear. Yeah, just go ahead and do that! Jesus. And, since the vest thing he'd been wearing above the waist didn't really go with either of the styles they were working with, he and the triplets ended up spending some spans of time standing around almost completely naked. Yeah. He wasn't having fun with that. At all.

He had noticed before that, at least in this particular part of the world, mages didn't have nearly the same hangup over nudity that muggles did. Especially between people of the same sex, but even in mixed groups they didn't seem to care as much. The Gryffindor quidditch team (excluding himself) would change and even shower together, for example, and no one but him seemed to think that was unusual. Much like the team had, Andi and the triplets all seemed to think how awkward he was about the whole thing was the only weird part. But he managed to make it through these moments every time by just aggressively not thinking about what was going on.

Much like the dancing, the proper clothes came in two different styles — though they had nothing to do with the other, it was coincidence. One of them, what Andi called the traditional style, was dress native to the wizarding culture of Britain, required for certain official functions, and sometimes specifically called for by a host. The women of House Black, apparently, had had something of a uniform for this purpose for centuries. Harry hadn't known this, but it was apparently Black tradition for the girls to be trained in both magical and physical combat from a very early age and, should the need arise, it was the women who did the fighting on the House's behalf. Counterintuitive from his own strongly muggle perspective, but he still wasn't entirely surprised when he'd first been told. Bellatrix. Dora. Andi was primarily a healer, did it professionally and everything, but apparently even she could be deadly vicious when she wanted to be. So, yeah, not surprising.

What Black women wore for these kinds of events reflected that. It was, basically, what he immediately recognised as duelling clothes. Loose trousers of that same damn cloth they used for everything. Unfortunately, the top half had to just go and be awkward — the wraparound tunic sort of thing, with an extra trailing bit extending all the way down to the ankle like a thin cloak, only draped over one shoulder. He was not at all comfortable with one entire shoulder being bare like that. The forearm the same side as the bare shoulder got a rather fancy wand holster. Usually, it was considered polite to use one charmed invisible instead — Harry now had one of those, actually — but Andi said this was one of the few exceptions. The thing was rather pretty, actually. Made of dark leather, mostly, soft bands with twisting lines of silver worked into them, extending up over the back of their hands, where a larger plate of silver was embossed with the House crest. Apparently, there were a couple dozen of these things sitting in the Black vault, waiting on any daughter of the House to have need of them. He kind of thought the whole thing was over the top, but he didn't mind being dressed up like his too much. And at least he got to wear trousers.

Which was not a luxury he got for the other style. For women, this mostly involved big, fancy
dresses. Not as ridiculous as those wide, ridiculously ruffly, archaic old ball gowns he'd seen pictures and stuff of — though Andi had said they might catch sight of a few people dressed like that, it wasn't common anymore — but, still. Dresses. Awkward, awkward, awkward, awkward, awkward. Though, a bit to his surprise, not as awkward as he'd expected. He'd expected he would be a complete mess. And, well, he honestly had been a little bit just with being told that's what they'd be doing here. Just seeing the thing had made it even worse.

Eventually, Andi had him calmed down enough — which involved sending out the other three girls — that she could actually talk him into changing. Honestly, he felt a bit embarrassed looking back to how much of a baby he'd been being about it. After much whining on his part, she'd managed to get him into the thing. And promptly shoved him in front of a full-length mirror she kept in the room. The dress itself was, actually, not too different from the one Dora had transfigured. A little nicer, he thought. In full punning fashion, members of the House usually wore plenty of black more often than not. The long skirt that same sort of cloth again, but probably treated slightly different, set to gleaming in the light like burnished metal. Unlike Dora's, Harry was pretty sure this was what a corset was, this thing going on here, or at least something much like one. Again, not an expert. All he knew was Andi doing the laces up the back hadn't been at all fun. Instead of little lace flowers for straps, his shoulders were covered with soft, thin fabric, sheer enough skin was indistinctly visible underneath, fanning out only across the very top of his arms, the rest bare. Save for the roughly elbow-length gloves which apparently went with the whole thing, that is.

Most of the writhing discomfort consuming him — most, not quite all — vanished the second he saw himself in the mirror. For long seconds he could only stare, his eyes following how his hair curled along his shoulders and chest, sliding across the skin between where dress ended and neck began, following the graceful swishing of the skirt with the slightest shift in his balance, tracing the curve along his side from the bottom of his ribs to his hips — not much of one, as thin as he yet was, but still. His fingers started roaming, mostly unconsciously, trailing across the cloth tightly hugging his stomach, down to the looser, thinner cloth over his hips, then up again to trace the line over his chest, his gloved fingers feeling a little peculiar on his bare skin. Reminding him, forcing himself to consciously acknowledge, that was himself in the mirror. Him, Harry Potter, right there.

Even in the privacy of his own head, using the name Harry in this particular situation seemed a bit inappropriate. But that was a thought for later.

He... Well, he looked rather nice, didn't he? Yes, that was certainly a pretty girl in the mirror just there, and that pretty girl was him. There was literally no difference between them, they were the same person. He was— Ergh, it felt weird even thinking that sentence. He was pretty. He was a girl, and he was a pretty girl. So there.

Somewhat to his own surprise, he suspected that thought would be much easier to get used to than he would have expected. If only because, well, it felt rather nice. Forcing himself to stop being a fucking psycho and just let it be, let himself acknowledge what was just fucking true, god dammit, was like something tight in his head he hadn't even noticed was there suddenly uncoiling, and he was filled head to toe with a weird, tingling warmth that nearly set him to laughing. He did notice he was grinning at himself like an idiot, but that one he couldn't stop.

A glance over his shoulder after a while, he wasn't sure how long, showed Andi still standing there watching him, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. In that second, he wasn't sure which he wanted to do more: hug her or slap her.

So instead he just rolled his eyes.

And thanked god Ron wasn't around — he would probably have had to hit him.
Ailís — Irish equivalent of Alice. I apparently disagree with the internet on how this should be pronounced. A couple places I checked said it should be like "ey-lish" [ˈeː.əlɪʃ], but both my admittedly incomplete knowledge of Irish orthography and the word of someone I know who is actually named Ailís agree it should be more like "uh-leesh" [əˈlɪʃ] — somewhat like Alicia, but with the last syllable dropped. So. Use whichever you want, I guess?

metamorphmaga — Not sure if I mentioned this yet, but that would be the feminine inflection of metamorphmagus. Technically, this is an adjective, not a noun, in case any nerds out there were about to correct me on that. The convention came about from, basically, misunderstanding Latin grammar. The phrase "Nymphadora is a metamorphmaga" would be something like Nymphadōra metamorphemaga es — ha ha, tried to put it in Attic too, since it's originally Greek anyway, and nope nope nope Ancient Greek is surprisingly hard — and English-speakers just kept the same word while inappropriately inserting an article, if you follow.

[back at the Yule Ball, Hermione probably should have been leading.] — Might have mentioned this already, but in this continuity Harry and Hermione went to the Yule Ball as friends. And, no, Ron wasn't entirely pleased with this arrangement either, but he'd still been walking on eggshells from their recent spat, so he struggled not to be an arse about it, and at least partially succeeded.
Chapter Summary

Oh, you have plot expectations? Dumbledore has all these ideas about who Voldemort is, all these plans to deal with him? That's nice. Tom doesn't care.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thomas Gaunt had long ago learned that things didn't necessarily turn out the way people expected them to. If anything, the more details someone had charted out, the more ways they would only be proven wrong.

Maybe if he'd actually taken that lesson to heart, instead of understanding it on an intellectual level alone, he wouldn't be in this situation.

It had now been some months since the eternally hapless Pettigrew had finally succeeded at something legitimately useful for once in his miserable life. Not that he had done all that great a job of it. Ideally, he would have had Barty craft the new body bound to him, but that would have necessitated trusting Pettigrew to handle the situation at Hogwarts and the Ministry, and Tom was fortunately not that much of an idiot. Besides, if one of his pawns were to be crippled, he'd much rather it be one he didn't care at all for one way or the other. Barty was clever, talented, devoted, and honestly rather entertaining to banter with — Barty deftly retaining his freedom as he had was more valuable than avoiding the inconvenience Pettigrew's ignorance had saddled him with.

One fault in that ritual Pettigrew had done: the form of the magical construct created for Tom to inhabit was dictated by what Pettigrew expected Tom to look like. So his true form had become that of Lord Voldemort — that hairless, flat-faced, reptilian-looking monstrosity — which, unbeknownst to all but a few, had previously been nothing but a complicated glamour. If he wanted to go anywhere without drawing undue attention, he'd had to cover up his new demonic visage with an equally complex glamour. And those had an annoying tendency to fail at the worst times.

Had to in the past tense, since that was an issue no longer. The secondary benefits of achieving one of the top items on his agenda made such inconveniences a thing of the past.

It had been months, and many of the foolish, incompetent buffoons he had surrounded himself with before his temporary incapacitation were growing impatient. They wanted to get back to their war against the Ministry. They wanted to get back to killing blood traitors and torturing mudbloods. They wanted to know when he was finally going to put Dumbledore in his place. The thought that he didn't much intend to do any of that had evidently never crossed their minds.

Not that he'd expected it to. They still thought he'd meant what he'd said, the first time around.

Although, honestly, he wouldn't mind slapping Dumbledore around a bit. Self-righteous prick.

He'd simply placated some of them — just because they didn't see it didn't mean plots weren't maturing, all would come in due time — and cruciated others — how dare they think to question their Lord? — whichever was appropriate for the role in each situation. They complained Amelia
and her people were watching them more closely, but that honestly didn't sound like his problem. He had other things to worry about, affairs he had to deal with personally. That he didn't even want them all to necessarily know about. Not until everything was ready, if ever.

This trip, for example. What felt like almost another life, shortly after Severus had told him of the prophecy, he'd immediately wondered if there wasn't a way he could hear the entirety of this prophecy himself — the young man's memory had been woefully incomplete. He had little reason to expect Severus would have the whole story now, nor was he entirely sure he'd be able to trust whatever he was told. He'd learned that, according to Augustus, every single prophecy made within the borders of the Nations was recorded, collected in the Department of Mysteries, deep in the Ministry offices. Only one of the subjects of the prophecy would be able to remove it. Even Augustus, a researcher in the Department, would have been unable to so much as listen to it. Which honestly made him wonder why the Hall of Prophecy even existed, but that wasn't really the point. It all meant he would have to go himself — something that would have been foolish at the time, with the Ministry on full martial lockdown, so he hadn't seriously considered it.

So he'd had to wait until today. Fourteen years later than he would have liked, but better late than never.

He stepped out of the Floo grate into the open, crowded Atrium. Arms crossed casually behind his back, he slipped into the crowd, letting their momentum direct him forward, toward that ridiculous statue at the center of the fountain. That thing had always been a source of cold amusement — he especially enjoyed the way Bella's lip would curl in disgust at the way the witch simpered at the wizard's feet — and he was honestly a bit surprised it was still there. He'd thought Dumbledore would have gotten rid of it at some point. He sensed no raised alarms, no panic, no one taking any undue notice of him at all. No one gave him a second glance.

And why should they? He was Adrian Wright, Unspeakable. He wore Mister Wright's face, his robes, carried his wand. Why, there was no reason to think he wasn't Adrian Wright at all.

The wand was actually his own, of course. A rather intricate displaced enchantment had given his wand the appearance and magical signature of Mister Wright's — a bit of magic so absurdly difficult to successfully pull off he doubted standard Ministry security could detect it, or even figure it out had they reason to try. Standard security did search for polyjuice, self-transfiguration, and personal glamours. So he hadn't done any of those — as far as all magic was concerned, this was exactly what he was supposed to look like. As he understood the talent, it was much as how a metamorphmagus had no "true" form, instead unconsciously forcing magic to accept whatever form they happened to be in at that moment as what they were supposed to be. He couldn't change shape as easily as a metamorphmagus — it took a fairly involved alchemical procedure, actually — but the achievement operated on the same principle. It was a new skill of his, one he was quite pleased with so far.

Even if acquiring the ability hadn't come with the agelessness that had been his inspiration to make the attempt in the first place, it still would have been well worth the effort.

The robes, though, actually did belong to Mister Wright. He'd borrowed them along with a fair portion of the man's memories, needed to imitate knowledge and mannerisms, complete the illusion. Fortunately, he was a quite competent actor. As long as he hadn't the grave misfortune to run into a close family member or childhood friend no one should be able to tell the difference. No one much seemed to like poor Adrian Wright, so that certainly made his job easier. Especially since the Unspeakable would need to return to work tomorrow with no one the wiser. The fewer conversations he would have to edit into the head of his unwitting accomplice after the fact, the simpler.
He'd expected this little infiltration of his to go smoothly — he was a bit more confident in this particular plan than, honestly, he'd been in most of his others. Defeating their defenses both by subverting the expectations those same defenses were designed with in mind and simply outclassing them with magic they probably couldn't detect? In most cases, only using one of those strategies would be more than enough. But even so, he hadn't quite expected it to go this easily. All throughout his walk into the very familiar heart of the Ministry, past the security desk, into the bank of elevators, along the dark hall toward the sealed courtrooms he must have walked down hundreds of times, no one gave him a second glance the entire way. He couldn't help feeling oddly disappointed. The government knew he was back, right? There had been so many Aurors in the graveyard, they had to. It had been in The Daily Prophet, he'd seen it. Surely they must have supplemented their security measures at least a little since his return, had to be on higher alert than they'd been before. That this was the best they could do was just...disappointing. Sad, really.

Now for the real test. He knew his way around the Department of Mysteries well enough in theory — he'd interviewed Augustus on the topic thoroughly and repeatedly, after all. But, surely, security here would be tighter. This was the Department of Mysteries, of all places! The magics they studied, experimented with, the knowledge they collected, yes, they had to keep a tighter hold here. The Unspeakables, surely, would be more wary. Surely.

And they weren't. Tom's walk into the Hall of Prophecies went just as smoothly as the rest. A couple Unspeakables had given him something of a lingering look as he'd opened the proper door — Adrian Wright, after all, did not regularly work in this particular field — but had ultimately just shrugged his presence off. Yes, this was really quite sad. He couldn't even enjoy his half-completed victory as he followed the slight tug pulling at his magic, drawing him to one little glass orb among the thousands stacked to the faded ceiling. It was just so disappointing.

Not that he'd wanted to get caught, of course. He simply found it fundamentally depressing that his own country was this hopelessly incompetent.

SPT: APWBD; SRS
—Dark Lord
—? (HJA Potter)

Here we are. Well. That was easy. No point in dawdling. Not even bothering to draw his wand, he erected a silencing barrier over this particular little hallway with a few flicks of his fingers, starting reaching out for the smooth, softly glowing orb.

And hesitated. The protections Augustus had described over these little things were really quite extreme. Any individual not the subject of the prophecy in question — including the Oracle who'd given it, and those she'd given it to — would be rather painfully killed on contact. Not necessarily just skin contact either. The proper individual removing one from its shelf would break the enchantment, but until then they were very dangerous little things. He could practically taste the deadly intent on the air.

He was hesitating for a reason immediately obvious to him: one of the subjects of the prophecy was named simply Dark Lord. He'd expected just his name — he was sure knowledge of his real name would have gotten out by now — not something so worryingly generic. Who could say for sure whether the Dark Lord intended was actually him? Even if it was him, the enchantment could still have been laid to kill him anyway. A very tempting little trap. It would even excuse the lackluster security around here.

But he wasn't so sure. That was something he would do, in their place. He doubted they were quite
so ruthless. Besides, academics had a tendency to ignore those sort of external details — if the
directive to lay the enchantment differently hadn't come from elsewhere, he doubted the idea would
have occurred independently to the Unspeakables. And, well, the Unspeakables would have
probably assumed the Dark Lord intended was himself, so they would have set the enchantment with
him in mind. No, he was sure it was perfectly safe.

Not that it really mattered that much. He still had a few horcruxes out there, and it wouldn't take him
long at all to alchemise a new body if this one were destroyed — he'd be out for a couple weeks at
the most. It would simply be first painful, and then an enormous waste of time. Not really something
he was eager to allow.

But it was probably fine. Forcing away the last of his uncertainty, he reached forward, plucked the
little glass ball off its stand — all he felt was the subtle unspooling feeling of the protective
enchantments melting away, the pulsing warmth of contained memory from inside. After an instant
of thought, Tom gave the orb a soft jab of undifferentiated mind magic. The containment magics
shifted, inverted, and suddenly his private little hallway was filled with harsh, rasping words:

One with the Power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches
born to Two who have thrice defied Him, as the Seventh Month dies
the Dark Lord will mark One as his Equal
One will have Power the Dark Lord knows not
Both must fade at the Will of the Other
for Neither can endure while the Other lives
One will be born as the Seventh Month dies

...

...

...

Well.

What had he been thinking? He was a bloody fucking idiot. At this level of foolishness, and if he
hadn't long been positive she was dead, he would be unsurprised to find himself married to his own
mother.

There were two major types of Divination, everyone knew this. There were Seers, of course — their
specific abilities were various, often subconscious and unpredictable, but always involved the
acquiring of information removed in either time or space by inexplicable magical means. What Seers
knew was simply truth. At least, generally. From what he'd read, it was not unheard of for Seers to
unconsciously misinterpret what they learned, to the point any specific details were almost
guaranteed to be useless. General impressions, plenty; useful specifics, rare.

Oracles, though, were completely different. For one thing, an Oracle was never aware of the
prophecy they were channelling — they always went into a trance, couldn't remember a thing. The
prophecy was meant for those who heard it. And, almost invariably, their actions in response to the
prophecy would make it come true. Prophecies were, by definition, self-fulfilling — the very few
exceptions to the rule involved recipients who killed themselves rather than allow the prophecy to
come to pass, or those clever enough to simply obliterate away all knowledge of the insidious things.

It was obvious, now that he'd heard the entire thing, that the best possible response to the prophecy
would have been to do nothing. But, he shouldn't have needed to hear the whole thing — that should
have been obvious! Sure, he wasn't one of the recipients, but he'd been told about the thing by one of
them, hadn't he? Wasn't simply that enough for Severus to, unintentionally, ensure the prophecy happened exactly as written?

*Morgen, he was such an imbecile.*

But this wasn't the time to get distracted by his self-directed rage. He had things to do. With a long sigh, he forced his fury away, at least for the moment, and turned back to the prophecy.

*One with the Power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches*

Even at the first line, he already wasn't entirely sure what to think. The prophecy refers to him as "the Dark Lord" three times — three exactly, interesting — but it wasn't like that was his name or anything. He wasn't even *technically* a Dark Lord. The Voldemort persona was, yes, but that wasn't really him at all, just a character he'd constructed to suit his purposes. One *could* argue he, Thomas Gaunt, was also a Dark Lord, but the title didn't quite fit so well. There were certain aesthetic and philosophical trappings that came with the title, and they didn't really fit him. He could only assume the prophecy was referring to him, as everyone else apparently had, but it was still curious.

And then there's the use of verbal tenses there, very interesting. At the time the prophecy was made, Lily would have been pregnant — the tense and aspect of the sentence implies the boy already had whatever "power" it was at that point. There were very, very few things a person had by then, not much more than hereditary magical talents and a predisposition to certain personality traits. This "power" of his would probably have to count as one of those, though he was hesitant to say for sure — prophecies could be annoyingly poetic at times.

*born to Two who have thrice defied Him, as the Seventh Month dies*

This one was more obvious. As far as he knew, and even being a bit liberal with how "defy" is meant, only two children in all the world fulfilled both requirements — Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. He'd been quick to believe it would be Lily's son. The Longbottoms had raised their wands to him, yes, but Lily's "defiance" had been much more personal: so few rejected an offer of alliance from him, especially at the age she had been. And she'd hounded him constantly from that day until the moment of her death — in a way, even afterward — either at the end of her wand or indirectly, words whispered into hidden ears. Lily had even been one of the very few who had intentionally targeted his true identity — it had been Lord Gaunt who had been meeting with her, their talks spectacularly falling apart when she somehow found out about his Voldemort scheme, so she'd known both names — though she'd seemingly been unable to convince anyone else. In some ways, Lily Evans, later Potter, was almost a greater pain in his arse than Dumbledore had been. So, yes, definitely her son, no question about that. No question about that at all.

Actually, now that he thought about it, there was no reason the "One" referred to couldn't have already been— Oh, wait, it said "will be born" in the last line, never mind. Though he hadn't heard that part the first time. Still, not important.

*the Dark Lord will mark One as his Equal*

And he was a fucking *idiot*. The boy was rather visibly marked, as Tom himself had seen. Whether that scar of his marked him as an equal or not was debatable — and entirely in the realm of what people seemed to *think* it meant. Most of Britain seemed to have been convinced by his very survival that Potter was some sort of incredibly powerful wizard *in potentia*, completely missing the *obvious* explanation that either Lily or her husband must have done something to protect him. (He knew it was Lily, of course, but he doubted the common people knew enough to determine that specifically.) Beyond that, he didn't think there was anything special about it. At the time, he'd noticed the slightest resonance between the two of them in the harmonics of their minds, but he hadn't take the
opportunity to investigate. And he'd probably never again have a chance to. Assuming it would even
still be there — it was entirely possible it had just been lingering transference from the ritual. No, no,
he didn't think that had any continuing relevance. That part of the prophecy was fulfilled.

One will have Power the Dark Lord knows not

This was curious wording, here. Did it mean Potter would have some ability he didn't? Or that this
would be an ability Tom himself hadn't even any knowledge of? On the face of it, he thought that
unlikely. He wouldn't be surprised if he were the most thoroughly knowledgeable mage in Britain —
he knew for a fact Dumbledore, for example, had never studied for any significant length of time
outside the borders of the Nations, and, to be depressingly frank, British mages were simply behind
the curve in many ways. Tom had spent years simply perusing the famous libraries of Raļqācit and
Agad, a few more personally apprenticed to a prominent Melīx sorceress. There were still places his
knowledge was incomplete, he would be the first to admit that (though not in public), but those
places were vanishingly few. This "power" would almost have to be something never seen before, a
completely novel manifestation, for him not to know of it.

Perhaps it would simply be an ability Tom didn't know Potter had. That was also possible. Maybe
Potter would "vanquish" him entirely because Tom underestimated him, ascribed less ability to the
young man than he actually had. Admittedly, he had shown himself very proficient so far at, to put it
bluntly, not dying. That was one area in which he was showing a very clear talent. But he knew the
boy was magically powerful — Severus had told him of that improbably impressive patrōnus he'd
managed, and at only thirteen. He'd simply have to take care to be cautious. After all, it didn't matter
what "power" Potter had if the boy couldn't actually hit him with it.

That is, assuming "power" was meant explicitly, as some sort of magical ability he would be fighting
Tom directly with, and not something more implicit, subtle. That could be more complicated.

Both must fade at the Will of the Other

for Neither can endure while the Other lives

And this, of course...

Well...

He had no idea what this meant. Interesting. Maybe...

A dozen connections shot through his mind all at once. And he was laughing, chuckling to himself
low under his breath.

It was an interesting reciprocal statement there, yes — whatever one of them did to the other would
be done to the first in turn. Very interesting. And also very confusing. The blunt interpretation one
might make was that they both had to kill the other, that in the end they would both be dead by the
other's hand. But, it didn't say hand, did it? It didn't even say die either. "Both must fade at the Will of
the Other" — how vague, how very curiously mild. Why, neither of them had to die at all, did they?

And that was where the realisation had hit him, the thought that had just made him laugh. Because he
saw it, he understood it. *The prophecy was already fulfilled!* For Harry Potter was far less than he
should be, born into the wealth and privilege of nobility, a prominent family powerful in magical
society since before the Statute, but sent away to be raised by his non-magical, commoner relatives.
Some things can't be learned beyond a certain age. And, from the few signs he'd noticed, the boy
hadn't exactly survived their last encounter unscathed. He'd not appeared in public at all since. Pleas
from Fudge to show his face at the Ministry went unanswered. The boy hadn't been seen at Diagon
Alley, and if he had been there at all, someone would know of it — the Boy-Who-Lived went nowhere unnoticed. An unnamed source inside the Department of Education had reported to The Daily Prophet the boy wasn't even enrolled in Hogwarts this year, a claim the Department had later confirmed! From what he could tell, even what little was left of Harry Potter seemed to be rapidly fading away.

And, well, Tom had faded plenty himself, hadn't he? That first time, reduced to a powerless, lonely wraith for nigh-on a decade. He guessed it was debatable whether that counted as happening at the "will" of the boy, but prophecies are funny things — the boy had been crying at the time, simple toddler thoughts quite likely wishing him away.

If he were to be completely honest with himself, that hadn't been very easy. For one thing, he really hadn't wanted to kill Lily. He liked Lily. But she just wouldn't get out of the way. He'd even tried simply incapacitating her a few times, but she kept deflecting the spells. Mostly, with her bare hands — there was a reason he liked her, after all. In the end, the fight had started turning distressingly one-sided, so he'd had to end it before she could get in a lucky shot. Because she hadn't been restricting herself to non-lethal spells, not at all.

But even after killing her, which had already made him feel bad enough — and he really hated that — then he had to deal with the boy. Sitting there, bawling his eyes out. That had just...

Tom would not at all hesitate to admit that he really, really, really did not like children — never really had, even when he'd been one. Especially when they were that young. But even he wasn't so apathetic as to be unmoved by the sight of a toddler crying over the body of his freshly-murdered mother. Especially when that mother in question happened to be someone he quite liked. He would most likely never admit out loud just how long it had taken him to summon the will to end the boy. He'd had to dwell on a memory of someone entirely different — a particularly arrogant Slytherin boy a couple years older than him, who hadn't much approved of a half-blood claiming the then-extinct House of Gaunt — to summon the emotion necessary to fuel the spell.

No, he hadn't enjoyed that night at all.

But, yes, that night had resulted in him fading away quite well. Arguably, he had faded much more directly by the boy's will a couple years ago, when he'd tried to use that sorry excuse for a Defence Professor to get his hands (sort of) on Flamel's philosopher's stone. What little strength he'd recovered, gone, left again to float adrift. For a few months there, he'd been sure he would never be able to arrange his own recovery, that he'd spend the rest of eternity a helpless, powerless shade, an infinitesimal fraction of the wizard he'd been — a fate he really preferred not to contemplate. Yes, if there was ever a time he'd ever "faded" at the will of another, that was surely it.

Not that stealing that little rock would have done him any good — yet another stupid mistake he'd made the last couple decades. He somehow hadn't known this at the time, but there wasn't even such a thing as a philosopher's stone. They didn't exist. What very, very few realised was that Flamel's treatise on the creation of his stone, and the stone itself, weren't literal at all — the entire thing was one big metaphor. What Flamel was actually getting at, under all the semi-nonsensical arithmantic proofs and runic diagrams and pages and page of verbose instruction, was less a process of physically creating an object, and more one of inward meditation. The trick Flamel and maybe a couple dozen other mages over history had managed was to understand their own body, mind, magic, and soul well enough that they could alchemise themselves.

The Elixir of Life? There was no such thing, but someone with such extreme alchemical control over their own body could easily prevent themselves from aging — themselves and anyone they knew sufficiently well. Turning any metal into gold? Someone so skilled in alchemy could simply conjure
however much gold they wanted, alchemise the temporary construct into permanency. There was no philosopher's stone, simply a rather blunt metaphor for true mastery over alchemy.

It wasn't an easy process at all. From what he'd read, when he'd finally found a text that wasn't complete horseshite, even people who knew the whole thing was a metaphor, knew exactly what they were supposed to do, the vast majority of them wouldn't be able to wrap their heads around the concepts involved. Even after years, decades of study.

Tom had figured it out in about a month.

He was really more embarrassed he hadn't figured out the truth earlier.

Well. This was rather anti-climactic, wasn't it? Here he'd thought fate had handed him some opponent destined to put an end to him. The truth was much less dramatic. He chuckled to himself a little more, shaking his head. He was such a fucking idiot. If he had just ignored the thing, none of this shite the last decade and a half would have happened.

And he had been so close, too. Just another year, maybe two. He would have claimed to have been shocked, when his old assistant came to him. Bella had had to abandon the job when it'd come out she was a Death Eater, of course. But she still would have felt safe coming to him — at least more safe than she would the DLE. But of course she would: she'd known the bare outline of his little gambit before "Lord Voldemort" had even existed. Not that they'd be sharing that with the Aurors. No, Bella would give him, and through him the DLE, all the information they would need to bring down Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Quite possibly in a single night, a few well-coordinated, simultaneous raids, augmented with another well-timed betrayal from young Severus (who had also been in on it from nearly the beginning). The most feared Dark Lord in modern British history would be dead — he had planned on finding a foreign wizard to use to stand in for him that night, memory altered to suit the character — and the worst of Britain's pureblood supremacists would be killed or imprisoned, all in one fell swoop.

That he would have made quite a name for himself in the process would have been a nice bonus — necessary for his subsequent plans, but still nice.

But now he would have to figure out a new plan. He didn't think the Väinö's Gambit he'd originally intended would work anymore. Rather annoying, that.

Oh, well. The prophecy was over with, nothing he needed to concern himself with in future. No reason to stand around here anymore. He was just about to drop the little glass ball to the ground, intending to destroy it and vanish the remains, when he hesitated. A smirk crossing his face, he put the orb back on its pedestal instead. Let Dumbledore think he hadn't heard the whole thing yet. Let Dumbledore think he still cared about the prophecy, about the Potter boy, the slightest bit. In fact, he should let leak some hints to that effect, somewhere they'd be sure to get to the meddlesome old fool's ears. Let that self-righteous, arrogant twat chase his own tail around for a bit. Himself, he had legitimately important things to worry about.

Like rescuing Bella. He'd been trying to distract himself from the thought that she was languishing in Azkaban right now, quite possibly the very most terrible place in the world to be. His raid on Azkaban had to be properly timed, properly executed, for there to be any hope of succeeding. So he'd had to wait. But there were only four days left, now. Only four more.

Whistling absently to himself — more to give him something simple to focus on than any actual good cheer — Tom turned on his heel, and started on his way out of the Department of Mysteries.
Tom stood, one foot propped up on the gunwale just to the side of the stem, calmly watching the island of Azkaban approach over the horizon.

Getting here had been comparatively easy. A quick apparation to the far north, lying in wait under concealment charms on the east coast of Stronsay. At exactly the proper moment, the shift change had come — seven men and women in the dark dragonhide armour and deep blue cloaks of the Hit Wizards. Tom, six of his own people following, had crept along behind them, until they'd all arrived in a little bay hidden by powerful wards a millennium old, holding little more than a tiny stone pier and a couple little, simple wooden boats.

The seven Ministry duellists had never even felt the strike from behind coming, were overwhelmed practically before they could react.

Armed with memories stolen from their captain — he'd been expecting a lieutenant, actually, though it didn't really matter — he'd led his people, all of them now wearing borrowed Hit Wizard uniforms, onto one of the little boats, properly activated the concealed enchantment to bring them floating to Azkaban.

He didn't know a whole lot about Azkaban. Well, he meant, he didn't really know much about what Azkaban had been before the Celtic Nations had started using it as a prison. But, then, no one else really did. There was much speculation on the topic, but no one was really sure. The British people hadn't built the fortress, but simply made a few alterations so the place could be reasonably used as a prison. Which apparently hadn't been easy: the fortress was said to be made of some ceramic-like material that almost seemed to be indestructible. Millennia of weathering, muggle tools both ancient and modern, even the strongest of blasting charms couldn't knock a chip from a single surface. Even diamond couldn't make so much as a scratch. No one was entirely sure what the stuff was, had even less clues about who exactly had made it.

Apparently, the place was architecturally similar to some old Belês palaces, but that was unlikely to be meaningful. They were over three thousand miles away from Crete, the homeland of the Belak, far removed from even the most distant enclaves of their civilisation in ancient times.

He'd read much conjecture that the island was once a hub for the old shadowgate network — a method of long-distance transportation between fixed points that had, millennia ago, stitched together much of Africa, west Asia, and the Mediterranean. That theory almost made sense. These terminals did, after all, tend to be found in isolated locations much like the island Azkaban was built on. (Apparently, the things had had a nasty habit of randomly, and impressively, exploding.) From what modern historians had been able to recover, there had been at least one terminal this far out — most likely located somewhere on the British isles or in Scandinavia, no one was sure exactly where — though it had been in operation for a comparatively short period of time.

But the idea didn't make perfect sense. Plenty of those old sites had been identified and analysed — none of them were built of materials anything like those in Azkaban. This terminal could have been built with a local method, used by some archaic civilisation native to the area lost to history, but then one had to wonder why there were no other sites around here of similar construction. With how impossibly durable Azkaban was, they'd certainly still be around, if they'd ever existed at all. The whole thing was a mystery, a rather frustrating one. He liked puzzles, generally, but he preferred puzzles that were solvable — one with no reasonable solution, and no available evidence to even attempt to find a solution, wasn't much fun at all.

And he should really start paying more attention to what was going on. Today was sort of a big deal.

Their little enchanted boat was coming up to the opposite pier now, the pale stone extending out into the water a sharp contrast against the almost obsidian black of the lonely island. As the pier
approached, Tom pushed himself up to standing on one foot, balanced on the gunwale, then stepped smoothly off onto the pier. His six disguised followers clambered up after him, much less gracefully. He strode down the off-white, crumbling rock with complete confidence, as if he were supposed to be here, but with little haste, as though he really didn't want to be. He could already feel the chill bite of the dementors stinging at his mind, so he guessed he might not even be acting all that much.

When his feet hit the dark rock of the island, it took all he had not to stop, to keep walking instead of crouching down to examine the stuff. Even with his boots isolating his skin, he could tell it wasn't rock at all — he suspected the firm, smooth, nearly reflective surface was the same mysterious not-ceramic the palace was said to be made of. He wasn't entirely sure how he knew. He'd reeled in his well-honed magical sense almost completely — one of the downsides of such a skill was it made him far more susceptible to mental influence, such as by dementors, while active — but maybe just enough managed to squeak by he could tell it didn't feel quite...right. He was having the sudden, peculiar thought that the entire island was artificial, not just the palace atop it.

Interesting. He wondered why no one else had had the same idea.

They were farther into the island now, the falling of their feet noisy with the crunch of gravel — a completely different material, cheap feldspar by the look of it, probably brought here by the Ministry to improve traction during the winter, or stormy weather. Ahead was the palace. The look of it wasn't quite what he expected. It was wide and low, made of a bright, yellowish material, striped in a few places with pink into red, the morning sun setting several of the curving surfaces into a bright glare. The place struck him as more administrative, or perhaps residential, than anything else. From what he could tell the few fortifications — the most obvious being a low stone wall encircling the entire palace, which he knew from his examination of the captain's memories was heavily warded — seemed to be later additions, made from imported materials.

Though, that definitely killed the Belēs exclave theory. The open courtyards (perhaps gardens, originally?), the smooth, organically curving walls and ceilings, the subtle, intricately-carved accents... Yes, all that did seem very Belēs, very similar to the floating cities upon which most of the modern Belak lived — he'd been lucky enough to spend a couple months exploring one, very nice places. But these cities were a much more recent endeavor, only developed in the last fifteen hundred years or so. The ancient Belak, thought to be contemporaries of the designers of this palace here, had been a more typical bronze age culture, designing comparatively simple architecture of angular stone — if less predisposed to heavy military fortifications than many of their neighbours. This site couldn't be Belēs, it didn't fit. Interesting. Frustrating, but interesting.

They were coming up to the gate now, a heavy, European-style portcullis suspended above the narrow space. He knew they were being watched by the previous shift. He knew the wards on the walls would detect duplicity where the human observers couldn't, and immediately lock the place down. It wouldn't be impossible to pierce their defences, but it would be difficult. Time-consuming.

Which was why he was going to cheat.

When he was maybe twenty metres away, right around where he expected the wardline to be, he made his move. He didn't apparate — ancient wards that had already been here before the British further reinforced the place prevented such egregious bending of space. (Also interesting, considering apparation hadn't yet been invented by the time the fortress was thought to have been built.) Instead, with a sharp push of will and power, he forced himself into the air, rippling across the distance much as would a wave of sound, coming to stand under the portcullis in hardly an instant. He rapidly cast a few stasis charms on the portcullis itself, separating the enchantments operating the mechanism from the wards likely cuing them to slam the door at this very moment. A few flicks of a finger of his off hand, a shining rune drawn into the air, and the charms were bound solidly to
himself — not permanent, and a bit of a sloppy job, but it should prevent the Hit Wizards inside from dispelling them long enough for the other six to slip in.

The two Hit Wizards immediately inside seemed to come to the same conclusion with impressive speed, and started casting curses directly at him almost right away. Perfectly deadly blasting and cutting curses as well, not the stunners he’d half-expected. Not bad. The seven they’d taken down a little bit ago hadn’t been slouches either. It was clear the people handling policy were morons, but at least Britain wasn’t completely bare of talent.

Pity they had to die.

This wasn't the best position to be duelling in, stuck standing in place, one hand locked above his head holding the stasis charms together. But he wasn’t concerned. He weathered the heavy stream of deadly curses without too much trouble, batting the blasting curses aside with twitches of his wand, absorbing the wider cutting curses with more proper shielding. He’d hardly been standing there a few seconds before a flurry of curses started singing across the air in the opposite direction. One of the two Hit Wizards fell instantly — Tom recognised the sharp absinthe of that particular killing curse as belonging to Barty. The other survived long enough to wail a moment in terror and pain, blood leaking from eyes and mouth, her left arm up nearly to her neck rapidly decaying away, before he snuffed out her agony with another flash of green. Those curses they'd used on her, so pointless.

He could never understand how some of the Death Eaters seemed to find it necessary to put that sort of extreme effort into torturing people they were just going to kill anyway. Especially when they were in the middle of something! Honestly.

A glance to make sure all six were past, and he let the stasis charms fade, skipping inside before it could slam down on him. That went well. He led the Death Eaters into a nearby building, through a couple eerily glimmering hallways — another Hit Wizard stumbling into them was summarily dealt with with another flash of green light — following the mental map he'd stolen from the Hit Wizard captain. Soon, he'd found the proper staircase, and started down for the subterranean levels.

Only to skip back a couple steps when spellfire splashed at his feet. These Hit Wizards weren't playing around, either: one of those would have violently shattered his leg, chips of bone slicing apart muscle and skin, the other start an inexorable progression of rapid rot. At least, inexorable for most people — he'd have been able to counter it without too much trouble — but it was still a bit nastier than he expected from Ministry-trained duellists. Making his way down a narrow staircase like this under constant spellfire of that calibre would be pushing it, even for him.

He consulted his mental map of the prison levels. Once he confirmed none of the prisoners would be in the immediate area, he casually sent off a blast of cursed lightning down the stairwell, the throbbing black arcs bouncing and skittering across every surface before disappearing into the room below. That should do it. The spitting sizzles almost entirely overpowered the screams of agony that started up an instant afterward.

He'd intentionally searched out curses that could be aimed from behind cover like this. It still sort of surprised him that nobody else seemed to have.

Once the sharp crackling faded away, the screams already cut off seconds earlier, Tom smoothly continued on his way down the stairs. He found himself in a room he was sure wasn't part of the original structure — the walls and ceiling were made of a flat, greyish stone that simply didn't belong here. There were a couple beds against a wall, a desk flanked by dozens of filing cabinets along another, a table in the middle with a deck of playing cards splayed at random across it. Of course, much of it was on fire now, turning the air in the room increasingly smokey, but he could still tell what it all had been before his curse had ruined it. Without pausing, he continued on toward a door at
the opposite end. Interestingly enough, the door set into the stone wall was made of darkened steel. He could feel the wards worked into the surface, the subtle chill seeping from beyond, a chill more spiritual than physical.

This would be it, then.

He pushed the door open with a pulse of magic and a flick of his wrist, revealing the space beyond. He couldn't imagine what this place had originally been for. The hall was wide and long, easily the size of the Ministry atrium and surely larger, floor, curving walls, and ceiling arching above made of a shimmering green material he assumed was the same sort as the palace on the surface. Since this mysterious material was apparently indestructible, Ministry workers hadn't been able to form cells directly out of it, instead building rows of them out of imported stone, the greyish blocks set one after another along both walls, a few lines running down the middle.

Oh, and much of the empty space between cells and ceiling was filled with a floating, contorting mass of seemingly countless dementors. That too.

But Tom didn't even slow. He stepped out into the stabbing cold, ignoring the dark shapes descending smoothly upon him, ignoring the fluttering of memories trying to surge forth, ruthlessly suppressing the rising dread. He could summon a _patrōnus_ to ward them off, of course, but he rather felt like doing something more dramatic, more...permanent. So he drew upon his fury, his fury the Ministry had sent Bella to this hellish place, his fury that anyone even allowed this international shame to continue to exist, his fury these mindless abominations would even _attempt_ to feed upon him. He drew his anger into a deadly sharp razor of absolute _refusal_, refusal to be made weak, refusal to bow before these spirits of death.

He lifted his arm, brandished his familiar yew-and-phoenix wand at the onrushing horde, and hissed a single phrase: 'Zita x-zalzalag.' The pillar of white which burst from the tip of his wand was bright, impossibly bright, so bright it should dazzle him, leave him blinking in pain. But it didn't. The Light of Gibil harmed only the unholy: vampires, inferi, boggarts. And, of course, dementors.

White light burst through the swarm of dementors, tearing through their formation like a severing charm through tissue paper. The air was instantly filled with a high, ethereal keening, the unnatural sound setting his bones to shivering. The dementors abandoned the attack, the entire mass contorting into a disorganised retreat, scattering away, the air still filled with inhuman shrieks of terror. In a moment, there was nothing above them but glittering green, obscured here and there with empty black robes, patched with smoldering white fire, drifting slowly toward the ground.

Tom's steady pace hitched only slightly, before the temporary weakness induced by the powerful spell mostly faded.

He thought it a bit sad that the British seemed to be convinced dementors couldn't be killed at all. The ancient peoples of Mesopotamia and Kemet had figured that out millennia ago. Most other magical nations were reasonable enough to kill the abominations on sight. None of the charms to do so were _easy_, of course, likely beyond the capabilities of the average mage. But it was certainly _possible_. For heaven's sake, it was _commonly known_ that dementors could breed, after a fashion — if they could reproduce but _never died_, they would have overrun humanity by now! It was simply incredible how stupid people were sometimes.

The six following him, looking a bit awestruck at that last bit of magic — he had to restrain an impulse to roll his eyes when he noticed that — swiftly made for the proper block of cells, deep within the dementors' nest. Tom, doing his best to ignore the pathetic moaning and screaming emanating from all sides, headed for one cell in particular. He couldn't see inside very well, but the number on the door was correct. He didn't even bother properly unlocking it — a twitch of his wand
tore the heavy steel door from its stone frame, the thing collapsing to the ground at his feet with a reverberating crash.

Once the echo was gone, he was met with hoarse, shuddering laughter. There wasn't a trace of true humour on the familiar, feminine voice, only a dark, hopeless sort of irony. Shrugging off the dread attempting to settle over his shoulders, he stepped into her cage.

Bella sat in a corner of the cell, legs drawn up to her chest, her back against one wall, shoulder, knees, and head resting against another. He knew this was her, but it was rather hard to convince himself of the reality. She was dangerously emaciated, every visible bit of her — which was more than it really should be with how cold it was, the uniform she'd been forced into long ago decayed to tattered rags — ashen, sickly skin stretched tight over protruding bone. He couldn't see much of her face past the impossibly tangled mass of her hair, not much more than her chin, every contour of the jawbone beneath distressingly obvious. What he could feel of her mind and magic was weak and cold, what had already been cracked frayed further apart by over a decade of dementor exposure. And still she sat there, not looking over to him — though she must have heard the door coming down — still laughing to herself like all of reality were some sick joke.

For a long moment, he could only stand and stare, fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Ooh, he very much wanted to destroy something right now.

But, with a supreme force of effort, he suppressed the fury clawing at his throat. Not the time for that. 'Bella?'

'He comes again,' Bella muttered between mad giggles in an uncharacteristically harsh, cracked voice. 'Comes and comes but never goes.' Her head rolled away from the wall, only to fall back against the rock with a subtle thud. Tom hardly noticed himself wince. 'I've heard all your whispers before, they never change. Don't want them.'

Well, this was...this wasn't good. Swallowing back his impulsive response, he stepped further into the cell, crouching down toward—

—and nearly jumped back again when Bella suddenly popped to her feet. Not very steadily, wobbling enough she'd probably fall if she hadn't had both hands against the back wall, but nearly standing all the same. 'No! I don't want to again, I don't! You can't fool me again, I know you're not real!' Bella stood there, leaning into the wall for support, black-shrouded head against the rough stone. Shaking from head to toe, her voice a soft whine, she muttered to herself, 'n'es pas réel, n'es pas réel,' over and over and over.

He took a quick breath, then reached out a hand, taking her arm just above the elbow. She was freezing and terrifyingly thin, but he tried not to think about that for now.

He took a quick breath, then reached out a hand, taking her arm just above the elbow. She was freezing and terrifyingly thin, but he tried not to think about that for now.

Bella froze, ligaments visibly tensing under her skin. Her face pulled a little away from the wall, only enough to gaze down at his fingers on her arm. After a long moment of staring, she shifted a little, and Tom felt cold, bony fingers ghost subtly across his. And she slowly turned to look at him.

She hardly looked like herself at all. Lips cracked to bleeding, cheeks impossibly sunken, yellowed eyes looking almost disproportionately large in her shrunken face. Tom could see far too many details in the vertebrae of her neck than he was really comfortable with. Her twitching eyes jerkily scanned his face — which she should theoretically recognise, since he'd made himself look like, well, himself. Probably a little younger than he strictly should be at this point, but he doubted she was coherent enough to realise that. 'You...' That was all she seemed to be able to manage, still just staring at him.
He wasn't sure what to do, so he just nodded.

And she was leaning against him for support instead of the wall. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around her much-diminished waist, doing absolutely everything he could to not dwell on how impossibly cold she felt, how unnervingly light. This wasn't the time for that. Bella weakly bunched his borrowed cloak in her fists, her head tucked under his chin against his chest, her heavy breaths shaking with...either laughter or tears, he honestly couldn't tell. 'You're actually here,' she croaked into dragonhide, 'I can't believe you're here. I thought...' Her voice trailed off, fading into indistinguishable shuddering.

He had absolutely no idea what to say. To be perfectly honest, he'd never really been all too great with people stuff — especially when it came to personal relationships. More formal relationships he could feel out fine, but he was almost always privately lost otherwise. And that was just in normal situations. This was hardly normal. He had no clue. So he just said, 'Sorry I took so long.'

'How long was it?'

Tom couldn't hold back a wince, but he did manage to keep himself from uncomfortably shuffling. 'Almost fourteen years.'

For a long moment, Bella was completely silent, even the laugh/crying gone. He wasn't entirely convinced she was breathing. Finally, in a soft, distant sort of voice, 'Felt like longer.'

Oh, yes, he definitely wanted to destroy something right now. In fact, he was feeling positively murderous.

But, no, this wasn't the time for that. Well, by his count they were still missing two Hit Wizards and two Aurors, but he didn't plan on hunting them down. If they were smart enough to stay out of his way they'd live. There were more important things to do.

Like getting Bella out of here.

A moment later, and with disconcerting ease, he had Bella off the ground, her shoulders over one arm and knees another. She hardly reacted, face still pressed resolutely against his chest. He walked back out into the hall, glanced around. The other six were a short distance away, supporting the eleven captured Death Eaters who'd survived this long into their sentences. None of them really seemed to be in that much better shape than Bella, incoherent and hardly standing on their own. Save for Pettigrew, the only one stupid enough to have been caught at the graveyard, and had barely been in here a couple months. Tom considered ordering them to leave him, but that wasn't quite in character. For another moment, he fought off the urge to curse Rodolphus's ugly face off his stupid head, but that was an old thought, so he was mostly used to it by now.

Not that he particularly cared what condition the other Death Eaters were in. He'd really only come here for Bella. He might have been able to get in without the other six — some of the timing and placement would have been tricky — but even if he had, showing up with only Bella would have raised some annoying questions he just didn't want to deal with. It had just been easier to bring them with, and let them take care of their comrades-in-arms.

Which, from the looks of things, was something they'd be doing a lot of in the foreseeable future.

When they had all gathered again, Tom hesitated for a moment. Usually, in these situations, he'd make one of those speeches. He'd gotten pretty good at those. Not by his standards — they were so formulaic, and the rhetoric was so transparently manipulative — but the short-sighted purebloods who were stupid enough to pledge themselves to their ridiculous Dark Lord seemed to get off on it.
This was one of those situations where he'd definitely make one. He'd even had the bare outline of one made up in his head for this exact moment.

But, honestly? He wasn't in the mood. He mostly just wanted to get the fuck out of here. So he turned on his heel and started leading the way out.

It wasn't until they were back on the ground floor that Bella spoke again. 'Hey, Tom.'

Normally, he wouldn't have been pleased with Bella using his real name in front of the Death Eaters, but he really just couldn't care right now. He glanced down to see her tracing the seams in his stolen dragonhide armour with a finger, an odd, crooked grin on her desiccated lips. 'Yes?'

With a pathetic shadow of her old teasing tone, Bella said, 'I've always liked a man in uniform.'

Tom could only shake his head, the barest traces of a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

[SPT: APWBD; SRS] — Sybill Patricia Trelawney: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore; Severus Ruaidri Snape

[HJA Potter] — Henry ("Harry") James Ashley Potter. You didn't really think "Harry" was his proper legal name, did you? Harry is usually considered a diminutive of either Heinrich (Henric/Henry in English) or Harold. I decided I liked Henry better. And, in case you're wondering, "Ashley" was until very recently (like, the sixties) an exclusively masculine name, and while it is far more commonly given to girls in the US (and was, in fact, never common for boys), in the UK Ashley is still primarily a boy's name, and not all that rare of one either. Things are funny like that sometimes.

[he would be unsurprised to find himself married to his own mother.] — Greek mythology reference, woooo.

Morgen — Don't know if I've mentioned this in this fic. Proper endemic name for Morgana / Morgan le Fay / whatever.

Raḥqācit — the native Egyptian name for the city of Alexandria. That transliteration is just a random attempt I made. The older name, the one I transliterated, is pretty much unpronounceable for native English speakers, but the more modern Coptic is just something like "rah-koh-tuh"

Agad — The ancient Mesopotamian city of Akkad. I messed with the pronunciation, because, well, it's been thousands of years. It really wouldn't really be pronounced anything like that anymore anyway.

Alchemy — In my headcanon conception of magic used in these fics, the simplest form of alchemy is permanent transfiguration/conjuration. Generally, any transfigured or conjured object can only remain in that form temporarily, until the energy sustaining the spell decays to a point it can no longer hold the object in the transfigured form (or, in the case of a transfiguring enchantment, as long as the runes are undamaged and allowed to properly charge). More advanced forms involve alchemising the physical and magical properties of an object separately. For example, Dumbledore and Flamel
did not "discover" the "twelve uses" of dragon's blood — they formally described the
twelve different magical properties of dragon's blood, so alchemists could create
something with the same useful magical effects without the negative physical effects
(true dragon's blood is highly corrosive). This led to the creation of dozens of new
potions, since potioneers no longer had to worry about their concoctions burning
people up from the inside. Most dragon's blood sold is actually pig's or sheep's blood
with the magical properties of dragon's blood alchemised into it. And, yes, Tom is 100%
correct on what the philosopher's stone actually is — whether Dumbledore was honest
in what he believed about the thing, and Flamel gave him a fake just to shut him up, or
they were both in on the trick is open to opinion — and, also yes, he is legitimately
ageless now.

Väinö's Gambit — I can 99% guarantee exactly what this is will be discussed in text
somewhere in a later chapter.

Belēs (IPA: /bʰɛlēs/) — Basically? The ancient Minoan Civilisation of Crete. This is a
more modern term in the attributive (like "Chinese" is the attributive of China).
Pronounced roughly "vel-hace". The tilde marks a nasal vowel, by the way, but those
are hard for me to pronounce reliably too, so don't worry about it.

Crete — I was going to use the term the Belak use, but decided that would be more
confusing than necessary for you non-nerds. In case you're curious, the word they use is
Kēffa (IPA:/kʰɛʃəl/; roughly "kayf-yeah")

Belak (IPA: /bʰɛlak/) — The specific term for people who are from Kēffa (Belēs is
used for objects, not people). Roughly pronounced "vel-hawk"

Zita x-zalzalag (IPA: ? /tsitʰaxtsaltsalak/ ?) — Intended to mean, roughly "I purify
through breath", but it's in Sumerian, and I'm hardly an expert on Sumerian, so
possibly wrong or nonsensical or both. "Breath" can also be considered a metaphor for
life, or spirit/soul/whatever.

Gibil (IPA: ? /kipil/ ?) — Sumerian god of fire and, by metaphorical extension,
civilization in general.

Tom may have ended up a little more babbly than I was intending. I was intending a bit
babbly — just because he's not a delusional lunatic like in canon doesn't mean he's not
strange — but I get weird when I'm sleepy, so whoops.

Did Tom interpret the prophecy correctly? Who knows! (I do.)

Until next time,
~Wings
September 1995 — Welcoming

Chapter Summary

To be fair, Melantha, Hogwarts gives you a bit of a sampling bias when evaluating the madness of the world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was quite possibly the last person Harry had expected to see at the breakfast table.

It was the very morning they would be departing for Hogwarts, summer break officially over. And Harry was doing his utmost best not to freak out like a crazy person. At some level, he felt the idea of going to school as Melantha was completely fucking insane, but a part of him found the whole thing oddly...was exciting the right word? He didn't think so, but something like that, anyway. He was half completely terrified and half, sure, he'd go with excited, and it was very, very strange.

He still wasn't sure what he'd do should anyone recognise him. Hermione said those who would would most likely be a very small minority. Mostly, just a few of the people in Gryffindor he spent more time around — she mentioned Angie, Katie, and Alicia specifically. Anyone else probably wouldn't notice, and she didn't think those who would would make too big of an issue over it. Harry could only hope she was right.

Speaking of quidditch, that was likely going to be uncomfortable. Unsurprisingly, Professor McGonagall had made Angelina quidditch captain. Also unsurprisingly, it had taken hardly any time at all for Angie to go completely insane about it. Harry had gotten a very, very long letter — apparently post sent to "Harry Potter" could still get to him, he hadn't been sure about that — from her about a week ago, more or less screaming at him for abandoning the team and running off to wherever he was going. He'd sat on it for a couple days, before deciding to write the strangest letter he'd ever penned in his entire life. Trying not to sound too suspicious, he'd apologised profusely for having to leave, then talked about how he had two cousins transferring into Hogwarts this year, Melantha and Artemis Black, who would probably be in Gryffindor, and how they were both pretty great flyers (all three of the triplets had been on a team at their old school, though Artemis was primarily a beater), so she might consider tapping either of them to replace him. In a pinch, Ginny would also do — she was a little weak seeking, but much better than nothing. If any of those three made the team, they'd be on his Firebolt, since he didn't use it for anything else and didn't really mind, so she didn't have to worry about finding a proper broom for them. He'd promptly gotten a reply telling him his apology was accepted, but only on the condition one of them was even half as good as he was.

He had no idea if that letter would make Angie more or less angry with him should she eventually figure it out.

And speaking of badges sent by McGonagall, Hermione had seemed surprised by just how much Harry didn't care about not being made prefect. He'd already known he couldn't possibly be picked — "Harry Potter" wasn't even attending, and "Melantha Black" wasn't technically a Gryffindor yet. And Melantha would have had to be picked over Hermione anyway, and no way that was happening. Besides, he knew himself well enough to know he would have made a completely awful
prefect, and that was without all the other shite he had to deal with. He hadn't wanted it. Honestly, if he'd been such a shoe-in, it was really a good thing this being-a-girl-now thing was happening this year, of all years, specifically because it meant he couldn't get it.

Not that Ron would have been his choice. If he were McGonagall, he'd have picked Dean, or maybe Neville — he was hardly the shy, clumsy little boy he'd been in first year anymore. Ron was far too self-centred and unmotivated to be good for it. Probably a mean thing to be thinking about the first friend he'd ever had, but it was true. But still, he hadn't wanted it at all. Which seemed completely incomprehensible to her.

Ergh, he was babbling to himself again. Sometimes he really wished there was coffee in the house. He hadn't managed to sleep very well, and the tea Remus bought didn't have enough caffeine to really make up for it.

Speaking of Remus, watching him and Missus Weasley dance around each other in the kitchen was really rather funny. They were working on getting breakfast ready for everyone — which was a bit of work, considering a number of Blacks were coming in addition to the guests already here — but Missus Weasley was obviously used to having the kitchen to herself, and didn't really know how to handle Remus. Especially since this was still Remus's kitchen more than it was hers. They kept getting in each other's ways, snapping at each other every few seconds, and Harry couldn't help grinning to himself watching. From the look on Sirius's face, he really couldn't either.

The breakfast table, expanded for the occasion, was still nearly empty — just Harry, Hermione, and Sirius, everyone else either sleeping, frantically packing, or still at their own homes — when a guest Harry completely hadn't expected pushed open the door and stormed into the room, his heavy robes billowing along behind him as dramatically as always. Harry felt his fingers involuntarily clenching around his mug of tea as he watched Snape settle into a seat at the opposite side of the table.

Somehow, Harry had managed to avoid being in the same room with the distractingly horrible Potions Master the entire summer. He couldn't imagine Snape was going to be at all tactful about this whole...Melantha thing.

But Snape didn't even look at him. Well, he did, dark eyes flicking to him for an instant, but that was it. 'Lord Black,' he said, voice completely flat.

Sirius, his amused smile from before only slightly dimmed, nodded back at him with, 'Master Snape.'

Were they...being civil with each other? Harry had no idea how to process that. He'd been positive they completely hated each other's guts. The very, very few times he'd seen them in the same room with each other they'd been at each other's throats. This was so weird.

'Lupin,' Snape shot over his shoulder, reaching a hand into his robes. Harry couldn't help tensing a little further, but he just pulled out a thick envelope of plain paper — muggle paper, even, not parchment. 'The intelligence Albus said you needed.' And he dropped the envelope to the table, just in front of one of the empty chairs next to him.

'Just a second,' Remus said from deeper into the kitchen, where he was busy dancing around a frantic Missus Weasley, washing his hands, then clearly putting tea together.

Snape's lip curled slightly in obvious impatience, but he didn't say anything.

This was very strange. Harry glanced to Hermione next to him, but she looked just as surprised as he did.

'So,' Sirius said, setting down his tea, 'any updates on those rumours of planned attacks?'
A bit of his usual cold disdain slipped into Snape's voice. 'Believe me, Black, had I any further knowledge you would certainly be the first person I would think to inform.' Ah, there it was. Before Sirius could say anything, Snape went on, his tone smoothly neutral again. 'I have not wavered from my assertion that those rumours were planted. The idea that the Dark Lord would strike at the Hogwarts Express is ridiculous. You may recall that the occasions he has attacked, or directed his Death Eaters to attack, children specifically are vanishingly rare, the exception instead of the rule.'

Harry might have imagined Snape's eyes flicking over to him for the shortest instant. 'Given his goals and his motives, the Hogwarts Express is not a viable target. I'm sure he only let the rumours propagate so the Ministry would be forced to spend resources defending it.

'While he theoretically could attack the Ministry itself, or any other target among settlements around the country, as some of those rumours suggest, I also find that unlikely. He hasn't yet consolidated his allies into a force that would make any such attack pragmatic, and the Dark Lord is nothing if not pragmatic. He is not preparing to move in any significant numbers. I stand by my original opinion that all these rumours are nothing but a distraction.'

Harry couldn't help himself. 'What's he up to, then?' Snape turned to stare at him, his gaze flat and heavy. He thought he might have felt the barest pressure of a legilimency probe, but the involuntary recall of random memories that came with it was completely absent, so he was probably just being paranoid. He still had to resist the urge to swallow, though. Harry still switched between loathing and fearing Snape, and it seemed he'd settled on fearing for the moment. 'I mean, he hasn't really been doing very much of anything since he got back, right? There's gotta be a reason. If he's spreading rumours he's going to attack places today as a distraction, he must be intending to do something today.'

He wasn't sure whether he should be offended by how surprised Hermione looked by him putting that together all by himself. Really pretty obvious, isn't it?

So slightly it was barely visible, Snape raised an eyebrow at him. 'Obviously.' Harry tried not to bristle at the scorn almost impossibly thick in the single word. Snape turned away from him, addressing the rest to Sirius. 'There are any number of possibilities. Without more information it is impossible to narrow them down. I'm afraid we'll simply have to find out in tomorrow's paper.'

For a moment, Harry considered asking why Snape hadn't just asked Voldemort — he was their spy, after all, finding out this kind of thing was his job — but decided that probably wouldn't be good for his continued health. Or his Potions grade, anyway.

That is, assuming Snape didn't already know, and was just not telling them. But Harry already had enough things to deal with without obsessing over which side Snape was actually on. Not to say Harry trusted him, not even close. He just didn't want to bother putting in the effort to think about it. He had his own shite.

And then Remus was settling in at the table, with his own mug of tea — and a second one for Snape, actually, but Remus and Snape being civil with each other was much less surprising than Sirius and Snape. They had managed to both teach at Hogwarts for a whole year without killing each other. The table descended into further awkward silence as Remus reached into the envelope, started pouring over the handwritten papers inside. After a few moments, Hermione leaned uncomfortably close against him, whispering into his ear. 'Since when is everyone here friends?' Harry could only shrug.

'Comment for the class, Miss Granger?' If that wasn't a familiar sentence — Snape said it nearly every time Hermione whispered some bit of advice to someone or another in Potions. Which was constantly.
'No, Professor,' Hermione said, the response sounding almost automatic.

It felt a bit peculiar when Snape didn't follow that up with taking some small number of points from Gryffindor. Like someone had broken off in mid-sentence, the whole thing strangely unfinished. By the way Hermione shifted in her seat a little, Harry guessed she was thinking the same thing.

Hermione had lost a ridiculous number of points in Potions over the years, but since she always made up for it elsewhere, nobody really cared.

Remus sighed, folding the papers back up onto the table. 'He hasn't been moving on the werewolves?'

'Not as far as I can tell,' Snape said with the slightest of shrugs. 'He's said nothing to indicate he's been making any overtures at all. To anyone, not just the werewolves. Our less savoury contacts seem to confirm this. Other than Greyback, nobody in any of the nonhuman communities seems to be mobilising, and I suspect he's acting on his own.'

At Greyback's name, Remus whitened a little, but his voice was still steady. 'Well, that's very strange. I would have expected more movement by now.'

'Perhaps he is simply being more thorough in formulating his plans.' Harry noticed Snape hadn't actually disagreed.

It didn't occur to him until just now that nobody had really been telling him what was going on with Voldemort lately. He'd been distracted enough with his own things he hadn't thought to ask. But it didn't sound like asking would have done any good — there simply wasn't anything going on. He wasn't sure what to think about that.

The next moments passed mostly in awkward silence. Harry noticed Snape was sucking down his tea a bit quicker than was really necessary, and was popping to his feet practically the second he was finished. Before he even started walking away, Remus said, 'Thank you, Severus.' He tapped the papers still before him quick. 'Will you make the meeting next week?'

Snape gave him a look — Harry wasn't entirely sure what kind of one, but it was definitely a look, staring down at where Remus was sitting, his reply delayed long enough it was plainly noticeable. 'Likely. It depends on how much trouble the new Slytherins make for me, and whether or not I'm called away.' Harry guessed he was talking about Voldemort there. With a last nod to Sirius, Snape turned off, and stormed his way out of the basement.

Harry hadn't been exactly sure how the consistently confrontational professor would react to the being-a-girl-now stuff. Somehow, he hadn't expected Snape wouldn't even comment at all. It was weird.

But Sirius managed to completely distract him from that thought. 'Moony,' he said, his voice low and teasing, 'you don't still fancy that git, do you?'

'What?' A couple seconds later, he realised everyone was staring at him — even Missus Weasley had stopped her bustling for a moment to peer at him over her shoulder. Maybe that had come out a bit louder than he'd meant it to.

Remus blinked at him for a second before shaking himself, turning back to Sirius. 'No, Sirius. That's ancient history.'

Harry could almost hear Sirius rolling his eyes. 'Mm-hmm.'
'Oh, piss off, Padfoot. I was tired of you all snapping at each other by fourth year, it's so unbelievably old now.'

Over the next minutes, the two kept bickering at each other, neither seeming that inclined to actually explain what was going on there. He was annoyed for a little bit, but just decided to drop it.

He had the feeling he didn't really want to know anyway.

They actually got to the platform with plenty of time to spare, which he couldn't really remember happening before, so it hardly took any effort to find a compartment for the seven of them — Ron, Hermione, Ginny, the triplets, and himself. Though, he expected Ron and Hermione to be gone much of the trip for prefect stuff, and the triplets would probably skip out to make a nuisance of themselves somewhere, so he guessed it would mostly be just Ginny and himself anyway. Ginny planned to grab Luna if she saw her too. They wouldn't be pressed for space — he'd noticed before that the compartments on the Hogwarts Express made themselves exactly as large or small as comfortable for however many people were in them — but it still seemed like a lot of people to him.

The second they had their trunks properly squared away he was dragged back down to the platform to say goodbye. Literally dragged: Artemis and Persephone — he thought it was Persephone — had grabbed him by an elbow each and started pulling him off. Normally being manhandled like this would really annoy him, but after spending a couple weeks at the Tonkses' in close quarters with his three younger cousins he was mostly used to it.

And then he got to be manhandled more. Mostly by Missus Weasley — sometimes he really wished that woman would keep her hands to herself, he couldn't imagine how she missed how awkward it made him every time — but Remus had to get in his own moment of making Harry uncomfortable. At least the Tonkses hadn't shown up as Dora had threatened, and Mister Weasley had the decency not to grab at him. Harry noticed again that Bill was conspicuously absent, but he was probably off on Order business, so he just shrugged it off.

Before too long everyone was splitting off again, and Harry was alone with Sirius. Well, not alone — it was getting close to departure, so the platform was a bit crowded now — but less surrounded by annoyingly grabby people, the air less suffocated with Weasley-energy. So, in the relative stillness, Harry abruptly noticed that Sirius looked sort of awful. Almost painfully downcast, glaring at the offensively bright red Express as though it had killed his mother or something.

Actually, come to think of it, if Sirius's mother had been murdered he'd probably just thank the person who'd done the murdering. Bad simile choice.

Anyway. Harry wasn't entirely sure what to do about that. But he should probably at least ask.

'Sirius? You okay?'

'Yeah, I just—' He broke off with a sigh, closing his eyes and slipping the fingers of one hand slowly through his hair. 'I know it might sound like an over-exaggeration. Dementors do weird things to your head.' Oh, this was one of those situations. Perfect. 'You know, I can't really remember a lot of what happened before I was sent there. I assume the happy parts — that's what they take first. And I know these last couple months weren't exactly the most uncomplicated.'

Harry almost laughed.

'But—' He shook his head to himself, laughing a little bit himself with a twisted smirk on his face. Not a happy laugh, one of those self-deprecating ones someone might fake when they know what they're saying was kind of stupid but they couldn't really help it. '—I've been the happiest I can
remember ever being, and I loved having you around, and I'm going to miss you. That's all.'

Oh, that was all, was it. That seemed like a rather, ah, superlative statement to just be that's all about it. Of course, Harry was almost positive Sirius was just pretending it wasn't as big of a deal as it was, so he wouldn't feel bad about leaving. Which was sort of a silly thing to bother doing, considering Harry had seen through it instantly anyway. But Sirius was silly sometimes, so.

He was aware he was being a bit of a hypocrite here — Harry did similar deflecting shite all the time — but that wasn't really the point right now.

He really had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. He could just say mostly the same thing back and not be completely lying. This summer had certainly been better than any time he'd ever spent at the Dursleys'. Even with how strange and confusing and complicated everything had been, he honestly thought he'd been more...

He wasn't entirely sure how to put what he was thinking here to words. He wouldn't say he'd been happy this summer, not exactly, but he wasn't entirely sure what happy felt like. His automatic impulse was to say he felt more...comfortable, maybe, at Hogwarts, but did he really? First year had been an awkward mess from the beginning — and that was before he started honestly freaking out a bit about Voldemort in second term. Second year...well, second year. Third year was just fucking insane. And fourth year he still didn't even want to think about all that much yet. Thinking about it, he really had to wonder why he'd always been so eager to get away from the Dursleys' every time, with how fucked up everything always got. At least he got fed proper at school, he guessed?

Yeah, it would be a pleasant change to have a whole term at Hogwarts without life fucking with him. Here's hoping.

But this summer, especially the last month or so, had felt almost... Well, this sounded a bit insane to say, considering, but it felt almost normal. Not normal for him, really, but the sort of life people who weren't him had. It was hard to put to words, exactly. Like he'd never realised just how miserable he'd been until he wasn't anymore. If that made sense. And he wasn't even entirely sure why things had been less shitty than normal. Having people around he legitimately liked and who actually gave a fuck? Not having to worry about teetering at the edge of starvation? Being able to do, for the most part, whatever he felt like? It felt almost weird not being forced to do the gardening or cooking or anything, he didn't even know what to do with himself half the time, just ended up reading books pulled from the shelf at random. It was all just so strange he wasn't completely sure what to think about it all.

And, yes, he was perfectly aware that it was a bit depressing that he didn't know how to handle not feeling like shite, but he couldn't really help it.

So, yes, even with this insane being-a-girl-now shite going on, this had definitely been the best summer he'd ever had, and quite possibly the best couple months of his entire life. But he wasn't entirely sure how to explain that in a way that made sense to anyone who wasn't himself — or even himself a bit, to be perfectly honest. Or if he even should? But he came up with something to say after another second of thought that might be fine. 'I'm gonna miss you too, Sirius.' Wow, he even sounded uncomfortable to himself, this was fun. 'Which is weird. I mean, erm. I'm not used to, you know, having a home to be sick for.' That didn't even come out close to right. Dammit.

But apparently it was fine, because Sirius was hugging him — which, honestly, he didn't mind nearly as much as most people, Sirius was fine — and sent him off with a final insistence to call him on the mirror whenever and an energetic ruffling off his hair. Harry was still futilely attempting to straighten it when he was halfway to their compartment, and he felt a slight jerk at his feet, the outside world starting to slide past the windows. He managed to pull that pretty close, considering
how early they'd gotten here. Weird.

Anyway. He was leaving for Hogwarts. Where he'd be, for consecutive months, surrounded by people who had absolutely no idea who he was. Which meant he should...probably start thinking of himself as Melantha? At the very least, he would need to be familiar enough with the name he wouldn't, well, fail to respond when people tried to call him by it. And he'd have to try not to react to his real name either. Actually, come to think of it, it would be perfectly fine if he reacted a little to hearing it — he was Harry Potter, after all, most people reacted somehow to his name. But he'd have to remember. He was Melantha now, that's what people would call him, he'd have to react appropriately to that. Right. He could do that.

Probably.

When he got to their compartment, he found it exactly as empty as he'd expected it to be: only Ginny and Luna were here, sitting on either side of the window, both reading in silence. He thought that was the transfiguration text Ginny had — the Weasleys usually bought previous editions, so it could be hard to tell without seeing the title — but Luna, her usual dizzyingly colourful self with wand stuck behind her ear (Did she use a sticking charm to do that?), just had a copy of the *Quibbler*. Actually... He tilted his head a little so he could see the cover, and saw she was holding it upside down. Honestly, he'd almost expected that. He'd been about to say hello, calling her by name, when he remembered Melantha hadn't met Luna yet. This was confusing. He hesitated a bit, sliding the door closed behind him.

'Hello, Harry Potter.'

Harry blinked, looked over toward Luna again. That had *definitely* been her voice — that soft, spacey tone was as identifiable as anything. The girl hadn't even looked up from her magazine, face still mostly buried behind the garish cover. What—? How had she—? Did she even—? 'Ergh!' He tipped to the side, flopping over to sit a bit to Ginny's left. 'You've got to be *fucking kidding me*!' Frowning only slightly, Luna looked up, her *Quibbler* dipping a bit. But she only frowned for a moment — it was quickly replaced with a dreamy smile. 'Oh, you fixed it.'

For a few seconds, Harry could only stare at her. 'fixed it?'

'Yeah, see?' With a flick of her wrist, she pulled her wand out from behind her ear, pointed at him. A few taps at the air in front of her, a few weird, shimmery ribbons of glowing light drifted over to him, wrapping around a few inches above his skin for a moment, shifting colours a few times before disappearing again. He had no idea what that had done or meant, but Luna just nodded to herself. 'Much better.'

Harry had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. He thought this might even be the strangest conversation he'd had with Luna in his life. Granted, he hadn't had all that many conversations with Luna, but *still*. He let out a long sigh, rubbing at his eyes. This was ridiculous. How many more people were going to figure it out on their own? Luna had somehow known it was him without even looking at him — she hadn't noticed anything was different until she pulled her nose out of that damn magazine! Just, fucking hell. 'You mind not telling anyone who I am? Trying to keep that to ourselves, you know.'

'All right, Melantha, I'll remember.'

How the—

Nope. Nope, he wasn't asking. He didn't want to know.
Turned out it wasn't anything weird. Ginny apparently took pity on him, leaned over to whisper, 'I told her you were coming. Melantha, not Harry.'

Oh. Well. That was sort of obvious in retrospect. He was doing that thing he did when he was too nervous to think properly, jumping to absolutely ridiculous conclusions. Some of the things he'd convinced himself in first and second year, honestly. He was being so silly. It wasn't even noon yet, and he'd already managed to make himself exhausted.

Fuck, he just wanted this day to be over already.

People were giving them weird looks. Not as weird of looks as he probably should have expected if he'd been himself, what with Voldemort being back and him surviving that and everything. But still weird looks. As they arrived at the Station, the triplets had reappeared, and Selene and Persephone — at least, he thought it was Selene and Persephone — had him by the elbows, dragging him off with the crowd. The plain black robes on people who were obviously not first-years rather conspicuously marked them as transfer students. Those who were more informed would probably even guess they were Blacks — the revival of the House Sirius had been up to had made it into the society pages. They kept getting curious glances. Not that Melantha particularly minded curious.

He'd gotten much worse than curious over the years, so he could live with that.

Before too long, the triplets were dragging him to a carriage, Ginny and Luna trailing along behind. Luna still had her nose in her Quibbler, but Ginny found how the triplets kept manhandling him far too amusing. He knew the carriages were pulled by thestrals, though he'd never seen them himself — Hagrid had mentioned something about them once — but he hadn't really expected the triplets to be able to see them. They said nothing, but by how they eyed the empty space in front of the carriages, giving them a wide berth, it was obvious they could. Six in a carriage was kind of a tight squeeze, barely giving him room to breathe with Selene and Persephone on either side.

Ginny was looking out the window, her lips pressed tight, obviously trying not to laugh at him. Yes, he'd need to do something about her later.

It wasn't until they were climbing out of the carriage at the other end, bathing in the warm orange light emanating from the castle, that he realised he had no idea where he was supposed to go. He vaguely remembered transfer students were Sorted after the first-years, but he couldn't remember where they went before that. He'd never had cause to pay attention before. Already the triplets were dragging him into the Entrance Hall, and he still had no idea what he should do. Maybe he should—

'Misses Black?' And if that wasn't a familiar voice. The triplets stopped a half-step after he did, all of them turning to Professor McGonagall. As the perpetually stern-faced woman waved them toward herself, he allowed himself a moment to take in her hat. Harry had always liked McGonagall's hats. They were never flamboyant or anything — he'd seen some honestly ridiculous hats worn by mages over the years — but he'd always liked them anyway. This one was low and wide, the brim nearly reaching past her shoulders, a deep black and crimson matching her robes, with a pleasant glimmering shine under the light filling the Hall. Very nice. Once they approached a more polite conversational distance, McGonagall said, 'Allow me to be the first to welcome you to Hogwarts.' Her eyes lingered for a moment longer on Harry than the others, making it clear she meant Welcome back in his case. Which also meant she knew who he was, but he'd known she would — Dumbledore had said it was more convenient for the continuity of his education if all his professors knew, and that their oaths to the school would include covering for him, so it was fine.

Then McGonagall was off, giving them an abbreviated rundown on exactly what the four houses were, the principles they (supposedly) stood for, exactly how it was all relevant, blah blah. He could be remembering incorrectly, but it seemed a bit more involved than the talk she'd given his first-year
class forever ago, but he guessed since they were going into fifth and fourth year they had to sort of
jump right into it. She told them to wait right here — they happened to be right in front of the
hourglasses representing the points held by the four houses — and follow behind the first-years when
they come up, but hang back by the doors into the Great Hall until the first-years were done. And
then she walked off.

Which the triplets took as cue to start one of their weird little dialogues.

'I think this is the most pretentious building I've ever been in.'

'You do know where we are, right?'

'Yeah, this is Hogwarts — school to the children of the rich and noble.'

'Well, and muggleborns.'

'Pretty sure they're obligated to take the muggleborns. Some treaty they signed with the Wizengamot
back who knows when.'

'Probably would have tried to get out of it by now if they could. Have you seen the names on the
Board of Governors? Pureblood twats.'

He failed to hold in a snort of laughter at that — she wasn't wrong.

'I didn't say I was surprised it's the most pretentious building I've ever been in. Just making an
observation. I mean, damn, are you looking at this crap?'

'Pretty sure all that pretty junk on the ceiling up there is actually gold.'

'I have the feeling those are real gemstones in these.' Persephone (maybe) tapped the Ravenclaw
hourglass with two knuckles as she said it.

'Speaking of the ceiling, is there any reason this place really needs to be this tall?'

'Of course there is: so you can see just how impressive that white granite staircase is.'

'Yeah, good point. Even the stairs are pretty, what is this.'

Melantha couldn't help but smile a bit through the low boil of nervousness. 'You three are ridiculous,
you know that.'

The three gave him identical looks of disbelief, as though shocked he hadn't come to that conclusion
earlier.

'I'm not saying I'm surprised,' he said, smirking a little. 'Just making an observation.'

Their manic giggles were nearly overpowered a moment later by McGonagall arriving with the first-
years. Since the triplets seemed plenty distracted, it was Harry who started off to fall into place at the
rear of the pack. They weren't even to the doors yet when the triplets started making a nuisance of
themselves. One of them, he wasn't sure which, called out toward the first-years in a syrupy sing-
song voice. 'Ceeerriiiii!' The other two echoed her a moment later.

One of the kids somewhere in the middle — wow, had they been that little when they were first-
years? — looked over his shoulder at them. Pretty sure he was a Black. Caron, or something like
that. 'What are you three doing here? This is Hogwarts.'
Before any of the triplets could get anything through the giggles which still hadn't entirely faded, Melantha said, 'The place has obviously relaxed its standards.' Personally, he thought the idea that Hogwarts had high standards in the first place was a little ridiculous, knowing what some of the students were like — and the professors, for that matter — but that was the common perception most British mages had, so...

And that just made the triplets giggle more. Weirdos.

Before too long, the firsties were all gathered up at the front, the triplets and himself hanging back, and McGonagall was shushing the room. Good. The triplets had started going off again, he doubted he would have been able to keep himself from laughing forever. The Hat started on another ridiculous song — by the sound of it, the thing knew about Voldemort being back and everything, all talking about unity and somesuch. Really, he wasn't paying all that much attention to the song. He was distracted by something almost right away.

There was someone new at the staff table. Hagrid was gone, replaced by whatever the woman was called who subbed for him, he couldn't remember, honestly. That he wasn't too surprised about — Hermione was pretty sure Dumbledore had sent Hagrid off to talk to the giants. This was just completely not at all who he had expected. He scanned the table for a bit, confirming all the people from last year were still there, they had the right number, meaning his first guess was probably right.

The Defence Professor this year was Bill Weasley.

Well. Maybe that class would be actually worth something again this year. A glance at the Gryffindor table showed the attending Weasleys seemed just as surprised and just as pleased.

And he was distracted again when McGonagall started calling names. He noticed this class of first-years seemed larger than his own and the one right after — in the final years of the war, the birthrate had dropped a fair bit — but not as large as either of the two previous. Seriously, the now third-year class was fucking enormous, there were over twice as many Gryffindors in that year as his, it was insane. Only a few names in, McGonagall called, 'Black, Carwyn.' For a moment, nobody moved, but then Selene — he thought it was Selene — yelled at the top of her lungs, 'That's you, Ceri!' The same boy from before jumped a little, then shuffled up to the front, his face flaming red.

Melantha tried not to lean away when Artemis moved in to whisper at him. 'Used to be Carwyn Sayer. Guess the poor little guy isn't used to it yet.'

He frowned a little. 'How common of a name is Carwyn, anyway?'

The girls just breathlessly giggled.

Carwyn was sent off to Ravenclaw, and the Sorting went on apace. Harry rapidly grew bored. It just wasn't very interesting when he didn't know anyone being Sorted. It just kept going, and going, and going, and honestly he was starting to get a bit hungry, and he didn't care, and he'd rather just be eating right now. He hadn't had lunch, okay, and he was actually used to eating regularly now, so it mattered. The gaggle of unsorted firsties gradually trickled away, until they were gone completely, finally, and McGonagall was waving the four of them up closer.

And staring now. Great. He tried not to seem too uncomfortable.

'Fourth-years,' McGonagall started, sliding the parchment in her hand up a little further. 'Black, Artemis.' With a little shrug, the one Harry had been pretty sure was Artemis walked up to the stool, and soon had the Hat on her head. The proportions seemed all wrong when the person on that stool, under that Hat, wasn't a tiny firstie. After a surprisingly long moment of wavering, the Hat sent
Artemis to Gryffindor. When 'Black, Persephone' was called, the two remaining triplets glanced at each other quick, as though not entirely sure which should be going up. Melantha rolled his eyes, gave the one he was pretty sure was Persephone a shove on the shoulder, sending her stumbling forward a few steps. After getting her balance back, she walked backward the rest of the way to the stool, sticking her tongue out at him. Weirdo. Unlike Artemis, Persephone and Selene were Sorted almost instantly — the first went to Slytherin, and the second to Hufflepuff.

That was weird. He hadn't expected the three to all go to different houses. They were alike enough people couldn't even tell them apart most of the time. In muggle clothes, Harry could pick out Artemis easy enough — she almost always wore trousers — but in robes it was a lot harder. Tiny personality differences, and half the time he was pretty sure he was completely fooling himself into thinking he'd figured it out at all. But maybe the Hat knew something he didn't. Or maybe the Hat had just decided to split them up for whatever reason reading Artemis — given the disparity in how long they'd all taken, that didn't seem that impossible. He guessed making it so no one had to deal with all three at the same time was doing everyone a favour. Oh well, whatever.

Oh. He'd just noticed one Black had been sent to each house. Hmm.

'Fifth-year,' McGonagall was saying. 'Black, Melantha.'

And that was him now, yes. In a moment he was again on the stool, suffering the rather uncomfortable feeling of the Hat intruding upon his mind. Since he'd been working on occlumency over the summer he could feel the tendrils of magic slipping into his head much more clearly, had to grit his teeth to stop himself from striking back at them. Yeah, very uncomfortable.

It didn't make him feel any better when thoughts that were not his own appeared in his own head.

_That's interesting. You've already been tagged a Gryffindor._

He couldn't help it. _Tagged? What do you mean, tagged?_

_It's irrelevant. It only makes it very likely that I've already—_ Melantha felt a weird shuffle run through the foreign presence, just for a second. _Ah, I see. Hello again, Miss Potter._

_Yeah, yeah, marvelous to see you too. Could you just send me off to Gryffindor already?_

_I'll forgive the impatience. That's what happens when you nap on the train, child, you miss the lunch cart._

_I know, I already had Ron laughing at me for it, I know it's my fault. Let's just go._

_I don't suppose I could convince you to go to Slytherin this time._

Melantha snorted. _Send me there, and I bet there'd be a murder in the dorms by the end of the year._

_And would you be victim or perpetrator?_

_Could go either way, really._

There was a thrumming of amusement from the Hat, and he heard soft, deep chuckling from above. I _don't think there's any way for me to react to a statement like that except to simply send you off to 'GRYFFINDOR!'_

Before heading off to the familiar table, he took a second to stare at the shabby old thing. Was that supposed to be a joke just then? Pretty awful.
The Welcoming Feast proceeded to be awkward, if uneventful. Hermione and Ron had managed to save him a seat, but he was still surrounded with people who he'd known for years, but didn't know that he knew them. Which was just weird. They kept introducing themselves, asking those new-person-small-talk questions that he was half-certain everyone but him had read from a script somewhere, and he had to make up answers for most of them that were easy to remember or weren't so ridiculous he'd accidentally contradict himself later, while carefully pretending not to already know anything about everyone around him. Oh, and, Lavender and Parvati came by at one point, since they'd all be roommates now — and wow was that going to be awkward — but he honestly hardly understood a word they'd said. It was that high-pitched, rapid-fire babble some girls got into when they were excited, and really he couldn't even try to follow it. He'd just tried to smile and get by without really saying anything.

Actually, that's what he did for most of the evening, really.

Well, okay, mostly uneventful.

'Black!'

Melantha winced at the sound of Angie's voice. She hardly sounded like herself at all, all sharp and harsh. Definitely taking the quidditch captain thing seriously then. He glanced over at Artemis, who was sitting opposite him with a fork suspended halfway to her mouth, then turned over his shoulder. Oh, wow, that was quite an intense glare on Angie's face right there. God damn. 'Ah. Yes?'

'Your cousin told me you two play quidditch.'

Before Melantha could answer, Artemis let out a confused, 'Which cousin told you that?'

Her glare only getting harsher, Angie crossed her arms over her chest, glaring down at Artemis. 'Harry Potter. Why, was he wrong?'

Artemis opened her mouth to answer, then paused, her head cocking a bit to the side, frowning. 'Harry Potter is our cousin, isn't he.' Half of the Gryffindors in earshot, and even some of the Hufflepuffs, started snickering at her; Harry noticed Hermione rolling her eyes. 'How did he know? I've never even met him.'

For a second, he wondered how Artemis would react if he told her she'd spent two weeks sharing a bed with Harry Potter. Actually, now that he thought about it, she'd probably just laugh the whole thing off. Never mind.

Might as well step in before Angie got even more annoyed. 'Erm, I think Sirius told him.' Technically true: the first Harry had heard of it was because Sirius had mentioned it. The four of them had ended up talking about quidditch later, of course, but still.

'Oh, right, okay. Heh, I just didn't—'

'Right,' Angie said, her voice now little else but a snarl, 'this is very interesting, can we get back to the point, please? Quidditch tryouts, next Saturday morning. Both of you are coming, and you better be worth my time, or I'm going to need your help killing your cousin.'

'Erm.' Melantha blinked at her for a second. 'As fun as killing Harry Potter sounds, I'm gonna have to pass on that part.' This was just the strangest conversation...

Once Artemis was done giggling, she asked, 'Isn't Potter a seeker? Don't know how much good I'd do you.'
Okay, Angie, calm down. Going to tear something at this rate. 'And why is that?'

'Well, I'm a beater, see.'

'I can play seeker,' Harry quickly shot in. *Quickly* because Angie's face was starting to turn an unnatural shade of red, and there was no way that was healthy. 'And I'd be fine taking chaser if you wanted to move one of them.' Not like it was a huge difference anyway.

The red started rapidly fading away. Good, crisis averted. He'd hate for either of them to have to spend their first night back in hospital. She gave him a sharp little nod, said, 'Good, see you then,' and turned to walk back off to her own seat.

Oh, yeah. Angie was going to be fun this year.

'Who the bloody hell was that?' Artemis asked the table at large.

He was just about to answer when he suddenly realised Melantha wasn't supposed to know yet. But one of the twins — he had no idea which, honestly — got there first anyway. 'Our marvelous Angelina Johnson, Gryffindor quidditch captain.'

The other twin nodded from his spot a couple seats away. 'As talented as she is beautiful—'

'—and as beautiful as she is terrifying.'

'Not joking about that one. Should have seen her in the duelling tournament last year. Scary lady.'

Hermione let out a short huff. 'You're just saying that because she's less willing than most to put up with the nonsense you two get up to.'

Both twins broke into wide, brilliant smiles. 'That's just really funny coming from you.'

'If there's any girl in Gryffindor who's worse than Angie, it's you.'

'Don't bother Hermione Granger when she's studying—'

'—or she'll curse you without even looking up from the page.'

'Don't be a bullying prat where Hermione Granger can see you—'

'—or you'll be spending some quality time in the Hospital Wing.'

'Our good friend Grammy Montague still gets red in the face whenever he sees Madam Pomfrey.'

'You would too if she spent hours dealing with curse boils on your cute little bum.'

'Okay, we wouldn't, but someone else would.'

'Oh, and let's not forget that time Hermione Granger *objected* to our, ah, *volume* the weekend before exams last year.'

'Oh, yes. I don't recommend annoying Hermione Granger. Couldn't walk straight for a week we couldn't.'

Hermione wasn't even looking at them, still calmly eating — though Harry thought he noticed the slightest of smiles pulling at her lips. 'You realise you're coming perilously close to annoying me right now.'
'Our deepest apologies, o Merciless Mistress of Myriad Magics Macabre—'

'—your most humblest of servants beg your leave.'

With a little nod, Hermione said, 'You are provisionally forgiven.'

The two gave simultaneous, awkwardly florid bows from their seats. And they turned to talk with Lee like nothing absurd had just happened.

What the... What the fuck was that? Harry would admit he hadn't been paying much attention last year, what with the Tournament distracting him and everything. But he couldn't remember Hermione and the twins being on that sort of teasing-level terms, nor any of the things they'd been teasing her about. No one else around him seemed surprised, though. It was...weird. He realised he'd been saying things were weird a lot lately, but this was so fucking weird he wasn't even entirely sure what to think about it. Hermione sent Graham Montague to the Hospital Wing? The Slytherin sixth—Erm, seventh-year now. Prat was huge. And an arse. A huge arse, he was awful. And Hermione had...

Huh. He was mostly just sorry he'd missed it, honestly.

But he had no idea what to think. He settled for just staring at Hermione next to him, wondering what the hell else about her there was he didn't even know about. It was a strange thought. Hermione was a lot more open about things than he was. Or, at least, he'd thought she was.

He must have been staring at her for a while, because Hermione turned to him, raising an eyebrow a little. 'What?'

'Er, nothing.' He turned back to his food.

He was really starting to wonder if the entire world wasn't just completely mad.

Chapter End Notes

[Not like it was a huge difference anyway.] — I made a couple modifications to quidditch, mostly done to balance the seeker position better. It'll be explained in-text later.

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Ha. Because I started posting the fics at the same time, I'm posting two chapters with Sortings in them on the same day. It didn't work out that way originally. In case it wasn't obvious, this chapter and the second half of the previous chapter — the part with Tom raiding Azkaban — happen on the same day.

Until next time,
~Wings
Chapter Summary

Longest. First day. *Ever.*

Chapter Notes

Second post for the night, whheeeeee.

By the way, in my head, they have a full day between arriving and the first day of classes. Because, honestly, it's kind of stupid there isn't one of those in canon.

The first moments after waking up were incredibly disorienting.

On the one hand, it was all very much familiar. The soft warmth of summer in Gryffindor tower, the slightest hint of rain on the air, the odd dustiness house-elf cleaning charms didn't seem to remove. The light past his eyelids had a very obvious reddish cast. The sheets were the same absurdly soft and smooth material that had long ago grown familiar despite never having slept on anything even close to that nice before first coming to Hogwarts. Almost undetectable, the slow, monolithic pulse of the castle around him, a magical presence so vast and powerful it was dizzying, but so diffuse he was half-convinced he couldn't actually feel it at all.

On the other hand, some things were a bit...odd. The dusty, rainy smell was perfectly familiar, but those weren't the only scents on the air. There was this weird, soft floweriness he couldn't quite identify, not entirely sure exactly what it was. There were voices on the other side of the curtains, but they weren't the harsh chuckles of Seamus or Dean, the soft murmuring of Neville, Ron's nearly-incessant half-shout. Instead, whispers danced around him, so soft and quiet he could barely hear them, but still obviously feminine. He recognised Hermione first, and he thought he maybe heard Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil too.

For an absurd moment, he wondered to himself what the girls were doing up here. Eventually he remembered that, obviously, he was being Melantha Black now and, obviously, she wouldn't sleep in the boys' dorm. That would just be silly.

And then he went back to being incredibly uncomfortable. Shite. He would wait for them to leave before getting up. He'd managed to hide himself away in here by the time the girls had started changing for bed last night, and he could avoid the same awkwardness again by just waiting. Yes. Good.

'Hey, you think Black remembers how to get to the Great Hall?'

'I don't know. Maybe we should wake her up.'

No! Bad! Fucking friendly bints!
'You two go on,' Hermione whispered back. 'I'll wait up for her.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah, I was going to do my book check quick.' By which he guessed Hermione was going to confirm, for probably the tenth time, that she'd remembered to pack all the books she thought she needed. Silly girl.

'All right.' Even on a whisper, it was obvious Lavender — at least, he thought it was Lavender — found Hermione very strange, but didn't really want to touch the topic. 'See you later.'

A few more whispers back and forth, soft pattering of footsteps, then the sound of the door opening and closing.

Hermione didn't waste a second, now at full volume. 'Mel? Please tell me you're just pretending to be asleep.'

He sighed. These days it seemed like he could never fool Hermione, not even for a few seconds. 'For a few minutes now. Everyone gone?'

'Everyone's been awake for hours already. Well, not Fay, but she always sleeps late. I didn't really think you did.'

No point to staying in here anymore, might as well get up. Besides, if Hermione had been up for hours, she was probably properly dressed already anyway. He flipped the curtains aside, slipped up to his feet. The girls' room was almost exactly identical to the boys' one. The only real differences were personal touches — a couple quidditch posters marking Fay's space, some colourful garlands hanging from the posts of Parvati's bed (which Hermione had explained in a whisper was some traditional thing from magical India), things like that. Except there were six beds instead of five. His year in Gryffindor had been five boys and five girls, but it was slightly lopsided now. Hermione hadn't mentioned it, but he gathered the room was bigger than it had been last year, expanded to accommodate him. Hogwarts just seemed to do things like that.

With a glance he saw that Hermione was, thank god, fully dressed, sitting cross-legged on the floor, sorting through her books. She already had over a dozen out, stacked in a few piles in front of her, but kept reaching into her trunk, again and again, pulling out book after book at a pretty good clip. Thing was almost certainly magically expanded.

He went for his own trunk, grabbed a pair of trousers and a shirt at random, retreated for the bathroom to change. Good, no one was in here either. The showers and the baths were walled off for privacy, but he was worried his new roommates wouldn't be as, ah, private as he would prefer. Which wouldn't even be a new problem, honestly. He couldn't count the number of times he'd begged Seamus to put some clothes on. Fucking annoying bloody twat.

By the time he got back to the main room, Hermione had removed all of her books and was levitating them onto a pair of bookshelves flanking her bed, filling a shelf at a time. And, by the way, just where the hell had those come from? Had they been in her trunk too, shrunken down or something? Actually, now that he thought about it, he vaguely remembered something about shrinking and expansion charms not mixing so well — judging by the volume of books he could see, the thing was definitely bigger on the inside than the outside. He considered asking, but decided it didn't really matter, and there was a decent chance he didn't really want to know anyway. Hermione's swotty enthusiasm was honestly a little unnerving sometimes. Either unnerving or vaguely adorable, usually one of the two.
By the time he'd gotten his wand holster thing back on his forearm — and if that wasn't the most convenient thing ever invented, it baffled him he'd never thought to wonder how people carry their wands around all the time before — Hermione was done unpacking. The second she turned to him, she said, 'Are you going down to breakfast like that?'

He glanced down at himself, then raised an eyebrow at her. 'Is that bad?' Couldn't see how, really. Sort of how he'd dressed every day since he'd actually gotten clothes that weren't completely horrible — he felt a little stupid he hadn't thought to do that himself before. Oh, erm, excluding much of the time at proper prissy pureblood princess bootcamp, anyway, but if Hermione expected him to dress all girly every day...or ever, really...

'When you're not in your school robes, you should wear something with Gryffindor colours. At least at first, until people start recognising you.'

Okay, he guessed that wasn't a horrible idea. Honestly, he sort of looked like he should be in Ravenclaw or Slytherin — most of the people around he was more closely related and looked a bit similar to were one or the other, and he guessed he didn't usually act very Gryffindor-ish either, most of the time. At least, not in normal social situations, too quiet and standoffish. And the plain dark colours he was wearing at the moment probably didn't help. He usually went for dark colours, actually, he didn't know how much he had that would actually work. After a second of thought, he searched out his red-and-yellow scarf, wrapped it once loosely about his neck, then turned to Hermione, arms crossed under his chest. 'Happy?'

For a couple seconds she just looked at him, her lips pressed tightly together, obviously trying not to smile. Finally, she managed, 'Yes, walking around wearing a scarf on a warm late summer day doesn't look ridiculous at all.'

He rolled his eyes. 'I kinda think I look ridiculous no matter what I do.'

Hermione just smiled at him a little, in an odd way that seemed almost...he wasn't sure, really. Whatever it was, it only made him annoyed. So he turned and walked out of the room before he could say anything he'd probably feel like shite about later.

He was distracted enough with grumbling in his own head he managed to bump into someone hardly even three steps from the door. Stumbling a bit, he caught himself with a hand against the wall, and was just about to apologise when he realised who he was looking at. 'Artemis?' It...was Artemis who was in Gryffindor, right? After a split second, something else occurred to him: this was the top floor on the tower, so there was really only one reason his strange cousin — not that he had any cousins who weren't strange — would be up here. 'Were you looking for me?'

'Ah, yeah.' Artemis looked a bit uncomfortable. Which was weird — the triplets hardly ever looked uncomfortable at all. Especially not this shifting sort of awkwardness, that was more his thing, honestly. 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

'Erm. Okay.' He backtracked, returning to the room, shrugging to a curious-looking Hermione. (But, then, when did she ever not look curious?)

Artemis, who had been trailing along behind him, froze as soon as she saw Hermione. 'Can we have some privacy?'

For a second there, he was pretty sure Hermione was going to agree and walk out, no matter how much it would bother her. But before she could, he said, 'I'll probably just end up telling her whatever it is as soon as we're done.'
'It's House Black business.'

Erm. What kind of House business could she be coming to him for? He wasn't even technically a Black at all...not that Artemis knew that, he guessed. But he just shrugged. 'Probably will anyway.'

Both of the girls gave him somewhat odd looks at that. He was pretty sure he knew why. For Artemis, he was perfectly aware the triplets didn't believe parts of the Melantha Black cover story — in this specific case, that he and Hermione had only met this summer. Persephone (maybe?) had obliquely hinted a few times how strange it was he was so familiar with certain people, but none of the three had outright accused him of lying yet. Which he thought was a neat trick, considering how much time he'd spent in their constant company there. For Hermione, well, he'd be the first to admit he didn't actually tell her things. At least not personal things. But he doubted this would be personal anyway. Because, again, he wasn't a member of House Black, not really, so he wasn't entirely sure how House business was his business, and it definitely wouldn't be personal, because he didn't have much personal investment in anything he could imagine to be House business anyway.

So. Whatever.

After some moments, then a long-suffering sigh, Artemis slammed the door closed, quickly ran through a series of privacy charms. A rather long list of privacy charms, actually — he was pretty sure he recognised one Andi had taught him to prevent shadow-scrying, which was a rather absurd degree of precaution, but fine. How serious Artemis was being about making sure no one would overhear was obviously making Hermione a little anxious, but she just sat on her much-emptied trunk, waiting.

What felt like minutes of straight casting later — probably only thirty seconds or so, honestly, but it felt like a fucking lot — Artemis turned to him. And she started, clearly doing her best to ignore the fact that Hermione was right there listening. 'I know you've never been in any House before, Noble or Common, but how much do you know about how we deal with each other?'

Oh. Well. He shrugged a little. 'Almost nothing, really.'

Artemis let out a long sigh, rubbing her face with both hands. 'Great.' And then she dropped her hands, planting them on her hips, giving him the most intense, serious look he thought he'd ever gotten from any of the triplets. Almost McGonagall-ish. Or worse, Andi-ish — he could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Andromeda Black angry, and never even at him, but still he'd quickly learned to avoid it if at all possible. He had to remind himself that he was actually older than her, and he hadn't done anything...at least, he didn't think he had. 'If anyone has a formal proposition to be brought to the head of any family, but they are not in a position, physically or socially, where they can bring whatever it is to him or her directly, they instead bring it to the most senior member of the House they can contact. You, Melantha, being the eldest member of our House presently at Hogwarts, are the one people here with no better means would come to to relay whatever business they have with us to Uncle Siri. Here at Hogwarts, you speak for House Black. Understand?'

...Great. That was just great. He was sort of hoping he wouldn't have to deal with all that bloody stupid pureblood society nonsense. No fucking luck, apparently. Awesome. That was just fucking perfect. He sighed, shaking his head to himself a little. 'Yeah, I got it.'

'Well, okay. Just a few minutes ago, Seònaid—' He knew that was Persephone's nickname, though he couldn't imagine where it'd come from. '—was in the common room when she was pulled aside by Draco Mal—'

'What?' And here he thought, since Malfoy didn't even know who he was, he could avoid dealing

But Artemis just looked slightly annoyed with him. 'Yes. Draco Lucius Regulus, Noble House of Malfoy. Let me finish, maybe?'

Before he could even think of saying something, Hermione beat him to it. And not what he probably would have thought of either. 'It's about his mother, isn't it?'

'His mother?' A second later, he remembered. 'Oh, wait, didn't Narcissa Malfoy used to be a Black?'

It could be his imagination, but he thought Artemis was giving Hermione a slightly grateful look. 'Yes, she was. Aunt Andi's sister.' Oh. He'd forgotten about that. That would mean Dora and Malfoy were first cousins — Malfoy was actually more closely related to Dora than he was. That was a weird thought. Certainly he had known that before, but he'd managed to forget somehow. 'And it's probably about her, yeah.'

He couldn't help frowning at her. 'You mean, you don't know.'

And Artemis just glared right back, a distinct patronising note working into her voice. 'Well, I'm so very sorry, Mel, but he's not exactly explaining very much. He's just telling Seònaid that he's been told to relay a request on behalf of a child of House Black. That's probably his mother, yes, but it could also be himself. Since Narcissa wasn't formally expelled from the House until a couple months ago, the term would be accurate for him as well. But he's not telling us, because he's supposed to bring it to you. So ask him!'

'Wait a second.' And there Hermione goes again, before he could even think to say anything. Not that he was exactly complaining — she was handling this conversation way better than he was. He was far too busy being thrown by the idea that Malfoy wanted to talk to him. Of course, Malfoy didn't know who he was... That was sort of a fun idea, actually... 'Is telling? Present tense? And, erm, us?'

Her face shifting into a grimace of awkwardness, Artemis shuffled in place a little, crossing her arms over her chest. 'Yeah, yeah, he's talking to Seònaid right now, and I can hear it, so I came to find Mel. Wow, isn't it so creepy how these three are? Can we get past that to the actual point, please?'

He'd sorta already suspected the triplets had some weird thought-sharing thing going on for a while now — that wasn't news to him. So it was rather easy to brush off. The fact that it was Malfoy Artemis was overhearing talking to her sister, of all people, was honestly bothering him more. He thought for a couple more seconds before deciding, with a shrug, fuck it. It wasn't like Malfoy even knew who he was anyway. He'd noticed before that most of Malfoy's prattishness over the years had been directed at the three of them — he was reasonably decent to most everyone else. He wasn't entirely sure why the insufferable arse had decided to target the three of them so consistently, but it didn't really matter. Oh, and the Weasleys, he seemed to really hate them too for some reason. But, anyway. He didn't look like Harry Potter, Malfoy didn't know he was Harry Potter, and Malfoy apparently wanted something from him. It would probably be the most pleasant conversation he'd ever had with the little poncy arse. True, not saying much, but still.

After telling Persephone (through Artemis) to tell Malfoy to meet him in a certain room shortly off the Great Hall just before lunch, he turned and walked out, going to get some fucking breakfast already.

He froze in the middle of the empty hallway, staring down at the Map.
In had already been one hell of a tiring day at Hogwarts, and classes hadn't even started yet. It wasn't even noon! Fucking insane. After that, just, perfect conversation with Artemis this morning, there had been the paper arriving at lunch. And if that hadn't been a nasty surprise. There had been noisy shouts of disbelief on reading the headline, followed by frantic whispers, filling the air all down the tables, people sharing the news.

It seemed they knew now where Voldemort was planning on attacking: Azkaban. He could slap himself it was so obvious. A group of seven, supposedly including the top prick himself, had killed and impersonated the set of guards arriving for the next shift, killed half the Hitwizards and Aurors present on the island, and managed to slip back out with twelve prisoners, including some of the most feared Death Eaters from the previous war, before help could arrive. From what little he knew, Dolohov, Travers, and the Lestranges had been responsible for some of the more brutal killings, and Rookwood had done most of their rune and spellcrafting work. It would take them a bit to recover, of course, but old Tommy boy now had some of his most dangerous supporters back. That could only be a bad thing.

It might be petty, but, honestly, that the rat was already free bothered him more than the rest. That Sirius, totally innocent, had spent over a decade in that hellhole, and the actual traitor had only been in there for hardly two months before being busted out... Yeah, it bothered him. Which he knew was kind of silly — Pettigrew was probably the least dangerous of the twelve — but he couldn't help it. The castle had been filled with a buzz of low-level panic ever since.

And he'd had a beginning-of-the-term meeting with Professor McGonagall. Supposed to be an introduction to the school for transfer students, to help them get adjusted to life in the castle as quickly as possible, which was all information he didn't actually need, but since he was pretending to be a transfer student, he'd had to go to keep up appearances. He could see growing quickly annoyed of having to pretend not to know things he wasn't technically supposed to know. At least he could say Hermione and Ron had just told him, he guessed. McGonagall, of course, like all the professors, was in on it. She'd even been calling him Miss Potter the whole time, which still felt kind of weird, but he was trying to ignore that.

There had been one part of that meeting that had been really annoying. McGonagall had apparently felt the need to warn him not to misuse the access to the girls' dorms and baths he now had. Which...he didn't know. He was rather offended by that. He meant, had he ever given any reason for anyone to suspect he was the kind of person who would...? He didn't know. Obviously, McGonagall didn't actually know him all that well. They'd hardly talked much at all, outside of classes, the rare meeting with his head of house, her telling him off for one reason or another (much of the time, let's be honest, for a shitty reason). So he guessed it was possible she'd just never payed enough attention to really know much about him. It was sort of understandable. Maybe. But he couldn't help feeling vaguely hurt.

And by the time he got out of there, it'd practically been time to go to his meeting with Malfoy already. After a long argument, he'd finally managed to convince Ron to stay behind. Ron had been very insistent that he wouldn't let him go alone — and, yes, it was the use of the word "let" that had really bothered him. But despite whatever Ron might have been thinking, it wasn't like he was trusting Malfoy or anything. Judging by their occasional little fight over the years, he was pretty sure he could take the little git one-on-one, if it came to it. So, as he'd neared the room, he'd pulled out the Marauder's Map to make sure Malfoy was coming alone, as they'd agreed.

It'd only taken a second, once he'd had it open to the correct floor, to find the dot labeled Draco Malfoy just stepping into the proper room. He'd checked the hallway between them quick, all the doors off it, and hadn't seen anyone else. Well, a few people, but that group right there were all
names he vaguely recognised as lower-year Hufflepuffs, and those two names right there were sixth-year Gryffindors, boy and a girl alone in a rather small little room — two guesses what they're up to. He hadn't really seen anything to worry about.

And then his eyes trailed to where he stood. It was very weird. He wasn't really sure what to think about it. The label over the dot that had to be himself was one of the weirder things he'd ever seen on the Map. The jumbled mess...it sort of looked like two different scripts laid over each other, the wide, simulated brush-drawn strokes of the handwriting used on the Map making it almost impossible to read. He thought he might see an "M" at the beginning, a "k" at the end, an "o" somewhere in the middle...maybe an "h"? The rest was too jumbled to make out.

After a moment of confusion he figured it out, and just laughed at himself a little.

Detection spells this accurate and wide-reaching could never be worked into a bit of parchment, no matter how good the creator was. So Remus had, basically, hacked into the wards, and gotten what they needed that way. And he kind of did mean hacked. Tiered ward structures like Hogwarts, people could be keyed into the wards with a greater or lesser degree of power over them — the Headmaster had complete access and control, professors had a little less access and far less control, and students had none of either. Remus had somehow gotten the present size, shape, and orientation of every room of the castle, as well as the location and name of everyone keyed into the wards, which was Headmaster-level information. No, he hadn't explained how he'd done that, but by the smirk on Sirius's face, it obviously hadn't been allowed.

Why that mattered was because the names on the Map just didn't come from nowhere. As Professor Babbling had (confusingly) explained, despite common superstition, a person's name wasn't attached to them in any way that was magically relevant — it was just a label people used, they held no inherent power. There was absolutely no magic of any kind you could use on someone to get their name (unless you're using mind magic to tear it from their head, that's sort of cheating). However, you could get a ward to match a name to a person's magical signature, if both were provided ahead of time. When students were Sorted, the Hat keyed them into the wards under the name pulled from their head. Guests had to be keyed in by a professor at the gates. The name that showed up on the Map was simply whatever name they were keyed in under. If they gave a fake name (and weren't caught), it would show a fake name. The wards still did detect people who hadn't been keyed in, the Map just didn't show a name — only a symbol indicating if they were human, or an elf, or a centaur, or whatever.

Unlike most people, he had been Sorted twice. So, he had been keyed into the wards twice, under two different names. He doubted the wards were designed to account for little mistakes like that — especially since it wouldn't really affect anything, he didn't think. The Map was trying to tell him "Harry Potter" and "Melantha Black" were standing in exactly the same spot, which got their names a bit mixed up.

He felt a little stupid for not figuring that out right away. Knowing how wards and the Map work, it's really obvious.

But, anyway, he didn't have time to laugh at his own stupidity. He had a meeting to get to. Unfortunately.

A minute later, the Map safely in his pocket, he was walking into the room he'd arranged to meet Malfoy in. It was one of those rooms scattered around the castle intended for mixed-house groups of students to hang around in outside of classes, this one of the smaller ones, holding a few plush armchairs, a couple couches, a rather large fireplace, and little else. This room was usually empty in the warmer months, but often taken in the colder — it was toward the heart of the castle, so had no
Malfoy, he saw, was on his feet, obviously turned to the sound of the door opening. There was a lot of black in his hair again, he noticed. For the vast majority of their first two years at Hogwarts, Malfoy's hair had been charmed an unnatural white, silvery blond. It was some House Malfoy thing, apparently, they all did it, Melantha had no idea why. For some reason, Malfoy had only partially charmed his hair starting in third year, resulting in a rather odd-looking mix of black and silver — his mother did the same thing, apparently. Unless he was going to be seeing his father, Hermione had reported gossip she'd overheard saying he'd charm it all white again then. It was weird.

But, perhaps the weirdest part of this, at the moment, was that Malfoy was looking right at him, and his lip wasn't curling slightly with disgust, he wasn't glaring at him, even a little bit. Melantha honestly couldn't remember the last time that had happened. But, of course, Malfoy didn't know who he was looking at, so he guessed he shouldn't be surprised. In an even, perfectly pleasant tone, Malfoy said, 'Miss Black,' his head bobbing in a respectful nod.

Except not a nod, he noticed — he recognised that from those fucking awful deportment lessons Andi had forced down his throat. It had been a bow, actually, from the hips, but so shallow it was almost hard to tell the difference. But then, that was perfectly appropriate. They might be bloody fancy nobility or whatever, but they were still underage, and they were just at Hogwarts. That was exactly what was expected between (supposed) strangers like them.

He barely managed to hold back a groan. He had to do that whole propriety thing. Fuck. At least he wasn't wearing a bloody skirt or anything — he could get away with not curtsying. He always felt really weird doing that.

Trying to emulate the same even tone — which wasn't very easy for him, Andi had called him on that so many fucking times — he said, 'Mister Malfoy.' He nodded back, but his actually was a nod, which he could get away with. In the eyes of their nonsense society bullshit, the Noble and Most Ancient (gag) House of Black outranked the Noble House of Malfoy, so he didn't have to be quite as polite to Malfoy as Malfoy had to be to him. There was a bit of a gender thing too, but ignoring that, still. Which...actually, that was kind of a fun thought, when he considered it. He'd have to be slightly less polite than Malfoy was this whole conversation, just because he could.

Malfoy invited him over with a wave, to where he'd set up a pair of armchairs facing each other, a bit apart. Trying to force off how awkward this all was, Melantha — he was trying not to think of himself as Harry, that would just mess him up — walked over and sank into the chair. Before Andi's voice in his head could get more than a couple words in, he crossed his legs and shite like he knew he was supposed to. Ergh. Felt so weird.

And he didn't waste a second. As soon as Malfoy was in his own chair, he said, 'How can I help you, Mister Malfoy?' Not that he wanted to help him, really — his first couple ideas just sounded too rude. Andi would probably yell at him if he cheesed off her baby sister's son for no good reason.

The corner of Malfoy's lips tilted in the slightest of smirks. 'Getting right to the point, then?'

'Is there any reason not to?'

Malfoy gave a smooth, almost artful little shrug. 'I suppose not. I've been told to relay a request for the Lord Black from my mother.'

Before he could stop himself, he let out, 'Oh, good.' When Malfoy stared at him, giving him a few slow blinks, Melantha shrugged a bit sheepishly. 'I was kind of worried this might be about Voldemort.' Honestly, he hadn't put together that possibility — that Voldemort would use the
Malfoys to initiate contact with potential allies in the newly-reformed House Black — until after arranging this little meeting, but it had still occurred to him.

With only the slightest of winces at the name, Malfoy nodded. 'My father hasn't exactly been discreet about his allegiance, has he.'

'Neither have you. From what I've heard.'

That trace of a smirk was back. 'This would be why you're not in Slytherin, Cousin.' Melantha tried not to flinch at _Draco Malfoy_ of all people calling him _cousin_. He knew it was just something a lot of people in the frequently-intermarried Noble Houses said as a matter of habit, but _still_. 'Don't believe everything you hear.'

That was a curious thing to say but, after a second of hesitation, Melantha decided not to ask after it. He didn't want to be stuck with Malfoy longer than necessary, and that was off topic. After another second of thought, he decided, Why the hell not? He didn't think it was anything he'd ever told— Wait, no, he'd told Dumbledore, but other than that. Mostly, he'd kept it to himself because he doubted very many of his friends would react very well. And out of habit, he guessed. 'Actually, the Hat _did_ tell me Slytherin would be best. But I already knew people in Gryffindor, so I asked it to put me with them instead.' Malfoy nodded a little, as though that were perfectly reasonable — which it was, really. 'Anyway. What is this request of your mother's, exactly?'

'Narcissa of Black begs of the Lord Black to hear her plea for asylum.'

Melantha quite abruptly had no idea what was going on.

From his lessons with Andi, he'd learned the legal system of magical Britain was a bit more _weird_ than he'd initially assumed. The best way to think of it, he'd decided, was as a cooperation of closely allied, independent nations. Or partially independent? It was confusing. Every House, whether Noble or Common, was one of these tiny little countries. While they did have to follow broad laws given by the Wizengamot (no killing people, that sort of thing), most of the more specific, internal things were handled by the Houses individually. Which meant laws about things like property rights and inheritance, that sort of thing, varied from family to family, which sounded _extremely_ confusing. They weren't the _only_ legal things of the same level, of course — for example, Hermione wasn't a member of any House, what with being muggleborn and all, so she was instead considered a citizen of Hogwarts, if that made sense — but they were the most numerous kind by far.

There were all kinds of different agreements between Houses, or a House and an individual, which Andi had tried to teach him, but honestly he'd only remembered maybe half of them. The whole thing was just so weird and complicated, hard to keep straight. But asylum he _did_ recognise. There were various ways in which someone's primary citizenship, so to speak, would no longer be with the House of their birth. Marrying into another, entering certain sorts of contracts, being expelled by their family, severing ties on their own, whatever. A plea for asylum was, in short, a former member of a House petitioning to be let back in. In cases where they'd left the House through marriage, if he understood correctly, well...

_Narcissa Malfoy wanted a divorce._

He had absolutely no idea how to process this.

After a few seconds of staring like an idiot, he managed to actually say something. 'Ah, you must have had a fun summer. I'm guessing your father isn't happy about that.'

'He doesn't know, actually.' Malfoy's voice was light and casual, but there was a hint of something
darker there, Melantha had no clue what. 'Mother is worried what will happen if Father runs to tell
the Dark Lord.'

'Not a fan, your mother.' He wasn't entirely sure he could believe that, honestly. From what he'd
heard, the Lady Malfoy had given very little sign she wasn't completely with the psycho Death Eater
bandwagon, but he'd admit he was hardly an expert on the woman. Only even seen her, what, once?

Malfoy raised an eyebrow slightly at that — it was only then that Melantha realised that had been a
very, well, muggle thing he'd just said. 'You could say that.'

'Well.' He didn't really have a whole lot of choice, here. This whole actually having a family thing
was still new and rather strange, but even he knew flatly saying no here, no matter what Lady
Malfoy might or might not have done in the past, whatever her personal politics now, just brushing it
off would be a needlessly cruel thing to do. Mostly, he knew Sirius and Andi would be really, really
furious with him if they later find out he had just kept it to himself. The Blacks had literally started a
war back in the Fourteenth Century over a single member of the House — taking care of family by
any means necessary, and sometimes even far beyond necessary, was sort of a thing with them.
Pushing himself to his feet, he said, 'I'll pass the message along tonight. I can't promise what he'll do
but, with how he's been collecting stray Blacks the last couple months, I'm sure he'll at least listen.'

As soon as Malfoy nodded that he understood, Melantha turned and walked out of the room. This
whole thing was way too fucking awkward for him to stick around any longer than he had to.

He'd been thinking that sort of thing to himself a lot, lately...

He hadn't even gotten there yet, and he was already regretting agreeing to this.

Apparently, over the last couple years, Hermione had been part of this study group thing. He had to
wonder how he'd never noticed that, but it did explain where she disappeared to sometimes. He'd
said something at one point about how he was planning on trying a little harder when it came to
classes, especially in Runes — he'd always thought runic magic was interesting, but now that he
knew from his mother's journals that runic casting was a thing it suddenly seemed a hell of a lot more
useful. He had actually seen Dora do some runic casting once, the very first time they'd met, but it
hadn't occurred to him to ask exactly what the fuck that was at the time. It was fascinating (if
dangerous) stuff.

So, over lunch, Hermione had suggested he come up to the library to meet her study group —
apparently, they had arranged to meet at their usual table to catch up before classes started. Ron had
made a very clear face of disgust at the idea, but Melantha had, somewhat reluctantly, agreed. Not
like he really had much else to do with his time.

It wasn't until a few minutes afterward that he'd realised he'd just put himself into an explicitly social
situation. Intentionally. What the fuck was he, a bloody masochist?

Hermione led him around one of the bookshelves, revealing the group waiting beyond, and his
unease only got worse. There were a lot of them, more than he'd expected, enough they'd had to put
a few tables together. A quick glance over them, and he quickly realised he'd only ever spoken to
three of them. Three of the eight sitting there quietly chatting. And two of those, he'd probably only
talked with a few seconds total, and one of them he'd first really met last night.

Yeah. This was a great idea. Fucking genius.

'There you are, Hermione, finally.' That was a red-headed Ravenclaw, watching them walk up, but
he honestly couldn't remember her name. Gryffindor never had many classes with Ravenclaws, for some reason, so he guessed that wasn't so surprising. As they came over, taking seats in the little empty space left — Hermione levitated over a chair for him before he could hardly move — there was a quick rush of chatter, everyone saying hello, quick questions back and forth about how summers were. He'd had no idea Hermione had so many friends, and then felt immediately guilty for being surprised by the thought. Hardly seconds after they were both down, Melantha trying not to look too uncomfortable, Hermione introduced her to everyone quick, and then the other way around.

Lily Moon, the only other Gryffindor, was the one he'd first talked to last night. According to Hermione, she'd been avoiding him before — she'd been named after his mother, apparently (she saved her parents during the Battle of Hogsmeade, Hermione'd said), and was a bit shy to begin with, and really just didn't want to make him uncomfortable. Which was a little weird, but okay. Then there were two Ravenclaws, Morag McDougal, the redhead, and Lisa Turpin. He'd never talked to either of them before, hardly knew anything about them. He recognised "McDougal" as a Noble House from those stupid fucking lessons, but that was all he had. The two Hufflepuffs, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, he'd said maybe a few words to ever. Even so, he noticed immediately something seemed a bit off about Bones. If he had to guess, she was furious, but was doing her best to try not to show it.

He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

The last three, all Slytherins, he could recognise by sight, even if he'd never talked to them before. Some of the things his old roommates, and other boys he'd overheard, had been saying about Daphne Greengrass the last couple years had just made him uncomfortable. She was pretty, sure, in that slightly intimidating, pureblood nobility sort of way, but a lot of what came out of their mouths just seemed...excessive. Tracey Davis he only recognised because she was the only halfblood Slytherin in their year, and people had been talking about it ever since she was Sorted — that was literally all he knew about her. And he only knew Blaise Zabini — for some reason, the only boy — because everyone knew his mother was a serial killer, but nobody could actually prove it. Gossip about it had been all over the school around the middle of third year, since she'd apparently killed her seventh husband over the winter holiday. No one had any idea how she kept getting away with it, and some of the theories he'd heard were completely ridiculous. But, again, that was literally all he knew about the bloke.

The entire first part of the meeting was just...completely awkward. For a little while, people kept on asking him questions, trying to get him to talk about himself and shite. Which...well, he hadn't really been comfortable doing that before this summer, and having to make sure anything he said meshed with the backstory they'd set up for him was just... It just made it a whole lot more difficult. In the end, they seemed to accept that he just didn't feel like talking a lot — Moon and Turpin were plenty quiet themselves, the latter painfully shy, so he guessed they were used to it. It probably didn't hurt when Hermione confirmed he had a good head for Runes, and had aced pretty much every Defence test he'd ever taken. Being weird and antisocial was perfectly fine with them as long as he was useful, he gathered.

After that, they just went on chatting between themselves, which was fine. Much better. He could just sit and listen, he'd gotten pretty good at that over the years. He'd developed a bit of a people-watching habit, all the way back since his time with the Dursleys, one that Hogwarts hadn't at all broken him of. So it was fine. And, since he was just watching and listening, it became more and more obvious to him that Bones was really not okay at the moment. "Bones", not "Susan" — he'd learned over the summer it was dreadfully rude to call someone you weren't actually friends with by their first name, which only made him wonder why no one had ever bothered to tell him that before. But anyway, she seemed a bit paler than he remembered — not that he'd ever really paid that much attention to her before — her hands almost constantly shaking. When she spoke, which wasn't often
also weird, she'd always seemed so talkative before), it was with a tight, angry sort of tone. It was...weird. And it was really starting to bother him how no one seemed to be addressing it. Abbott kept sending her concerned looks, but nobody else hardly seemed to notice. Which meant they probably knew already.

When they'd been sitting there for maybe a couple hours, he wasn't sure, the most likely possibility suddenly occurred to him. But he shut his mouth. He very much doubted she wanted to talk about it.

But he did ask Hermione, trailing her on the way back up to the Gryffindor Tower to stash her newly-borrowed library book. 'Which one?'

She glanced over her shoulder at him, frowning a little. 'Which one what?'

'Bones. Which one?'

Hermione seemed to get it all at once, her face suddenly collapsing into a very familiar look of worry — she'd been wearing it thinking of him so many times it'd be impossible not to recognise it.

'Dolohov. He killed her mother. She was only a few months old at the time. Her father was killed even before she was born, actually, by a different Death Eater.'

'Did he escape too?'

'She. And no. Her aunt Amelia — she's an Auror, and has been the Director of Law Enforcement for a while now — she killed her not even two minutes later.'

'Oh.' Well, he guessed he could understand, then. The murderous arsehole had killed her mother. Alongside who knew how many other people. The monster should be in prison, or else just plain dead. But, no. Instead, the incompetent fuckheads at the Ministry had let him escape, and he was out again. Would probably kill who knew how many more people. He understood that just fine.

He was sure most of the orphans of that stupid fucking war felt much the same.

Speaking of orphans of that stupid fucking war, turning into a corridor on the seventh floor, nearing the portrait now, he and Hermione almost ran right into Neville. It still surprised him how tall Neville was. How much of that was just because Melantha was a little shorter than Harry had been? Whatever, didn't really matter. Neville flinched on seeing him, a fearful wince usually reserved for Snape, but not from fear alone, his fingers twitching toward his wand for a moment before checking himself. He'd been doing that every time he saw Melantha, actually, though it'd only gotten worse since the paper this morning.

That was just it. He couldn't stand Neville, of all people, looking at him like that.

He muttered something to Hermione about meeting her in the common room, then charged forward, grabbing Neville tight by the elbow, and dragging him off. Neville did resist a little bit, but fortunately he was startled enough by the move he stumbled. Neville was a lot more fit than most people realised, what with toiling in gardens all day for years as he had, and Melantha had noticed before he was a bit weaker than he'd been before — he wasn't sure he'd be able to drag Neville anywhere if he had a chance to actually dig his heels in. But before he could recover his balance, Melantha had pulled him into a nearby room, this one a small classroom filled with dust-layered desks. Drawing his wand, he turned back to the closed door, laying privacy charm after privacy charm on the room, nearly every one he'd been taught over the summer. A little more than was probably necessary, to be honest, but he didn't want to take chances.

Belatedly, he cast a detection charm to make sure they were actually alone in the room. Okay, good.
He slipped his wand back into its holster.

When he turned back to Neville, he wasn't entirely surprised to see he had his wand out, pointed at him. Not surprised, but he couldn't help feeling a little hurt. Neville was one of the closer friends he had. Not the closest, sure, but they'd hung out a fair amount, mostly when Ron was being a prat, and Hermione off doing who knows what. He was the least annoying Gryffindor boy in their year — and, yes, he was including Ron in that. He'd almost been looking forward to seeing Neville again, actually. He was the calm and quiet sort, more like him in a lot of ways than most people he knew, was perfectly nice to be around. In the insanity that was this summer, he'd found himself missing him a little.

So. It kind of hurt.

'What do you want?' Wand hand shaking, voice unsteady, that wasn't exactly as composed and intimidating as Neville was probably hoping for. He was trying, anyway. He wouldn't have even tried as recently as a couple years ago.

'I—' He broke off, sighing. God, this was awkward. Fuck. Just tear the bandage off, just do it. 'It's me, Neville.'

A flash of confusion crossed his slightly-reddened face. The traces of baby fat were completely gone now, he noticed. Blokes weren't really his thing, but even he could admit Neville was turning out pretty good-looking. He'd be completely unsurprised if he heard random girls fawning on him this year. Erm, more than usual, that is — Neville had no idea how much people already talked about him. 'Who?'

He crossed his arms over his chest again. This was, just, so awkward. Had he even told anyone any of this bullshit by choice? Not that he could remember. 'You know. Harry Potter. Boy-Who-Likes-Gardening. Boy-Who-Gives-Defence-Pointers. Me.' He'd been helping Neville in Defence occasionally since second year, when the absence of any practical lessons in Lockhart's joke of a class had had Neville absolutely certain he was going to fail. Neville was one of the very few who'd never believed he could possibly be the one attacking people, no matter how much the Parseltongue creeped him out, so it'd been nice.

'Erm.' The confusion just got worse, his wand arm dropping half-heartedly, less out of conscious choice as indecision. Which made sense, he guessed. How many people knew he'd been tutoring Neville in Defence? Almost no one. Even fewer people knew about the gardening thing. When he'd admitted it to Neville — complete with the context of how the Dursleys had actually made him do it, but he'd come to enjoy it more than was probably reasonable — he'd made Neville swear not to tell anyone, it was too private to let most people know. But. Girl now. So, confusing. After long seconds of staring, he said, 'Are you serious?'

'Yes, Neville.' On a whim, he decided to prove it. He pulled out his wand again, being very careful not to point it anywhere near Neville. He seemed too baffled to react anyway, but still. He started bringing forth the familiar memory — and then abruptly changed tack halfway through. Instead he thought of Grimmauld Place, and Sirius, and the Tonkses (Blacks, whatever), people who actually gave a fuck, a place where he was free, and safe, and had something strange and unfamiliar that was actually sort of what he assumed having a home might feel like to normal people, and he intertwined that feeling with the magic rising from his center, directing it toward his wand hand, not forcing, but coaxing, pleading, as his wrist repeated the complicated wand movement long since bound to muscle memory, the words, 'Expectō patrōnum,' tumbling over his lips with hardly a thought, automatic.

As always, casting a patrōnus just felt overwhelmingly, dizzyingly, good. He couldn't really explain it. It was like being wrapped up in something warm and soft, where he was safe, and loved, and —
dare he say it? — happy. It was the best feeling in the world, he was sure. Last year, he'd taken to just casting it, leaving the thing sitting around as long as he could, on the days all that shite had left him feeling particularly awful. And the presence of the soothing, silvery light was just as he remembered it, felt no different at all.

But he still found himself blinking at it like an idiot. Because, it felt the same, but it didn't look the same. His old _patrōnus_, the wide-antlered deer that looked so similar to his father's animagus form, that was gone. Instead he was looking at... Well, he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at. A cat of some sort, obviously, one of the larger ones. Long, graceful, powerful. But he couldn't tell exactly which kind — the washed-out, nearly monochromatic glow of a _patrōnus_ didn't give him enough details to know, and he wasn't exactly a cat expert anyway. And, well, if someone had told him ahead of time that his _patrōnus_ had changed, he'd probably have expected himself to feel a bit down about it. He didn't exactly have a lot of his parents, and knowing that little tenuous connection... It'd been nice. But, at least while it was actually present, soothing him with its warmth and its all-embracing light, he couldn't really care. It didn't really matter to him in the moment whether it was a deer or a cat or a fucking slug. It was beautiful and it was his and he didn't care.

'I thought it was supposed to be a stag.' That tone of slightly-jealous wonder was on Neville's voice again, the same one he always used seeing Melantha cast the thing. He'd tried to teach Neville to do it himself, but Neville had decided he didn't have any memories happy enough, and had given up. Melantha was pretty sure his wand, his father's wand, had been holding him back again, but hadn't argued.

For a few seconds, he could only stare at the cat, languidly prowling around the room. It came over to him, rubbing against his leg much like Crookshanks did with anyone short-sighted enough to feed him even once — well, brushed into his hip, more like, with their relative heights, but still. He couldn't feel it as a physical pressure, exactly, but he did feel the pure, light magic brush against his own, sending a thrill of eager warmth through him, and he couldn't even attempt to keep a smile off his face. 'It was. I hadn't tried it since, well.' He gestured to his newly girl-shaped self with his open hand. 'I even had to get a new wand and everything. I guess this changed too.'

'It's really you, then.' Even if the _patrōnus_ wasn't right, he guessed, it was rare enough of a thing for people their age it was still good enough for Neville. On top of the other hints, anyway.

'Yeah. Just, ah...' The flash of fear sliced through the calming haze of light magic, and the silvery glow abruptly vanished. He couldn't help wincing a little. 'Could you not tell anyone? I don't really want it getting out. I don't think I could deal with that right now.'

'Of course. You know I won't, Harry.'

He couldn't help but smile at that. A weak smile, sure, but still a smile. Sometimes he really thought — in the most complimentary way possible, of course — that Neville belonged in Hufflepuff. 'Just call me Melantha now. It's less confusing that way. And someone could overhear, that too'

'Right,' he said, looking slightly sheepish. 'I'll remember.'

'Oh, and, ah.' He hesitated for a second, running a hand through his hair. And then instantly wishing he hadn't — he still hadn't learnt to adjust the movement for how much longer his hair was now. 'If you could not give any of the Blacks a hard time, that'd be great. It's not like they're not on our side. Sirius did expel Lestrange from the family, you know. I was there when he did it.'

Neville looked an interesting combination of angry and uncomfortable — brow lowered in clear fury, but still shifting in place awkwardly. 'I know. I just...'
'Believe me, Nev. I get it.' He really did. They were both orphans of that stupid fucking war, after all.

With a slight, shy smile, Neville just nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Seònaid (IPA: /ʃɔː.nɪt/) — something like "shone-it" (I am guessing on the pronunciation slightly, don't know Scottish)
September 1995 — Like Mother…

Chapter Summary

Turns out, Lily was a complete and total badass.

Also? Melantha is so completely done with this shit.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the longest chapter of To Reach Without so far. And that's including all sixteen I have finished, not just the ones on AO3. Lez do this.

A couple lines copied from Chamber of Secrets.

His first day of class, History, Potions, and Runes had been exactly what he would have thought. But Melantha didn't quite know what to expect from Defence Against the Dark Arts with Professor William Weasley. So, after taking a couple steps into the room — along with Ron, Hermione, Moon, Bones, and Abbott (the last three seemed to be making Ron very uncomfortable) — he paused a second to look around.

It was the same place they'd been in the last couple years, the same rectangular room with arched windows overlooking the lake, the same rows of paired desks, the same longer desk for the professor (now littered with papers and odd little bunches of crystal), the thing slightly higher with how the room tiered up a little over there. Bill had obviously been in here, though. Here and there were shapes glowing harsh colours drawn into the walls. Obviously runes, he could tell, but he couldn't read all of them. There were a couple relics obviously borrowed from somewhere in Egypt. Melantha noticed in particular a long, low statue of a shining, black, regal-looking cat laying right in front of the desk, and a crumbling, waist-high plinth on the opposite side of the desk from the board, dozens of weathered Egyptian hieroglyphs covering the entire pale granite surface, and atop it... Was that a pensieve? The rough, rune-encrusted bowl seemed a bit larger than Dumbledore's, the only one he'd seen before, but it looked like the same kind of thing.

Huh. Interesting

And, of course, the Professor himself was in. Leaning back in his chair, hands folded behind his head, both feet propped up on his desk. He knew Missus Weasley had tried to convince her eldest son to make himself up a bit more professionally before taking such a job as teaching at such a place as Hogwarts; it was obvious she'd failed. Bill's hair was still long, tied back in a loose, casual-looking ponytail. He still had the earring with the curving, glinting tooth dangling from it, which Melantha guessed he could understand — not very many people could claim to have survived a fight against a nundu, even a juvenile one. His dark boots on the desk were the same gleaming dragonhide, his simple trousers and tunic far more casual than most professors would teach in. It looked like Bill was going to try to maintain that same impression of really just not even trying, but still making out all smooth and suave anyway.
Melantha was positive half the girls in the school would be completely smitten with him by the end of the week.

Hermione and Abbott dragged the six of them into seats at the front of the class — though only Ron seemed to really be opposed, looking slightly uneasy with the idea of taking Defence from his eldest brother. Melantha knew, due to the age difference, Ron hardly knew Bill or Charlie that well at all, had never been too comfortable around them. Hermione had claimed, over the summer, that Ron had a bit of hero-worship going for the both of them, bad enough he didn't really know how to talk to them most of the time. Which Harry had plenty of experience with, if entirely from the other side.

After a few minutes of whispered speculation on exactly what they were going to be up to this year, Bill tipped around a little, his feet slipping off the desk to fall softly to the floor. With a simple beckoning gesture, wand nowhere to be seen, the door at the back of the room slammed closed. Fully half the class jumped, everyone instantly falling silent.

Casually showing off wandless magic would do that.

Rising slowly to his feet, casually pacing around to the front of the desk, Bill said, 'Welcome to fifth-year Defence Against the Dark Arts. I'm William Weasley — though I suppose I have to get used to being called "Professor", now.' He pulled a face of awkward reluctance; Melantha heard a few muffled snickers. 'And, yes, before you ask, those Weasleys.'

He could sense the eyes flick to Ron next to him, who shuffled in his seat slightly.

'The Headmaster was aware, selecting your professors the last years, that their tenures would be, hmm, brief, and their abilities quite likely less than spectacular.' That barely-restrained snort of laughter was probably Seamus. 'So, he tried to choose people who specialised in one area or another of defensive magic, to give you as wide of a grounding for your eventual OWLs as possible. Last year, you had wanded curses and basic duelling with Sir Moody — at least, you were supposed to, although Crouch was surprisingly faithful to the planned curriculum. Master Lupin managed to get all the lower years through most of the creatures likely to appear on the exam, or your daily lives. Quirrel gave you the first-year introduction to basic self-defence principles and, I expect, a few strategies for combating the inexorable advance of boredom, which is more useful than you'd think.' There were a few snickers at that, as Bill's eyes flicked to someone to Melantha's left. 'Yes, Mister Smith?'

'You skipped Lockhart, Professor.' There was a faint challenge on the boy's voice, as though daring Bill to come up with anything positive to say about the man — everyone knew he'd hated their former professor.

Bill raised an eyebrow at him. 'You tell me. Can no one think of nothing useful they learned during Lockhart's tenure? Miss Bones?'

An obvious smirk on her voice, she said, 'How to spot a fraud?'

His lips tilted a bit into a rueful smile. 'I suppose, but I would argue Lockhart wasn't even very good at it. His improvisation was awful. No one else? Miss Granger?'

'Not everything written in a book is true, even if it claims to be.' Melantha blinked, glanced over at Hermione. He could vaguely recall, when they'd finally proven how enormous of a fraud Lockhart was, how absolutely offended Hermione had been. At the time, he'd thought she was in some weird denial, refusing to believe her hero (and slightly disturbing crush, don't think he hadn't noticed) could do any such thing. But she hadn't mentioned him ever again, had she? Now that he thought about it, it was obvious she hadn't been offended because she'd thought their accusations were false, but
because she'd known they were true...

'Exactly,' Bill was saying, smiling brightly at her. 'No person is infallible, and books are written by people. Even excluding the ones who're intentionally misleading, simply fraudulent, or just plain lazy, even the certified experts writing your textbooks are completely capable of making mistakes. To be honest, I would be surprised if even half of everything in the library here were perfectly accurate.' His angle on her wasn't great, but Hermione still looked slightly disheartened at that. 'In most situations, it doesn't necessarily matter if whatever source you're using isn't perfect. But in my line of work, using a reference with too many errors will get you killed. It's almost better not to use them at all.

'Speaking of my line of work,' Bill said, leaning back against his desk, 'there is one major field of magic you haven't touched in this class at all, which is part of why the Headmaster approached me. Some of you may know this, but immediately after my graduation from Hogwarts some years ago, I was taken into a curse-breaking apprenticeship with the Goblin Nation in Egypt, during which I also completed Masteries in Enchanting, Warding, and Dark Magic — Runic Curses, specifically. Since I had recently paid off my educational debts to Gringotts I felt it was time to return to Britain. I'll admit, that I felt I could lend a hand with the Dark Lord situation we're having at the moment was a part of that.'

Well, if Bill had been intending to impress half the school, that was pretty much all he had needed to say. Yeah, I heard about Voldemort, the most infamous British Dark Lord in centuries, somehow returning to life. That's exactly why I came back, no big deal.

'As for the other part of why the Headmaster offered me the job...' Bill reached a hand behind him, picking up one of the weird crystals on his desk. He bent over, placed the little thing on the floor, stood back up, and jabbed in its direction with his wand. The air in front of and above the student desks was suddenly filled with... Well, Melantha wasn't sure what that was. It was magical light, obviously, softly glowing in every colour of the rainbow, suspended in the air. Not a thick cloud, but hundreds of disparate filaments, a forest of lines twisting, splitting apart, joining together in a confusing web. Deep at the center, a brighter, thicker orb of white light, shining with pure brilliance. Even if Melantha had absolutely no idea what it was, he could admit it was definitely pretty.

'This,' Bill said, speaking over murmurs from the class, 'is a three-dimensional runic diagram of the wards of Hogwarts.' Oh. Well. Melantha leaned in a little, narrowed his eyes. Now that he was paying more attention, he noticed the little filaments were lines of writing, rune after rune after rune — must be hundreds of them, thousands in all. 'The work here is unique, and has long been of interest to warders and enchanters. This especially,' he said, pointing at the ball of white at the center, 'nobody's entirely certain what that is. I must have read dozens of theories, no consensus.

'We've all heard of how the Defence position is cursed, that's why no one lasts more than a year. Interviewing me for the position, the Headmaster asked me, if such a curse exists, where I would look for it. I thought the answer was obvious.' Bill pointed his wand again, and the image shifted. Instead of the large web, there was only a single thread, four strings of runes braided together, glowing a bright, lively red, accented here and there with a splash of blue. Bill pointed at the hanging runes, his voice perfectly smooth and casual. 'That, boys and girls, is the curse on the Defence position.'

For long seconds, the room was absolutely silent.

'You've got to be bloody joking!' shouted Seamus from somewhere near the back. 'It was on the wards the whole time?!' No one else was quite as noisy, but half the class was whispering to each other about it.
With a (completely deserved) self-satisfied smirk, Bill said, 'Yes, Mister Finnegan, I said much the same thing myself, when I found it last night. Does seem an obvious place to look, doesn't it? Turning slightly more serious, he pointed again to the representation of the curse, floating innocently in the air. 'How many deaths is this responsible for? How many experts in their fields of study saw a premature end to their careers, right here in this castle? How many innocents have lost their lives, the Department of Law Enforcement that should have protected them gradually weakening due to substandard education among their applicant pool? How many, because they were never adequately taught to protect themselves?

'This,' he said, jabbing at the curse with a finger, 'is an example of why, if only in self-defence, everyone should learn absolutely everything they possibly can about warding, and runic curses. Which is exactly what I'll be teaching you this year.'

While Bill started going over the basic outline of everything they'd get into that year — everything from curse and poison detection, some basic warding, to a very elementary introduction into breaking harmful enchantments and piercing wards — Melantha couldn't help smiling to himself a little. Looked like they had another year of DADA that wouldn't be a total waste.

Before too long, the class was called to an end, and everyone was clamoring to their feet. Melantha stood up with everyone else, about to sling his bag over his shoulder when Bill's voice cut over the chatter. 'Miss Black, stay behind.'

Melantha blinked, but dropped his bag back onto his desk, weathering the curious glances from a few of his classmates before they had all trailed out. Soon she was alone in the room with Bill.

A few silent flicks of his wand, and Melantha felt successive waves of magic wash past him — palings slipping into place, he knew, so no one could listen in. Then Bill, perched back on his desk where he'd sat for most of the class, smiled at her. 'How'd I do?'

He shrugged. 'Seemed fine to me—' She couldn't help smirking a little. '—Professor.'

Bill made an over-exaggerated shudder at that. But he was still smiling. 'Anyway, since I had your last class of the day, the Headmaster told me to tell you to come up to his office right from dinner. You know where it is, right?'

Oh. Well. He'd known this was going to happen eventually. Dumbledore actually telling him things, he meant. He had said he would, as soon as Melantha learnt that occlumency stuff. Probably her least favorite thing she'd ever studied, but by that last week at Grimmauld Place, she'd been able to hold Sirius off perfectly well. Not without getting a headache, but still. This was...good, right? Yes. Good. Anyway, Bill was waiting for him to answer. 'Yes, I know where it is. What's the password?'

'Guess.'

'Lemon drop?'

'Got it in one.'

Melantha rolled his eyes. 'Well, thanks, I guess.'

With a few shivers of magic in the air, the palings dropped away. 'Good luck, Miss Black.'

Slinging his bag over his shoulder again, he said, 'Thanks, Bi–Professor.' Whoops. Going to have to get used to not calling him by his name anymore. That's going to be annoying.

Though, had to admit Ron definitely had it worse.
After an uneventful couple of hours — excluding that little snit Hermione and Ron had gotten into again, and wow did they ever seem to be fighting a lot lately — Melantha found himself standing in front of the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's tower. He couldn't help being a bit nervous. More nervous than he really thought he should be. This was what he'd wanted, right, for Dumbledore to tell him stuff? None of it could really be that bad, could it?

All that talk about needing to know occlumency, certain things not meant to be public knowledge... Dumbledore had just intimidated him a bit. That was all. Yeah.

He gave the stupid-but-strangely-appropriate password to the little stone monster, watched it leap out of the way in its smooth, disturbing imitation of life. That thing had always bothered him. Then it was on to the rotating staircase, which also bothered him. The first time he'd been on it, he'd only gotten a vague impression of oddness, not quite sure how to put words to it. But then Hermione had explained it to him: standing on this staircase, he should find himself going in circles, but staying at the same height. It was simply rotating, after all, not visibly ascending. For some completely inexplicable magical reason, he'd end up at the top without taking a single step. It was just...subtly unnerving.

And then he was knocking on the gleaming wooden door. And then Dumbledore was telling him to come in. And then he was looking around the room with slight annoyance. He had to admit, it was a really nice office, all big and open with shining granite and gleaming wood. But, all those little clinking, snittering devices that did who-knew-what... They were pretty neat, he guessed, but they made so much distracting noise he had no idea how Dumbledore could think with them in here.

Come to think of it? He probably just silenced them when he really needed to concentrate. Kind of seemed to defeat the point, though.

And then he was seated in a very familiar, comfy chair. And then Dumbledore was offering him one of those ever-present lemon drops he damn well knew Melantha wasn't going to take. And then he was asking after Melantha's occlumency training, then warning him he had to check he'd done well enough, and just as Melantha was about to ask—

Oh, god damnit! He flinched away from the acid tongue of fire stabbing into his head, immediately turned to thinking of nothing but coldness and smoothness, forcing his mind as placid as he could possibly make it, even as he ignored the splotches of white agony flickering across his eyes, the clenching in his own jaw. For a few seconds the fire surrounded him, dancing across the glassy surface of his mind, searing so hot he thought his brain might be boiling. How long was he going to keep—?

And then the fire retreated, so abruptly Melantha lost balance, even though he was already sitting, nearly falling out of his chair. By how bright the sky still was, he was sure that couldn't have lasted very long, but he was suddenly exhausted, as though he'd been practising quidditch for hours, covered in sweat, shivering in his seat. He rubbed at his now throbbing head with unsteady fingers, shooting Dumbledore a glare. 'Was that really necessary?'

'I do apologise, Miss Potter.' There was a hint of regret on his voice. Not a lot, but it was there. 'I had to be sure, and there is no other way.'

Better be damn well worth it. While Dumbledore got up, disappeared over by one of his cabinets, a pitcher of ice water appeared with the slight pop of elf magic. Melantha immediately poured himself a glass and drained the whole thing in one go, the cold almost painful on his throat — his headache didn't go away completely, but it did make it a little better, and he did stop shaking. He poured a second glass, pressed the smooth, cool material against his forehead, almost shivering with relief.
He'd have to sneak down to the kitchens tomorrow, find which elf sent this up, and thank them. They always loved it when he thanked them. He got the impression people didn't do that much. Which he could completely understand — the elves' reactions, he meant. Over the summer, Sirius and Remus (and, later, Missus Weasley) had almost actively fought him doing anything in the kitchen, but he'd still managed to take over a few times, if only to clear his head for an hour, and he hadn't been entirely sure how to react to them thanking him. The Dursleys certainly never had.

He'd noticed before that the people in magical Britain he tended to identify with most were the house elves. He still wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that.

After a few moments, Dumbledore was back, his pensieve set in the center of his desk, filled to the brim with a silvery, ethereal shimmer of memory. Looking at it again, Melantha got the distinct impression Bill's was not only larger, but older — Dumbledore's had not a single chip along the rim, smooth and gleaming, the curve of the bowl and the arrangement of runes seeming somehow more...streamlined? Whatever. Not really important, he guessed. He could just ask Bill later if he were really curious.

'Before we begin, Melantha,' Dumbledore said, his voluminous sleeves pooling between the pensieve and the edge of the desk, 'there is one thing I must briefly inform you of. Upon your father's passing, you became Lord Potter. However, you were obviously too young to fulfill your obligations to your House. Your parents did prepare for such a possibility — Sirius was to be Lord Regent, but, obviously, he was in no position either.'

Melantha tried not to snort at that. It'd been explained to him over the summer that Dumbledore's position in the government was something rather like the magical equivalent of the Lord Chancellor (back when they mattered). Which, since higher offices had been vacant since the Statute of Secrecy, made Dumbledore effectively the most politically powerful person in the entirety of the country. Sure, the Minister had plenty of power himself, but he was essentially a bureaucrat: his job was to enforce the laws the Wizengamot passed, provide the services the Wizengamot funded, make sure all that functioned properly and efficiently. Fudge's actual power in the Wizengamot, which was sort of a combination of a legislature and the nation's highest court, was very minor. While he could make his opinion known on the floor, his vote didn't even technically count. Dumbledore, while he didn't technically have a vote either, was in charge — the presiding officer, basically, under some modification of parliamentary procedure. It was also his responsibility to ensure the proper functioning of the judicial side of the justice system. Not only should he have done something about Sirius not getting a trial, it was literally his job.

Hermione had wondered aloud at one point if it was really wise to have the High Enchanter (Lord Chancellor), Supreme Consul (both their Ambassador to and President of the UN General Assembly), and the Headmaster of Hogwarts be the same person. Melantha thought anyone who couldn't admit she maybe had a point was delusional.

But he guessed there was really no point in making a thing about it right now, so he didn't comment.

And Dumbledore was talking. 'I took the liberty of assigning Ignatius Fawley and Elphias Doge — both men I would trust with my life — respectively to manage your estate and represent House Potter in the Wizengamot.'

Melantha could only blink at that. He'd known, though not entirely processed, that he had a hereditary seat in the Wizengamot, but... Estate?

'Sirius wanted me to confirm to you that, at his request, they are currently in the process of transferring over trusteeship of House Potter to House Black. Unless I am very much mistaken, I suspect Remus will be filling you in on all salient details sometime in the near future. With that, I'd
like to get to why I asked you up here. Unless you have any questions?'

Well. He did have a couple thoughts, but he wasn't sure just how important they really were, whether it mattered to him either way. He somehow doubted Dumbledore should have had the power to just hand over control over Potter stuff like that, but...did he really care? So he just shook his head.

Dumbledore's voice dropped slightly, his tone turning somewhat less business-like, a little warmer. 'I would like to show you a memory tonight, Melantha. You will recall, some years ago, when you were exhausted and weak from your trial with Quirinus, you asked me why it was Voldemort was so interested in you, why he tried to kill you as an infant.'

In an instant, the lingering heat and pain from the legilimency attack was gone, replaced by sharp ice slicing through his veins. For a moment, he could only stare at Dumbledore's composed, wrinkly face. Yes. Yes, he did remember that. 'You said—' He paused, swallowed a bit, trying to steady his voice. He just knew he wasn't going to like this. 'You said you'd tell me when I was older.'

'Yes, well.' A flicker of chagrin crossed his face, but only for a second. 'Sirius is quite insistent I should have told you then. If not the specifics, at least the general idea. And while I'm still not sure I was wrong, I can admit Sirius may have a point.'

Melantha somehow managed to not roll his eyes. That might be the most half-arsed apology he'd ever heard.

'The memory I am about to show you—' The swirl of glimmering thought and memory in the pensieve contorted, as though anticipating what Dumbledore wanted, already organising itself. '— took place in Hogsmeade, on the First of November, Nineteen Seventy-Nine. I had made an appointment to interview an applicant for the Divination professorship. I'll admit,' he said with an easy shrug, 'I had no intention of actually hiring her. There are so few Seers; I thought it better to perhaps offer a minor elective in the second year to introduce a few basic concepts, perhaps screen for the legitimately talented, instead of sinking so many resources into a subject few get any benefit from. I wasn't planning on hiring anyone. But, this applicant was a descendant of an exceptionally talented Seer and Oracle, and was already well-regarded herself, so I felt obligated to at least meet her.

'The meeting almost didn't happen at all,' he said, a darker tone slipping into his voice. 'The previous day, a large force of Death Eaters, lead by Voldemort himself, tried to take the village in what is now referred to as the Battle of Hogsmeade. At first, it seemed the Ministry defenders were outmatched, but the appearance of a few Order members, backed by an influx of civilian volunteers, tipped the balance before too much damage could be done, Voldemort himself retreating before Lily, James and Sirius, and my brother Aberforth. But our meeting place survived, Sybill confirmed she yet intended to come, so there we were.

'It happened at the very end of the interview.' With a slight, wry smile on his face, he added, 'If I didn't know better, I would almost think she'd planned it.' Dumbledore beckoned, gesturing at the pensieve between them.

Melantha grimaced — he hadn't exactly had great experiences with these things so far. It didn't help that he was very sure he wasn't going to like this. But he reached his hand forward anyway, dipped his fingers into the soft, cool water-but-not-water.

With a sickening lurch, he was yanked forward, straight out of himself and into the pool of memory. For an infinite instant he was falling, surrounded by twisting silver light and a tingling chill, pressing inward, forcing him inexorably downward.
And then, with a sudden snap that ran through him head to toe, he was standing on solid ground. Or hardwood floor, anyway. The room he found himself in was rather shabby-looking — the stone of the hearth was crumbling a little, the glass in the windows was scratched in places, the rugs covering most of the floor were faded and threadbare, the plush armchairs were littered with holes, stuffing poking out in a few places. Which was especially peculiar. This was obviously a magical place — the everlit candles gave it away — but all those were things that could be fixed, at least superficially, with a simple mending charm. Hmm.

Just getting to their feet from the wounded armchairs were two figures in robes. Dumbledore looked almost exactly the same, maybe a couple fewer lines on his face. Though he did look exceptionally weary, face drawn and shoulders curled with exhaustion — if he had just been fighting the previous day, that wasn't so unusual. The other was a slightly younger-looking Professor Trelawney, complete with bug-eye glasses and innumerous beads slung all over her. God, she looked so ridiculous. He didn't know much about her, honestly, just that she didn't have the best reputation. A third of the school seemed to think she was a fraud. Another third was sure she was a pisshead. The last compromised, and said she was both. From what he'd heard, he really couldn't thank Hermione enough for talking him out of taking her class.

He watched Dumbledore escort her to the door with something about contacting her later with his decision, Trelawney saying in that throaty, melodramatic tone of hers that yes, she was perfectly sure he would. Another third was sure she was a pisshead. The last compromised, and said she was both. From what he'd heard, he really couldn't thank Hermione enough for talking him out of taking her class.

Melantha recognised it instantly. Because he'd seen it before, hadn't he? Making his way across the seventh floor, nearly running into the weird, reclusive Professor, half panicking when she suddenly seized up in some kind of fit. He'd been just about to run off to get help when Trelawney had grabbed at him, fingers hard as steel crushing his arm. Then she'd spoken, her voice completely wrong, deep and harsh and inflectionless, the air shivering around him with some weird magical something he didn't know enough to read, talking of servants and masters...

This younger Trelawney grabbed at Dumbledore much the same, a wince of pain shortly flickering across his face. And then she was speaking in that same impossibly deep and wide tone, Dumbledore's eyes widening and face paling with every word. 'One with the Power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches—' Trelawney took a violent, shuddering breath. '—born to Two who have thrice defied Him, as the Seventh Month dies — the Dark Lord will—'

Dumbledore jumped at a sudden thud, followed by muffled voices and indistinct scuffling, slipping in from the other side of the door. He gestured sharply with the hand not locked by Trelawney, the noise instantly cutting off.

'—Mark One as his Equal — One who will have Power the Dark Lord knows not — Both must fade at the Will of the Other — for Neither can endure while the Other lives — One will be born as the Seventh Month dies—'

The last word wrung out of her, Trelawney collapsed, slumping with a messy rattling from her beads. If Dumbledore hadn't caught her, she probably would have fallen straight to the floor. Dumbledore was staring at the shivering, stammering woman, a peculiar sort of expression on his face. It seemed, maybe, part-shocked, part-terrified, part-...relieved? He wasn't sure. Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, hesitated for a moment, then—

He was yanked off his feet, the solid world around him abruptly vanishing. For a moment there was nothing, only light and cold, a vague feeling of upward motion. Then he was thrown back into himself, sitting right in the same chair in Dumbledore's office he'd been in before. He shook his head,
trying to clear away the lingering disorientation, trying to process what he'd just heard.

But, it seemed like Dumbledore didn't feel like giving him the opportunity. 'Then, of course, the race was on.'

Melantha could only blink at him. 'Huh?'

'You may have heard the struggle on the other side of the door, partway through the event itself. I later learned a Death Eater had overheard, rushed to inform his—'

'Yeah, I don't care about that.' Dumbledore broke off immediately, blinking at him, but she ignored that. The portraits of old Headmasters long deceased were voicing their disapproval of him interrupting — some a bit more loudly than others — but he ignored that too. He really didn't care about the history lesson, he didn't. He really didn't think that mattered at the moment. He knew what that was, vaguely. Hermione had read about them, informed him. But not a lot. 'Prophecies.' He hesitated a moment, his fingers tapping restlessly at the arms of his chair. 'I don't really know much about the things. Much of anything, really.'

For a second, he thought Dumbledore was going to resist the slight change of subject — he'd obviously planned out which direction this conversation was going to go in beforehand. But then he nodded, folding his hands again on his desk. 'Not a lot is known of prophecies, to be honest. The mechanics of how they function I mean — it is one subject magic theory has managed very little to illuminate. We know certain people, referred to as Oracles, who are usually but not necessarily also Seers, will occasionally go into something of a trance. Oracles themselves never remember a word of the prophecy given through them, are usually completely unconscious of the process — though they sometimes need medical attention afterward, so in those cases they know one happened, just not the details of exactly what.

'Outside a few exceptional situations — for example, cases where individuals involved have committed suicide rather than allow it — prophecies seem to always come to pass. Though, often not in the way people expect. Prophecies tend to be couched in ambiguous or subjective language, so, not infrequently, it's only obvious what was meant in retrospect. One must be cautious with prophecies.'

Increasingly, more and more each day it seemed, Melantha was coming to believe the world was an absurd place.

Because, it was rather ridiculous, wasn't it? This big civil war (by magical standards) going on, with a magical giant on either side. One, probably the most widely-respected champion of the Light in...well, centuries. The other, the most powerful, most dangerous, most feared dark mage since Frances Cromwell in the Seventeenth Century. (Apparently, Cromwell was still considered to have been worse — it baffled Melantha that there had ever been people worse than Voldemort, but maybe he was too close to see clearly.) One half-seriously called the second coming of Myrón, the other a self-proclaimed immortal Dark Lord. Figures so much larger than life they were quite nearly legendary.

And they both listened to a drunk blathering about the imminent birth of someone fated to defeat one of the two. It was just... It was just so silly. Dumbledore had listened to the prophecy, hid the Potters away, done everything he could to ensure they weren't killed before their time. Voldemort had listened to the prophecy, done everything he could to hunt them down to ensure they were killed before their time. To kill him, the prophesied fucking saviour. An infant! It was ridiculous!

Honestly, he had no idea what he should feel being told this. No idea what Dumbledore probably assumed he was. But he was certain this wasn't what anyone would have expected. This... It was just
'Melantha?' The tone of concern on Dumbledore's voice was clear, blue eyes sharp on him. His entire bearing seemed oddly cautious, delicate, as though he were handling an armed bomb or something. 'Tell me what you're thinking.' Phrased as a command, yes, but his voice was soft and gentle enough he probably thought it came off more as a suggestion. An offer, maybe, to help with whatever was going on in Melantha's head.

But, really, there wasn't much going on in his head. This was all just so silly! It was far too ridiculous for him to really take seriously. He might change his mind later, he guessed. But even then, he expected he'd mostly just be annoyed at everyone else for, well, taking this nonsense seriously. Really? But, he didn't think calling Dumbledore an idiot was exactly the best way to handle this situation, so he just shrugged. 'What do we do about it? What's the plan?'

'The plan?'

Melantha frowned at him. 'The plan. For me. I figure Voldemort has one hell of a head start on me, yeah? So, if I'm to have any chance at all, I have to start learning.' Actually, come to think of it, Dumbledore probably should have arranged more intensive Defence lessons a long time ago. But, this wasn't really the time to argue about that — nor would it really do any good. Maybe he could whip it out later, sometime Dumbledore wouldn't be expecting it, just for fun. It was possible Sirius was starting to influence him. 'I'm sure there's an Order member or an Auror we can talk into coming to the castle on weekends to—'

'Melantha,' he started, cutting across his ramble with his sympathetic voice only slightly sharpened, 'I think you may have misunderstood something. I don't plan on you fighting Voldemort. Not directly.'

For long seconds, all he could do was stare silently. What? So...Dumbledore obviously believed this prophecy was a thing, right. If he didn't, he wouldn't have bothered telling him about it. But... But if he believed this stupid nonsense so much, why was he working against it? Sure, he'd expect Sirius to fight it, if he knew about it, but Sirius was a stubborn son of a bitch.

Anyway. The prophecy said Melantha would have to be the one to do it, right? To kill Voldemort? That was the basic essence of the thing, if he hadn't misunderstood. Which, honestly? The idea didn't bother him too much. Not counting the one he was a baby for, so didn't remember, he'd already faced Voldemort in one form or another, what, four times? He'd known that, for some absurd reason, Voldemort was obsessed with making sure he died. So, the psycho was going to come after him anyway, even without a prophecy saying so. He'd sort of always known it'd be the two of them, in the end. Which was probably why he wasn't freaking out right now. That prophecy was less telling him something new, and more confirming something he'd sort of already known. Though, doing it in a completely idiotic way, but still.

Dumbledore saying he didn't plan on Melantha fighting the bastard was really just more confusing than anything. That's it, he was just completely confused. 'Isn't that what the prophecy says, though?'

With a soft-but-authoritative nod, Dumbledore smiled at him. A gentle, beneficent smile, as though doing some great service for Melantha or something. Giving him a gift he'd always wanted. 'That is not what the prophecy says. Not really. I admit,' Dumbledore continued, again speaking over him, this time before he could even get a full syllable out, 'I'd once thought the same. In a way. That this was all leading to a direct confrontation of some kind between the two of you. Not a proper duel, of
course — it will be some time yet before you could ever hope to match Lord Voldemort toe-to-toe. I believed some other power you held would carry the victory for you, defeating Voldemort on a level on which he can't even defend himself. But, circumstances have since changed, and I've reevaluated my opinion.'

It took barely a second for him to figure out what Dumbledore was talking about. 'My mother's protection, you mean. You thought it would kill him. Again.'

Dumbledore nodded again, a slight aura of sadness pulling at his face. Melantha ruthlessly suffocated his own short flare of annoyance — he couldn't even come close to regretting the loss of something that required subjecting himself to the Dursleys to maintain, especially not now that he had something not entirely unlike a real home. 'That was my theory, yes. Unfortunately—' Oh, stop moaning about that already, god. '—that possibility no longer exists. But perhaps I shouldn't have been so focused on that anyway. Notice, the prophecy does not say you will kill Voldemort yourself. It does say Voldemort will be destroyed by your will — your will, not your hand. It's an interesting word choice. I now believe it far more likely that this power of yours is political, or social, people either united behind you, or personally loyal to you, defeating Voldemort in your name. Or some situation much like that. Whatever the exact details of how it will come to pass, I no longer believe it will be something you do yourself.'

Oh. Oh, gross. He was really regretting coming here right after dinner now. Near the end of last year, he might have let slip to the kitchen elves that some people these days put almonds on treacle tart in place of breadcrumbs, and they'd followed through marvelously. And, somehow, it had never occurred to him to try hitting a slice with a warming charm — the elves tended to serve it at about room temperature — and he was really beating himself up for that now, because it was absolutely genius. It had been so absurdly good that, honestly, probably half of his dinner earlier had been treacle tart, which he knew was weird, he couldn't help it. And he'd used far too much clotted cream.

The point was, his stomach was rebelling all of a sudden, a tense sort of nausea working all the way up to the back of his throat, a cold sweat falling over him. He could almost taste the cream, all tainted by stomach acid, so fucking nasty. He took a long breath, trying to sit completely still, not make it any worse. He somehow doubted the Headmaster would appreciate him spewing treacle tart all over his desk.

That, and it would be a bloody waste of treacle tart.

He'd been worried about this. The thought had occurred to him, over the summer, that Dumbledore and Fudge or whoever would try to use him as some...political...thing. He didn't know. But...that was just far too...with too many...

Honestly, he'd rather just fight Voldemort again.

Melantha took another long breath, fighting the nausea down, fighting the uncomfortable flush that always seemed to come with that sort of thing. 'But what if you're wrong? I mean, Voldemort will probably come after me either way. Shouldn't I learn to defend myself, just in case?'

An odd, wary look in his eye, Dumbledore said, 'I'm not sure how much you'd be able to do.'

Oh, and now he was flushing for a completely different reason. Somewhat distantly, he felt his fingers clench on the arms of his chair, his throat tighten a little — which wasn't making it any easier to not be sick, but he couldn't really help that. Because, oh, yes, he was just completely helpless, wasn't he? It wasn't like he'd successfully fought for his life a dozen times already! Hell, in the last four years, he'd faced Voldemort right in his stupid snakey face more times than anyone else! And that was while he was at Hogwarts, under supposedly the best wards in the country, surrounded by
adults whose job it was to keep him and the other students safe. Last year, they'd had much of the staff and even people from the DLE here actively trying to protect him. And still he'd ended up in that joke of a duel with Voldemort all by himself, and he'd still managed to survive long enough for help to arrive — which Dumbledore had himself admitted was as good as they could expect from someone several times his age! Considering everything that had happened over these years, and the fact that they knew Voldemort would come after him no matter what anyway, this was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard!

And now Dumbledore had a faint impression of exasperation about him, in that slightly disappointed way he was so good at. 'I did not intend any slight against your personal abilities, Miss Potter.' Oh, well, of course he hadn't meant any slight against his abilities when he'd made a slight against his abilities. Obviously. 'I think you perhaps fail to understand just how much of an advantage Voldemort has. You were fortunate enough to be born a very powerful mage, yes, and with an impressive degree of natural talent. Few your age are as gifted. But Voldemort was born with equal, if not greater, power and talent. And he has over a half century on you. A half century to study magic you've not even yet heard of, far beyond your abilities at this stage. A half century to perfect all the various and deadly skills he has long worked to acquire.

'I'm not trying to offend you, Melantha, only make you understand the reality of the situation. At this moment, Voldemort is far beyond you. But that is to be expected: he is an exceptionally dangerous Dark Lord, and you are fifteen years old. It would be no shame to admit it. Quite honestly, if we were to try to wait long enough for you to develop enough ability to last in a legitimate fight against him, one he is putting forth his concerted best effort to kill you, just enough for you to survive for ten seconds, we would have long lost the war in the interim. It is not the way.'

Melantha glared at him. 'I'm not saying you train me up to beat him or anything.' Except, he was sort of saying that, but it was obvious he wasn't going to win that argument. 'Just a little bit, so I'm not completely—'

He cut off with a flinch. That look Dumbledore was giving him. Suddenly razor sharp, completely serious and a bit annoyed. Melantha abruptly felt like a chastised child sent off to the Headmaster to be scolded, and it took everything he had not to awkwardly shift in his seat like one. Maybe he shouldn't have been arguing like that, but it was his own damn life, so he felt he was entitled to argue a little when someone else was doing something stupid with it. Dumbledore didn't even say anything right away. He just stared at him — just a sliver softer than a glare really — for a long, tense moment. Then he unfolded his hands, lifted one a bit above the surface of his desk, hand open.

There was a slight blur of motion, and a tiny glass bottle came to a rest in Dumbledore's hand with a soft smack. His voice low and intense, he said, 'To my knowledge, there have been four people, total, who have fought Lord Voldemort, one-on-one, and survived. Three of the four were long-established, well-respected wizards. One was not.'

Before Melantha could even think to ask what the point was, Dumbledore continued, unstoppered the bottle and poured the silvery liquid-gas into the pensieve with an absent sort of air. 'Late in Seventy-Nine, we received convincing evidence the Death Eaters planned to strike at the Noble and Most Ancient House of Bones, who had been steadfast political opponents of Voldemort's puppets in the Wizengamot since the beginning. We thought it best to place someone with the family, to protect them in the event of an attack. There was some disagreement — half the family wanted someone from the Order, the other half an Auror. In the end, they settled on a compromise candidate, a friend of the family, a member of the Order who had partially completed an apprenticeship with the Aurors before leaving to act independently.

'Early in the morning, December the Thirtieth, the attack came, and Lily Potter crossed wands with
Lord Voldemort for the third time.’ And Dumbledore gestured to the pensieve with an open hand, the order clear.

Melantha hesitated for a second. He wasn't entirely sure how to feel. For one thing, he still hadn't shaken his anger at Dumbledore basically brushing off his request to be taught some really basic things, honestly, he didn't think it was too much to ask. But also because, well. Unless he was reading this completely wrong, Dumbledore had gotten this memory from...

He took another long breath, cautiously reached forward until he felt the cool not-liquid against his fingers.

After floating through silvery ice for a couple seconds, everything was black. He couldn't tell where he was. Actually, he didn't much feel like he was anywhere. He tried to turn his head, but the vague impressions of shape he could see in the darkness didn't move at all. He moved his hand in front of his face...at least, he thought he moved his hand in front of his face. He couldn't see it. This was really—

He jumped a little at the sudden sound of Dumbledore's voice, unnervingly close, as though he were standing right over his shoulder. 'A little different this time. I've anchored our view a little above, behind, and to her right. It would be hard to see, otherwise — she moves around too much.'

Melantha was just opening his mouth to ask what was going on with all the blackness when there was suddenly a shuddering thud through the air, as though everything around were vibrating. There was also a weird flickering of multicolour light, but so dim and brief he wasn't sure what that was. The shadows around them lurched into motion, he heard a bit of shuffling cloth. A quick flash of dim, green-blue light, and then the dark was suddenly pierced by a flood of silvery-white.

After a second of blinking, trying to get his eyes to stop complaining, the image in front of him came into focus, and his breath caught. The light, as he'd expected, came from a patrōnus. A rather familiar one, actually — he wasn't sure it looked exactly the same as his new one, but it was a very similar kind of big cat. The soft glow emanating from the thing revealed enough to suggest they were in a bedroom. Standing right next to the patrōnus was...

Well, he was behind her, and it was dark-ish, so he couldn't see her very well. Somewhat taller than him, he thought, clothes in the middle of a transfiguration, stretching into simple trousers and tunic. Long braid, glinting a little pinkish in the silvery light, stretching down her back. He couldn't see her very well. But he knew who it had to be.

It was strangely hard to breathe at the moment.

Lily crouched a bit, wrapped an arm around the neck of her patrōnus. And then...well, he didn't know what this was. The world around them got weirdly smeary? Everything wiped away, broken apart in several places by bright, silver-white streaks. It was...peculiar. It didn't take long for him to guess what had to be happening. He'd known it was possible to send a patrōnus to someone, carrying a message or whatever, but he hadn't known it was possible to go with.

Five seconds into this memory and it was already official: his mother was awesome.

After a short moment, the world smeared back into place, and they were somewhere else. A hallway, green carpet and wood-panelled walls and stucco ceiling brightly illuminated with dozens of flamelight enchantments. And they weren't alone. 'No, no, no,' Lily said, approaching the two men and two women rushing down the center of the hall. She pointed to one of the women — tall and round-faced, freckled and red-haired — who was obviously pregnant, rather far along. 'You go to the ward room, Liz.'
The woman's face pulled into a glare, and she crossed her arms in something like defiance — which looked slightly awkward with how very pregnant she was. 'I can still—'

But Lily cut her off with a single word: 'Susan.' He blinked at that. Though, now that he thought about it, that this must be Susan's mother was really pretty obvious. Lily suddenly jabbed her wand in her direction, a soft white light surrounding, erm, Susan, just for an instant. 'Stasis charm. Now go.'

The woman grimaced but, after a sigh and a quick exchange with one of the men, turned on her heel and started off in the opposite direction. Now four, Lily and the Boneses continued their way down the hall, talking about wards and floos and portkeys. Over the babble, hoping Dumbledore would hear him, he said, 'Stasis charm?'

And there came Dumbledore's voice again, from uncomfortably nearby. 'Certain magics, both casting them or simply being in their presence, can have a number of detrimental effects on an unborn child. A certain type of stasis charm can be used as a sort of magical isolation, for a short period of time, as a preventative measure. Elisabeth doesn't get anywhere near the fighting, but I assume your mother thought it prudent to take precautions anyway, just in case.'

Now they were in what was obviously an entrance hall of some kind — a large, tall room made of bright, shining granite a yellow-white, before a tall door of heavy, dark wood. Lily came to a halt a couple feet away, spun to face the others. His view spun with her, which made him slightly dizzy. 'My Lord,' she said to the oldest, a tall, distinguished-looking middle aged man seeming not at all diminished for being in a dressing gown, 'I suggest you stay back here with Dilwyn, stop anyone who gets past Amy. Don't want to leave the door undefended — they could get back to Liz.'

The other woman — slightly shorter than Lily, with short, dirty-blonde hair matching both men, a sharp, focused sort of look about her — jerked her head toward the door. 'I'm guessing we'll be holding just outside.'

'You'll be just outside,' Lily said with a slight nod. 'I'll be keeping Voldemort busy.'

Melantha was slightly surprised when nobody so much as twitched at the name.

In a perfectly level voice, if a bit severe, the older man, who he decided had to be Susan's grandfather, said, 'So he came himself, then.'

Lily nodded. 'He's out there, alright. I can feel him.'

Er...

'You mind if I blow up your door?'

'If you think it necessary, feel free to blow up the whole house.'

'I think that would be counter-productive.' But Lily turned to the door again, and both her hands were moving. Her wand made several quick slashes through the air, thin white lines settling into the wood, the stone some distance to the side and above, dividing much of the wall in front of them into a couple dozen sections. Then, she was writing with the pointer finger of her off hand, runes formed of searing red-white light carving themselves into the air. He didn't recognise most of them, but he thought that one might be Egyptian for fire. While she wrote — a bit surreptitiously, as though she didn't want the others to notice — she turned her wand to her own waist, a soft white light flashing for an instant.

Just like the stasis charm she'd done for Susan.
He did some figuring in his head quick and realised that, in December of ’79, his mother should have already been pregnant with him.

Huh.

With a curving, twirling swish of her wand, Lily gathered up the runes floating in the air, and sent them flying off to the door. Except, not quite that simple. They seemed to sort of divide on the way there, multiplying, one set of runes settling into each section of the divided door and wall. He was getting the feeling there was about to be a very big boom. Lily glanced over her shoulder — his view didn't turn with her at that, but he only saw as much as the curve of her cheek, the slightest glint of green. 'Ready?'

A short, tense chorus of agreement.

'Give me a second to burn through them. I'll try to take out as many on the way as I can. Oh, and block your hearing a second.' Lily turned back to the door, waved her wand quick at her own head. All sound instantly vanished, leaving them in rather eerie silence. She then gave her wand a circular little twist, then a sharp, forward jab.

With a flash of reddish light, in perfect silence, the door and much of the wall exploded outward, debris flying out into the night. Flying over and into—

The only sound he heard was his own gasp. Somehow, when he'd imagined the Death Eater raids he'd heard described, he'd never expected there to be quite so many of them. Judging by the number of moving shadows out on the half-illuminated grass past the door there had to be...two dozen? Three? A lot, anyway.

He was suddenly wondering how his mother and the Boneses could have possibly survived this.

And then another weird thing happened. It was a lot like the darkness the memory had started in — completely black, with only the vaguest impression of shape, almost unnoticeable streaks of colour. An instant later the blackness fell away, and Lily was standing in the moonlit yard, barefoot on the grass. Standing right in front of three cloaked and masked Death Eaters. In a fluid motion, she stabbed her wand out at the nearest, and—

... And a fountain of blood and bone, glittering black in the wan light, exploded out of the Death Eater's back, the fresh corpse crumpling to the ground with hardly a breath of protest.

... Erm.

Again the world shifted in a dizzying spin as Lily twisted on her heel, her wand arm moving in a wide curve. A cutting curse, so overpowered it was visible as a sharp blue arc, sliced into the air out in the opposite direction, heading straight for another group of Death Eaters. Two dove out of the way, one simply dropped to the ground. They were smart; the stupid one put up a shield. The curse slipped through it like it wasn't even there. Sound snapped back into existence just in time to catch the man screaming.

Stone and wood were falling from the sky, debris from the obliterated wall and door finally approaching the ground.

The world disappeared into shadows again before he could get a good look, but he was pretty sure
that Death Eater was just bisected shoulder to hip.

Just... Did he just watch his mother kill two people? Just like that?

Bloody fucking hell, what was even happening...

Reality smoothly snapped into place again. Lily had apparently turned around during...whatever she was doing to move around, because he could see the Bones mansion laid out in the center of the clearing. Most of the Death Eaters, he thought, were now between Lily and the building, as well as a lot of roaring, red-orange fire. Where had *that* come from? Surely it hadn't been there a second ago. The debris from the explosion, maybe? Had Lily charmed it to set anything it touched on fire? Whatever.

When Lily had reappeared, she'd had her open hand extended out back toward the mansion. Now she eased herself gradually back, her hand slowly closing into a fist, drawing away. It... Well, it was one of the stranger bits of magic he'd ever seen. Little splinters of orange-red, like flame pulled off and condensed into something solid and glimmering, split away from each of the fires in front of her. The thin little flecks of light shot toward her hand through the air. And, judging from a few voices raised in surprise and agony, a number of Death Eaters as well.

Lily turned, flicking her hand, now surrounded by roiling splinters of frozen fire, off somewhere to her left. Half of the darts left her hand, slicing off into the air — and into a few more Death Eaters. Most managed to dodge them, one absorbed them with a strange shield charm of pulsing blackness, but one got a sizzling wound through her shoulder. Again, she spun half around, sending the rest off in the opposite direction at, unsurprisingly, another group of Death Eaters. They all managed to block or dodge, though.

Even as those weird things flickered through the air, Lily jabbed her wand down at the ground to her right, then flicked it up, and suddenly there was a glittering wall of green-blue crystal blocking the entire right side of his vision. An instant later, the whole thing shattered into a million pieces — must have been a powerful blasting charm of some kind. The Death Eaters in front of her were ducking their heads away from the raining fragments, but Lily hardly even reacted.

She casually turned in the direction the blasting charm must have come from, his vision turning with her, to reveal Voldemort standing hardly a few feet away. Well then. Exactly as Melantha had heard him described: thick, black robes, impossibly pale skin, flat-nosed face with slitted eyes an unnatural red. He was playing with his wand, casually rolling the thing between his fingers, staring at Lily with... *almost* a smile? Maybe not quite, but... It was kind of creeping him out and he couldn't quite say why.

It didn't help when Lily said, in a high, girlish voice, 'Why, Thomas, we simply *must* stop running into each other like this.'

Okay, yeah, he was definitely smiling now, the faintest hints of pointed teeth visible past thin lips. That was so very creepy. 'Miss Evans.' Did... Did Voldemort just address her halfway respectfully? And *not* mockingly? The fuck... 'I might have guessed you would be here.'

'Didn't you hear?' She held up her off hand, wiggled her fingers at him. 'It's Potter now.'

Voldemort raised an eyebrow at that — or, he would have, if he had eyebrows, whatever — his lips twitching with amusement. 'Mm-hmm.'

'Don't much approve of my husband, do you?'
'I suppose that might depend on which one you're talking about.'

And just what did he mean by *that*? It must have made sense to Lily, because she just gave a slight snort of laughter. Really? What the fuck...

Lily's wand hand raised at her side, an orangish glowing shield appearing in the air just to her right, a charm of some sort splashing apart in a bright flash. The shield still up, Lily turned a little that direction, enough he could see some Death Eater, one of the few who hadn't left to join the noisy battle he could hear in the direction of the manor. 'That—' A few flicks of her wand, each releasing a thin, curving band of deep red flame, each coming to rest against a shield charm the Death Eater cast in response, but not vanishing, a soft white glow appearing at each point of contact. '—was—' Lily's wand moved in an odd, retreating twist, the tips of the fiery ribbons contorting, changing into hooks piercing the shield; a downward yank of her wand and the shield was torn away, dozens of yellow sparks falling to the ground. '—rude.' This time, just a sharp jab.

With a flash of light and a soft *bang*, roughly the upper left quarter of the Death Eater's body was blasted away, blood falling to the grass over the next seconds with the soft patter of rain.

Melantha would admit he was in something of a shock by now. Nothing anyone had ever told him about his mother had prepared him for *this*.

And, when his view twisted back to show him, Voldemort was still smiling. That was just so *creepy*. 'Young people these days,' he said, shaking his head slightly. 'No manners.'

Lily snorted again. 'I'm sorry, that's just funny coming from you. Does your glass house even have any walls left, old man?'

A smirk twitching at his lips, Voldemort shrugged a little. 'I'll admit, I've been—' His wand arm snapped up, catching a curse coming in from Lily on a shield charm springing from nowhere, his entire form vanishing behind a sudden explosion of fire. And the duel proper started.

Melantha could barely even follow it. It was just so *fast*, he could hardly even tell what was happening. Lily never stayed in the same place for two seconds. Which, sure, he knew that was basic duelling tactics — it's hard for someone to hit you if you move — but she wasn't using her legs to get around. For a couple seconds, she and Voldemort would trade attacks back and forth, rapid-fire charms splashing off shields, redirected on the tips of wands, or deflected with bare hands, a dazzling dance of light in every colour of the rainbow too fast to hardly even pick them apart, intermixed here and there with a bit of so-quick-and-you'll-miss-it conjuring, his ears pounding with the constant thudding and crackling of curse after curse after curse. Then Lily would *move* — her surroundings would disappear and, after an instant of still blackness he couldn't even see her in, she'd be standing somewhere else. Sometimes Voldemort would be the one to *move* first, apparently through the same bit of magic. It was this odd, complicated dance, each trying to step into an advantageous position on the other, magic consuming the air each time they met.

For minutes — they were keeping it up *so long*, not even slowing! — Melantha could only stare, blinking to himself, the dazzling light and deafening noise of the duel washing over him. Was *this* what actual fights between adult mages were like? That famous duel Dumbledore had had with Grindelwald, all those battles over the last war, he hadn't been imagining anything like *this!* This was *insane!* He hadn't even known this was fucking *possible*!

The unforgiving pace of the duel slowed for a moment, Voldemort hidden behind an odd shield charm made of angular panels that seemed to glow an angry purple and black, the sight of it almost entirely obscured under the dozens and dozens of blazing yellow charms Lily sent crashing against it, one after the other without pause, incendiary curses setting the air ablaze, churning scorched dirt up
metres above, carving craters down metres below. Then, from the centre of the conflagration came something that, even though he knew it was a memory, still clenched at his heart, set a chill down his spine. Bursting out from behind the shield was fire, flowing out in a wave taller than Lily, but it wasn't exactly normal fire. There was orange, yes, but also a deep red, a crimson colour no natural fire should be, and black, tongues of flame as dark as the night sky. Sort of like the cursed flames Snape had put in the potions room just before the Stone.

But as the wave of fire inverted, contorted, he could see... Well, he knew what this was. He'd never seen it before, only heard it described, but it couldn't be anything else. The flames rose not as random, indistinct shapes, but as dragons, tigers, hawks, chimerae, serpents, each only holding its shape for a moment before splitting apart, or merging with a neighbour, fluidly shifting from one form to another, the conflagration letting off a constant, high, malicious hiss that seemed almost eerily quiet. Melantha had read of fiendfyre, knew just how incredibly dangerous the stuff was — difficult to control, all but impossible to extinguish, as much a danger to the caster as it was to the target and everything around them.

And the wave was advancing, leaving nothing but blackened ground behind, toward the Bones manor.

Lily turned immediately, the world again vanishing, reappearing an instant later. She was now standing right in front of the insanely dangerous magic, infernal creatures of heat and darkness tumbling over each other in their haste to consume her.

That...just seemed like a really bad idea to him.

For a moment Lily stood there, hardly moving a muscle. She drew in a long, slow breath. Her wand hand slowly raised, coming to point at the approaching fire, smooth and casual, as though she weren't just about to be obliterated by dark magic. Melantha had to bite his lip to hold back the ridiculous urge to yell at her to get out of the way. And then— Wait, what was that? He could have been imagining it, but...he thought he saw a flicker of white and purple dance across the fingers gripping her wand, sparking all the way up her arm, so fast, there and it was gone, he almost wasn't sure he'd seen it at all. Huh. Then, in a stern, commanding voice, Lily said, 'Is-ā lāgesat.'

The inexorable wave of fiendfyre...stopped. It was still shifting and contorting, creatures of flame still forming and breaking apart, but they didn't advance another inch, the attack halted. Lily took another long breath, 'Obvertite.' The red and black fire contracted, the creatures constricting into concentrated flame, pulling itself together into a roiling, hissing ball six metres wide, a smooth orb of dark flame floating in the air.

'You can't be thinking of doing what I suspect you are.' Lily turned a little, revealing Voldemort standing a short distance away. He was staring at her with narrowed, calculating eyes, an odd, slack expression on his disturbingly inhuman face, as though seeing Lily for the first time, and realising he had never seen such a thing quite like her before.

He couldn't see Lily's face from this angle, but he was sure from the peculiar teasing sound of her voice she was smirking. 'I have to teach you not to use fire magic in a duel with me somehow.'

Voldemort frowned at her. 'I'd rather you didn't kill yourself,' he said, tone flat. 'It would be boring.'

'Such confidence you have in me, Thomas. I'm offended.' And then Lily's wand was moving, twisting in a little circle toward the fiendfyre. 'Prō mē elementa—'

Voldemort shot a dense web of spells at Lily — Melantha was a bit surprised when she recognised the familiar red of stunning charms. But Lily drew a couple runes in the air with her off hand, shields
springing up to intercept, deflecting away the few that got past with twitching fingers.

'—meam nexum subīte—'

Lily was shaking now, fingers and shoulders twitching in hardly-visible tremors. He saw more flickers of strange light running over her in brief flashes, white and purple and black, so short-lived he could hardly see them, but the soft orange glow slowly brightening around her wand between her fingers was impossible to miss. Voldemort tried to stop her again with another stream of charms, but this time she just slipped through the dark instead of bothering to defend herself. For the short instant the world was only blackness, the colours wreathing Lily were far more visible, a shimmering sheath of twisting, rainbow light...

'—et in meā manū vigēte.' With the last syllable of the lengthy incantation, Lily drew back her wand, tapping the wrist of her opposite hand.

Lily disappeared in a torrent of black and red, the fiendfyre falling upon her, and she screamed. And she screamed, and she screamed, a high, long note of agony, almost too loud and unbroken to believe it could have possibly come from a human throat. The fire couldn't be burning her, he knew — if it were, she'd already be dead by now, and, er, he would never have been born. Something else must be happening, but he couldn't even begin to guess what.

Eventually, the screams faded out, reducing to harsh, breathless panting, even as the riotous fury of the fire settled somewhat, contracting inward. Through a haze of red and black, Melantha could barely see Lily shakily pushing herself back to her feet, teetering for a moment before settling. The cursed flames calmed further, moving inward until...until... What the hell was this? A circle around Lily, a couple metres wide, shimmered with low, flickering flames. And around and on her... A long, graceful cat hugged her right leg, a shaggy, vicious-looking wolf growled at her left, a serpent wrapped around her waist, over her shoulder and down her right arm. On her left shoulder perched a dark phoenix, a trail of fire sheathing her skin from the end of the bird's tail all the way down to the tips of the fingers of her left hand. All of them still obviously made of fiendfyre, nothing but hissing orange and red and black, but seemingly oddly stable, almost solid. And, somehow, not killing her.

Just...just...how?!

Voldemort was again standing in front of Lily, giving her a look. Melantha wasn't sure what kind of look — his face was distorted a bit from the heat shimmer surrounding Lily — but he was sure it was a look. «You're lucky you aren't dead, foolish child.»

Lily's shoulder lifted in a shrug, the fiery coils of the serpent visibly tightening for a moment in subtle protest. «I would almost think you care, old man.»

«Almost?» It was yet hard to see him, but Melantha was still disturbed enough by the smile on Voldemort's face he couldn't repress a shudder. I honestly think this war might be boring without you around. And that's closer to a compliment than most will ever get from me.»

A short chuckle, almost lost in the hissing from the cursed fire surrounding her. I'm flattered. Not gonna stop me from trying to kill you again in two seconds.»

«Didn't expect it would.»

And the duel started up again. If anything, it was even harder to follow now. There was still the nearly constant stream of charms coming far too fast for Melantha to interpret. They still kept skipping around, both moving through blackness in the same confusing dance. But now the fiendfyre was a constant part of the fight. Black and red flames, either concentrated in the form of one beast or
another or flowing free, striking at Voldemort again and again, battering at oily, glimmering shield charms, consuming conjured barriers. It seemed Lily could do whatever she was doing with the borrowed fiendfyre and keep up the same duelling pace from before, because she hadn't seemed to have let off on the curses a single bit. It... This was going to sound a bit crazy, but he almost got the impression Voldemort was spending most of the fight on the defensive — constantly throwing off curses from Lily, shielding against or countering the encroaching fiendfyre, too busy ensuring he didn't die to counterattack. Lily only had to block or deflect a curse once every couple seconds, the fight now clearly lopsided. It almost seemed like Voldemort was losing.

He was starting to get the feeling his mother might have been completely terrifying.

But, amazingly, he had something else to distract himself with. He almost turned to Dumbledore, his mouth already open to ask the question, when he suddenly realised Dumbledore wasn't here to look at anyway. And then he hesitated. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to ask for clarification. Because he wasn't entirely sure Dumbledore had even noticed.

It had been at the end of his second year, fucking second year, just after that insanity in the Chamber. He'd been disturbed by Tom Riddle, the boy who was far too like him in too many ways, but had grown up to become Lord Voldemort. He'd been scared. He hadn't even been sure of exactly what. He'd said, to Dumbledore, that the Hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin, how everyone had thought much of the year that he was Slytherin's heir, because he's a Parselmouth...

The Headmaster had said, he remembered it clearly, 'You can speak Parseltongue, Harry, because Lord Voldemort — who is the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin — can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar.'

An odd theory, sure, predicated on Voldemort leaving something behind on that night. Which, of course, he had. It was peculiar his scar had faded now — he'd certainly taken plenty of healing potions before — and Dumbledore had said something about finding magic in that room he hadn't expected, which he implied had given Melantha Parseltongue, though the ability had remained for some reason Dumbledore couldn't explain. 'Anyone who claims to fully understand the functioning of mind and soul,' he'd said, 'is either hopelessly arrogant or a liar.'

But, if the assumption that whatever magic that had been had been what had given him the ability was faulty in the first place...

When he'd told Hermione some of that conversation with Dumbledore shortly afterward, she'd pointed out a problem he hadn't thought of at the time. Salazar Slytherin lived over a thousand years ago. He'd had children, roughly a dozen of whom had lived to adulthood to have children of their own — the exact number depended on which source was consulted, and there was apparently some disagreement over exactly how many of Ravenclaw's children had been his. She had been married to someone else, true, but people at the time had pointed out how peculiar it was that some of her children were Parselmouths. Anyway. He'd had children, his children had had children, those children had had more. The Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin had been active in Britain until about the Fifteenth Century, intermarrying with dozens of other magical families, in Britain and a few other nations.

Hermione had said it was absolutely ludicrous to assert Tom Riddle was legitimately the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin. It was simply impossible. In fact, back in fourth year, she'd once pointed out that, yes, he was, in fact, descended from Slytherin — House Black had been a major ally of House Slytherin back when it existed, intermarriages had not been uncommon — but so was everybody else. Certainly everyone in the Noble Houses, probably most in the Common
Houses, and, most likely, even some of the muggleborns, through squibs born into one family or another. For extra hilarity, numerically speaking, it was likely that more of Slytherin's living descendants were muggle than magical. Slytherin lived a thousand years ago. A thousand years is a long time. After centuries of intermarriage, well, that's just what happened.

And, well, Salazar Slytherin was hardly the only source of Parseltongue around. There were places in the world where the talent was common, cultures that prized it, did their best to spread it around, keep it alive. Most Parselmouths in western Europe had been descended from Slytherin, but he wasn't the only option. So it didn't even necessarily mean anything.

He wasn't surprised Dumbledore hadn't noticed. Surrounded by the hissing of the fire, from the perspective of a speaker, he would admit it might be hard to tell. He'd only known because the way it had lingered in the air, the way it'd pulled at him, meaning almost more known than simply understood...

They, Lily and Voldemort, had spoken Parseltongue.

Lily Potter had spoken Parseltongue. Natural, fluent, easy Parseltongue.

His mother had been a Parselmouth.

... Did nobody know? Nobody? That...

Had Dumbledore lied, or was he just wrong?

He wasn't sure how to feel about this. Any of this. He probably didn't have to be the one to kill Voldemort, the absolutely ridiculous magic done constantly in this duel, the fact his mother and Voldemort seemed to have been oddly friendly (even while trying to kill each other), the fact that his mother had been a Parselmouth. He just... He had no idea.

He didn't understand anything anymore.

He was so dazed, lost in thought, he didn't even notice the duel ending. He jerked with surprise when the December night long ago was washed away by cold, silver light, and he was suddenly thrown back into his body in Dumbledore's office. It felt almost strange, being somewhere so soft, so quiet, after the harsh violence that had been going on all around him for what had to have been an hour or more. And the duel had been long — the sun had dipped quite a bit in the sky, he noticed with a glance.

Dumbledore was talking about... Honestly, he wasn't really paying attention. Something about how his mother had been a ridiculous prodigy, had been capable of most of the third-year charms by her first day of first year — wandlessly — had worked every single day since she'd first learned of magic — when she'd been seven — to make herself the absolute best witch she could possibly be, an arduous, incessant campaign of self-improvement. By the time of that duel, she'd been teaching herself whatever she could get her hands on for over a decade. And she still hadn't been able to defeat Riddle. Expecting Melantha to do any better, in the short window they likely had before a still-weakened Britain would collapse, well.

He was trying to be all nice. Saying they would take care of it. Melantha didn't have to worry too much. They might need a little help from her here or there, but it wouldn't be anything too demanding. Most everything direct would simply be far beyond her abilities — beyond most anyone's. He would keep Melantha informed, because Sirius had demanded it. But there wasn't
actualy that much he had to do. It was all taken care of. Or would be, in time.

Melantha was hardly even listening, the words washing over him. He was still and silent, hardly even thinking a thing, hardly aware of his surroundings at all. Still and silent.

He didn't understand anything.

Melantha snapped out of it two days later.

Ever since coming back to Hogwarts, he'd been a bit careful about exactly how he handled bathrooms and loos and such. He timed things in the dorm so he was never changing or washing at the same time as his roommates — which was a little inconvenient schedule-wise, but he'd figured it out. They were rare, but dotted across the castle were a few little rooms with a single toilet and sink. He'd tracked them down on the Map, used them whenever feasible. He couldn't really explain why, he just felt vaguely awkward about these things. He just couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't supposed to be in with girls, had a niggling of guilt at the back of his head. Years of social conditioning, he guessed.

And maybe a slight concern people would figure out who he was and freak out. Couldn't deny that was there a bit too.

He stood at the sink, slowly washing his hands, the almost too hot water running over his skin. Absently feeling the strange tingle from the soap. He'd noticed that, this year, the soap made his hands tingle. He had no idea why. He suspected there might be magic in the soap, that he was feeling it work. Which was a little weird, since he'd never felt it before. But he had been told before that, so to speak, you have to use magic to gain magic — people gradually grow more powerful with literally each spell cast. Minimally, but that's how it works. That, and he hadn't been magically mature yet anyway. Maybe he was just now sensitive enough to feel it, hadn't been before. It was a possibility anyway.

God, he was so... He didn't know. Restless? Exhausted? How could both of those be options, that made no sense. He wasn't sure what word to use. Sitting in class the last couple days, lazing through the introductory lectures always repeated at the beginning of a year, had just felt...wrong, somehow. He wasn't sure how. It was rather similar to the feeling he got in a girls' loo, actually, come to think of it. Like he didn't belong there. And it was so frustrating, and he didn't understand what was wrong, and he was really just starting to get tired of it.

He was so tired of being tired.

And he heard Ellie's voice ringing in his head again, repeating what she'd said some weeks ago. 'You know, Melantha,' she'd said, that knowing smile on her face again. 'You know what you're feeling. You can tell me you don't as much as you like. You can pretend to yourself, maybe even so well you'll almost believe it. But, deep down—' She'd shrugged. '—you know. You don't have to admit it to me, but at least try to admit it to yourself. It'll be a lot easier on you.'

Alright. Fine. He could do that.

He would do that.

He'd been all dazed and empty for a little while, sure. But it was becoming increasingly obvious. And it was starting to get really hard to ignore.

There was a slight rattling in the air, the toilet seat vibrating against the bowl.
He was angry. Dumbledore had made him angry. But not just angry.  

*He was completely fucking furious.*

He took a long breath, pulled his hands out of the stream of water. Placed one on either end of the sink, perched on the lip. He felt drips of water slide down his wrists, between his fingers, slipping away across the black surface. He didn't turn off the faucet, just stared down at the rushing water.

Dumbledore was fucking doing it again. Again! Had that old coot ever done anything right? It was like he hadn't even thought about this at all. Certainly not from Melantha's perspective. *Oh, don't worry, Miss Potter. Just sit back and let the adults take care of everything, no need to worry yourself over it all.* Right, because they've all bloody well done a perfect job so far! Just great!

He could practically hear Snape in his head now, saying something about how he was such an arrogant child to think he knew better than all these fully-trained wizards, blah blah blah. Oh, yes, how dare Melantha look at every single thing that had ever happened to him in his entire bloody life and notice the bloody fucking obvious pattern. How arrogant of him!

 Seriously, how stupid was Dumbledore? They'd take care of everything? Just focus on his schooling? He'd been paying attention the last...forever, right? When had the adults in his life ever been there for him when he need them, huh? When?

Never. That's when.

He knew at some level that his experience certainly wasn't typical. He knew, intellectually, that the kind of shite that had always happened to him was supposed to be the kind of shite adults took care of, so kids didn't have to. He knew that. He just... He didn't feel it. It'd always been him. Alone.

The rattling was getting louder, he absently noticed steam was rising from the sink in front of him, but he wasn't really paying attention to that.

He was too busy being furious.

He'd always had to take care of himself. He was used to that. Honestly, he wasn't sure if he knew anyone he would trust to take care of, well, anything for him. Hermione, maybe. Sirius, maybe. Andi...maybe. He doubted he'd be comfortable with it, but maybe. And he'd been, he was, perfectly willing to learn, do, whatever he had to to protect himself. He'd been in the middle of a sentence, voicing an idea. It wouldn't even have been the first time he'd gone out of his way to learn magic he really didn't need to for class or whatever, but because he needed it to protect himself, and he'd wanted to. It had taken him forever, but the *patrōnus* was an infamously finicky spell — Remus had been impressed he could do it at all. Actually, most everyone who had learnt about it had been. And he was rather proud of that one. Probably his favourite thing he'd managed to do with magic so far. Not only because it was advanced, difficult magic, though that was part of it. Not only because he'd managed to successfully protect himself, and even a few others, though that was certainly part of it too. But because it had been *hard*. He'd been told he probably wouldn't be able to do it no matter how long he worked at it, but he'd *tried*, he'd worked on it *every damn day* for months, and never gave a fucking inch, even after the days he'd practised against the boggart, drained both emotionally and magically, until he'd *fucking done it*, until he'd *proven* he wasn't the useless, lazy, talentless, stupid waste of space honestly half the people he'd ever met seemed to think he was. He'd actually *achieved* something, and it'd felt *great*.

And he'd been all prepared to do all that again. Actually fucking work for once. And what did Dumbledore say? Nope, not needed! Voldemort would crush you like a bug in seconds! There's really no point to it! Because, *obviously*, Voldemort is the *only* person who's ever going to attack you
ever! Not like he has dozens of followers, not like dark creatures are a thing, not like there are all kinds of people in this country who hate you for no good reason! Nope, you have no chance against Voldemort, so there's no point even trying!

*That was the most fucking idiotic thing he'd ever heard!*  

*What the bloody fuck was that arsehole thinking!*  

He could feel he was shaking now, he could feel the power rising inside of him, like helium filling his chest, pushing up and outward, furious, lashing tendrils stretching out into the room around him. The gentle everlit candles at either side of the mirror flared, narrow pillars of flame reaching up to scorch the ceiling, filament cracks running through the mirror, the stucco walls around, the granite tiles at his feet. The water still pouring from the faucet was flash boiling the instant it hit the surface of the sink, as though striking a hot skillet. Some of the superheated drops splashed up to his hands, his arms, but the heat didn't affect him. The toilet seat behind him was clanging, almost deafening, he thought he heard the water in the bowl quicken into a roiling boil. Sparks of electricity crackled in his ears.

He was losing control of his magic. Obviously. He wasn't sure if he could stop it. At the moment, he wasn't even sure he wanted to.

He just...

He was just so fucking tired. He didn't want to do this anymore. To just sit back, ignoring the huge target painted on his back, waiting for the next disaster to strike. He was so fucking tired of the cautious, passive life he'd been living. Who knew doing nothing could be so exhausting? He was done. Just done.

He felt a smirk pull a little at his lips. He had thought to himself he didn't want to be Harry Potter anymore, hadn't he? His magic had been nice enough to grant him his desire — if not *quite* the way he'd been thinking — and look what he'd done with it. He'd hadn't changed a bit! Different container, contents the same. The same meek, shy, passive, pathetic Harry Potter. Wouldn't do a thing for himself, wouldn't step an inch out of his rut, unless he absolutely *had* to. Someone about to steal a Philosopher's Stone, arseholes being bullying gits, best friends' sisters being kidnapped, if he was fucking *forced* to — then, shite, he'd barrel through everything in his way like an unthinking, stereotypical Gryffindor halfwit. Arguably, he'd only even learned the *patrōnus* because he'd felt he'd had to. But if he didn't *have* to?

And what had he been doing these last few months? Either what he'd been *told*, or what he felt he *had* to.

In other words: the same fucking thing.

And he *hated* it so fucking much!

He was done! He was so bloody fucking done! That was it! From *this second onward*, he was going to do, in everything, *what she damn well fucking pleased!*

Dumbledore thought it was pointless for her to learn anything beyond what was taught in class, she wouldn't need it to protect herself. Well, *fuck him!* She didn't *need* his permission! She had an Auror for a cousin, didn't she, a Hit Wizard for a godfather? She'd just *ask* them. She'd send them both an owl, before bed, tonight!

She still had the Room of Requirement — note to self: get Dobby more socks. Not only could she
use that as a practice space, somewhere people (McGonagall) couldn't just barge in and force her to explain herself. But not only that, she could ask the Room to give her all the books it might think she'd need, that might be useful on her new path toward not being *so completely helpless*. Some of it might not be too great, but the Room had to have *something*.

Oh, what probably would have something? Her mother's journals. She'd flipped through a few of them, and it wasn't just notes for classes — she'd been writing about her own work too. And, as that memory had shown her, her mother had managed to make herself into a *complete and utter monstrosity* with a wand, so that was a good place to go. That was another owl she should send: to Gringotts, asking them to send her the rest of the journals. Would have to remember to write that one as Harry Potter.

*Ha ha, Dumbledore,* she thought to herself with a high giggle, *didn't expect that one, did you? Showing me that memory, showing me it was completely pointless to try, at least in the short term, that I'd never catch up. Well, whoops! You just showed me where to look! Good job!*

She would get Dora here, or someone Dora might be able to set her up with, to learn how to not be completely useless in a fight. Yes. She would have her mother's journals sent in, look for other books, to learn as much awesome shite as she possibly could. Yes. But that wasn't all she wanted to do. Oh, no.

She was still giggling, and, really, her throat was starting to hurt a little from it now. She just couldn't stop. What her magic was doing now really wasn't helping. She wasn't destroying the room anymore, the flames had fallen back to their usual height, the water had stopped boiling. The tense, tight, violent shivering of fury in her chest had melted away into something different. She wasn't even entirely sure what it was now. It was light as air, lighter, like it was about to pick her right off the ground, shining bright like a flamelight enchantment set between her ribs, warm and soothing like a good mug of hot chocolate. It was making her a bit dizzy, and rather giddy, and she *couldn't stop giggling* like such a *fucking lunatic*.

And, honestly, she didn't really want to.

She stared at herself in the mirror for a long moment, taking a few deep, slow breaths. Familiar green eyes, her mother's eyes, stared back at her, more sharp and intense than she thought they should be, almost seeming to gleam in the candlelight. But, her magic had been being weird, and that could happen, whatever. She let her gaze trail over her face, the heavy lines of her dark eyebrows, the gentle curve of her cheek, the sharp point of her chin that she was pretty sure was genetic, her razor nose and thin— *Whoops.* She noticed she was biting her lip, stopped. Oh, wow, that steam from the sink must have really fucked up her hair, it was much messier than usual. She hadn't really noticed when it was shorter, but the jet black mass was dense and wavy as fuck, it got so tangled so easily. There was a glint of sweat along the curve of her neck from it too.

Oh, wait, maybe that'd been the magic, come to think of it. She'd noticed before when Hermione got especially worked up, she lost control of her magic a little bit, and the first thing to be affected was her hair, making it even more of a mess. She suspected the bushiness was mostly from her magic, actually — both her parents had rather straight hair by comparison.

Anyway.

Okay.

So.

She was a girl now. *'So fucking what?!'* What was so bad about that, honestly! It was even nice
sometimes! She'd been being _so fucking ridiculous_ the last couple months! Seriously! Really, had she been that attached to being a boy in the first place? No, no was the answer, no she hadn't. And if... If she were completely honest... She really...

Oh, you can think it in your own head, you _fucking lunatic_, stop being such a psycho!

_She was really fucking girly sometimes! There!

She'd long made a habit of, just, ignoring it. Hiding it. Because, fuck, Dursleys didn't want any _freakishness_ around them, did they? She'd learned a long time ago to try to be as _normal_ as possible at all times, to not even _think_ freakish thoughts in the privacy of her own head. And, well, boys aren't normally supposed to be all girly, are they? You can bet that's a bit of freakishness Vernon never tolerated.

Well, she was done! She was done being all self-conscious about this shite! She was going to do what she _damn well pleased_!

Yeah, Vernon? _Fuck you! Flowers were pretty!_ If she felt like drawing them in the margins of her books, guess what? _She was going to fucking do it!_ If she felt like painting them onto her hands, or carving them into her bedframe (the elves could fix that when she graduated, right?), or, fuck, picking them and putting them in her goddamn _hair_, she was going to _do it_, and he could _just bloody go to fucking hell_!

Fuck it all! Just _fuck it!_ She was going to say what she wanted the way she wanted, she was going to do what she wanted, and everyone else could _fuck off_! Even herself a few hours ago, yeah, fuck that pathetic bitch. It was so ridiculous what she'd let the Dursleys do to her. The Dursleys were _so_ ridiculous! Seriously, Petunia had locked her in the cupboard once, denying her lunch _and_ dinner, because she'd caught her _skipping_. Skipping! Or how about that time, back in year two, when Dudley and his stupid gang had teased her with insults that, in retrospect, weren't really insults, and kicked her around for nearly an hour, just because she'd been having lunch with a few girls in their year that week? _Seriously?_

What the fuck was _wrong_ with those people? Honestly...

There was a Hogsmeade weekend in a few weeks here. And, know what? She was going to drag Hermione out — because someone had to know what she was doing — and she was going to buy herself some clothes. Because, damn if what she had didn't _suck_. She was still dressing like Harry Potter! But she _wasn't_ Harry Potter anymore, and she _didn't_ want to be! _Fuck that!_ She was Melantha Black now, and, honestly, she was actually sort of starting to _like_ the idea. And if she was going to _act_ like it, she was going to _dress_ like it.

Because, fuck, as long as she was being honest right now in her head, _for once_, she might as well come out and think it. Not only did she think she _looked_ rather nice in the small number of dresses and skirts and whatever other _girly_ shite Andi had made her wear, it was also sort of fun! She _liked_ it! And no, little tingle in the back of her head saying she _shouldn't_ like that, it was _weird, it was not weird, she was a girl_, that was perfectly acceptable! She was going to do it, she was going to _like_ it, and anyone who was uncomfortable with it could just _fuck off_!

Including herself when she actually got around to it, as she assumed would happen. _Fuck her!_

Because, yes, she wasn't so naive as to think all her head fuckery was going to be over just because she'd decided just now it was going to be over. _Of course_ it wouldn't be that easy. _Of course_ her plan to not be so passive, to go and learn the shite she thought she needed to learn, _of course_ that wasn't going to go perfectly smoothly, was going to take a lot of bloody work. _Of course_ she wasn't going
to stop being pathetically shy and self-conscious just because she didn't want to be. It wasn't going to be that easy.

But damned if she wasn't going to try.

She was tired, she was so damn tired of her shitty, passive, self-denying nonsense. It obviously hadn't helped her a single fucking bit. She was done. So very, very done.

She was going to do what she damn well pleased.

Yes.

With a nod to herself in the mirror, she pulled out her wand, did as much as she could to repair the damage she'd unthinkingly done to the room. Which was most of it — she overpowered the mending charm a bit. Tucking her wand away, she stepped into the hall, a soft smile pulling at her lips.

Well. This was going to be great. She wouldn't allow it to be anything but.

Chapter End Notes

Supreme Consul — Supreme Mugwump in canon. Which makes absolutely no sense. "Mugwump" as a political term originated in nineteenth century America, ultimately from a word in an Algonquian language (presumably Massachusset/Wampanoag). It would be a bit peculiar for the top position in the European ICW to be a Native American word. Instead, I picked a term referencing the Roman Senate, which seems much more plausible.

Frances Cromwell — In case you're curious, yes, that Cromwell. In my headcanon history, muggleborn sister of the (in)famous Oliver Cromwell. Sister, not Cromwell's youngest daughter, who had the same name. Dark Lady, successfully conquered magical Britain (and, through her brother, the muggle side as well), and thus partially responsible for the enormous mess made of the Seventeenth Century, which contributed to the Statute of Secrecy happening.

[but it was a very similar kind of big cat] — Yeah, Lily's patrōnus isn't a doe. There are reasons why I did that, they'll come up later. Although, from a certain perspective, I didn't even change it. JKR confirmed Lily's patrōnus was a doe in an interview, it wasn't actually in any of the books. So bleh.

[I suppose that might depend on which you're talking about.] — Why, yes, I do have irons in the plot-fire. Why do you ask?

Is-ã lũgesat (IPA: /ɪ.ʃɐ̃.l̥ʊ̃.ɣʰɛ.ʃɑt/) — This is from a conlang, the language they speak in the civilisation of magical Crete I've made up. Means "bow to me", as a command.

Obvertite — Plural command of Latin verb meaning "turn to(ward)"

Prō mē elementa, meam nexum subīte, et in meā manū vigēte. — "Elements before me, submit to my binding, and live (with)in my hand." The verb for "live" used also means to flourish or thrive. In short, this is a spell that binds some bit of elemental magic to the caster in a way that gives them such control over it they can make it do pretty much
whatever they want by thought alone. Usually, you can only do this with a spell you cast
yourself, but Lily cheated and used lügesat–obvertite to transfer ownership of the spell,
so to speak, to herself first. And, in case you're wondering, yes, that is a completely
insane thing to do with fiendfyre.

Holy shit, I'm so glad I finally got to that scene. I'm probably just as sick of the constant
angst as any of you are.
Oh, and, uh...about Lily’s use of completely badass magic...and Tom apparently
knowing her...and her apparently being a Parselmouth...ah...
*flees*
September 1995 — Intent

Chapter Summary

Sirius is making plans to fuck shit up, and Melantha is rapidly losing her ability to give a fuck.

Chapter Notes

*Fair warning, the first scene (which somehow ballooned to like 8k words, ha ha whoops) gets pretty nerdy. But I guess you should be used to me being nerdy by now. And the second scene just did not go the direction I had originally planned at all. I can spot the very moment the Melantha in my head just goes HA HA NOPE. Whoops.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If someone had told Sirius, at any point after he'd turned twelve or so, that he'd be sitting in this chair, behind this desk, there was absolutely no way he would have ever believed them. Even now, it seemed surreal.

The official headquarters of the Wizengamot was, as he'd known from childhood, somewhere on the island of Inys Dyvīl — though it was unplottable, and had been for long enough no one was entirely sure exactly where anymore. The thing was an enormous construction of wood and stone, the circular Chamber itself left to the open air (though warded to prevent rain or snow from falling in), the ring of surrounding halls and chambers glistening with granite and marble and precious metals. Underground, sprawling out some distance in all directions, were chambers and offices and apartments reserved for each Noble House, those meant for older or more powerful houses arranged near the middle, the weakest to the fringes.

Being a Noble and Most Ancient House and everything — and, for most of their history, one of the more powerful ones at that — House Black had a set of rooms directly under the Chamber floor. It wasn't exactly a very ascetic place, either. Every surface of every room, walls and floors and ceilings, were all tiled with shining black granite, swirls of reds and yellows and greens visible here and there, broken occasionally by intricately carved trim of silver or gold. The Lord's office, which he was sitting in right now, held a gleaming desk of dark oak, bookshelves filled with dozens of volumes he hadn't had the opportunity to look through yet — not that he expected anything pleasant, honestly — a few couches and chairs off to a corner encased in shining black leather. The tall chair behind the desk looked severe and uninviting, but he'd decided once he'd sat in it there had to be an array of cushioning charms and such worked into it, because it was actually quite nice. He couldn't see it from this angle, but he knew on the wall behind him was a floor-to-ceiling reproduction of the familiar House Black coat of arms in marble and silver.

This wasn't the first time he'd come here, since taking up the Lordship of the House some months ago. But sitting in this chair still felt indescribably strange. Like he didn't belong here, a child playing at his father's place. He had to wonder to himself if he'd ever get used to it.
Not really the time to think about that. He had other concerns for today. He certainly wouldn't be here otherwise.

He felt the slight tingle at the back of his mind, the wards alerting him to the arrival of his guest. Finally. This was really the only business he had here. He'd just as soon have stayed at home, but he didn't feel comfortable letting this particular person through the wards there as yet. He didn't have to walk out to welcome his guest in himself — Danielle would take care of that — but he got to his feet anyway, walked around to the front of the uncomfortably ornate desk, propping himself up against the center. And waited.

He didn't have to wait very long. Only a few seconds later, there was a soft knock against the door, the heavy wood pushed open a few inches, revealing the unassuming, brown-haired girl in her late teens on the other side. Danielle Kelly, one of the several grandchildren Sirius had found of his great-uncle Marius, a squib who'd been cast out of the family before Sirius had even been born (which he'd reversed posthumously, for all the good it did). While some of Marius's children and grandchildren were magical, some of them were muggles — Danielle was one of House Black's muggle members, something that hadn't happened since before the Statute of Secrecy, but it was technically legal, so he didn't care. Danielle was studying at university right now, but had some free time and was curious enough to be interested, so he'd offered her a job as his assistant. One of a couple he needed to manage all this rapidly accruing House business nonsense, actually.

He'd freely admit, part of the reason he'd offered her the most visible assistant position he'd been looking to fill was because she was a muggle. She didn't even try to hide it, either, usually appearing in the Wizengamot Chamber or the offices below in one obviously muggle-style dress or another. Before her first day, she'd reluctantly asked if she should dress like a witch, and he'd told her not to bother. Mostly? He just loved to see the scandalised looks on the faces of all the self-important inbred arses all around him. And how anyone who wanted to speak to him in here had to go through her first like this, ooh, it just tickled him, he loved it.

By the sharp-but-subtle smirk he caught on her every once in a while, he knew it all amused Danielle too. If he'd needed further proof she was a Black, he guessed that was it.

Leaning slightly through the gap into the room, in that odd muggle English accent of hers, Danielle said, 'The Lady Malfoy to see you, Uncle.' Technically, she shouldn't be using that familiar of address in this particular place.

But if he actually cared, he would have corrected her by now. Besides, he was sure she was perfectly aware of what the rules were for this sort of thing anyway — Andi had given her an etiquette booklet and a few lessons when she'd accepted the job. 'Let her in, then.' 

Danielle stepped aside, pulling the door open with her, and then Narcissa was walking into the room. More gliding than walking, he guessed. Even when they'd been children, Narcissa had always seemed to take up the whole prim and proper thing far better than any of the other Black kids. She hardly seemed changed for the years since last they'd met at all, actually — if he hadn't known better, he'd almost think he was still sixteen, the both of them stuck at one of those mind-numbing society parties they always got dragged to. Narcissa might not have hated them quite as much as he had, and had been much better at hiding how much she did, but she'd still complained in private. There was hardly a single line on her face, looking far younger than he did by now (for which he blamed Azkaban), the smooth, shining silk robes and jewelry glinting at neck and wrists somehow familiar despite the fact that he'd never seen these exact specimens before. Oh, and the flat, coldly observant cast to her face, couldn't forget that. Myrðin, his younger cousin always did have one hell of a glare, she even looked sharp and annoyed when she was happy.
It also helped that the blonde highlights she'd been putting in ever since she'd been engaged to Malfoy were gone, all of it solid her natural black. He didn't think he'd seen her without that since...Hogwarts? Her sixth year, his seventh, he was pretty sure.

But it was better not to think about that too much. Dwell too deeply in his memories, and he might find the familiar, icy blackness the dementors had left him with crawling over his mind before he could even react. Better to move on.

'Narcissa,' he said, giving her a thin, reserved smile. 'This is a surprise.' The meeting itself wasn't, of course — she had gotten the message to Mel so she could call him and arrange it, after all. What she and a few others he'd talked to inferred the meeting was about, though, that was a surprise.

For a second, Narcissa froze; at a guess, he'd say processing the fact he'd used her given name. That was a bit out of place, but he was in the power position here, and he'd never been much for all those tedious properties anyway. With a hesitant nod, she replied with, 'Thank you for meeting with me, Sirius.'

After a few confused blinks at Narcissa — in the quick and dirty education most of the new members of the House had gotten in their history and alliances, House Malfoy had been named one of their more powerful enemies at present, after all — Danielle turned back to Sirius. 'You'll be in the corner, I assume.'

'Yes, thank you, Danielle.'

A last uncertain look at Narcissa, then she closed the door, and they were alone.

Sirius didn't waste any time, and led Narcissa around to the little sitting area in the corner. They'd hardly both sat down when there was the slightest of pops, and a couple bits of laden dishware appeared on the table between them. Sirius continued to not waste any time, immediately pouring himself a cup of coffee, splashing a bit of honey into it. He'd already gotten snide comments from a few people who'd been in here about how it wasn't "traditional" to serve coffee to his guests like this, which he really just thought was funny, honestly. The common sort of tea everyone drank these days had only been introduced to Europe in, what, the Sixteenth Century? Barely a hundred years before the Statute. How was that "traditional", exactly? The same beverage form of coffee everyone knew about now hadn't been seen in Britain until the Fifteenth Century, which was still earlier, but their ancestors had known about the source plant since literally Roman times. Couldn't say the same thing about tea.

Well, ancient Celtic peoples had drunk various tisanes once upon a time, which some people did still hold on to — James had been particularly attached to this one mint brew Sirius had always found just disgusting. But that wasn't what people usually meant.

And, sure, he'd barely ever even seen coffee before he'd started stealing Lily's, but that was hardly the point.

After a moment, he realised he'd probably been sitting there thinking to himself a little more than he probably should have, so he quickly dragged himself back, glanced up for Narcissa. And was a little surprised to see she wasn't paying him any more attention than he'd been her. She was staring at the plate of...whatever they were called, he honestly didn't know. These thin little crispy pancake things, wrapped around strawberries and cream cheese. He must have seen them a million times growing up — they were one of the things more commonly found with the finger food at pretty much any occasion — but he'd never bothered asking what they were called. Possibly because he'd never liked them all that much himself, really. They were fine, sure, but he just hadn't cared enough to ask.
By the distant, slightly dazed look on Narcissa's face, there was something more going on here, some significance to this he didn't follow. 'Is something wrong?'

She blinked to herself for a second, glanced back up to him. 'He's still alive, then? Kreacher.'

Well. That managed to answer nothing. 'Yes, he is. Was in a right state when I first found him, but he's been doing gradually better.' His little speech about shifting times and such had helped a little; shattering that locket Reggie had stolen from Voldemort and bade him destroy had helped a lot more.

Sirius still had no idea how to feel about that one.

But, back to the present conversation, right. 'How'd you know, anyway?'

'He knew these were always my favourite, is all. I don't think I told anyone else.' Every movement slightly hesitant, she picked up one of the little things, brought it to her mouth, and slowly bit down. Her flat face didn't give away even the slightest bit of whatever might be going on in her head.

Alright, then, Sirius wasn't entirely surprised by that, he'd admit. He'd told Kreacher he would be meeting with Narcissa today, and that it was quite likely she might be legitimately asking for asylum. The thing had been so ecstatic at the idea of having his young Miss Cissy back Sirius had hardly been able to believe he was the same irascible little elf. Arranging for one of her favourites to end up on the table was just the sort of thing he'd do. Sirius waited a few moments, sipping slowly at his coffee while she ate the little thing — and hid a smirk when she calmly-but-swiftly followed it with a second and a third — before getting straight to the point. 'Before we say anything else, I'd like you to confirm what your son told Mel.'

Narcissa paused for a moment, before visibly resettling herself — Kreacher's thoughtfulness had apparently thrown her off more than he'd thought. She didn't answer until she'd taken a sip of her own coffee, the flickered grimace she sent down to it almost unnoticeable. 'Assuming Draco told your ward I'm seeking asylum with the House of Black, you heard correctly.'

Well. That was it, then. Honestly, when he'd started putting the House back together, this was not one of the consequences he and Andi had predicted. This could get somewhat complicated, not even considering how Andi would likely curse him if he didn't take this seriously — no pun intended. Might as well get things started with probably the most important question: 'Why?'

'In short, the Dark Lord.' Big surprise, there. For a long moment, Narcissa didn't say any more, just staring at...honestly, he couldn't tell. Not even pretending to drink her coffee anymore, either. Finally, after what felt like a couple minutes, she started talking again. 'I'm not sure you remember — it was a long time ago — but I was never particularly enthused about the Dark Lord.'

Sirius shrugged a little. While that was true, he knew, it wasn't really the whole story. 'You've certainly never said much against him.'

'Skýlla and Khárybdis,' Narcissa said, her tone still even, but now with the slightest hint of sharpness. She was probably calling him an idiot in her head right now, he guessed. 'In the beginning, my objection to the Dark Lord and his followers was more about their methods than anything — I was raised as deep into the blood purist mindset as you were, but I didn't see much point in killing them all. Mudbloods, I mean.' Sirius barely managed not to flinch at the word. 'They weren't that much of a threat, surely, to justify that much effort to get rid of them. As long as they didn't get ideas above their station, I honestly didn't see how they mattered, especially not enough to risk so many of our kind as the Death Eaters had been doing.

'Honestly,' she said with a slight tilt of her head, 'I didn't give the whole thing a second thought until I
caught Andi and that Tonks boy together.'

Sirius frowned a little to himself; with what he knew of the timeline of Andi's expulsion from the House, that didn't make a lot of sense. 'When was that?'

Narcissa's eyes flicked back to him, blinking, as though suddenly remembering he was there. 'January. My first year at Hogwarts, her seventh. They ran off five months later.'

'You didn't tell anyone.' He couldn't help the shade of shock on his own voice.

Which just seemed to annoy Narcissa a little, her thin eyebrows falling into a slight frown. 'I didn't. If I told someone it's quite possible they would have killed her. That was the fate of blood traitors, after all.' Sirius certainly knew that — he couldn't count the number of assassinations he'd evaded after he'd finally left the mad remnants of the family. 'Andi always did look out for me, when she could, so...' She shrugged, as though the matter were simple, and of no consequence. 'And, over the next few years, I got to know Severus—' Sirius did his best not to grimace at the name, mostly succeeded. '—a bit, and he only ever had good things to say about Evans. Or at least he did when we were in private. By then I'd already been a bit half-hearted in parroting the same blood supremacist speech I learned to repeat, and I think he could tell. I actually witnessed Evans flatten Arianna Yaxley in two seconds in fourth year, and by then, well, the evidence speaks for itself.'

Sirius vaguely remembered that. They had been in fifth year, in May or June he thought. Most of the school had been outside, he and the other three under their usual tree by the lake. Some seventh-year Slytherins were taking out their exam anxiety on a younger muggleborn or two — honestly couldn't remember their names or even their genders, but he was sure they were in first or second year or something. Lily had come out of nowhere, tried to talk them down with that icy derision she could get when she was truly furious. Yaxley had taken exception to something she'd said, and fired off some dark curse or another at her (Sirius didn't remember what, only that James had been livid over it). Lily had batted the curse away like it was nothing, and an instant later Yaxley had been motionless on the ground, thin curls of smoke rising from her robes. Sirius hadn't even really seen it, it'd been so fast. The other Slytherins, showing a bit of sense for once, had decided not to push her any further, and had instead picked Yaxley up and carried her to the Hospital Wing, where she'd ended up staying the next four days.

Sirius hadn't been joking even a little when he'd told Mel that Lily had honestly scared him sometimes. She'd been perfectly nice and sometimes even sickeningly sweet to people she liked, sure, would do whatever necessary without hesitation for her friends. But, when she got angry? Not just annoyed, over something stupid, but really, truly enraged? Completely and utterly terrifying.

And add in that he was rather sure she'd been powerful and knowledgeable enough in her later years to count as a sorceress already, and he could see why Lily could give anyone second thoughts about that whole blood purity thing.

But anyway, Narcissa was still talking. 'But I couldn't very well say anything about it, could I? I'd be putting myself at nearly as much risk as Andi. It was a balancing act, you could say, between visibly agreeing with the Dark Lord and his followers, but not seeming too fanatically supportive either, lest they decide to try to recruit me. Which, with Lucius as a husband, wasn't at all easy to do.'

Mostly reasonable, he guessed. Just with a couple holes, but... 'That wasn't your only option.'

Narcissa raised an eyebrow at him — only that, but he still felt like she were laughing at him. 'Wasn't it? What were my other choices?'

'The Order would have protected you.' It would have taken some convincing to bring them on board,
but Sirius was rather sure he would have been able to pull it off. At least, before she married Malfoy, but even then Dumbledore probably would have jumped at it, the way that man was about second chances and all. 'Or the Circle of Agastya, at least.'

'If I'd known the Circle existed,' she said, traces of frost on her voice, 'they would have been to my tastes, I suppose. But I would not have gone crawling to Dumbledore. I despise the man. Quite frankly, if my choices were between a painful death at the hand of the Dark Lord or spending the rest of my life indebted to that deluded, self-important, condescending, blundering hack of a High Enchanter, I'd rather die.' Well. Just say what you think, why don't you. 'But joining either wouldn't have solved my problem anyway. They were both explicitly fighting the Dark Lord, the Order even created for that sole purpose. My intent was to avoid the war as best I could — throwing myself at the mercy of either wouldn't have helped much with that, in the end.'

He had to admit, she did have a point there. Dumbledore may not force people to fight directly, true, but he was rather persistent about getting people the Order had directly helped to contribute somehow. Whether it would be hosting a safe house, donating funds or sociopolitical capital of some kind, or just tending to any wounded or even brewing healing potions in their free time — and Narcissa had been intending to get a Mastery in Potions, he recalled, he hadn't heard if that'd actually happened or not. Doing any of those would only have painted a larger target on her back.

And, well, going to the Order would also require her to interact with Dumbledore on occasion. When he'd been younger, he would have been immediately suspicious of anyone that would be a downside for, but he saw things a bit clearer these days. Not to say he thought Dumbledore was a bad person, and Sirius did plan on remaining in the Order. He just didn't think he was absolutely perfect. No one was, of course, and it was now embarrassing in hindsight how convinced he'd been of Dumbledore's infallibility. Order meetings were usually insufferable these days, since half the people there still seemed to think Dumbledore was Myrðin reincarnate or something, and it stung all the more because he knew he'd been just like them the first time around. It was just so...ergh.

Though, he had to admit, how Mad-Eye kept rolling his eyes at half of everything the Dumbledore-fanatics ever said never ceased to make him chuckle under his breath.

'So,' he said after another couple sips, 'is that all that's different this time? You have somewhere you can go?' He considered pointing out he was a member of the Order anyway, but that was sort of irrelevant — Sirius had made it clear to Dumbledore that members of his House would be permitted to join or avoid the Order as they saw fit. Most of them had settled on avoid.

'Not entirely.' It was hardly noticeable, but he'd known Narcissa long enough he noticed the difference. The almost inaudible hardness on her voice, the slight tension in her shoulders, fingers. She was definitely holding back something.

Sirius figured it out rather quickly. 'Ah, this is about Draco, isn't it?' Warily staring back at him — she had to know her son had been not exactly kind to Harry over the years — Narcissa nodded once. 'I assume I'm supposed to believe he's no greater a supporter of Voldemort's than you are.'

Narcissa noticeably flinched at the name — a bit less than he'd expected, honestly. 'The last couple years, he's been working the same semi-neutrality I have. Before, oh, roughly when he turned thirteen, he revered his father, and believed all the nonsense he repeated. I managed to turn him around.'

'How?'

With a slight shrug, Narcissa said, 'History books. British ones pre-Statute only, but certain foreign texts from more recently.'
Ah, yes, that would just about do it. It was astounding, comparing modern British history texts to ones published in most other magical nations. Their ancestors had undertaken a fair bit of historical revisionism during the decades surrounding the Statute of Secrecy. Really, most British people seemed to honestly think things as ridiculous as large-scale witch hunts had actually happened — old Bagshot in particular was known for her "scholarship" on the topic, and none of it was even true!

Other nations weren't entirely innocent of it either, of course, but most had progressed a bit since. Most British people in the modern day weren't aware that magical and muggle society hadn't been segregated for nearly as long as they liked to think, weren't aware the entire concept of blood purity was a comparatively recent innovation. There was a reason House Black hadn't had any muggle members in centuries, not never. Assuming young Draco actually listened to what he'd read, it wasn't at all inconceivable that he'd started questioning what his idiot father had taught him growing up. So Sirius just nodded.

'The problem comes in with the fact that Draco is his father's heir — one day, he will be Lord Malfoy. The Dark Lord will want him. I could avoid taking his Mark without too much difficulty, though admittedly after some arguing with Lucius, but I'm not sure Draco can do the same. One day, maybe in a year, maybe in a week, one day he'll be forced to choose. Take the Mark, or die. This is the best way to stop that from happening.'

He could slap himself. If that wasn't the most obvious thing in the world. I'm guessing you want asylum for Draco as well.'

Slightly to his surprise, Narcissa shook her head. 'If necessary, but a lesser degree of association would be ideal. Some type of protection or sponsorship, perhaps.'

For a couple seconds, Sirius was confused, but when he finally put it together he felt like slapping himself again. 'If he's officially adopted into our House, that would make his claim on House Malfoy, if his father dies, a lot less cut and dry.'

'When his father dies,' Narcissa corrected lightly. She didn't seem too concerned about the possibility. Not that Sirius was entirely surprised — even he wasn't so foolhardy as to threaten a child of any of the women of House Black. Andi had been angry with him enough for allowing Dora to go anywhere near the Order, and the girl had volunteered for that, and was already an Auror.

Sirius couldn't help thinking it was a bit peculiar how protective Andi still was of her daughter. Seriously, that girl did not need to be protected. Not to flatter himself too much, but Sirius wasn't exactly a slouch in a fight himself, and he'd be surprised if Dora couldn't flatten him on two hours of sleep and without even using her wand. He could probably count the number of living people he'd bet could actually take her on his fingers — definitely, if he excluded other Aurors. Honestly...

But, anyway. It was completely obvious what he should do here. It wasn't even that hard of a decision. Sure, he'd never really gotten along with Narcissa all that great — not after he'd started at Hogwarts, at least. But that didn't mean he could just consign her and her son to the Dark Lord's nonexistent mercy. Even if she weren't family, he'd probably feel obligated to do something about it if he could. And, really, this wouldn't even be that difficult. And Andi would probably stop giving him dirty looks over that whole Dora-joining-the-Order thing. Not much reason to say no, really.

'Alright.' He sighed, rubbed at his forehead for a second, running through a few possibilities in his head quick. 'You remember the villa in Provence?'

Narcissa had to think about that for a second. 'The old Roman manor house, on the Mediterranean just east of Istres?'

'I'd suggest you go hide out there until I can get the parchmentwork finalised. Lucius and his Death
Eater buddies can't intervene if they can't find you.'

For a moment, Narcissa just stared at him, blinking. Eventually, she said, 'What, right away?' Huh, actually sounded a bit surprised.

'Would you rather sit on it?' Narcissa just gave him another weird look at that, so he shrugged. 'Run home quick to grab whatever you think you might need, but other than that. The place might be a little bit of a mess, honestly—' He hadn't checked, been too busy with things in Britain to bother. '—but the wards are pretty solid, and you should still be keyed in. And it should only take a couple days, so.'

Sirius had to congratulate himself a little. He wasn't sure he'd ever managed to render Narcissa completely speechless before. He could only assume she hadn't thought he'd agree as easily as this.

He tried not to be offended, and mostly succeeded.

A few minutes later, Narcissa was gone, and he started on his way out. He stopped in the room just outside his office, standing before Danielle's desk. She was reading through some thick volume — a magical-manufactured text of some kind, judging by the binding — but he wasn't sure what, chewing absentely on the end of one of those brightly-coloured highlighters of hers. 'Anything come in today?'

Without even looking up from her book, she reached into a drawer to her left, pulled out a thick stack of bound parchment, and dropped it with a thud to the surface of her desk. 'Another revision of Boot and Diggory's creature law reforms was released from committee yesterday.'

Sirius winced; he'd hated these reforms from the very first second he'd heard about them. Which wasn't at all surprising, considering most of the people working on the thing were in the Light's faction. Not all of them — there were a couple names of pureblood supremacists attached to it — but mostly.

It was a bit embarrassing in retrospect, but he'd been extremely naïve about politics until very recently. He'd long had it in his head that Light equals good and Dark equals bad, but it wasn't nearly that simple. For one thing, there weren't necessarily stable factions in the Wizengamot who called themselves Light and Dark — there were major alliances of Noble Houses that tended to subscribe to ideology traditionally considered one or the other, but that wasn't quite the same thing. These alliances were usually called by the Ancient Houses almost universally at the center of them, but temporary terms would turn up for one or the other from time to time. Right now, the so-called Dark faction was the Ingham–Monroe alliance, and the Bones–Longbottom alliance was sort of neither, somewhere in the middle. Since there weren't any Ancient Houses that could be considered Light, that faction these days was mostly just called, well, the Light. Which he thought just sounded silly, but he wasn't in charge, so.

And, sure, that was a bit more complicated than he'd assumed — these were shifting, temporary alliances, and just because Houses were in the same faction together didn't mean they would necessarily always vote together. But he'd even managed to entirely misunderstand what "Light" and "Dark" actually meant. To put it briefly, the Dark were magicentric, and the Light were humanocentric. Traditionally, the Dark opposed regulation of various forms of magic, supported liberal laws when it came to non-human beings and magical creatures, and supported the assimilation of muggleborns while opposing greater rights for muggles. The Light, again traditionally, supported regulation of magic, supported restrictive creature–being laws, and supported the assimilation of muggleborns while ensuring protections for muggles and allowing various degrees of cultural exchange. Houses not aligned with either faction tended to mix and match positions.
Of course, the keyword there is *traditionally*. The Houses of the Ingham–Monroe alliance had stayed ideologically pure, for the most part, but various Houses had broken off to form a second "Dark" faction. They were, in short, Voldemort's people in the Wizengamot, rabid pureblood supremacists all, and were what Sirius had thought of growing up when he'd heard "Dark" in relation to politics, despite them not really being ideologically Dark at all. On the regulation of magic, sure, but not really on much else. Some of the "Light" Houses were still ideologically Light as well, but they'd been messed up just as much as the Dark had. And, much as the disorder in the Dark could be blamed on Voldemort, there was one man largely responsible for the mess in the Light: Dumbledore.

Dumbledore, upon being named High Enchanter, hadn't been a politician at all. He'd been a talented-if-ignored Professor of Transfiguration who'd been crowned Champion of the Light with his defeat of Grindelwald — he hadn't been at all prepared to be suddenly thrust to the top of the British political world. Which probably indicated a huge problem with how the nominations for High Enchanter worked, but that was something to consider next time around. Everyone hailed Dumbledore as a new leader of the Light, a designation he didn't much argue with.

But there was a problem with that: *Dumbledore wasn't ideologically Light*. He was neutral at best, really. Supports greater regulation of magics considered dangerous — Light. Supports more liberal laws concerning werewolves, centaurs, merpeople, veela, giants, and goblins — Dark. Supports more restrictive laws concerning vampires, ghosts, lilin, and a couple others — Light. Prefers muggleborns to fully assimilate into magical culture, leaving behind that of their birth (even if he doesn't come out and say it) — Dark. But, at the same time, supports greater protections for muggles — Light.

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem. He'd fit right in with the Bones–Longbottom alliance (soon to be Bones–Longbottom–Black, Sirius planned on joining). The problem came in because he *claimed* to be Light, a claim everyone repeated and believed. He was, effectively, the leader of the Light faction in the Wizengamot, even though he didn't agree with them half the time. Exactly how he handled himself politically made it even worse. His bargaining style was generally rather soft and passive — he'd come to the table with concessions already made, and would be far too quick to sacrifice his own desires for a compromise. To be perfectly fair, that sort of style was just fine for a neutral facilitator. But he was *supposedly* the leader of one of the three major factions — that's not how he should negotiate in his position. At all. He's been crippling his own side for decades now, seemingly without even realising it.

The combination of Dumbledore's ideologically moderate stance and general political weakness cued a dramatic reshuffling of the Wizengamot in the decade immediately after his investiture. The ideological Light mostly stayed put, joined by a smattering of Light-leaning Houses from the Bones–Longbottom alliance, and even a couple of the traditionally Dark, while some of the neutral-leaning Light broke off in protest. Over the next years, as Dumbledore did little to stop his own faction from passing tighter restrictions on the practice of magic, and even creature–being laws he personally disagreed with, many of the neutrals fled straight to the Dark in a desperate attempt to overcome the Light's plurality. Then, a decade later, when the pureblood supremacist "Dark" started to rise, some of the ideological Light jumped ship to join them, since, by the most absurd arrangement of chance, they had more political opinions in common with those psychotic bigots than they did the leader of their own faction.

Which was all why laws like these kept happening. The few ideological Light left in Dumbledore's faction write up some stupid nonsense like this. They give Dumbledore a few concessions — from what he remembered of this specific case, pseudo-being status for centaurs and merpeople (they refused the being label for some reason, it was stupid), greater rights for goblins, and full human status for veela (which was going to be very controversial when it got to the floor) — which he considers enough for a good compromise, and lets it go past. On the floor, the bigots will almost
certainly slip in a few more unreasonable regulations Dumbledore will only put up token resistance against. And, even though most of both the Ingham–Monroe and Bones–Longbottom alliances will vote against it, the pureblood supremacist "Dark", the Light (and "Light"), and a few defecting neutral Houses here or there will still make it an easy pass.

When Andi had made him finally understand just how bad it was, he'd almost wanted to cry. It was just so depressing. Until he'd found out Doge, the moron Dumbledore had chosen to temporarily fill the Potter seat, had actually voted for the law that made it almost impossible for Remus to find any kind of work at all, at which point he'd switched straight to rage.

This law, if anything, was even worse. Last time he'd checked, Dumbledore hadn't moderated Diggory's frankly ludicrous views of werewolves at all — should this law pass, Remus would legally be considered a bloody magical creature, not even the non-human being the law treated him as now. Lilin would have it just as bad, with the added benefit that, depending on exactly how one read the law, they could potentially be sent to Azkaban for just using their natural gifts at all. It was so bloody stupid.

Reluctantly picking up the revision and holding it at arm's length, as though worried the thing would bite him, he said, 'Please tell me they actually fixed it this time.'

'Of course they did,' Danielle said without looking up, her voice perfectly flat. 'Also, Voldemort has started a hospital where he uses his dark and terrible powers to provide magical healing to muggles free of charge, the goblins have risen from their subterranean warrens to start a circus, and the Daily Prophet did an exposé about how completely stupid Fudge's hat is.'

Forcing his voice level to match hers, he said, 'I'll have to catch the next show. I can only imagine what a goblin circus would be like.'

Danielle rolled her eyes before returning them right back to her book. 'No, they didn't fix it. What fantasy world do you live in?'

'Magic.'

'Yes, I realised that was a stupid thing to say even as I was saying it. Anyway, I've already highlighted the sections changed from the last revision. Just slightly different wording, shouldn't make a significant difference in the application of the law.'

'Alright.' Honestly, he was rather impressed Danielle could follow all this stuff half as well as she could — she'd only known the absolute basics of the magical world before, but after hardly a week on the job she'd already known all the ins and outs of Wizengamot procedure and how all the various Departments and Commissions and Councils interacted like the back of her hand. Ted had explained that the subject she was studying in university was sort of the comparative science of how government worked, but he'd still thought it was a bit much. 'Anything else?'

'Oh, wait.' She shuffled around her desk for a moment, eventually pulling an envelope and a loose slip of paper out from under another book. 'Just a statement of intent from Director Zabini.'

Sirius just stared at her for a second. A member of the Wizengamot would sometimes send a notice to allies confirmed or potential of a previously unplanned move they were to make in the next session — that in itself wasn't unusual, he'd gotten six in one day once. It was the name that was weird. 'Zabini? Bella Zabini?'

'How many Zabinis are there, really?' A fair few, actually, but he didn't think that important right now. Turning the deep purple envelope around, Danielle read off the front. 'Department of
And damn if you magical people don't love your names.'

He ignored the last comment. He was too busy trying to think of why the hell Zabini would be sending a statement of intent to him, of all people. Back when his father had been Lord Black, Zabini had been considered a friend of the House — if mostly because she'd had an on-again-off-again thing with Bellatrix for a few years there — but that had been back before the Zabinis had had a vote in the Wizengamot. They were foreign nobility (royalty, technically), and Zabini only even had a vote now because she was the Director of a Department. He guessed they'd been friendly enough, back before he'd gone to Azkaban, but he didn't think friendly enough for her to assume they would be allies on much of — Actually, he was having a thought. 'What does it say?'

Danielle shrugged. 'Just the title of Boot and Diggory's proposal, then Cēterum cēnseō haec stulta vervēca esse dēlenda. I get the Punic Wars reference, but I'm not sure what a, erm, it's vervēx singular, right?'

Oh, yes, he hadn't been mistaken. Zabini would have to be deadly serious to even consider writing those words — considering the origin of the phrase, and a slew of inflammatory uses over the history of the Wizengamot, Sirius could probably start an uproar in the Chamber just by meeting someone's eyes and saying the word dēlendum. He wouldn't be surprised if Zabini were feeling positively murderous right now.

Not long after Sirius had been exonerated, and had reunited with Andi, who'd been in the same Slytherin class with Zabini, she'd offhandedly mentioned that Zabini had gone through a few more husbands while he'd been away. Which hadn't been a shock to him — he'd fully expected it. Honestly, Zabini somehow ending up the Director of Education was the part he still didn't get. Zabini wasn't human, and exactly what she was was why he'd expected it: Zabini was a lilin, one of only two he knew to be currently in Britain. And the other was her son, so that was practically cheating.

He knew only a little bit about lilin, partially from Zabini herself telling him across a couple visits to Grimmauld Place when he'd been younger, partially from reading a couple books. Not that he could trust the books to be entirely accurate. There were reasons there were only two lilin in all of Britain: the Celtic Nations had never exactly been friendly to the race, hostile enough they'd been considered by law to be "abominations" until the Fourteenth Century, and creatures until the Nineteenth. Which, as far as he could tell, was a bit of an overreaction. There were plenty of lilin elsewhere, after all, and it wasn't like they went around murdering everyone or anything.

From what Zabini had told him, the lilin and the veela were rather similar — similar enough they both considered each other distant relations. In their own language, they called both of their races together the people of the Song, which was apparently a reference to some peculiarity about how they perceived magic he hadn't quite followed. Distinguishing between the two of them, the veela were Daysong, the lilin Nightsong. Both races had a set of very similar magical abilities — they could call fire without any focus, assume a rather avian form, and manipulate humans (and other races to greater or lesser success) through a sort of instinctive emotional legilimency.

The differences came in the details. While a veela's avian visage seemed rather like a hawk, lilin were proportioned more like owls. Veela fire did interfere with magic somewhat, and could get rather hot, but was comparatively harmless. Lilin fire, on the other hand, was technically considered to be dark magic: it came out a mix of blues and purples and blacks, burned through enchantments like they were hardly there, and humans injured by the stuff were infamously tricky to cure. For one thing, burns from lilin fire, much like any wounds from dark magic, were resistant to healing spells, and would scar permanently without careful, specialised treatment. In addition, for some reason, the
victim would enter a harsh chill a few hours afterward, risking death by hypothermia if it wasn't caught quick enough.

The last part didn't exactly improve their reputations with Light-thinking people. Veela, while just as non-human, were by comparison rather innocuous. Their emotional manipulation worked by inducing a sort of romantic obsession — humans under the thrall of a veela tended to over-exaggerated displays of admiration or devotion, which were usually more embarrassing than anything. Long-term overexposure could permanently damage a person's mind, yes, reducing them to a dreamy, near-catatonic state, but that didn't happen often. The entire purpose was for self-defense, for the veela in question to diffuse any threatening situation long enough to escape, and wasn't really intended to be used against a single person for an extended period of time.

Lilin were, well, less...wholesome? Their effect on humans was more one of intense desire. Passionate. Sensual. Jealous. Since the impulses affected were rather more animal, they tended to linger for longer as well — while a veela could usually only affect someone in their immediate presence, their hold fading as soon as they parted, the equivalent compulsion laid by a lilin could last for hours, even days. For all the stories out there of veela seducing men (or women) against their own interests, the superficially similar stories about lilin were a hundred times worse. Much like veela, it was quite possible for a lilin to permanently damage a human's mind, though it worked a bit differently. For one thing, overexposure wasn't so much a problem of length but of intensity — a lilin throwing too much at a human all at once could turn their brain to mush. Even, he'd been told, accidentally. Apparently, it was quite easy to lose control of it in the heat of the moment, so to speak. A sufficiently powerful mage could resist it well enough to retain their sanity, which was part of why Zabini had liked Bellatrix so much, but a simultaneous lapse from both parties was still all it would take.

Unless Sirius was very much mistaken, Zabini hadn't killed any of her husbands on purpose. Involuntary manslaughter, sure, but not outright murder.

A lot of people, in Britain especially, very much did not like lilin. Which he didn't think was necessarily fair. For one thing, between veela and lilin, it was lilin who had the higher opinion of the human race. Lilin were usually rather fond of humans, while veela tended to think themselves superior. And for another, thinking of lilin as vicious, uncivilised animals was...well, sort of silly? The ruling clan of the lilin — Değsüt, where the "Imperial House" attached to Zabini's name came from — had been around since literally before the birth of Western Civilisation. They were old. According to a few extremely old myths, lilin had actually done a fair amount to help humanity along. As an example, written language? Yeah, according to the Melīx, the first humans to develop writing far as anyone could tell, the lilin had flat taught them how. They weren't nearly as malevolent as many people thought.

There was a reason Sirius didn't really agree with the Light on creature–being stuff.

Which was why Zabini had sent him this statement, of course. It was rather obvious what she was getting at. Last he'd checked Boot and Diggory's proposal, it reduced the official classification of lilin from beings to creatures. If she were suddenly considered a creature by law, Zabini wouldn't be allowed to keep her position as Director of Education, which she was only even permitted now due to a loophole: Ministry positions were only open to humans or members of any Noble House (even foreign ones), but while beings could be legally recognised as nobility despite their non-human status creatures could not.

For a moment, he had to wonder if Dumbledore had decided to not interfere with that measure on purpose. Zabini, to make a bit of an understatement, did not much approve of Dumbledore. She was probably his second greatest opponent in the Wizengamot after Malfoy, and considering she headed
the Department of Education and held a seat on the Hogwart's Board of Governors that was especially bothersome. But after some thought he decided it didn't matter — he'd already known Dumbledore didn't like lilin, never mind Zabini specifically, so he probably wouldn't have advocated for them in any case.

Zabini might have come to a slightly different conclusion. Her exact wording was telling. *Haec stulta vervēca* — "these foolish castrated goats." Naming the proposal itself suggested Boot and Diggory to be targets, but the use of *vervēx* was obviously a reference to Dumbledore. He wasn't entirely sure, to be honest, how exactly Dumbledore and goats had become so inextricably linked in the public consciousness, but he'd long known the association existed. The use of a word for a *castrated* goat specifically was an extra bit of funny. Such insults (threats?) from veela or lilin always amused him, he loved it. It was very clear to him what Zabini was doing with this statement of intent, exactly why she'd sent it to him and quite likely dozens of others in the Wizengamot.

Zabini was entirely fed up with the unholy alliance of Dumbledore's people and the blood purists. And she was declaring war.

He was completely powerless to stop a gleeful smirk from spreading across his face. This was going to be fun.

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**Baby Cousin—**

Sorry about the slightly roundabout way of getting your letter to you. Sirius recommended it, he's worried your post might be monitored or intercepted. Might want to be careful about stuff you send by owl.

I'm not really sure what to think about all this. I mean, it isn't like I thought Dumbledore was completely and totally perfect like a lot of people I know seem to. Mum has never really liked him, she's never said why, so I guess growing up I heard a lot more doubt turned his way than some. But none of that makes any sense. I mean, sure, I'm not going to argue that you have any shot at all against He-Who-Smells in a straight duel. That'd be ridiculous, even some of the best fighters in the country would be squished. But, like you said, the Dark Bastard isn't the only one around who might make a try for you. Teaching you to handle yourself a bit is, just, the obvious thing to do? Most Noble Houses even teach their heirs a fair bit more than you'd learn in school just in case. Not teaching you what even some of your far less threatened peers get is just completely stupid. I have no idea what he could possibly be thinking.

I've talked about it with Sirius, and got Dad to check quick, and yeah, there's nothing anywhere that says you can't arrange supplemental lessons of your own, even inside Hogwarts. Especially if it's Sirius arranging it, there's pretty much nothing Dumbledore could do about that without getting everyone ever furious with him. We both agree it might be smarter to keep it on the down low, just so you don't have to deal with him being all preachy, but even if he finds out about it he shouldn't be able to interfere.

So, yeah, about these duelling lessons, I am so willing to help you with that. I've already started making up an outline of everything we'd go over, even. A lot of it won't be very easy, some of the spells are NEWT-standard or even Mastery-level stuff and you'll probably get beat up more than a bit, so it might not be fun all the time. But if you want to get good fast then that's only way to do it. And, well, if you wanted an easy time of it, asking an Auror wasn't smart either to do. What I have in mind even falls far short of their training program, that was just brutal sometimes.
You said you had a place to go, so that's covered. I'll trust you know what you're doing for that. As far as times to meet go, my schedule isn't even close to regular, so I can't make the same time consistently or anything. Auror life, that. I drew up a rough timetable of when I'd be available for the rest of the month on the back of this letter, but that might change if something comes up. Meeting at least once a week would be good, more often would be better. Pink about when you want your first lesson, mirror Sirius and he'll tell me. Don't owl it. We're working on enchanting something you can talk to me with, I'll have it by then.

Oh, one more thing: you need to pick a training partner. I know that wasn't part of your original idea, but it's really for your best. You can't practice duel with me very effectively because, honestly, the skill gap between the two of us is enough I could trash you with hardly paying attention, wouldn't even need my wand, and I'm worried anything we do would just come off as...I don't know, condescending? Like I'm toying with you? I get the feeling you wouldn't appreciate it, is all. Pat and it's fun to have someone to learn and compete with. So, yeah, training partner. Pick someone you trust well enough to not go blabbing it to everyone, would actually be interested in learning this stuff, is talented enough they can keep up, and who you won't feel too embarrassed getting slapped around a little bit by. Because that is going to be happening a bit, can't really avoid it. Anyone you want is mostly fine with me, but I'd rather you not bring that little Weasley. The whiny one. Ronald, I think his name was?

I can't think of anything else important. Oh, when you meet me to bring me to the spot, wear something you can move around in under your robes. Can't train too well in full robes, they get in the way. Make sure whoever you pick knows too. I think that's it. Pick a time, tell Sirius, and come open the door for me. I'll be stopping at Honeydukes on the way.

—Dora

Well. Looked like the very first place she'd thought to go for lessons had panned out. Not that she was surprised, honestly — Dora was already nice to her enough it made her a little uncomfortable, she'd expected her to be willing. So, not even a week after Dumbledore had told her no, and she already had an Auror tutor lined up. Not bad.

Melantha folded up the letter, put it back where she'd found it. Which had been something of a surprise in the first place. She was just back from breakfast, grabbing her broom quick to head for the quidditch tryouts starting in a few minutes, when she'd found the letter sitting on the foot of her bed. Honestly not even sure what that roundabout delivery method Dora had referred to was. For a moment, she was stuck pondering those last couple sentences, a bit confused. She was supposed to be opening the door for her? Which door? And...why would Dora bother telling her she'd be stopping at Honeydukes on the way? That didn't make any—

When she finally figured it out, she felt like slapping herself. Dora was sneaking in through the secret passage between the basement in Honeydukes and that statue of...that Healer who developed an old treatment for dragon pox, can't remember her name. Obviously.

And now she apparently had to find someone to take her duelling lessons with. Great.

A moment later, she was slipping out of her dorm's window, the updrafts that always seemed to follow Hogwarts' towers clawing at her clothes and hair. She could have just walked down, she guessed, but she hadn't accounted for reading a letter, so she'd probably have been late, and this was just easier. Though, now she had to get the window closed again — she could leave Gryffindor
Tower just fine, but the place was warded against approaching brooms well enough she wouldn't be able to get close enough to even touch the open window to close it. After a moment of thought, she reached for her sleeve, pulling out her wand even as she slid around to the side with a few twitches of her ankles. Intentionally underpowering the spell as much as she could, she summoned the sliding part of the frame, and the window softly snapped shut. There.

She didn't shoot straight for the pitch, instead taking her time with a couple sliding curves between a few towers, updrafts and crosswinds lightly buffeting her. By the way she slipped through the air, she thought her weight was probably about the same — she was shorter now, but she'd been eating better, so she guessed that made up the difference — but her balance was slightly different. Not too much different, she didn't think, but a little. Wouldn't be too hard to adjust for.

As soon as she thought she had the picture of it, she didn't bother dallying any further. Seconds later, wind tearing almost painfully at her face and hair while the world blurred around her, she was arcing over the quidditch pitch, then gradually came to a stop, plopping to the ground next to the other Gryffindors who'd shown up, standing waiting on the grass for the team to arrive.

She didn't miss the annoyed glares a few people were giving her Firebolt. It was basically cheating, having a professional-tier broom to play on a school team like this, but it was the only one she had, and she honestly didn't care enough about quidditch to think it worth getting a different one just for this.

Actually...that was something she hadn't thought about before. Did... Did she even want to be on the quidditch team? No one had really asked her opinion the first time, just sort of press-ganging her into joining. She'd mostly gone along with it because, well, she did like flying, and the team had kept pounding into her head over and over that there was no one else they could go to, she was their only choice, and she hadn't really wanted to disappoint them, she guessed? It'd just been easier not to say anything. And, honestly, in the years since, it'd never even occurred to her to consider whether or not she wanted to stay. She was sure that, if it had, the fact they would have needed to find a new seeker would have dissuaded her from thinking about it seriously anyway.

Well. Just a few days ago she'd decided she was going to do what she actually wanted for the first time in her bloody ridiculous life, so. She should take a moment to decide if this really was what she wanted. Yeah.

Okay, good things about re-joining the team. She did like to fly. The game could be sort of fun sometimes. During practice was pretty much the only time she ever saw Angie, Katie, and Alicia, since they were usually off with friends in their own years otherwise. If she didn't join, she'd still likely see the twins, but she thought she might miss the girls — hmm, probably more Katie than Angie and Alicia, to be honest, she liked Katie. She thought there were Gryffindors who only liked her because she did pretty well on the team, so it would make things sort of easier she guessed. Erm... She couldn't really think of anything else that mattered.

Bad things about re-joining the team. Not exactly a bad thing, but she could just go flying whenever she wanted, that didn't require being on the team. And the game could be fun, sure, but, if she were being completely honest with herself, it wasn't her favourite thing to do, not even close — it still struck her as strange how obsessed some people got about it. And there were almost always pick-up games going on, so if she really felt like playing she could just go join one. And, to be completely honest some more, she really didn't like the fact that the games were played in front of practically the whole school. Even after years of doing it, it still made her dreadfully uncomfortable every single time. Being on the team might make some Gryffindors nicer to her, yes, but it also made a fair number of people in other houses, Slytherin especially, just awful; there was no period of the year she hated more than the week or so before any Gryffindor–Slytherin match, constantly being jeered
at and hexed in the halls, it was awful. And, well, this was her OWL year, the professors were talking constantly about how much harder everything was going to be this year — the amount of homework they'd been assigned just this first week alone was staggering — and she was adding lessons with Dora and self-study from her mother's journals on top of that. Practices took up a fair amount of time, and she wasn't sure she could fit in everything, and quidditch was really not that important compared to—

Oh.

Oh, wow. She was having a thought. She'd gotten to know the chaser girls comparatively well over the years, what with how much the seeker was basically a chaser most of the time. She'd heard them talk a fair bit about what they wanted to do after Hogwarts — when the time to pick electives at the end of second year had come around, he'd been curious just what the fuck mages did after school, so he'd asked. Of the three, the only one who wanted to stick with quidditch professionally was Alicia (though she'd said something about an enchanting apprenticeship if that didn't work out). Angie had said something about...pet shops and breeding magical creatures, whatever, he hadn't followed much of that. But, Katie's plans?

Katie wanted to be a goddamn Auror. She was apparently even good enough to maybe make it. And Melantha would be getting personal tutoring this year from a current Auror, which she needed a second for. Well...that was just perfect, wasn't it?

So...

Melantha blinked, looking around the pitch, the stands, taking in the small crowd of nervously chatting Gryffindors around her.

Why was she here, again?

As she tentatively made her decision, she couldn't help wincing to herself. Angie was going to be so, so angry with her.

Taking a long, steadying breath, she hopped back onto her broom, and shot for the Gryffindor changing room — she assumed the team would be in there right now, finalising the plan for the tryouts. Sure enough, she found the girls and the twins not far inside, Angie giving what sounded like a very Oliver-esque rant to the other four, all with varying shades of disinterest on their faces. Come to think of it, doing any fair job of captaining this team was probably a bit like herding cats. Anyway, the twins spotted her immediately, bright grins splitting their faces. 'Why,' said one, cutting over Angie, 'if it isn't little Mel!'

'Did you get lost or something? You're supposed to be—'

'—outside, with the eager, hopeful masses."

She mostly ignored that — she was already casting the increasingly familiar list of privacy charms around them. It was a bit harder to ignore Angie again glaring at her. That girl was going to give herself a stroke before the year was out. 'What are you doing back here, Black?'

'And, paranoid, much?' Katie said, giving her a weird frown. 'I mean, was that a paling against shadow-scrying? Seriously?'

Alicia blinked at her. 'What in Morgen's name is shadow-scrying?'

'Long-distance surveillance magic. Extremely finicky, no one uses it. So, paranoid.'
'Yeah, well.' Done with the charms, Melantha slipped her wand back up her sleeve, again crossed her arms under her chest, hugging her Firebolt to herself. 'I just really didn't want anybody else to hear this: I'm Harry Potter.'

Angie snorted. 'Right, and I'm the—'

'No,' one of the twins said, again speaking over her, 'she's not lying.'

The other nodded. 'She really is. We've known for months. Went all girl-shaped at the beginning of the summer, no idea why.'

'Though, hearing she'd be going to Hogwarts pretending to be a completely different person made our day, didn't it, Forge?'

'That it did, Gred. Perhaps the best prank we ever did hear of.'

'Maybe we have been rubbing off on her after all.'

'First Hermione, and now Harry bloody Potter. Good influence, we are.'

'None better.'

Melantha did her best not to shift in place like an awkward...she didn't know, crazy person, whatever. Through the twins' whole thing, the girls were just staring at her, Alicia looking mostly surprised, Angie a bit confused, and Katie...well, she seemed faintly amused, which was a little annoying, so she did her best to ignore that. A few seconds after the twins were done, Angie said, 'Well, you know I can't just give you the spot. If you don't want people to know who you are, I mean.'

'Well, actually, erm.' She shrugged, trying not to look too guilty. Or would it be better if she looked guilty? She wasn't sure, really. 'I came to tell you I'm not going to try out. I decided just a minute ago I...don't really want to be on the team anymore?' She winced at the sound of her own voice, coming out more a question than the explanation she'd been going for. 'I mean, with Voldemort—' Everyone else flinched. '—being back and all, I just have...you know, more important things to focus on.'

For a couple seconds, the team just silently stared at her. Then Angie let out a long groan, rubbing her face with both hands. 'Alright, fine. I didn't think you'd be around anyway, so I guess it makes no difference. But, damn, Harry, couldn't—'

'Melantha.' She'd hesitated just an instant before correcting her, making Angie break off from whatever she'd been saying, staring at her through her fingers.

'Ah, question?' Katie was actually raising her hand. Okay, then? 'Are you, I mean, actually a girl now? Or is that a weirdly thorough disguise or something?'

'No, I, er, it's permanent.' She didn't really think Katie wanted to know the weirdness that had been going on in her head lately — she wouldn't know what to say anyway.

'So you're stuck like this?'

'Ah.' She hesitated a moment, shuffling her feet a little, looking off at the wall. 'Erm, Dumbledore said he could reverse it for me, but we, er, didn't. Obviously.'

'Right, fine.' Angie took a long breath, shaking her head to herself. 'This is all really interesting and all, but we do have tryouts to get to. There wasn't anything else, was there?'
Melantha shook her head. 'If I could just talk to Katie for a second?' Her eyes flicked back to Katie as she asked; she got a shrug in return.

A few seconds later, the rest of the team had walked out toward the pitch — though the twins did stall a bit, wailing about how they didn't know how they would go on without their tiny little star seeker until Angie managed to drag them away. Once they were gone, single eyebrow raised slightly, Katie asked, 'Yeah?'

'Erm, you still wanted to be an Auror, right?'

For a short moment, Katie was silent, blinking up at her from her bench. Obviously wasn't a question she'd been expecting. 'Ah, yeah. I applied for their summer internship program thing for next year already.'

Right. Thought so. 'Well, I have a cousin who's an Auror, and she's going to be coming to the school once or twice a week to give me some lessons, and she said I'd need a training partner or whatever. I was just wondering if you'd be interested.'

And Katie was silent again. For longer this time, blankly staring at her, frozen mouth dropped slightly open. Finally, she managed, 'You're fucking joking right? Of course I'm bloody interested.' Melantha felt a sheepish smile pulling at her lips. 'Which Auror is this?'

Melantha almost said Dora, before realising it was very unlikely Katie would have heard of her by that name. 'Ah, Tonks.'

'Right. Yeah, I'm definitely interested, thanks for thinking of me.' Probably wouldn't be tactful to mention she almost hadn't. 'Once the practice schedule is set I'll find you and we'll figure out a time, yeah?' With an agreement from Melantha, Katie gave her a brilliant smile, popped her broom onto her shoulder, and wandered out to the pitch. After tearing down her privacy charms, Melantha walked out the other direction, started lazily drifting back up toward the castle on her Firebolt.

Well. That could have gone worse.

Chapter End Notes

Inys ðyvil (IPA: /ɪˈnɪs.ðɪ.βɪl/) — Literally meaning "dark/shady island", Brìfhwn name is a cognate of Welsh Ynys Dywyll, referring to the same location, which is now officially called Anglesey in English and Ynys Môn in Welsh.

[it was technically legal] — Any muggle formally a member of one House or another, Noble or Common, is allowed to know about magic without any legal consequences.

[My first year at Hogwarts, her seventh.] — If you're thinking of correcting me, I've adjusted birthdates in the House of Black like crazy. It's not a mistake.

sorcerer/sorceress — Might have explained this earlier, since the term did show up in that Tom-POV chapter, but oh well. In my fics, a general term for an exceptionally powerful mage. It's more a social convention than it is a scientific evaluation of ability, so it isn't like there're any hard and fast rules for exactly who does and does not count as one, but it's generally accepted that they have to have both an unusual degree of natural power as well as enough knowledge and skill to stand head and shoulders
above the vast majority of their peers. While Lily could likely be considered one from roughly the age of eighteen to her death, which is very young for a sorceress, it wasn’t something that was popularly said at all, not least because most people weren’t aware of just how good she was. In the present day, British sorcerers (among less visible figures) include Dumbledore, Flitwick, Snape, Tom, Bellatrix, Bones, Kingsley, Dora, and Dolohov, and potential sorcerers (that is, people who have the natural talent, but not yet the fully-developed skill) include Neville, Hermione, Astoria, Bill (who’s not far off by this point), Katie Bell, and Melantha. Both Zabinis should technically be on one list or the other, but they’re not human, so they don’t count.

[most British people seemed to honestly think large-scale witch hunts had actually happened] — In my headcanon, people were on occasion executed for "witchcraft", yes, but never in any significant numbers, disproportionately in England, and the victims were almost always muggles. Which is, you know, what actually happened. Basically, it happened for the same reason irl historians say it happened: superstitious people blaming social outcasts for bad fortune on absolutely no evidence. The prominence witch burnings are implied to have in History of Magic class and the consciousness of the magical people of Britain is revisionist history — which is funny, because people irl have often blown what actually happened far out of proportion as well. And, for the record, Bagshot specifically wasn’t being misleading on purpose, she just trusted bad sources.

[the entire concept of blood purity was a comparatively recent innovation] — True. The state of magical society in medieval Europe will be talked about a bit more later, but I just thought I’d confirm that Sirius isn’t wrong.

Değsüt (IPA: /ðɛɰ.ɯθ/; /ɖɛɣ.tʰɯʈ/) — Just a name, in Nightsong. And yes, I did mean to give two entirely different pronunciations just there.

[Cēterum cēnseō haec stulta vervēca esse dēlenda.] — An intentional reference (on both my part and Zabini’s) to Cato the Elder’s favorite saying in the years leading up to the third Punic War, where Rome not only defeated Carthage, but erased their entire civilisation from existence. Yeah, Bella Zabini is not a happy woman right now.

[the seeker was basically a chaser most of the time] — Reference to the modified rules in my headcanon of quidditch which, since Melantha sprung actually having an opinion on me, don’t actually matter anymore.

Just to clarify, yes, the locket horcrux is destroyed.

That second scene, just. I completely intended on quidditch being a thing in this fic. I even worked out in my head modified rules that actually made sense, a few plays and shit, the mechanics of exactly how the enchantments on brooms work. And then, suddenly, writing the try outs about to happen, the little Melantha in my head is just like, "Why am I here?" If you think about it...exactly how much enthusiasm does Harry actually show for quidditch in canon? He got dragged into it the first time, and pretty much every year has moments where he’s complaining about practices being awful, or everyone else being crazy obsessed over it. He never really seemed that into it to me. He doesn’t stop doing it, true, but this is socially spineless canon!Harry. So, I'm like...shit.

Yeah, that didn't go the way I'd planned.

Until next time,
~Wings
Chapter Summary

Mel has her first duelling lesson; eventually, she's going to stop underestimating Dora.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September, 1975

'Ooh, shut up, Alice.'

'Yes, Alice, do shut up.'

'Morgen, Marlie, stop being such a killjoy. And, Sev? Shove it.'

Lily noticed his eye twitch, and she had to hide a smirk. She was well aware she was the only one who could get away with calling him that — but, then, she was sure Alice knew that too. After a moment to hold his aggravation back, Sev said, 'I'm not entirely sure what I'm supposed to be shoving.'

'Hmm...' At the soft humming noise, everyone looked down at the table between them, the girl laid out spread-eagle across the surface. 'I assumed she was talking about your wand.'

While everyone just blinked at her, Sev's eyebrow slowly tracked up his forehead. 'And where exactly am I supposed to be shoving my wand?'

'There are some intriguing charms you can do with—'

'Everyone who doesn't want Lovegood to finish that sentence?' Terry raised a hand as he spoke, the uncomfortable expression very clear. Which likely meant he wanted it to be clear.

A smirk pulling across her lips, Alice said, 'I dunno, I can stand to hear more.'

Cassie lazily lifted a hand toward Alice, but it flopped back to the table before she reached Alice's robes. 'I'll show you later, annif.'

With a roll of her eyes, Marlie said, 'Well, that was subtle.'

'I'm not sure Lovegoods do subtle.' No one really had any argument for that; Cassie even opened her eyes long enough to wink over at Lily before seemingly falling asleep again. Weirdo. 'And, really, Marlie, I thought you'd be used to Alice by now. I doubt Myrðín himself could get her to shut up.'

'Love you too, Lily dear.'

She smiled back at Alice over her tea. 'Mm-hmm.'

'At the very least we don't have to worry too much about—'
'Oh, Morgen,' Marlie said, her head abruptly falling to thud against the table a couple inches from Cassie's knee. 'Oh no, oh no...'

Terry stared at her. 'I don't really think it's that bad.'

'I believe,' Sev said in a low drawl, 'this demonstration of theatrics is because Black is walking over.'

'Oh.' Lily frowned for a second, then glanced back to where Marlie's face was hidden behind dirty blonde hair. 'I thought you finally scared him off.'

'I'm rather certain you scared him off.' Sev pitched it in a low whisper, and Lily had to hide a smirk again.

'I thought I had! Blasted idiot can't learn to leave—'

'Evans, can I talk to you quick?'

Lily frowned, turned to look over at Black, standing at the edge of the table. What did he want to talk to her about? Something happened to Remus, maybe? Last night was a full moon... 'Go ahead.'

For a few seconds, Black glanced around, eyes lingering for an instant longer on Sev and Terry than the rest — though, Lily did notice his lips twitch looking at Cassie. 'Could we go somewhere private?'

Sev let out a snort. 'Yes, because I'm sure Lily is so eager to be alone with you.'

A grimace of annoyance flashed across Black's face, but Lily jumped in before he could say anything; she was really not in the mood for another of their shouting matches. 'I'm sure whatever you have to say can be said in front of my friends.' Well, conceivably, Black could be relaying a message from his father, but she honestly doubted it.

Black hesitated for only a moment, then sighed. 'I just thought I'd warn you.'

'Warn me?'

It took him a long time to say anything, visibly fighting down reluctance and awkwardness. Thankfully, her friends were actually being quiet for once. She guessed even they could tell when to take things seriously at least some of the time. 'It's about James.'

She shot a glance at Sev quick, saw he was looking just as confused as she. 'What about Potter?'

'He's...' Black let out something between a sigh and a groan, glancing up at the ceiling in supplication. 'Look, he was just talking in the dorm night before last, and he was just talking more, ah, earnestly than usual.' Did Black just avoid making a pun? Hmm. 'Maybe something happened over summer I don't know about, it doesn't really matter. I just thought I should warn you.'

Lily thought about that for a second, frowning at him. 'Are you telling me my creepy stalker is about to get creepier and even more stalker-ish?'

With a wince, Black shrugged. 'Yeah, I guess I am.'

'Yes,' Sev said, his voice drawn into snarl, 'because that self-obsessed, arrogant ponce wasn't bad enough already.'

Lily hadn't the heart to disagree. Mostly because she didn't. 'Well.' She shrugged. 'Thanks for the
warning, I guess.'

Looking extremely uncomfortable, and perhaps slightly guilty, Black wandered off.

After a couple seconds of everyone sitting in confused silence, Cassie said, 'How interesting.'

Terry snorted. 'You find everything interesting.'

'Everything *is* interesting.'

He just rolled his eyes.

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**September, 1995**

Melantha was not at all enthusiastic about this meeting. As if things hadn't been complicated enough the last couple of months.

The purpose of the meeting itself she wasn't too excited about at all. She still wasn't comfortable with the idea of everything that went with being Lord P— Erm, Lady Potter, right, like *that* wasn't weird. But anyway, the whole magical nobility thing was still incredibly strange to her. Not to mention the thought that, well, she got the impression that she was...actually sort of wealthy? Considering she'd had practically nothing growing up it was a very hard concept to wrap her head around. The identity of the person she'd be talking about all this with didn't help.

At the time, when Remus had been around as the Defence Professor, she'd sort of thought it was great. Not only was an adult, for perhaps the *first time ever*, going out of his way to help her with something she desperately wanted — she'd been mildly obsessed with the *patrōnus*, in retrospect — but he also happened to be one of her parents' friends. One of their best friends. Sure, she'd met a few people who'd been acquainted with her parents, but that wasn't quite the same thing. He'd even said a bit about them. Not a whole lot, but some. Actually, he was practically the first to mention Lily much at all. He'd even been the first one (excluding Snape) to say anything less than complimentary about either of them: he'd acknowledged James had been a bit of a bully at times, especially toward the Slytherins, and that Lily could have something of a dangerous temper when pushed. Those had been interesting to hear. But since he hadn't said much, she'd only wondered instead, trying to figure out who this Professor Lupin person was, what having been friends with him said about her parents.

Now, well. Now she didn't look back on that nearly so favourably. For one thing, in retrospect, he really, *really* hadn't said very much, as little as he could probably get away with to deflect her curiosity. And even then, he hadn't admitted to even knowing her parents at all until, well, she'd found out on her own and asked him about it. He hadn't even mentioned that he'd actually been closer to Lily than James — he'd made it sound as though he were a Marauder first and really only knew Lily through James, which both a few comments from Sirius and Lily's journals proved to be a total lie. Her mother's fifth year personal journal (which she had felt a bit weird about reading at first, but she really couldn't stop herself) had even quoted Remus complaining about James and Sirius any number of times. And that time Remus had caught her out with the Map, rescued her from Snape's wrath only to yell at her, accuse her of dishonouring her parents' sacrifice by being out *after curfew* in the halls of Hogwarts, which she'd been told repeatedly was *the safest single location in magical Britain*...

She'd talked about this a little bit with Hermione. Hadn't told her all the details, but it'd been enough for Hermione to guess Remus had just been, maybe, grieving. That he'd never really gotten over the two of them dying, and talking to Harry had been incredibly difficult, and he'd acted despicably, yes,
but not out of malice. It was entirely possible Hermione was biased, since Melantha was half-sure Remus was their second Defence Professor she'd developed a bit of a crush on, but she guessed she'd just have to take Hermione's judgement on that at face value. She certainly had no idea herself.

Oh god, please don't let Hermione get all crazy over Bill this year...

So, no, she wasn't excited about this meeting at all. She was sort of nervous, actually. It really didn't help that reading her mother's journal had already... Well, she had questions she wasn't sure if she wanted to know the answers to, was the thing.

But, after a long calming breath, she knocked on McGonagall's office door anyway.

A minute later, her feet were skittering across wooden tile as the Floo chucked her out into the Three Broomsticks. She managed not to fall down again — how many was this in a row now? — but she still cursed under her breath. Stupid fucking thing, were there any forms of magical transportation that were not terrible? She was dusted over with a bit of soot, which she'd noticed never really seemed to happen to anyone else either, at least excluding bloody children, but that was easy enough to get rid of with a quick cleaning charm.

'Ah, there you are, Melantha.' She jumped at the sound of Remus's voice coming from very near to her shoulder — she'd been distracted with getting rid of the soot, hadn't been paying attention. He was looking rather better than when she'd first met him, especially since, wasn't the full moon in a couple days? Or a couple days ago? Whatever. He looked far less drawn and thin than he had before, more colour in his cheeks and even, surprisingly, in his hair. His robes were, while not gaudy or overly expensive-looking, not cheap and threadbare either. But she guessed that was expected, considering House Black had sort of taken him in. Even if she was a bit annoyed with him at present, she couldn't help feeling slightly relieved.

Thankfully, Remus didn't try to hug her or anything — even without how conflicted she was feeling about him at the moment, she still wasn't comfortable with people grabbing at her all the time. The hand at her back guiding her up to one of the rooms upstairs was almost too much, the quivering of unease in her stomach quite distracting. She really wished people would stop touching her without her permission.

Come to think of it, she wouldn't be at all surprised if no one (excluding Hermione) even realised she didn't like it when people did that. She should probably say something about it if she really wanted them all to stop, but...that just sounded incredibly uncomfortable. And, well. She wasn't entirely sure how she would go about making that request without, erm, offending anyone? She wouldn't want to come of like a bitch or anything, it just... It wasn't like she hated them, she just wasn't a very touchy-feely person, she guessed. She only wanted her personal space, was that such a bad thing?

Though, it wasn't the only way people had a habit of being uncomfortably familiar with her. In retrospect, it wasn't surprising she hadn't realised it was inappropriate to call anyone by first name without permission — she hadn't known it at the time, but the way even total strangers had called her "Harry" incessantly had been presumptuous of them to a degree anyone who'd grown up in the culture would have considered it offensive. The few people who'd called her "Mister Potter", despite how cold and distant it'd seemed at the time, were simply being properly respectful.

The perils of being stupidly famous, she guessed: everyone thought they knew her. Especially the ones who didn't.

Before too long, they were in one of the private dining rooms, folders and notebooks and loose parchment strewn across the table. A butterbeer was slipped into Melantha's hand, and Remus got straight into it. And she was quickly overwhelmed.
Apparently, since quite literally its inception, the family business of House Potter had been potioneering. In fact, in the magical world, "Potter" itself was an occupational surname meaning just that — the founder of the House, who'd apparently been born a Longbottom, had been a rather famous potions master in his time. For the most part, her ancestors had focused on medical potions, to the point that a good portion of the potions used in Saint Mungo's to this day were originally formulated by Potters. Melantha herself had even been given some of them. Skelegro, for one — blech. Some of them were new enough to be still "owned" by House Potter (again, including Skelegro), though exactly how that worked was slightly complicated. If someone wanted to go ahead and brew the potions by themselves that was perfectly fine, but if they were making them to then sell them to a third party House Potter was legally entitled to a portion of the proceeds. Which they (erm, she) got a crazy amount of, apparently. Not a lot objectively, she guessed — it was roughly, what, maybe five thousand pounds a month or so? — but it seemed like a fucking huge amount of money to her.

And that wasn't all there was. See, apparently she'd had ancestors who were just as shite with potions as she was. Well, okay, she could brew if she didn't have Snape hovering over her like a malignant cloud of condescension and hatred, that wasn't the point. But anyway, these had took to starting up little farms for growing various potions ingredients, or bred creatures for the animal components, gradually working up to acquiring bloody plantations and ranches for the same purpose, mostly on foreign soil. By the present day, House Potter controlled, Remus estimated, about a sixth of the entire market for potions supplies throughout Europe — higher in Britain, lower in the east, but a rough average.

Which was just... Melantha had gotten the impression by now that she would be finding out today that she actually had money. A strange concept, sure, but she'd expected that. With how loaded all of the nobility she'd met seemed to be, she couldn't really expect anything else. But, somehow, it hadn't occurred to her that Remus would be telling her she was a goddamn millionaire. She ran the galleons-to-pounds conversion (rounded slightly) in her head multiple times just to be sure she wasn't mistaken. It just...

She didn't understand. If she had all this, why had she grown up as she had? It didn't make any sense. It wasn't like she didn't own multiple houses she could have lived in or anything. If Dumbledore hadn't been able to find someone willing to look after her out of the goodness of their hearts, he could have arranged a fucking ridiculous salary for it without hardly damaging the House's finances at all. She couldn't imagine anyone whose actual job it was to raise her, who'd be willing enough to take it up, could have done any worse than the Dursleys had. Even if those blood wards or whatever had been so important that Dumbledore absolutely had to make sure she lived with Petunia...couldn't they have all moved to one of the Potter properties instead? She was sure the Dursleys might have looked at the situation differently if they'd gotten to live in a fucking manor house because of her. Or, at the very least, the Dursleys could have been set up with some kind of stipend or something in exchange for taking care of her — she couldn't remember how many times they'd gone on about how good they were to accept the burden on both their time and their finances, ungrateful freak this and that, blah blah. Of course, with how they'd spent, Melantha was sure they could have provided for her properly and hardly noticed it, but it was the principle of the thing, she felt. It would have made a difference. She was positive they would have treated her much, much better if there'd been something — especially if that something came with the threat of it being taken away if they didn't. Or maybe that was too Slytherin of an idea, she didn't know. But, surely, that would have been a better thing to do, either one of them.

It just didn't make any sense.

And then Remus said something that turned this entire situation completely insane — as though it weren't already. 'Wait, wait,' she said, holding up a hand to cut him off. 'I own house-elves?'
'Own isn't the appropriate word, but yes.' Remus flipped through a couple of sheets of parchment again, his expression entirely unconcerned, if slightly confused. 'Several properties house a number of landed elves — I don't see an accounting anywhere of exactly how many. There are also two, no, three elves bound directly to the family. That is, you.'

...Okay. What the fuck was this now? She didn't...

She carefully labelled this new information never tell Hermione ever.

It took her a long moment to find her voice — not that she was entirely sure of what exactly was going on in her head, she just couldn't string words together properly. Finally, she managed to say, 'I can just go free all of them, right?'

Remus frowned at her. Only slightly, and more in confusion than anything, but definitely a frown. 'No, you can't. Well, the three family elves, yes, but not the landed elves.'

'Okay.' She took a few long breaths, doing her best to shrug off the sudden urge to go take a long, hot shower. 'And what's the difference?'

'Between family elves and landed elves?' At her nod, Remus gave a light little shrug. 'In short, the first are bound to a family — magical beings of some kind, not necessarily humans — and the second are bound to a particular location especially thick with ambient magic. They usually come to some sort of arrangement with whoever they happen to be sharing the land with, the exact details of which change from place to place. And, I don't know how aware you are of this, elves have formidable magic of their own. These elves do not see you as much of any authority at all, but perhaps an ally. And these are their homes. The point I'm getting at is, I doubt you could remove them even by force if you wanted to. Elves can be quite tenacious little things when they have cause.

'And as for the family elves...' Remus, staring up at the ceiling, took in a slow breath, let it out as a heavy sigh. 'I know your dealings with elves so far have been limited, and I know from things Hermione has said that they haven't exactly been ideal. One thing you have to understand about elves is that they are bound to their word in a way that humans are not. It's simply the way their magic works — if they make an oath, their own magic compels them to keep it, until they are somehow released. In the case of family elves, the loyalty and obedience they swear to the head of the family is the same oath that, technically, all members of a House are bound by, with a few additions that, like with the landed elves, vary from family to family. The difference is that elves are magically bound to that oath, while the human members of the family are not. It is not unheard of for unsavoury individuals to take advantage of this. Conceptually, it's not much different from a Lord or Master of a House abusing human members of the family.'

Melantha failed to hold back a wince at that, but she was pretty sure Remus didn't notice.

'So.' Remus shrugged again. 'You could release the three if you wanted to, yes. It is, technically, the same rite by which you would expel someone from the family, were there anyone but yourself. But I would suggest you consider it very carefully before you do. One of them has only petitioned to join the House in the last couple years—' Wait, what? ' —and another is slightly younger than you are, but I remember Tisme. She's been with the House for a while now — I believe she was born when your great-grandfather was a child — and she is extremely proud. It would devastate her. But it's your decision. I wouldn't stop you.'

Okay. She had absolutely no idea how to process this. On the one hand, it kind of did explain a lot. It'd always rather bothered her that no one really seemed to care that there was, basically, an entire slave caste within magical society. But, if mages conceptualised the whole thing as elves being just nonhuman members of a House, a peculiarity of their magic the only real difference, well, that would
at least explain why no one thought it was a big deal. How people could at once say the way Dobby had been treated was absolutely despicable, and how it was probably best that he got out of that situation, but not want to free elves in general. How many of the other students had been offended by Hermione's little abolitionist kick a while ago.

Of course, not that Melantha was necessarily taking Remus's word on this. Sure, it explained a lot about how mages thought about this, but that didn't necessarily mean they were correct. Just because mages didn't conceptualise it as slavery didn't mean it wasn't. She... Well, she guessed she'd just have to make a judgement on all this by herself.

Fuck, why did everything these days have to be so complicated?

Anyway, speaking of her own judgement, 'It's Dobby, isn't it? The new one, I mean.'

'Ah, yes. He came forward in... Remus trailed off, frowned to himself for a second, then reached into the stack of parchment again. 'July of Ninety-Three, yes. Since you were only twelve at the time, you couldn't have confirmed any oath he gave, so he has a sort of provisional status at the moment. He's a Potter elf and not a Potter elf. It's complicated.'

'But he works at Hogwarts.'

Remus nodded. 'In situations like yours, which are rare but do happen, the family elves will usually go live with a landed community somewhere, until such a time their master is old enough to receive them. Tisme and Nilanse are staying with the Wizengamot elves, and Dobby is it Hogwarts.'

'Tisme and Nilanse?' she repeated with a frown. 'Interesting names.'

Shrugging, Remus said, 'They're elvish.'

'Oh.' Somehow, it'd never occurred to her elves might have their own language. In retrospect, it really should have. That Dobby and Winky and the Hogwarts elves all used the same weird dialect should have been an enormous hint.

They wrapped up pretty quickly from there. Remus had her confirm she was fine with him taking care of Potter stuff — not that she really had anyone else she knew could handle it — and that the person he'd picked as her new proxy in the Wizengamot was acceptable to her — she'd almost laughed when she'd found out it was Andi, kinda felt sorry for the rest of them. Though, even if she didn't think Andi was a hilarious choice, anyone would have been better than the person Dumbledore put there. When she'd been told a few details of the arsehole's voting record she hadn't been very happy.

But politics was another thing she was trying not to think about. She hadn't expected the Dark to make nearly that much sense, and she had enough things already she was trying to figure out without adding that nonsense to the mix.

When they were mostly done, Remus then had to go and ask if she wanted to stay for dinner. She completely failed to hold back a sigh; she'd been trying not to let on that she wasn't exactly pleased with Remus right now, until she could maybe be more reasonable about it later, but being stuck with him longer increased the chances she would slip up. She'd have to find some not-obvious way to say no. Maybe something about having arranged something back at school this evening? Maybe she could—

'Is something bothering you, Mel?' She jumped at Remus's slightly-exasperated voice, trying not to look guilty. 'You've just seemed a little...off, this whole time.'
Oh, yes, just come out and ask about the thing she didn't want to talk about, perfect. Thank you very much, Professor Lupin. She really didn't want to confront him about third year. Partially because, yes, he had been great about teaching her the *patrōnus* and everything, even if he hadn't been perfect with other things, and Hermione was probably correct that he had his reasons for the rest. There would be little point to it. But he'd always been more perceptive than most, she seriously doubted he would believe her if she said nothing was wrong, or made something up, so—

She blinked as a thought occurred to her. That could work as a deflection perfectly fine. It wasn't exactly something she wanted to talk about too much either, but it would certainly be easier. Less personal, she guessed. Well, less personal for her, anyway, at the least more removed for him. Alright. Good.

After another moment of hesitation, she said, 'Sirius found some of my mother's old journals, and I've been reading them.'

Remus winced, but only for an instant before his face went blank again. What was *that* about? 'Yes, he told me about that. I'm guessing you have questions about something.'

Okay. He was...more awkward than she thought he'd be about this topic. Doing a rather good job of hiding it, but still. Was there something weird she didn't know yet? Hmm. Think about that later. 'Well, it's just. I kind of got the impression my mother, erm...' She shifted in her seat a little, suddenly wishing she'd thought of something else. This was just so unbelievably uncomfortable. 'She just kind of seemed to hate my father, is all. A little bit. I think she uses the phrase *creepy stalker* more than his name.'

Remus set his elbows against the table, his face falling into his hands, fingers rubbing at his forehead. Yeah, he didn't look happy with this topic either. Probably more unhappy than she was, honestly. The thought that her parents didn't really like each other — or, at least, that their relationship was extremely lopsided — didn't bother her nearly as much as she thought people would probably assume. Honestly, she didn't really see how whether they loved each other or not mattered now, especially since, well, she couldn't even remember them at all so it had never had time to affect her. She was really more confused than anything. From what her mother had written, she *really* couldn't imagine what could have possibly happened between when she was fifteen and when she was nineteen, for Melantha herself to exist. It'd be like her in a couple years marrying Romilda Vane or Goshawk, whatever her first name was, that Hufflepuff who'd tried to slip her a love potion last year. It just didn't make any sense.

Oh, god, there weren't love potions involved, were there? Come to think of it, that was one possibility that would make her care. Fuck...

But anyway, Remus was finding his voice again. Sounding *incredibly* awkward, he said, 'Look, Melantha, I know you're still more muggle in a lot of ways, culturally, than you are one of us. And there's nothing wrong with that, necessarily. It's just, things don't always work the same way here, and this is one of the things I've noticed muggleborns often have trouble getting used to the idea of.' He let out a long sigh, his hands falling back to the table. 'To summarise a complicated situation briefly, *all* marriages are arranged marriages. Even in Common Houses.'

For a few seconds, Melantha could only stare at him. Okay. *That* hadn't been what she'd expected him to say at all. 'So... I'm sorry, *what*?'

He sighed again, taking another moment to rub at his face. 'It's the way our civil law works. The head of a House — Lord or Lady of a Noble House, Master or Mistress of a Common — has total legal authority over everyone in their House. There are limits to just what they can do, of course, but not very many. Most contracts anyone makes, with very few exceptions, must be confirmed by their...
'Now,' he said with a shrug, 'there are rules for this. Forced marriage is against the law; no matter what two heads of House decide, the marriage can't happen if both parties actually getting married don't consent to it. In fact, if the DLE catches wind of such a thing happening, anyone complicit can find themselves in Azkaban for a long time, under rape charges. People can't be coerced into it, either — they couldn't tell someone in their House, for example, you either consent to the marriage or you'll be disowned, that's illegal too. It's harder to prove, so people do sometimes get away with it, but illegal.

'I know I got a bit afield from the point here.' He gave her a slightly self-deprecating smile, which she almost had to smirk at. 'What I'm trying to get across, is that... There is this expectation in modern muggle Western society that people get married for love. That that's what's supposed to happen. This is actually a new idea — it only turned up in the last few centuries, and hasn't even made it to the entire muggle world yet — but it's a very widespread one. And it's an idea we simply don't have. Not to say whether a couple are compatible or not isn't ever a consideration, it definitely is — it's part of the Lord or Master's responsibility to find someone the family member in question will be able to get along with, not just who will be best for the House in other ways. And not to say love matches never happen, they do. It just isn't the expectation.

'With your parents specifically...' He gave a helpless sort of shrug. 'Your father certainly loved your mother, I have no doubt about that. But, well. From the beginning, James did very little to make a good impression on Lily, that's undoubtedly true. When his parents died, he had a rather harsh awakening, and he grew up very fast. But, by then, her uncomplimentary opinion of him had already been well-founded. And, well, he wasn't really her type. For one thing, they disagreed on more things than they agreed on. And, from what I know of Lily, she wouldn't ever be able to truly respect a man who couldn't...' Remus hesitated a long moment, frowning up at the ceiling. '...keep up with her. Intellectually, magically, whatever. And for all the talent James had, and he was talented, Lily was in another realm entirely — I doubt there was anyone in our generation who could come close to her. Severus was closer than most, but even he couldn't keep up. She was a little unnerving to be around, sometimes, to be honest.'

The last said in a low, somewhat absent voice, Remus then stared down at the table, his gaze pointed somewhere in the past. At first, Melantha hadn't been sure what to think about this Lily-Evans-was-an-absurd-prodigy tidbit people had been dropping lately. It hadn't been something Hagrid or McGonagall, who she'd most often heard her parents referenced by previously, had really mentioned at all. Or at all. She thought Flitwick might have said something about it. Once. Although, come to think of it, it sort of explained why everyone expected her to be good at everything. And why Remus had agreed to teach her the *patrōnus* in the first place.

Sure, he'd prevaricated on it for a little bit, but he'd ultimately done it. And when she had eventually managed it, he'd seemed oddly unsurprised. Impressed, yes, but not really surprised. And him being impressed might actually have had more to do with the scale of the thing than her simply managing it at all. She hadn't known it at the time, but apparently what she'd done — sent the dementors into a panicked retreat, dozens and dozens of them all at once, on her first successful casting — was absolutely ridiculous. As in a "that should not be possible" level of ridiculous. Apparently, Snape had known something weird was going on right away because the only person on the grounds he knew of who could pull off a *patrōnus* that ridiculously powerful was fucking Dumbledore.

It wasn't the only time she'd done something supposedly impossible either. In the first task, summoning her Firebolt from all the way over in her dorm? Yeah, shouldn't be possible. That was actually when Flitwick had made that comment about her mother, apparently he'd witnessed her do something similar once. According to Hermione, two simultaneous stunners shouldn't have been
near enough to bring down an acromantula of the size she and Cedric had fought — not only was the hex not powerful enough to overcome an acromantula's natural magic resistance, but the standard stunner was also less effective against most invertebrate nervous systems, so it would have been far less effective to begin with. One or both of them must have massively overpowered the charm for that to have worked. And that time a week ago she'd nearly destroyed one of the bathrooms just because she'd been angry. Whoops.

Far as she could tell, Melantha must have inherited most of her mother's absurd magical ability. Apparently, it wasn't at all surprising that she would — children didn't always end up with the magical talents of their mother over their father, but it was often enough that, again according to Hermione, there were a slew of matrilineal magical cultures out there for that exact reason. She just hadn't learned to use it. While her mother and Snape, of all people, had been spending their pre-Hogwarts days teaching themselves how to cast basic charms wandlessly, she'd been locked in the cupboard most of the day. At least, most of the day she hadn't been forced from one chore to another. And, well, when she'd gotten to Hogwarts, she'd mostly just been trying to avoid being noticed — for all the good that had done. And, she'd admit, maybe revelling in the newfound freedom to be lazy, just a little bit. She wouldn't really expect herself to be nearly as good as Lily had been at her age.

Come to think of it, if she had been as ridiculous as her mother had been from childhood, to the point that even her friends had obviously been a little scared of her, it probably would have been even more impossible to convince people she wasn't the bloody Heir of fucking Slytherin. So, mixed blessings.

But anyway, Remus talking again. 'I think what happened is your mother rationally evaluated her options, and picked the best offer she had. Not unusual — she's hardly the only woman around to have made a similar decision. But I honestly don't think love had anything to do with it.' And Remus gave her a soft, level sort of look. Shooting for understanding, maybe? As if he understood that the way magical culture handled this sort of thing was new to her. As if he knew that she'd been given, over and over the last couple years, a somewhat over-romanticised view of her parents' lives. As if he knew this detail certainly hadn't been included.

And as if he thought she would care.

Ignoring the odd niggling of awkwardness she got whenever she used this passage, Melantha tapped the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoor with her wand, the hidden door sliding open with a dull clunk.

'Finally!' cried a high, childish voice. 'I thought you were never coming.'

Melantha stared at the person just inside. Not...quite what she'd been expecting. The girl was tiny, maybe twelve years old at the outside, bright blonde hair descending in ringlets over her shoulders covered in a Hogwarts uniform in Hufflepuff colours, face dominated by large bright eyes and rounded nose of almost exaggerated adorableness. It took her a couple seconds to find her voice back. 'Dora?'

'Yes, it's me.' The little girl stepped out of the statue, the passage closing behind her at a wave of her hand. 'I thought I'd evade notice easier as a student. I'd gotten my old robes complete with badge all transfigured up before I realised someone might actually recognise I'm not any of the prefects. So I thought younger was better. Anyway, where are we going?'

Still blinking in confusion, Melantha's feet nonetheless turned toward the seventh floor, her unnervingly young cousin skipping beside her. No, really, she had apparently decided she was going to skip the whole way. Weirdo. 'Hold on. You were a prefect?'
The stranger who was Dora raised an eyebrow at her. 'Of course I was. Apparently, Pomona even tried to get them to make me Head Girl.'

Erm... 'Was Sprout high or something?'

Dora shrugged. 'Probably.' At Melantha’s disbelieving look, she smirked at her. 'Come off it, would that really surprise you? Who honestly knows what all she grows in those greenhouses where no one's looking.'

There really wasn't anything to say to that.

Before too long, the two of them were walking into the familiar corridor on the seventh floor, Katie already waiting for them, leaning against that hideous tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. 'There you are,' she said as Melantha came into view. 'I was starting to worry I was...’ She trailed off, staring at Dora at her shoulder — or rather under her shoulder, really, which was a little weird with how short Melantha was now. 'Erm, hello?'

Dora wiggled her fingers at her. 'Hey, there. Auror Black. We using the Room of Requirement, then?'

Before she could answer, Melantha had to hold back a chuckle at the dumbfounded look on Katie's face. 'Ah, yeah. Did you know someplace better?'

'Hmm, not really, I guess. At least, if it can be big enough. How big can this thing get, anyway?' Without waiting for an answer, Dora skipped over to right where the door always appeared, started pacing back and forth with her eyes closed.

'Pretty big, I think. Practising in here last year, I didn't really notice a limit. Why, what did you use it for?'

'Shagging, mostly.' Okay, that was an uncomfortable thing for someone who looked like a little girl to be saying. The familiar door appeared in the familiar abrupt way, and Dora didn't waste a second before grabbing the handle and walking in. 'A little bit of duelling practice, but mostly shagging. Oh, hey, it is pretty big. How did you find this place, anyway?'

The space Dora had requested was strangely open. In fact, it almost felt like they were outside. The floor was rough and uneven, partially covered in grass, here and there bits of granite in various sizes punching through, the ceiling dark and far enough above their heads it was a little indistinct. Large enough there was almost enough space to fly in, not quite comfortably. Some metres away, the ground switched to marble tiled floor, home to a table and three chairs of dark redwood, a pair of bookshelves stacked with volumes, a chalkboard against the far wall. 'Ah, I needed somewhere to practise for the Tournament last year, so I asked Dobby, and he showed me this. You?'

'Also asked an elf. The elves here love me.' Even as Dora started stretching up into a more adult-sized form, a smirk crossed her face. 'Of course, I was asking for a place I could bring people we wouldn't be caught in flagrante, if you follow.'

'Er.' Melantha glanced back at Katie, who had stopped looking around wide-eyed to give Dora a look at that. 'You said that's why you needed it and the elves just told you?' Smirk only widening, Dora said, 'I did say the elves love me.'

'Okay.' Katie shrugged a little. 'I know a lot of shagging goes on here, and the staff don't actually try that hard to stop it, but that seems a bit enabling, even for this place.'
Melantha frowned. 'Enabling?' Far as she could tell, they did try to stamp out, erm, that sort of behaviour when they could. They didn't especially go out of their way, but she definitely wouldn't say they enabled it...

And Katie just smiled at her. 'Think about it: what use could a magical castle ever have for broom cupboards? And isn't it interesting how they're all mostly or completely empty?'

But when she put it like that...

After a couple seconds to trade names properly — she was still insisting people call her Tonks, even though that wasn't even technically her name anymore — Dora noisily clapped her hands once. 'Alright, then. I thought we'd start with you two just coming at me quick to give me a feel of where you're at. Go on, then.'

'Erm.' A quick glance at Katie showed she was just as surprised as she was — though Katie seemed to be shrugging it off, pulling out her wand anyway. 'What, both of us?'

Before Dora could answer, Katie said, 'Come on, Mel, she's an Auror. I bet she can flatten the both of us without even trying.'

A wide smirk stretched across Dora's face. 'That, Tinkerbell, would be a very safe bet.'

...Tinkerbell? Did Dora just make a muggle pop culture reference? Did Katie even know what that—

Apparently Katie did know what that meant, because she immediately fired off what looked like a blasting curse straight at Dora's face. Wow, not playing around, apparently. Dora, who'd gotten her wand in her hand at some point Melantha hadn't been watching, lifted the bit of wood right for the incoming curse and smoothly flicked it down into the ground behind her, where it scored a long furrow into the dirt and rock, bits of debris flung into the air from the force.

Yeah, that was definitely a blasting curse. Yeesh.

With a flick of Dora's wrist, several...were those spears? Several spears just appeared in the air around her, six or seven of them maybe, metal tips glinting in the light. Hmm. Melantha darted off to the side as fast as she could, but hadn't managed to get away quite quickly enough; with a slurred incantation, she banished the furthest rightward spear away from her, sending the thing flipping end over end against the ground. She kept running around, hoping to get near to the opposite side of Dora from Katie, so she'd have to split her attention. She didn't get very far before a few blasts of light started in on her direction — bludgeoning hexes, looked like, she wasn't entirely positive. Four frantic jabs of her wand, 'contege, contege, contege—contege—', and she had all four of them stopped.

Damn, those hexes had hit hard, she'd felt the impacts all the way up to her shoulder, Jesus. Well, she wasn't here just for play. Still shuffling along the uneven ground, doing her best to aim and not trip at the same time, she shot a few random hexes over her shoulder, not really thinking so much about exactly which ones she was choosing. 'Stupeat—impediātur—tūllēre—stupeat—dentēsogē—'

'Are you joking?' Dora followed that with a giggle, interspersed with a few loud shattering noises, bits of ice and rock flying through the air from...whatever she and Katie were doing, no idea. 'Using those playground jinxes on me, are you serious?' Along with the word, Dora passed her wand in Melantha's direction in a wide, casual wave.

A wide casual wave that left an arc of soft, blue-purple light racing through the air toward her. No clue what that was, but no fucking way did she want to get hit by it. Waving her own wand toward the ground in front of her, wide sweep left to right, 'Sepenglaciałem,' a shoulder-height wall of thick,
blue-white ice appeared a metre or so in front of her. Just in case — she had a bad feeling that arc of light was a ridiculously-overpowered cutting charm — she cast a prōtege between the ice and herself, throwing enough power into it her wrist was tingling.

Good fucking thing she did, too. A line was carved straight through the wall of ice, the entire thing dissolving into a thousand glittering pieces, the now-invisible cutting charm hitting her shield, the impact throwing off a secondary flare of white light. Slicing through the ice had weakened it enough she'd barely felt it, though. Melantha let the shield fall, twisted her wrist back around, jabbed forward with an 'expelle' that she probably shouted way louder than was strictly necessary. The tinkling shards of ice were caught in her banishing charm, sent streaking off toward Dora.

With an easy swirl of her wand, all the shards of ice melted, contorted, re-formed into dozens of tiny darts of gleaming metal, which Dora then immediately sent flying at Katie. Melantha winced — whoops. At least Katie conjured a wide, bronzish shield easy enough, the darts clattering away around her.

Ah, shite. They were both doing plenty of conjuring, weren't they? Melantha wasn't nearly good enough at transfiguration to even try using it in a fight. Just...fuck.

While Dora was busy dealing with Katie's counterattack — she'd transfigured the shield into a few circular bronze blades, not fucking around at all, was she — Melantha flipped through the spells she knew in her head quick. That would do. 'Flammaseriem iace.' Roughly a dozen little orbs of red-orange fire spouted from her wand one after the other, all of them landing exactly where she wanted: scattered about Dora's feet, still burning despite the lack of any visible fuel. She noticed Katie glance at her, looking a bit annoyed with her for "missing", but she ignored that. She drew deep within herself for that familiar well of power, and magic suddenly came crackling through her veins, setting her nerves alight, her heart to pounding in her throat. Forcing it all down into her wand, the tendons in her wrist and hand searing from the heat of the passing energy, Melantha hissed, 'Sto uranó fiānete!' The magic leaving her made her feel a little dizzy, tingles racing across her skin, but she brushed it off, forced her eyes to focus on Dora.

Not that she could actually see Dora at the moment. Her little elemental magic trick had turned all the little fires around Dora into big fires, each widening by several times, stretching a dozen feet into the air, her ears suddenly filled with the angry roar of flame, the heat of it licking at her face even from here. She couldn't see Katie either, temporarily dazzled by the bright yellow-orange light. Huh. That...hadn't been too much, had it? It couldn't have been, Dora wouldn't—

And of course it wasn't. The flames stretching toward the distant ceiling suddenly twisted, curving around clockwise, the bases slowly, bit by bit, lifting off the ground. As the fire separated from dirt and rock, a harsh wind blew outward, and Melantha had to raise her arm, cover her face to keep kicked-up grit from flying into her eyes. Her fire arced up over where she could now clearly see Dora, wand hand curving in a casual clockwise swirl, the entire mass coming to meet in a swirling vortex a couple metres above Dora's head. Katie took the opportunity of her apparent distraction to send a stunning hex at her, but Dora just batted the bright red light out of the air with the back of her hand — could have told her that wouldn't have worked. Shooting a wicked grin over at Melantha, Dora said, 'That? Much better. But not good enough. Try again.' Even as Dora spoke, the storm of fire above her contorted, inverted, shifting colours and twisting inward, coalescing into—

Into a couple dozen javelins of glimmering ice. Melantha failed to hold back a sigh. Perfect.

A little under half of the javelins shot down at her with terrifying speed, but she'd obviously seen that coming. She definitely couldn't blast all those out of the sky before they hit her, and a normal magical shield wouldn't stop them, so she had to settle for a, 'Līmen clūde!' The spears bounced off the
invisible barrier, a couple shattering into thousands of little pieces at the impact, the physical force and the draw on her magic both making Melantha stumble a little; she nearly tripped over a random piece of ice, stupid thing. Before she could even get her balance, Dora had already sent another attack off at her, four flashes of yellow light that looked suspiciously like blasting curses. But not at her, not directly, instead toward the ground just in front of her. Oh, wow, this was going to hurt. After an instant of panic, she remember something she and Hermione had figured out last year, forced a wide-angle softening charm into the ground at her feet, putting as much into it as her wavering magic would give her.

The curses hit the ground, expelling the energy they contained in a flash of blue-white light, throwing a thick stream of dirt and rocks, some the size of her head, flinging into the air at her. Thankfully, her softening charm worked, it didn't hurt it all. It was quite nice, actually, felt rather like having a bath in a tub full of feathers.

The thought of her practice sessions with Hermione, the things they'd looked up, gave her another idea. A potentially crazy idea, but an idea.

With three, four, five castings of 'glaciem circueundam,' Melantha filled the area between the two of them with several big bunches of ice. Not small or weak ones either — that spell was supposed to be used to surround someone in a nice little frozen prison, but it didn't necessarily have to directly target anyone. She was just using it to make herself a nice barrier of somewhat spell-resistant ice; this spell she was going to try did have a long incantation. Drawing in a long breath, again gathering up a surge of magic from deep within, doing her best to ignore the explosions and tinkling of ice from in front of her, she let the spell fall from her lips.

'Austre furēns, caelitem īra tuam excī, et sub fulminibus inexōrābilibus—' Okay, ow, she'd forgotten how much casting this spell fucking hurt, electric power sparking up and down her arm, but she forced it off, focused on finishing the thing, hopefully before her defenses were gone. '—terram inundā!'

She wasn't too modest to say even she'd been impressed the first time she'd cast this thing. With an explosion of noise, crackling and snapping and sparking, a bolt of blue-white lightning lanced out from her wand, struck the ground a couple metres from her feet. In an instant, the lightning forked from one to three, again, again, again, dozens and dozens of bright, electric tendrils crawling across the ground in an inexorable wave, leaping over slabs of rock, shards of the ice prisons Melantha had hid behind, bits of conjured metal from whatever Dora and Katie were doing. The ground in front of her, her entire field of vision from left to right, was alight with it, a sheath of writhing blue-white energy covering everything for long seconds. After the screaming, tearing, scorching magic had passed, a wave of dizziness overwhelmed her, and Melantha collapsed to her knees. Gritting her teeth against the tingling burn raging inside her, she cradled the wrist of her wand arm against her chest.

It didn't escape her notice her wand hand was steaming. Jesus, she hated casting big spells like that, it was never fun...

Once her vision stopped swirling, once the ear-popping crackle of electricity faded away, she glanced up. And immediately let out a soft groan. Dora was perfectly fine. She'd been half-sure that would have gotten her at least a little bit — the book Hermione had found that spell in had said it would eat away at most any magical shield, even punch right through the weaker ones. It looked like Dora, who was staring at her with a slightly surprised look on her face, had just conjured a fine wire mesh in a hemisphere over herself, thin bits of metal faintly glowing in a few places. That... That was cheating.
Even as Melantha grumbled to herself, a mound of dirt a short distance behind Dora and to her left shifted, rolled back, and Katie shakily pushed herself to her feet. Shooting a glare at Melantha, she said, 'Were you trying to hit me with that? You're supposed to be hitting her, not me! Myrðin...'

Melantha winced; it hadn't really occurred to her to worry about how Katie would deal with something like that. It wasn't exactly something she could aim very well. 'Erm, sorry.'

And Dora just giggled at them. Of course. 'Well, as amusing as this all is—' Before the last syllable had hardly left her lips, Dora had already sent another volley of metal darts off at Katie. Which Katie had apparently been expecting, since she immediately transfigured the ground in front of her up to block it, retaliating with a couple blasting curses shot around the earthen barrier.

They were still doing this, apparently. After that little trick, Melantha didn't know how much she had left in her.

Not that she had long to worry about that: a trio of conjured spears were suddenly darting toward her. Her legs were practically jelly at this point, she doubted she'd be able to get up quick enough under her own power, so she instead jabbed her wand down and to her left, the banishing charm pushing her up, stumbling to the side out of the way. She was tottering so badly, her legs so unsteady and clumsy, she almost fell right back to the ground again. She'd put a bit too much into that last spell, evidently — she felt uncomfortably numb, like her legs and left arm had all fallen asleep, the world swaying dizzily around her. The right arm wasn't numb, of course, that one was practically on fire at the moment, but she was trying to ignore that.

Not good, not good at all. There was no way her half-insane cousin was going to let up just because she was obviously having problems. Had to focus. Problem was, she could barely even see Dora right now, little more than a colourful blur, shrouded by the occasional splash of light, explosion of motion as she and Katie traded a few more attacks and counters. She was probably only a couple seconds from passing out here, but she knew Dora would take one final shot to finish her off, she would have to—

And there it was, three arrows of white-yellow light stretching in at her. She thought one would miss her...maybe, it was hard to tell with her vision all wonky. Probably wouldn't do much good in her current state, but she cast a quick prōtege anyway. One of the charms glanced off the edge of her shield, the second hit closer to the middle, both curse and shield shattering in a flash of white light. Which left the third she was completely defenceless against, the thing hitting her in her left side, between the bottom of her ribs and the top of her hip.

Melantha let out an involuntary gasp, again falling to her knees, hands against the ground in front of her barely keeping her face from hitting the dirt. Holy fuck, ow, that hurt! She grit her teeth to keep in the scream from the stabbing, throbbing, burning pain in her side, her throat still betraying her with a choked whimper. Her fingers tightened shakily against the ground, the muscles in her back and stomach quivering in protest, which just made the agony from her side worse, turning her vision to white and red spots. What the fuck was that thing?

After a couple seconds, she finally noticed the odd, warm wetness running in streamers down her skin, wrapping around both sides of her thigh, gradually soaking into her trousers.

...  

Was... Was she bleeding? What the fuck did Dora hit her with?

Before she could gather the energy to force herself up to check, her blurry, spotty vision was consumed with soft red light, and everything went black.
Melantha started awake, and instantly let out a moan.

Yeah, she'd definitely done too much magic there. Her entire body was consumed with the warning signs, a sort of numbing tingling at the best, a harsh burning at the worst, concentrated in the joints of her wand arm, so bad in her wrist and hand she wouldn't be surprised if the thing was actually covered in burns. It'd probably be gone in an hour or two, replaced with the sluggish numbness of magical exhaustion, but fuck it was going to suck until then. Something was different about her left side, though, didn't quite fit. It was an odd, stinging tightness instead. No idea what that was.

It took a couple moments for her to realise she was sitting upright, in a soft, comfortable chair. She blinked her eyes open, glanced around to find they were still in the Room of Requirement, sitting at the table, Katie at her side, Dora across from them. Dora would have had to ask the Room to replace the furniture — Melantha was pretty sure her big lightning spell had set everything over here on fire. Speaking of on fire, most of the open area in front of her looked like there'd been a fucking war going on over there, the ground torn up and blasted apart, debris scattered randomly all over the place, large sections scorched to greater or lesser degrees, all of it looking intimidatingly awful.

Yeah, a magical fight could really fuck a place up, she'd noticed that before.

'Drink.' At Dora's voice, Melantha looked back to the table, quickly enough she saw Dora shove a tall mug toward her. Before she could ask, Dora said, 'Hot chocolate laced with healing and revitalising potions. My mum's specialty.'

Melantha honestly doubted anything with potions in it could taste even halfway palatable, but she just decided to go with it. She lifted the mug with her right hand — she didn't trust the numb fingers of her left to have a stable enough grip — and brought the smooth stone mug to her lips. Huh. This actually wasn't half bad. Chocolate, honey, and cinnamon, she couldn't even taste the potions. Kudos to Aunt Andi, she guessed.

Come to think of it, even Andi's plain potions usually weren't that bad. Almost tasteless, most of the time. Weird.

While she sipped at the drink, the warmth spreading down through her chest, the fingers of her other hand absently went for the weird tight spot over her stomach. It took her a moment to figure out the dim pulling she felt at her fingers: there was a hole in her shirt. How had that happened? She leaned back in her chair a little, looked down at herself. And nearly dropped her chocolate.

There was a hole in her shirt, yes, a nearly perfect circle cut out of it nearly wide enough to fit her fist through. The cloth surrounding the missing section was stained brownish-red, a smear trailing down to her waist, continuing down to her trousers, a large blotch of the same colour at the top of her thigh. What the... 'What did you hit me with?' Her voice came out rather smaller and shakier than she'd be entirely comfortable admitting later.

With a light shrug, Dora said, 'Piercing curse. Don't worry about it, I healed you. You're fine.'

Oh, she was fine was she? Sure, slipping her fingers through the hole, she could feel her skin was smooth and unbroken, but... Just, fuck, a piercing curse could easily be lethal! Hit someone in the wrong spot with it, and they could be dead in an instant, before anyone could even try to do something about it. Seemed a bit reckless to be tossing those around, was all. So she felt the need to say, 'You do realise you could have killed me, right?'

And Dora shrugged again. Shrugged! 'We throw much worse at each other in our practice duels, believe me.' By "we" she must mean the other Aurors. Suddenly, Melantha really didn't want to know what all they got up to in their off time — they were some of the only people in Britain
licensed to study almost any magic they wanted, their practice duels probably got completely insane. 'Anyway, not bad, either of you. You both did better than I was expecting, to be honest.'

Katie just snorted at that; Melantha didn't think much differently. She really didn't think she'd contributed very much, it'd felt like Katie'd had most of Dora's attention the whole time, and she'd only been an occasional nuisance. Which she was trying to not let bother her. She was only fifteen, after all, she was mostly self-taught in this kind of thing, Dora was a goddamn Auror...

Of course, that didn't much excuse her being so far behind Katie. Maybe fifth year really made a difference? She didn't know.

'Bell.' Dora turned to focus on Katie specifically, Katie straightening a bit in her chair. 'Would I be wrong in guessing Transfiguration is your best practical class?'

Katie shook her head, then shrugged. 'Well, Defence first, Transfiguration second.'

'Right. You did rather well, transfiguring and conjuring. Creative, but maybe a bit slow. If I read it right, it felt like the magic itself was smooth and easy, you just had trouble deciding what to do — am I right?' After a second of thought, Katie gave a slow little nod. 'Right, see, that can be a problem. You have to get to the point you just—' Dora snapped her fingers three times in quick succession, the sharp crack echoing in the open room. 'It's not easy to learn, but you have to get it to the point it's nearly instinctual. It's the only way you'll ever get the jump on someone like me. One of my tutors had some tricks for combat transfiguration — refining forms for each situation you can then slip into without thinking — that's one thing we can work on. And you can use some charm work, but my baby cousin here will be needing the same anyway.

'Mel.' She winced when Dora turned to her; she couldn't imagine she was going to like much of what she was going to hear. 'It's very clear you have a frankly absurd supply of raw magic at your beck and call. You just need to be somewhat more discerning about how you use it. Where did you learn that elemental magic, anyway? Saepe, serie, circueundeum — those aren't things they teach in Charms class. Or Defence, unless you got a really interesting professor one year I haven't heard about.'

She frowned over her chocolate. Not quite the question she'd expected to be asked. 'Ah, well, looking stuff up for the Tournament last year, Hermione found a book on the stuff. She thought it seemed useful, so we taught ourselves a bunch of it.'

'There is a lot of extremely useful elemental magic out there,' Dora said with a nod, 'though perhaps too much to choose from wisely without guidance. I'm guessing little Hermione picked the ice spells — saepem and circueundeum were the ones I noticed — to easily block curses that wouldn't be stopped with a protege, since you haven't worked up to full conjuring yet, yes?' Melantha just nodded — that'd been Hermione's precise thought, actually. 'Okay, so, once you do work up to conjuring, you're not going to need those anymore. And that monster of a lightning spell... I couldn't hear the incantation over all the explosions going on, but if I'm not mistaken, that was Austre furēns, blah blah blah, sub fulmine inundāns, right?'

'Erm.' Yeah, Melantha somehow doubted "blah blah blah" was part of the proper name of the spell, but, 'That's it, I think.'

'Yes, very good spell in theory.' Dora blinked, cocked her head a little. 'Did you try it in the graveyard, by any chance?'

She shrugged. 'Never really got the chance. Incantation is lengthy, and, erm, it didn't really occur to me anyway.' Rather hard to think strategically while in the middle of being tortured.
'Ah, shame that. You might have managed to fry a couple of the Death Eaters too slow to realise a normal shield wouldn't block elemental magic like that. That's the sort of situation a spell like that is really useful for: when you're significantly outnumbered, and even the chance a couple of the bad guys won't see it coming is good enough reason to try.'

In a grumble, Katie said, 'And preferably when your friends are behind you.'

Melantha couldn't help a wince at that, but Dora just smirked. 'Yes, well, do want to be careful about that. Thing is nonlethal, just knocks anyone hit with it out, and temporarily charms them against basic revival spells — which I would guess is part of why Hermione suggested it. But, the problem I was getting at, you're not really suited to it. It is a very powerful spell, yes, but it shouldn't have taken that much out of you. You almost blacked out from it. That shouldn't have happened, as powerful as you are, nowhere close. I could tell just feeling it your ice spells took too much out of you too. No — lightning, ice, water magics, these are obviously not suited to you at all.'

Okay. That made no sense at all. 'What do you mean not suited to me?'

'Elemental magic isn't like normal charms. You'll find some classes of spells you're especially good at, while others come much less easily to you.' Dora shrugged a little. 'It's just the way it works. Myself, I discovered a long time ago that I'm very good at elemental magics dealing with ice and water, but I can't do spells involving fire or light nearly as well. You, however...' A slight smirk stretched across Dora's face. 'Can't think of any elemental spells that came especially easily to you?'

Melantha didn't have to consider it for even a second. 'Every fire spell I looked at I got on my first try.' Come to think of it, even the first-year fire spell they'd learned in Charms class she'd gotten right immediately. And nearly set Ron's books aflame on accident.

With a smile and a nod, Dora said, 'There you go: fire. There are dozens and dozens of varieties of charmed fire we can look at — elemental fire magic is most useful for burning away charms and transfigurations, or in the more powerful varieties destroying enchantments or even burning right through wards. It can be damn scary stuff, very fun. You have to be a little more careful, as it can be all too easy to seriously hurt someone, but the stuff is extremely useful. Kinda makes me sad it doesn't like me. I'll get a book on it from the family library, bring it for you next time.'

'So.' Dora leaned back, pushing her chair up on two legs, propping her knees against the table and lacing her fingers behind her pink-shrouded head. 'Bell, you'll be refining your combat transfiguration, and learning some more hexes and curses, get more comfortable using them. Mel, you'll be focusing on elemental magic, mostly fire, and the same with those hexes and curses — though I wouldn't be surprised if you already know most of them, you seem to focus on charms — and also getting you casting silently, and maybe a bit of combat transfiguration later in the year. Both of you will work on physical conditioning, curse deflection, charm duplication, and one quick movement trick each, which one specifically depends on which you each take to. And anything else I decide you could use down the road as I come up with it. Both do as well as I expect you to, and you'll probably be the two most dangerous kiddies in this school by the end of the year.

'Sound like fun?'

Feeling slightly overwhelmed — but mostly, if she were to be honest, exhausted — Melantha glanced over at Katie. But all Katie did was smile, nod back at Dora.

She let out something between a sigh and a groan. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Chapter End Notes
Lily's group of friends: Alice Prewett (5th year Gryffindor), Severus Snape (5th year Slytherin), Marlene McKinnon (5th year Gryffindor), Terence Davis (6th year Slytherin, and yes, that Davis), Castalia Lovegood (6th year Ravenclaw, Xeno's younger sister). And yes, the "Black" in the scene is Sirius.

Annīf (IPA: /ɐ̃.nyːf/, roughly uh-nee-f) — Brīwn term of endearment; cognate to Welsh "annwyl" and, if I'm not mistaken, Irish "ionúin" and Scottish "ionmhuinn"

[with a few additions that...vary from family to family] — For example, the no-human-clothes-give-clothes-to-release thing is a common, but not universal, addition to the oath. Sort of characteristic of an ideologically Light mindset, but not limited to those families.

Tisme — IPA: /tʰiːs.mɛ/, roughly "teesh-meh"; there will be a less weird nickname introduced later

Nilanse — IPA: /ɲi laːn ɕɛ/, roughly "nee-lahn-sheh"; there will be a less weird nickname introduced later

[Annīf, whatever her first name was, that Hufflepuff who'd tried to slip her a love potion last year] — This is the third-year Hufflepuff who asked Harry to the Yule Ball in GoF.

[There is this expectation...that people get married for love. This is actually a new idea — it only turned up in the last few centuries, and hasn't even made it to the entire muggle world yet] — That's actually true. Go ahead and research it if you don't believe me.

Contege — Latin, second-person imperative meaning "conceal" or "protect". Inspired by fanon contego. Not as durable as a full prōtege, but still useful.

Impediātur — Latin, third-person passive subjunctive of "hinder"; impedimenta in canon

Tītillēre — Latin, second-person passive subjunctive of "tickle"; titillando in canon

Dentēsogē (slurred "dentēs augē") — Latin, imperative of "enlarge teeth"; densauggēo in canon

Sepenglaciālem (slurred "saepem glaciālem") — Latin, "icy fence" in the accusative, object of a dropped verb

Expelle — Latin, imperative of "drive away"; depulso in canon

Flammaseriem iace (slurred "flammam seriem") — Latin, imperative of "throw a series/chain of flames"

Sto uranó ftánete (Greek: Στο ύπερο φτάνετε) — Greek, intended to be imperative of "reach toward the sky", but I'm not nearly as comfortable with Greek as Latin, so no guarantees

Līmen clūde — Latin, lit. "close (the) door", shield against physical objects
glaciem circueundam — Latin, "encircling ice" in the accusative, object of a dropped verb. If it sounds familiar to some of you, that’s because Charissa used the fire-based equivalent in chapter 11 of TLG.

Austre furēns, caelitem īra tuam excī, et sub fulminibus inexōrālibibus terram inundā — Latin, something like "Raging Auster, call forth your celestial anger, and drown the earth with inescapable lightning," Auster being the Roman god of the southerly wind. Rather powerful area-effect lightning magic. Considered using Greek, decided I’d probably fuck up the grammar. And yes, I do put far too much thought into this shit.

Whew. Such a nerd, I am.

It sort of disappoints me that, in canon, Harry does something ABSOLUTELY RIDICULOUS like drive off all those dementors — which, from the other uses of that charm we see in the books, is just absurd — then spends the rest of the books being...magically mediocre. Blech. And not just skill-wise, but how he independently put in the enduring effort to learn it like that? Yeah, pretty sure Harry peaked as an interesting character in book three, and just steadily declined into passive angsty uselessness afterward. Blech, blech, blech.

Stupid AO3 HTML auto-edit whatever thing, keeps messing up my formatting in unpredictable ways, grumble grumble...

Anyway. Until next time,

~Wings
Chapter Summary

Finally making that trip down to Hogsmeade, Mel has a couple of very awkward conversations. But like she knows any other kind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Melantha stared at the Map spread out over her legs, watching the hallways and rooms immediately around her.

Once again, she was having another damn meeting she wasn't happy about. This was becoming far too frequent of an occurrence. She'd gotten used to her talks with Ellie, sure, and the upcoming discussions she knew she'd be having with Dumbledore she was...eh, conflicted about, she'd say. But ever since the start of the term, she'd been wrangled into meetings with people she'd really rather not talk to, with a few more waiting over the horizon — and the third week of classes wasn't even finished yet! There'd been Malfoy on practically the first day, then that awkward talk with Remus. She was currently working up the nerve to call the elves who were apparently bound to her, and she still hadn't told Hermione she needed help getting less shitty clothes, even though the first Hogsmeade weekend was just days away, and apparently the fucking Minister of Magic was being more and more insistent about meeting Harry Potter for something, she hadn't been told exactly what...

She wondered if she could just write a letter to Fudge telling him to piss off. That would be fun. But no, she had a suspicion, from what Sirius had said, that they'd probably have to give him a face-to-face eventually. Which since, ah, "Harry Potter" wasn't exactly available right now, would probably involve shenanigans. Didn't that just sound fun?

For not even close to the first time, she wondered what it would be like to live a boring life.

But she had no time to keep wallowing in self-pity in that embarrassing way she could sometimes fall into: there was the name she was waiting for, slipping through the hall just outside, alone as they had agreed. From what she could see of their surroundings, it didn't look like he'd been followed, and no one was waiting in the wings to interrupt them — not even Ron, who she'd had some difficulty shaking off. Alright, then.

She'd just gotten the Map folded up in her pocket when the door clicked open, and Malfoy stepped into the room. Without even looking at her, he closed the door behind him, then pulled his wand, let out a litany of privacy charms. She noticed he'd missed a couple in the suite Sirius had taught her, so she drew her own wand to add them quick. When Malfoy turned back toward her, she noticed one eyebrow slightly twitch. Probably noticing she hadn't bothered even standing up — she was sort of implying, on purpose, she'd rather keep the mood more informal than it'd been last time. Not that she really wanted to be meeting with Malfoy of all people anyway, but if she had to she'd rather not have to be all proper and stuffy and blech. She didn't even manage it very well when she was trying, honestly.

Whatever he thought of it, Malfoy didn't comment, just walked on over and, with a nod and a
muttered, 'Cousin,' fell into the armchair across from her. After a second rearranging the cloth of his trousers over his legs, Malfoy said, 'And what is it you wished to talk to me about, Miss Black?'

She couldn't help herself. 'Getting right to the point, then?'

It was so slight she might have imagined it, but she thought she saw a smile twitch at the corners of his lips. 'Is there any reason not to?'

Ha, he'd remembered; she had to hold back a very unlady-like snort...and since when had she cared about that? Probably just Andi's voice in her head. 'I suppose not.' Well, now that they were done quoting each other, might as well just get this over with. 'Have you heard from your mother in the last week or so?'

For a long moment, Malfoy didn't respond, just staring back at her. Again, it could be her imagination, but she thought she noticed sudden tension, his fingers tightening slightly on the armrests. Finally, 'No. She usually writes me over the weekend, but I didn't hear from her. I didn't think anything of it — sometimes we skip a week. Did something happen?'

And now Melantha paused a moment before speaking. Not out of hesitation, exactly. It just... Okay, this was probably one of the more mean things she'd ever thought about anyone ever, but it hadn't really occurred to her that Draco Malfoy might care enough about his mum to write her a letter once a week, or get so obviously nervous at the thought that something might have happened to her. It was just a weird thought, was all. Like learning Voldemort spent his free time in his flower garden or something. After a couple seconds, she recovered. 'No, she's fine. She met Sirius a bit ago, and he thought it best she get out of the country until everything's settled. In case anyone tries to stop her, you know.'

The barely-tension slipped out of him, and she thought she saw Malfoy let out a slight breath. 'The Lord Black is giving her asylum, then.' At her nod, he asked, 'Out of the country where?'

'Ah, France. Old Black property there. In Provence, I think he said.'

'Aquitania, then, not France.'

Melantha had to roll her eyes at that. Magical and muggle borders weren't always the same — in fact, they were completely different more often than not — which meant the country referred to as "France" in the magical world did not include Provence. At least, not technically, but it wasn't uncommon for people to call Aquitanians French as well. Whatever, at least Malfoy hadn't been using his arseface voice while correcting her. 'Doesn't matter so much, does it?'

'Matters more than you would think.' When Melantha gave him a look, he shrugged a little. 'There's a reason there are so many non-human communities in Aquitania. While the Dark Lord does not have many foreign allies, they do still exist, but they are far less likely to be found there. Mother is safer in Aquitania than she'd be in France.'

Melantha nodded — she'd heard that about Aquitania before. While Fleur herself was French, born in a small veela commune not far outside of Paris, Beauxbatons was actually in Aquitania. Things were better in France for veela than they would be in Britain — she only had to look at how Fleur had been spoken of in public, and even by government officials, to know that — but she still wouldn't have been able to get into any of the top-tier schools in her home country. Aquitania had even been spared the worst of Grindelwald's war, since the sociopolitical ills his revolution had been aimed against had been far less severe there than most other European nations. They weren't the most progressive ICW nation in the modern day, but they weren't far from it. 'That's not all I had to tell you, though.'
He didn't say anything to that, just gave her a somewhat confused look. Not too surprising, she guessed. Narcissa had told Sirius in no uncertain terms that her son would not be leaving the Malfoy family with her — apparently, she fully expected her soon-to-be ex-husband to die any day now, so she wanted her son still legally situated where he could inherit the House without any fuss. But, she was worried Voldemort or his cronies would then turn straight to Malfoy, so she wanted him to get whatever protection possible.

Apparently, she'd said Malfoy would not be running straight to Voldemort at the first opportunity, would rather avoid the Death Eaters entirely, and Sirius had actually believed her. Melantha still wasn't really sure what to think about the idea that Malfoy wasn't perfectly willing to jump on the genocidal maniac bandwagon, as he'd given every indication he certainly was, but she'd just have to deal with that later. 'I'm supposed to tell you that you are now under the protection of House Black.'

Malfoy opened his mouth to respond, then froze, staring back at her in apparent shock. For a few seconds he was silent, blinking slowly to himself, before saying, 'Which kind?'

She had to wince slightly at that. There were a couple different levels of protection a House could give a non-member but, honestly, she didn't remember what the distinctions were, and she didn't think Sirius had told her in any case. The wince wasn't because she felt bad about not being able to give Malfoy the information, not at all — she was more thinking what Andi would do to her once she learned her lessons hadn't sunk in too well. But she did have enough detail, she guessed. 'I don't know which, honestly. Sirius just told me my cousins and I were to treat you as one of our own.' And if that weren't galling as all hell. Sirius had basically just told her to suck it up. She'd started making a comparison to how much Sirius and her father had absolutely despised Snape when they'd been in school, but he'd just laughed at her and said, to quote him verbatim, 'I guess it sucks to be you.' She did appreciate how Sirius was looking out for her and everything, and how nice and almost awkwardly supportive he was being, even with the suddenly-a-girl stuff, but he could really be an enormous arsehole sometimes.

For another long moment, Malfoy was silent, staring back at her with flat gaze and empty face. Then he nodded, said, 'Thank you, Melantha.' Oh, great. She saw what he was doing with that instantly. He wasn't actually thanking her for anything she may or may not have done, that wasn't the point; it was just an inoffensive bridge to going on a first-name basis. And she didn't really have a good reason to refuse, either. If she did, Andi would be annoyed with her, and an annoyed Aunt Andi was not a fun Aunt Andi. Melantha Black had very little justification to be rude to Draco Malfoy — at least, unless she wanted to claim she was borrowing a grudge from Harry Potter, which would be hard to make sense without explaining she was Harry Potter, which she really didn't want to do. So, trying to not let any annoyance slip into her voice, she said, 'It was nothing, Draco.' Ergh, that even felt weird, blech.

A second passed, Malfoy still staring at her. Then he... Well, there was no other word for it: he relaxed. The difference was so slight she probably wouldn't have noticed it if, well, she hadn't spent so much time in shouting matches with the prick, she'd learned his body language rather well watching for signs he was going for his wand. He sank into the chair a little further, his eyelids dropped only slightly, as though no longer consciously keeping them open wide. It was the strangest thing. She didn't know what to think of it. After a moment of thought, she realised what this was: in his head, Malfoy had moved her from the potential ally category to family. Which... Yeah, she still had no idea what to think of this. This was very weird.

Mostly to cover how suddenly uncomfortable she was feeling, she said, 'That's not going to be a problem for you, is it?'
He blinked back at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I get the impression we're not your kind of people. Sirius isn't exactly your usual Lord Black. Hell, of the Blacks at Hogwarts right now, I'm the closest to a pureblood, and my mother's a muggleborn.' They'd put that detail into Melantha's backstory just so make things easier on her. It was easier to remember a lie if it was also mostly true.

But Malfoy just shrugged. 'I'll admit I likely haven't heard of everything, but I can't think of anything the House of Black has done in the last months that I too strongly disapprove of.'

...What? How did that— No, that didn't make any sense at all. This was the same Malfoy, right? The same twit who'd constantly spouted that same pureblood nonsense propaganda any chance he got? who'd seemed eager at the idea of all the muggleborns being eaten back in second year, ecstatic at the idea of Voldemort's return? She'd known for a while while he disproportionately targeted herself and her friends with his arseholishness, but this still seemed like a bit much.

And there he was, giving her a politely confused look at her reaction. And she didn't know which half of that was bothering her more either — the confusion or the politeness. 'Are you okay?' Sure, there was a bit of snark on his voice saying that, but...

Okay. Fine. As long as she had him here, and he didn't know who she was, so he wouldn't be an arse automatically she could just...ask? Sure. Let's do that. 'I'd just gotten the impression from a few people you were, I don't know... Really into that whole blood purity thing.'

For a moment he still looked confused, but then he nodded. 'Right. You're friends with Granger. Almost forgot.'

She hesitated for an instant, then shrugged it off — fuck it. 'I also might have talked to Harry.' Still felt weird talking about herself in third person like that, but fine.

To her surprise, Malfoy's only reaction to the name was a smirk twitching at his lips. 'Oh, I'm sure he had plenty of fun stories to tell about me. Absolutely littered with curses and insults not at all appropriate for civilised conversation, I'd guess.' Well, she couldn't exactly argue with that. Giving her a soft smile that was honestly annoying her quite a bit, he said, 'I've told you before, Cousin: don't believe everything you hear.'

Trying to keep her voice level, fighting against the anger clawing at her throat, she said, 'So, if I were to ask Hermione about what you've said and done here at Hogwarts, she wouldn't back it up.'

'That's not what I meant.' He shrugged slightly, as though this whole thing were some casual topic that didn't really matter. Which was only making her more annoyed. 'I'm sure whatever they tell of what actually happened is accurate — Harry Potter is many things, but he's not a liar. Honestly, it would probably do him a lot of good if he learned to be.'

It took absolutely everything she had to hold back a shocked laugh at that comment.

'What I meant was that everything I said wasn't necessarily trustworthy. They might repeat my words accurately, but that doesn't mean I meant what I said. I did originally, sure,' he said with another shrug, 'but I didn't have all the facts at the time. For example, do you know how old the entire concept of blood purity is?'

'Ah...' The question surprised her out of her disbelief for a short moment. She didn't know that, actually. 'I'm never occurred to her to wonder about it. 'Erm, no.'

Smiling again, he said, 'Most British mages don't, actually. It's not something that's really talked
about here, but Continental scholars have done the research on it. In the later Middle Ages through the first generations after the Statute of Secrecy, people were termed "pureblood" if they had two magical parents. Not even their grandparents — just parents. As late as the Fourteenth Century, the concept didn't exist at all. Some people still had issues with muggleborns, of course, but that was more a cultural issue than it was a racial one. Muggleborns brought foreign languages, and foreign customs, and Christianity, none of which were wanted by the mages of the time, who'd mostly held on to their native Celtic traditions. Go back as far as the Founders, and you'd have to look hard to find anyone who cared — magical and muggle society weren't even separate back then. There are no pureblood lines extending much further than the Seventeenth Century. The concept simply didn't exist.'

That...made no sense. For at least one reason she could think of. 'But, what about Slytherin? That whole hating muggleborns, and the Chamber of Secrets, and...'

Malfoy shrugged. 'Made up. It's a myth.'

Okay. Annoyed again. Glaring back at Malfoy, she said, 'No, the Chamber of Secrets definitely exists. Back in second year—'

'Again, Melantha, that is not what I meant. Yes, the Chamber of Secrets exists. No, it was not built by Slytherin. Back in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, there was a very powerful Dark Lord, Ignatius Gaunt, who conquered a significant portion of Scotland and Ireland, and ruled his kingdom from Hogwarts Castle. We tend to skip over that entire period in History, unfortunately. That whole story about the Founders, about how Slytherin did not want to accept muggleborns and got into a duel with Gryffindor about it, all that? It appears in no sources before Ignatius Gaunt, who was rather vehement in his opposition to muggle religion, started spreading the story about his famous ancestor supporting his views. It is a myth. It was Gaunt who invented the entire thing, and it was Gaunt who built the Chamber of Secrets and Gaunt who created the basilisk inside. I can point you toward multiple books that explain the whole thing. Though,' he added in an undertone, 'they are all in French and Occitan, don't know if you speak either.'

That...

She had no idea how to respond to that. At all. That it was Malfoy of all people saying it just made it worse. Did... Did Dumbledore know about this? If Malfoy had found it in multiple books, even if they were foreign, she couldn't imagine Dumbledore hadn't at least heard of the idea before. But...if he knew about it, why had he said all that stuff he had back in second year? Maybe just to be less confusing? But wouldn't it be better to tell her that all this pureblood nonsense was a new idea, that they were silly and stupid and wrong? She didn't understand this at all.

Of course, it was possible Malfoy was misinformed, or lying, but it explained a few things. Hermione had said before there were holes in the story they were told in History; she'd said no one she'd read had ever explained exactly how a separate magical society developed so early before the Statute for purebloods to even exist centuries and centuries ago. If mages and muggles hadn't been separated until very recently, if the whole thing were some strange, nationalistic myth, then that would explain a lot. She had to wonder if Hermione had ever tried reading any French books. She could read French, right? Hermione was fluent in French, she knew, so it seemed a reasonable assumption.

Well, she knew what she was getting Hermione for Christmas.

And Malfoy was still talking. 'There has never been any evidence that muggleborns make worse mages than purebloods. In any magical culture. Ever. Sure, there are some magical talents that are heritable, and thus aren't found in muggleborns, but that's not the same thing. Just because
muggleborns cannot be metamorphmaga, or Seers, or Parselmouths, or—'

'Lily Potter was a Parselmouth.' She'd almost said my mother there, whoops. And...well, maybe she shouldn't have told that to Malfoy, but she guessed it didn't really matter. It wasn't like anyone would believe it if he went spreading it around anyway.

His eyes wide with surprise, Malfoy said, 'Was she really?' She just nodded. 'Huh.' He blinked to himself for a moment. 'She was from a squib line, then.' At her odd look, he said, 'That's the exception to the rule. Parseltongue was created, by mages, a very long time ago, carefully bound in blood magic — blood alchemy, specifically. This was thousands of years ago, before some people got squeamish about such things.' By the lightly mocking tone on his voice, she could guess exactly what Malfoy thought about the illegalisation of blood magic.

To be entirely honest? She wasn't even sure she disagreed.

Woah, woah, woah, wait a second. Was it common knowledge Parseltongue was created by blood alchemy? She meant, assuming that was true — and, since no one had bothered explaining to her exactly how Parseltongue worked or where it came from, she had no reason to think it wasn't — was that a thing people could figure out without too much research? It would at least explain why all of Britain considered Parseltongue automatically dark — blood alchemy was, with a few specific exemptions, extremely illegal here. She'd already decided Dumbledore's assertion that she'd picked up Parseltongue from some weird magical contact with Voldemort or whatever was completely wrong. She'd heard her mother, in that memory, have a conversation in native Parseltongue, she must have inherited it from her. But...if it was blood alchemy... She wasn't an expert on obscure magic or anything, but even she knew magics of the body and magics of the soul were entirely separate. If Parseltongue was carried on the blood, Dumbledore's theory wasn't just wrong — it was impossible.

But anyway, Malfoy was talking. 'Parselmouth must be inherited — that is fact. That means Lily Potter had an ancestor, most likely a recent ancestor, who was a Parselmouth. And, since only mages are Parselmouths, she must have magic ancestors. Either that, or she was adopted by a muggle family, for whatever... Actually,' he said, voice slightly lower, 'that's not a bad thought — she didn't look anything like her muggle relatives.'

She felt her mouth drop open at that, but she was beyond caring at this point. Mostly because he was right: Petunia looked nothing like Lily, not even a little bit. She hadn't seen pictures of her grandparents very often, but she hadn't seen much of her mother in them either. Petunia had even said a few times she suspected Lily had been conceived by an affair their mother had had, she looked so different. Which didn't necessarily mean anything — that sort of thing did happen, if not very commonly, close family members didn't necessarily have to look very similar. Hermione had said something to that effect after seeing a picture of Lily and comparing her in her head to Petunia. This was just something Malfoy was saying today that she knew for a fact was true, which was only making her feel weirder about the other shite he'd said she wasn't so sure about. But that wasn't exactly the problem she was having. What was really bothering her was, 'How do you know that?'

And suddenly Malfoy looked slightly sheepish. This was a weird day Melantha was having right now. 'Professor Snape is my godfather. He was friends with her when they were children. I saw photographs one day at his house.'

Well. If nothing else, that explained Snape's preferential treatment of Malfoy. It didn't quite explain how Malfoy had had the nerve to go snooping around Snape's home — it was very clear from how oddly uncomfortable he looked that he hadn't had permission to look through those pictures. But... They'd gotten off topic. 'Okay. Fine. If you don't believe all that shite, why are you such a prat to Harry and Hermione all the time?' She could ask about Ron, or even any of the Weasleys, but she
kind of suspected Malfoy only went after them because they were friends with her. That, and their fathers hated each other. No point in asking, really.

Malfoy shrugged again; he did seem to be doing that a lot this conversation. 'I don't like Potter. I have reasons, which I don't care to get into right now. Probably not even rational reasons, to be honest.' Oh, well, at least could admit that! Bloody stupid git. 'As for Granger...' He trailed off, frowning up at the ceiling for a couple seconds. 'Well, Granger bothers me. Always has.'

She frowned at him. 'She bothers you? What's that supposed to mean?'

After the slightest of sighs — oh, so now he was getting annoyed with this conversation, bloody prat — Malfoy started in a light, almost condescending voice. 'I know you haven't been here for very long, just a couple weeks, but just judge based on your initial impressions. Who in our year do you think is the most gifted magically?'

'Erm. Hermione?' That was the obvious answer to her, yes, but the more confusing part about this was that it seemed Malfoy thought that was the obvious answer too.

With a nod, he said, 'Almost certainly Granger. If Potter were here, I'd say he's a narrow first or a close second, but since he isn't, it's clearly Granger.' She had to frown at that — both because she'd never really thought she was nearly as good with magic as Hermione, and she thought that had to be the first time Malfoy had ever given her something that could even be liberally interpreted as a compliment. 'Now, at first, I was very angry about that. See, I'd swallowed everything my father had told me. I thought, obviously this girl is cheating somehow. She has to be. That's the only way it makes sense. And the professors have to be in it. Some political nonsense, probably — the Headmaster is Dumbledore, after all. And, look, Uncle Sev is the only one who isn't kissing the hem of Dumbledore's robes, and he's the only one even half-heartedly criticising her. That just proves it!

'Nonsense in retrospect, of course. She really is just that good. If anything, Professor Snape is harder on her than is entirely justifiable — by the way, tell anyone I call him Uncle Sev in private and I will deny it, and then hex you, cousin or no.' Melantha smirked a little at that; Malfoy obviously noticed it, replying with a glare. Sort of a teasingly false glare, which was weird, but still a glare. 'Shut up.

'But anyway. I had long been told an ideal of exactly what the perfect pureblood noblewoman should be like. From all kinds of sources, it doesn't really matter specifically. You probably know the image by now. A woman ofirrepressible magical power, vastly knowledgeable and skilled enough to be a threat when crossed. To her family and friends, warm and gentle and unshakably loyal; to those beneath her notice, an insurmountable wall of iron pride and cold disdain; to her enemies, the unquenchable, unstoppable wrath of gods. A woman of intelligence, of honour, of grace. Tell me: does this remind you of anyone?'

If it hadn't been obvious from context who he was talking about, Melantha would never have guessed it. Partially just because...she never really thought of Hermione like that, she guessed? She was just...Hermione. And, well, this was Malfoy talking, it was weird. And the tone of voice he'd said the whole thing was just... 'You don't, erm, fancy Hermione or anything, do you?'

She almost jumped out of her seat when Malfoy let out a sudden, sharp bark of laughter. The sound was clear and light, which was sort of odd — had she ever heard Malfoy laugh in a way that wasn't sneering or derisive? After a couple seconds, he managed to get control of his breathing a little, the slightest chuckling still on his voice as he spoke. 'Myrðin, no. Are you serious? That girl gets on my nerves something awful. And the feeling is clearly mutual — without a lecture to distract us, we can't stand to be in the same room for two seconds without screaming at each other. Honestly, me and Granger...' He trailed off, shaking his head and chuckling to himself a little.
Okay, well, he didn't have to react that badly. Melantha found herself oddly trapped between blushing and stammering like an idiot and...she didn't know, defending Hermione's honour or something? Not the right phrase. Whatever, it was stupid, because Malfoy had just gone on a little rant a second ago about how great Hermione was, she was perfectly justified in thinking something was going on there, no reason to be embarrassed, and Hermione's character obviously didn't need defending from him...which was still an odd concept to wrap her head around. This conversation was just so absurd. 'I didn't think it was that funny, but okay.'

A smirk on his face, he said, 'I'm mostly just imagining what Granger would do to anyone who suggested it.'

Oh. Well. Okay, that would potentially be amusing, actually. No one would get out of that conversation without being hexed with something. 'Okay, fine, you don't hate her. Why do you keep being such a prat to her all the time, then?'

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at her, the image somewhat ruined by the laughter still pulling at his lips. 'Did I say I don't hate her?'

'Erm...'

'I don't hate her because she's muggleborn, sure. But she's willfully ignorant of anything she doesn't care for, arrogant and self-righteous about everything she does, and annoyingly preachy over anything she disagrees with — a set of traits depressingly common among Gryffindors, actually. I don't like her, but I have actual reasons for not liking her. I needle her a bit more than other Gryffindors because she could be better, but she chooses not to be. She bothers me.'

Well...

The worst part about that was Melantha couldn't even necessarily say he was wrong. She meant, Hermione was great, probably her favourite person in the world right now, but even she could admit that at times she could be a bit...much. Sometimes.

And, well, something Malfoy probably didn't even know about, when Hermione got an idea in her head, she had a tendency to sort of run with it to places that weren't always the most...reasonable? Like. Okay. Figuring out who the Heir of Slytherin was back in second year, sure, that'd been important. She'd been convinced it was Malfoy with very little evidence — but, then, so were Melantha and Ron, but Hermione was supposed to be the smart one, okay. But even the two of them weren't completely insane enough to think of brewing fucking polyjuice in an abandoned girls loo, and try to...what? What had they thought Malfoy was going to tell them? Even if Malfoy had been the Heir — which, in retrospect, it should have been obvious he wasn't — how exactly was talking to him in the Slytherin common room like that supposed to help?

The entire thing made absolutely zero sense...and they could have gone to Azkaban for it. Not just expelled, legitimately sent to prison — criminal law in magical Britain made no distinction between trying someone as a minor or as an adult. And sure, Melantha should have seen the whole thing was stupid, yes. But Hermione? That level of reckless stupidity from Hermione was just...

She wanted to believe Hermione was intelligent and eminently reasonable at all times. She really did. But looking back on the last four years it was clear that wasn't always the case. Hermione was a stupid as the rest of them sometimes.

So, yes, Hermione wasn't perfect. With how she sometimes got into professorial or preachy moods, she could even see how someone from the outside, who didn't know her as well, would actually find her annoying. But even just thinking Draco Malfoy of all people might be even a little bit right about
Hermione was making her feel extremely uncomfortable. She didn't want to talk about this anymore. Any of it, really. 'So, I hear you play quidditch.'

By the slight smirk on his lips, Malfoy thought the subject change was just as awkwardly transparent as, honestly, it had been. But he went along with it, started babbling off about the people on the Slytherin team and their practices, and blah blah, talking about how, with Potter gone, they might actually win this year. Which, Melantha realised, was probably true — Ginny was good, yes, but she wasn't better than Malfoy. Or even Cedric, for that matter. Without Melantha, Gryffindor would need to get lucky to win. She wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that.

But she wasn't thinking so much about it. In one conversation, Malfoy had given her far too many things to think about. She was really starting to wonder if she was ever going to run out of those any time soon.

Melantha stalked over toward the Gryffindor table, aiming herself in the general direction of the pack of flaming orange-red hair she'd caught at a glance. She slumped into a seat across the table from Ron and Ginny — since making the quidditch team, she was apparently cool enough to hang around her brothers without them getting too annoying — and stared at the platters of food in front of her. And tried not to be queasy. Maybe because of...what she'd woken up to this morning, or...the reason why exactly she'd woken up to this morning, or...the aftereffect of the charm she'd used, she didn't know, but the thought of eating was honestly a little gross. But she pushed the feeling off, ignored the quivering in her stomach, and started loading her plate with whatever happened to be nearby.

Ron said something to her, but his mouth was full at the time, so it wasn't the clearest English she'd ever heard. From long experience interpreting Ron's food-obstructed speech, though, she knew he'd said, 'What got into you?'

Nope. She wasn't going to talk about that. And definitely not during breakfast. She just shot Ron a sharp glare, hoped he'd take the hint. By the baffled look on his face, that wasn't so likely.

Even as she slipped into the seat next to her, Hermione said, 'Chew, Ronald, and then swallow. And then talk. Please.'

Making the motions as smooth and exaggerated as possible, Ron chewed a few times, then swallowed enough food all at once that it really wasn't helping settle Melantha's stomach at all. 'There, happy?' She didn't have to look to know Hermione was rolling her eyes. 'But seriously, what happened? You look like you just got in a fight with Malfoy or something.'

Melantha just glared at him again, let out a grunt that, to her mind, very clearly said Shut up if you know what's good for you. Then she scooped up a forkful of eggs, and had to wrestle not to spit it right back out when her stomach gave a sickening heave. Oh, behave! Come on! Stupid bloody thing...

Ergh, bad choice of words...

'It's nothing to worry about,' Hermione said from her side. In the exact sort of casual voice that Ron never bought ever, only made him try to figure out what was going on harder. You'd think she'd learn these things.

'Really? She looks like she's gonna bloody curse someone.'

Melantha turned away from her food long enough to say, 'Maybe you, if you don't drop it.'
Which just made him smile at her. In a somewhat confused sort of way, but still. Prat.

'Honestly, Ronald.' Hermione let out an exasperated sigh, but when she spoke again there was a slight playful tinge at the edge of her voice. Even the sound of it gave Melantha a sinking feeling of dread. 'It's really nothing to worry about. Mel's just getting used to some things is all. Probably would have happened earlier, but—' The playful edge was temporarily replaced with a sting of hatred. '—she had a bit to make up for after spending so long with those people. But anyway, it's perfectly normal, just something she'll have to remember to address, oh, roughly once a month.'

An instant of silence, Melantha didn't dare look up. She really wished Hermione hadn't said that. Ron's foot seemed to live in his mouth, and this really wasn't something she wanted to even think about right now, and she was positive Ron was going to be a—

'Wait, are you on the rag?'

Yep, there he goes. Her fork ground against her plate with a teeth-jarring screech, but she wasn't the only one to react. To her right, the twins said, in unison, 'Eating, here!' She thought she might have heard Katie, sitting with Alicia to the twins' other side, muffle a snort of laughter. (Oh, funny, was it? She was definitely getting hexed in their lesson with Dora tomorrow.) In her peripheral vision she saw Ginny, without a sound and hardly even an expression, reach up and smack Ron over the back of the head, then go straight back to eating.

With a combination of the hit from his sister, and another 'Honestly, Ronald,' from Hermione, Ron had apparently gotten the message. For a few moments, there was silence. Blessed, blessed silence. But it was not to last. 'I should have known, really.'

Melantha frowned, glanced up at Ron, who had a half-uncomfortable, half-amused sort of look on his face. Dreading what he was about to say, she asked, 'Should have known what?'

'I mean, I just should have figured you'd be all pissy when you're—'

She dropped her fork, letting the thing noisily clatter down onto her plate, brought her wand to her hand with a flick of her wrist. Point aimed square right for Ron's chest, she said, 'You finish that sentence and I will hex you.'

Ron lifted both hands in playful surrender, before turning back to his breakfast. He might have been trying to play all casual, but it was rather obvious — the tension in his shoulders, the slight hitch to his grin — that he was really uncomfortable with the whole topic. Good, maybe he'd shut up next time. But, not too surprising he'd be uncomfortable, she guessed. They hadn't talked about it at all really, but she knew he still hadn't come to terms with the whole suddenly-a-girl thing. Hermione had said at one point just to give him time, which she guessed she was sort of doing by...pretending there wasn't a problem, which...was probably a bad idea?

She was really starting to get tired of hearing Ellie's voice in her head, saying shit like that.

After another moment of silence, Hermione started talking. 'It's rather fascinating, actually. There is a rather simple charm you can use to, to put it obliquely, remove any offending substances—'

Melantha grimaced; was there a rather simple charm to block her own hearing? '—but the charm's effects are limited to only that. It doesn't interfere with the hormone cycle much at all. From doing a bit of reading, I'm not sure how aware mages are there even is a hormone cycle.'

Sending another glare up at Ron, Melantha said, 'Say anything including the word "estrogen", and I will hex you.' Honestly, he just seemed mostly confused by that — she momentarily wondered if mages even knew what estrogen was. Or did they use a different word for the same thing? They did
things like that sometimes.

And Hermione was still talking, Jesus. 'Actually, you'd be at a low point in your estrogen levels right now. Estrogen peaks in the proliferative phase, right before ovulation—' Ghrk, no. '—but stays slightly elevated through the luteal phase, roughly in the middle of which progesterone peaks. During menstruation—' Ergh, god, why was she saying this... '—itself, female sex hormones are actually at a cyclic minimum. So, if these hormones have any effect on mood or behaviour at all at this point in the cycle, it's more out of their lack than their presence. Which there is minimal evidence for, but it's generally thought to be more psychological than biological, if that makes sense.'

'The hell are you talking about?'

With a shrug, Hermione turned to her. 'It's all in your head.'

...

Well, of course it was all in her head! Melantha could have told her that! Her being annoyed at the world right now had nothing to do with hormone cycles or whatever the fuck Hermione had been blabbing about. She was annoyed because she'd woken up with blood all over her sheets, and she'd needed to get help from Hermione to deal with the fact that she was leaking, and the entire thing had been unspeakably embarrassing. Literally unspeakable, she had been incapable of speech. And sure, she'd said to hell with it and had decided to just run with the being-a-girl-now thing, yes, but that didn't mean things like this weren't still weird and uncomfortable and... And! And Hermione had spent the entire time looking faintly amused, and she was so done with being annoyed this morning and she just wanted it to stop.

So, yes, she was perfectly aware it was all in her head. Thanks for the diagnosis, Doctor Granger.

Come to think of it, Hermione should really be thankful she didn't share every little thing that was going on in her head all the time. She doubted she'd be happy hearing things like that.

There was a lot of shuffling and motion from her left, and she glanced at Hermione to see the twins had practically teleported over there — she hadn't even noticed them move. One was sitting on the bench at her opposite side, the other standing behind her, practically draped over her shoulders. Erm. Okay. 'While we would have preferred a different choice of topic,' one started.

The other picked it up, without even the slightest gap in cadence. '—you know we love it when you get all academic on us.'

The other picked it up, without even the slightest gap in cadence. '—you know we love it when you get all academic on us.'

'When's our detention, Professor Granger? We've been—'

'—very, very bad.'

In a level, almost bored-sounding voice, Hermione said, 'Boys? I am trying to eat here.' Her face was nearly as expressionless as her voice, but Melantha caught the traces of a smile pulling at her lips.

With hardly another word, the twins sauntered off — apparently, that had been intended as a parting shot. Once they were gone, Artemis leaned over from a few seats away. 'I think I finally get how other people feel talking to us.'

Selene, sitting directly behind Artemis at the Hufflepuff table, turned around to give the Gryffindors a dazzling smile. 'Yeah, but we're prettier.'

'True, true.'
But Melantha mostly ignored them — which wasn't a bad suggestion when it came to dealing with either the Weasley twins or Black triplets, honestly. She was just staring at Hermione, who had gone straight back to eating. Eating rather faster than she had been before, but still just eating. 'What the hell was that?'

'What?'

'Since when were you all buddy-buddy with the twins?'

Hermione glanced over at her for an instant, then shrugged. 'Last year.'

A tone of doubt on his voice, Ron said, 'You realise those two have even less respect for the rules than we do.'

Somewhat to Melantha's surprise, Hermione didn't immediately go on the defense about that one. Instead she just gave Ron a flat, level look, staring silently for long seconds. She waited for Ron to start squirming before she said anything. 'Ron? I am currently blackmailing Rita Skeeter.' Then she grabbed a bun off a nearby platter, got to her feet, said, 'I'll meet you out front, Mel,' and walked away.

For a few moments, she and Ron sat, watching Hermione calmly walk away. Finally, Ron said, 'Is it just me, or is she getting even scarier?'

Melantha shrugged, turned back to her breakfast. 'Well, you're not wrong.' Not that she'd necessarily say that was a bad thing. Hell, she'd been spending a lot of time with the Blacks over the last months, and half of them were rather scary, if she took a second to think about it. Sirius used to be absolutely deadly with a wand — after years in Azkaban, he was rusty — and could supposedly get rather irrationally vindictive when he was angry. Andi had been taught nonmagical self-defense growing up, as had both of her sisters, so she didn't even need a wand to fuck people up, and was entirely willing to do so if she felt it was necessary. She had no idea what the deal was with Ailís, she seemed perfectly nice to her, but Sirius tiptoed around her like she were an armed bomb or something — Sirius. And Dora, of course, despite the seeming carefree silliness, which Melantha was starting to think was just a facade, was a simply ridiculous duellist, and was so cavalier about maybe hurting people a little bit she'd used a piercing curse to take Melantha out in a practice duel. While she obviously didn't know this from first-hand experience, apparently even her own mother had been scary enough she scared scary people.

So she was getting oddly used to scary people by now. For the most part, as long as the scary people were on her side she was fine with it.

A few minutes later, she was just about to get up to meet Hermione when a hand fell on her shoulder. Even as she jumped, she felt someone move in close, hair tickling at her neck, breath at her ear. 'Welcome to womanhood, Potter.'

She blindly swiped around toward Katie, but the girl had already skipped backward out of the way. Giggling to herself, she walked out with Alicia. Katie was getting hexed. Oh yes, she was getting so hexed. They were going to be working on deflection tomorrow too, it wouldn't even be hard to "miss" and aim a hex somewhere it'd be harder for Katie to catch it. She'd have to select a particularly annoying one, just because. Katie would almost certainly retaliate, but it would be worth it.

And Melantha was walking through the thin crowd in the courtyard in front of the main entrance alone. Ron had insisted on coming along at first, but as soon as she'd said exactly what she and Hermione would be doing in Hogsmeade, he'd abruptly decided he had other things to do. After a
moment of searching, she found Hermione sitting on one of the stone benches, her nose at its habitual place stuck in a book. But she must not have been too lost in whatever she was reading, because Melantha hadn't even said anything before Hermione had the book folded and put away.

For some reason, she could see the thestrals pulling the carriages now. Which was really strange, because she hadn't at the beginning of the year, but she could see the things plain as day now. The only thing she could think of that might count was seeing her mother's memory of that fight at the Boneses' — on a related note, she'd since learned Bones's father had actually died during that battle, before she'd even been born, how fun. But, if something like that worked, how come watching, for example, someone dying in a film didn't count? Maybe since the actor wasn't actually dying, did that make the difference? If someone didn't understand that films weren't real, and thought the person actually had died, would that count? Or did the memory count because some special thing about how pensieves work? It was weird.

This might make her sound a bit crazy, but she actually liked the thestrals. They were... It was hard to explain. Sure, they were these big, bat-winged, dragon-horse things, leathery black skin stretched so tightly over bones they were rather creepy-looking, she wasn't going to deny that. And those noises they made, the rare times they made noises, those reverberating, hooting calls, were a bit creepy as well — apparently, people who couldn't see thestrals couldn't hear them either, which was interesting. But anyway, that wasn't really the feeling she got from being near them. Standing next to one just now, maybe only a metre away, she felt...calm? It was hard to explain. It was like the things radiated a sense of peace and tranquility, she could almost see it wafting off of them, and it was just... It was nice. She didn't know why. It just was.

She did move the thought to her don't say this out loud box. She had absolutely no idea how other people would react to her claim she found soothing creatures popularly thought to be death omens.

She and Hermione managed to get a carriage to themselves, and before long they were smoothly plodding on toward the village. Melantha spent most of it staring out the window, watching the trees slowly slide by, but Hermione had long been used to her, so she'd already had her book out again practically before they'd even sat down. After a few minutes of silence, she asked, 'Just where are we going anyway?'

Hermione didn't answer quite right away, probably running to the end of a sentence or something, and even then she sounded slightly distracted. 'Fenwick's. It's a second-hand clothing shop, just a bit off High Street.'

'Ern.' She blinked for a moment, giving Hermione a look — a look which was pointless, considering Hermione still had her eyes on her book. 'You do remember I'm loaded, right?' Even more loaded than she'd thought a couple weeks ago, really.

'I know. Wizarding clothing is charmed, buying it second-hand isn't an issue. Besides, the other options are Twilfitt and Tattings or Gladrags, but I think you'd be uncomfortable in one and would rather go naked than wear anything from the other.'

'Are they really that bad?'

Hermione shrugged slightly. 'One is geared more toward the wealthy social conservatives of magical society, and the other... Well, you know Lovegood. She shops there. Imagine what she usually wears and you've got the general picture.'

She had to wince at that. From a muggle perspective, mage fashion sense seemed rather odd — even excluding all the robes and cloaks and weird hats and such, they had a tendency toward the use of bright contrasting colours that would be immensely out of place in the muggle world. Luna took that
exaggerated colourfulness and went absolutely nuts with it. When she wasn't in her uniform, everything was so bright and clashed so awfully it made Melantha's eyes water just looking at her. Which might even be the point, she honestly didn't know. 'Well, you're the expert here, I guess.'

Hermione still didn't look up, but Melantha noticed the slightest hint of a smirk at her lips. 'Honestly, Mel, when am I ever not the expert?'

'Not that I disagree, exactly, but ooh, if Andi caught me gloating like that she'd glare so hard I'd have burns after.'

And she just smiled.

Some minutes later, the thestral dragging them along finally came to a stop in the familiar area along the near side of the village, and the two of them hopped out of the coach, Hermione's book again vanishing into the bag at her hip. As they wandered off, Melantha nearly stopped to give the thestral a quick pat of farewell, but, well if someone watching didn't know what was happening she might look a bit crazy, patting the empty air like a weirdo, but to someone who did know what was happening she'd still look a bit crazy, patting a fucking thestral like a complete psycho, so...yeah, maybe she wouldn't be doing that. At least not in public.

Before she fully drew herself back to the present moment, Hermione had hooked her arm through hers, and was dragging her off to the village. Melantha nearly yanked herself out of Hermione's grip, but stopped herself at the last instant. Fighting down the fluttering in her chest, the anxious tingles sparking across her skin, she told herself quite forcefully it really wasn't that big of a deal. She had to stop being so crazy. Seriously, what did she think Hermione was going to do to her? This was Hermione of all people. Just, settle the fuck down, you crazy person. Besides, it wasn't like she was using that arm right now anyway. She could have her wand in hand in an instant, and Hermione wouldn't get in the way at all, and having her so nearby might actually be helpful if something really terrible ended up happening, god forbid. So, Hermione could just...have that arm right now. No big deal.

No matter how hard she tried to convince herself, a part of her — smaller than it might have been a couple years ago, larger than she would claim if Hermione should ask — was still screaming at her no no no, bad, and it just wouldn't shut up. But it was more a little distraction than it was a serious problem, she could deal with this.

God, she was so exhausted of being such a fucking nutcase. She'd thought she was doing better than this these days. Hermione had dragged her around the common room or the library much like this dozens of times the last few weeks, and that hadn't bothered her nearly as much. Maybe just because this was much more public or something? She never had liked crowds, but she didn't see how— Ergh, this was annoying. Stupid fucking brain...

In the middle of beating herself up, she heard the slightest twittering of a chuckle from Hermione. Lasted less than a second, and muffled enough she'd barely heard it, but there. She glanced over at her — and slightly up, actually, still getting used to how short she was now — to see what looked to be a rueful smile pulling at Hermione's lips. Okay... 'What is it?'

'Oh, nothing,' Hermione said in a light, easy tone. The sort of tone someone uses when it's most definitely not nothing. 'Just sort of funny, is all.'

'What's funny?' She hadn't really noticed anything going on around them, just the usual Hogsmeade weekend crowd, and she doubted Hermione had any idea what had been going on in her head, but she really doubted anyone would consider that funny.
'Here I've got you in Hogsmeade all to myself. Just not exactly as I'd pictured it.'

Melantha figured out what she meant in maybe two seconds. And was honestly more confused than anything. 'Wait, what? I mean, er...'

Giggling to herself under her breath, Hermione squeezed her arm slightly. 'Relax, Mel. It's a thing of the past. Not really interested in girls, after all.'

'Oh my god...' Melantha closed her eyes — she didn't know where she was going anyway, Hermione could lead the way whether she was looking or not, made no difference — started rubbing at her forehead with her free hand. It was obvious what Hermione meant. She'd just, 'I had absolutely no idea.'

A teasing lilt to her voice, Hermione said, 'I had noticed that, believe it or not.'

'I just...' This was so ridiculous. How could her best friend...well, fancy her, or whatever, without her even noticing a thing? This was insane. And now she had a headache. Great. 'Since when?'

She shrugged, high enough Melantha felt the motion through her arm. 'About halfway through third year, I'd think.'

'Seriously? I had no—' And then another thought occurred to her, and she found herself groaning. 'And I asked you to the Yule Ball. I am a such a fucking arseho—'

She was cut off with a slap at her shoulder — quite a bit more playful than she felt she deserved at the moment, honestly. 'Stop that. I had a lovely night. Yes, it was somewhat annoying we weren't going as a couple, but then, I could have told you I wanted to, couldn't have I? And I didn't. I knew you were still working through things, and damned if you didn't have enough to distract your attention that year, so I didn't force the issue. There are reasons I never just came out and told you how I felt, and that's not on you. I knew—' Hermione gave her a sharp poke in the upper arm. '—a lovely—' And another poke. '—night.' The third poke landed in roughly the same spot as the other two, which rather hurt, actually; she failed to hold back a wince. 'Really, don't worry about it. It's over now, anyway. I find it all kind of funny now, honestly.'

'Ergh.' Well, fine, Hermione could find it funny if she wanted to. Personally, Mel kind of thought she was an arsehole, but fine. Or...come to think of it, maybe it was a good thing she hadn't noticed. It's entirely possible she might have held back her craziness long enough to, she didn't know, actually start...dating Hermione...or something? She'd never really thought of Hermione like that, but she might have done it anyway, for whatever reason made sense at the time. Just because it's what Hermione wanted, or just to feel better about the insanity going on that whole year, whatever. And, well, then if the whole suddenly-a-girl thing still happened... Yeah, if she'd had a girlfriend at the time, this whole situation could have been a million times more awkward. Not that she'd be saying any of that, seemed tactless. Or that Hermione hadn't already thought of that herself, because this was Hermione. Not the point. Whatever.

'Oh, I mean, erm.' Hermione drew in a breath through her teeth, harsh enough it whistled slightly. 'I—I don't mean I find it funny that someone might fancy you, I mean, erm, my own preoccupations from my present perspective are funny in retrospect, which isn't the same thing, er...'

Under her hand still at her forehead, Melantha had to smile a little at that. 'It's fine, Hermione. I knew what you meant.'

With a sigh, Hermione said, 'Oh, good. I thought I'd done a Ron for a second there.'
Melantha tried to hold back a laugh, but it ended up coming out as a very undignified snort. Andi would be mortified. Ron was pretty good at sticking his foot in it, wasn't he? She dropped her hand, tried to shake off her little bout of self-flagellation. She did still feel rather awkward, but if they were back to making jokes now, fine, she could just get over it for the moment. 'Well, I was an idiot. Still am, but I mean any bloke should be bloody ecstatic to have you being... You know what I mean.'

'Yes, I know what you mean.'

'Come some arsehole who isn't appropriately beside himself, you tell me and I'll curse the shite out of him.'

A smile on her voice, Hermione said, 'What makes you think I wouldn't curse him myself?'

'I don't. Maybe I'd just want to get a shot in myself, is all.'

'Aw, see? Such a charmer.' Was... Was that sarcasm? She really couldn't tell at this point. 'And I know you weren't aware of this at the time, but you were a very fanciable boy — well, I suppose you might have noticed when you had to keep brushing people off, but I'm not really counting your fangirls. And, you know, I may not be the best judge of such things, but I'm sure it won't be too long before you have boys following you around.' Ergh, if that wasn't an unpleasant thought. In the short silence, Hermione reached over to pat her arm just above the elbow with her free hand. Voice dripping with false seriousness, she said, 'You're very pretty.'

Oh, wow, this was uncomfortable. Should she be able to feel a blush on her own face? There was no way that was healthy. She didn't really have a proper response for that, so she just let out a groan. Hopefully, Hermione would get the point — the point being, Change the subject now, please.

'I'm not even kidding, though! I mean, you like girls still, right?' Honestly, she hadn't even thought about that... 'See, Tracey and Susan like to use nicknames when talking about girls they like; partially in case someone overhears them, partially just for fun. Earlier this week, I heard them using a new one, Delechit, and had them translate it for me. Apparently, that's you, chosen because you are, and I'm quoting Tracey exactly here, tiny yet delicious.'

'Oh, god.' Yep. This was uncomfortable. She really didn't want to be here right now. Wonder if anyone had ever turned themselves invisible with accidental magic before just out of sheer embarrassment. 'Can we talk about something else, please? anything else?'

'Honestly, for those two, that's rather tame. They can be extremely crude when left to their own devices. But we're here now anyway.'

Grumbling under her breath a little, she let Hermione lead her into the little store. Didn't look all that different from muggle clothing stores, honestly — the small ones, at least, not the huge department store-type ones, which she didn't think magical society had an equivalent for. Well, except for how all the words and numbers on the signs and things kept moving, that was different. Hermione had hardly dragged her past the little front display area thing when something she'd just said caught up with her. 'Wait a second, "talk about girls they like"? Are Davis and Bones, er...'

'They're lesbians, yes.' Hermione shrugged. 'Far as I can tell, magical society is far more permissive when it comes to sexuality — for the most part, nobody cares what anyone else gets up to. From what I've heard, you'd be surprised how many people in our year don't really care which gender their partner is, and I do mean girls and boys. Tracey and Susan both only like girls, though.' While Melantha was processing that — a lot of things made far more sense, in retrospect — Hermione turned around to give her a teasing smirk. 'I can give you a list of the girls I know are open to dating another girl, if you want.'
She just rolled her eyes. 'No thanks, I'm good.' No matter how much Hermione teased her about it, she really didn't think dating was in her future any time soon. Even dismissing whether or not anyone would be interested, she had enough shite going on already without worrying about any of that. Romance was not on her radar.

Which just made the rest of the morning especially fun.

Hermione was with her going through... Okay, now, she'd noticed before mages didn't wear robes and other similar traditional junk all the time. They also wore stuff that was very obviously inspired by muggle clothing, even if cut slightly differently, and made of different materials. She and Hermione were looking at the skirts they had right now. Which, yes, was somewhat awkward. She couldn't help the voice in her head going off about woah, what did she think she was doing here, these were girl clothes, she wasn't supposed to be even thinking about this. All she could do was try to ignore it. If she paid attention it only got louder, and that was bad, so pretending it didn't exist was best, yes.

Whenever Hermione asked her to express an opinion it just made it worse. Fuck, this was so uncomfortable. Had she really volunteered for this? This had been her idea from the beginning? She had to be a masochist or something, this was crazy.

Oh, hey, that— No, Vernon, shut up. It's pretty, go to hell, so there.

God, she was such a lunatic.

Anyway, they were right in the middle of that when a voice from behind them nearly made Melantha jump a foot in the air. 'Maïa, this hurts. You'll come here with the new girl, but not with me?'

Melantha was momentarily frozen. She'd learned Hermione had other friends, yes. It had been sort of a weird thing to learn, a reaction that sort of made her feel shitty, but yes. She guessed Hermione had had to have someone to talk to when she had been out at quidditch practice or something and Ron had been being a prat. And some of those friends were people she wouldn't have expected, sure. But it still struck her as extremely odd to hear Hermione referred to by the nickname that, so far as she knew, mostly only her French cousins used, in the voice she recognised from Arithmancy as belonging to Daphne bloody Greengrass.

Looking over her shoulder and yep, she hadn't identified the voice wrong, there she was. Long, straight hair a vivid blonde with occasional flecks of a light brown, the thin, sharp face extremely common in British magical noble families, hard blue-grey eyes — that couldn't be anyone else. And, she'd never really had opportunity to notice this before, but when Greengrass wasn't in their baggy, frumpy Hogwarts robes, she... Well, there was a reason the Gryffindor boys considered her an acceptable subject of their fantasies despite being a Slytherin.

Though, those discussions she really never liked overhearing never included Davis, for some reason. And Davis was here too, her arm linked with Greengrass's much as Hermione had taken hers earlier, but she and Greengrass went practically everywhere together, so she would have expected that. She had mostly the same aristocratic features, with very familiar grey eyes — apparently, House Davis had intermarried with House Black on more than one occasion the last couple centuries. Her hair was a solid black, cut to dangle somewhat above her shoulders. If anything, Davis was even more...erm, was "buxom" the appropriate word? Whatever. And since Davis, any time they weren't forced into uniform, tended to revert to tee shirts and jeans — weird for a member of a Noble House, but okay — her figure was far more noticeable than with Greengrass, who usually went with comparably looser dresses and things. She would guess people usually ignored her in favour of Greengrass because... Well, she was a little...
The word was abrasive. Greengrass could be cold, sure, but she was nowhere near as bad as Davis. She was a bitch, basically. Melantha had hardly even talked to her before the start of this term a few weeks ago, but she'd already figured that out rather well, thanks.

'...and I'm quoting Tracey exactly here, "tiny yet delicious."'

Oh, great, knowing that was going to make this even more awkward than it would have been normally.

'Honestly, Maïa,' Davis was saying, 'if you were coming here anyway, you could have taken Daph off my hands and spared me the trouble. Kyrke, I hate this place...'

'I didn't know I was coming here until yesterday, actually,' Hermione said with a slight shrug. 'Mel needs some clothes, turns out.'

'Excuses.'

'Oh, be nice, you.' Shortly after Greengrass finished, she noticed Davis wince — she hadn't actually seen it, but by the placement of Greengrass's free hand, it looked like she'd just pinched Davis in the arm. Turning to Melantha, 'So, were you looking for anything in particular?'

'Erm, sort of everything, actually.' When Greengrass just stared blankly at her, Melantha gave a little awkward shrug, and said, 'It's a long story.' Yeah, she was definitely not explaining that right now, and certainly not to these two. Honestly, her cover story was nearly as bad as the truth, though in a somewhat different direction. Sort of a "everyone I loved died and everything I had was lost in a whirlwind of tragedy only a few months ago" direction.

Then Greengrass was slipping free of Davis, who seemed faintly annoyed all of a sudden, and now Melantha had Hermione and Daphne bloody Greengrass of all people helping her. If this wasn't absolutely bizarre. It only took a couple minutes for both of them — Davis was hanging around providing occasional commentary — to insist she use their first names...in a way that sort of made Melantha think she probably should have been already, maybe? Just, it felt slightly weird. Here she was, talking to two Slytherins, and they considered her... Well, they sort of were friends now, weren't they? That study group Hermione had basically dragged her into didn't meet all that often, but it was probably enough already anyway, especially since they'd declared her their DADA expert almost right away, so she'd actually spent a fair amount of time talking to all of them earlier this week. Still, it was weird.

She should probably switch to first names for the whole study group. She doubted anyone would object. It usually took conscious effort to remember to use last names anyway.

Of course, in her bit, Davis still had to be Davis — or Tracey had to be Tracey, whatever. Her exact words were: 'For the love of all that's cute and fuzzy, Mel, quit this "Davis" shite.' But, well. Tracey Davis. She actually said that "cute and fuzzy" line a lot, no idea where that came from.

She was rather quickly deciding she would rather Tracey wasn't here at all. Daphne was fine. It hadn't taken very long legitimately talking to her before Daphne started making her think of a Slytherin Hermione — roughly similar degree of intellectual preoccupation, all nice and sweet with people she actually liked; just, the number of people she actually liked was somewhat smaller, and she showed everyone outside that group an icy wall of either polite indifference or sarcasm, depending on how much they annoyed her. Gryffindor boys, for example, usually got the sarcasm. She remembered in particular a comment once about Seamus's clumsy wandwork, if you knew what she meant, it was brutal. But, the point was, Daphne was actually helping, and she was being mostly nice about it. Obviously, she caught just how uncomfortable Melantha clearly was, and by a raised
eyebrow here or there thought it was strange just how little in the way of clothing she had, but she didn't say anything about it.

Tracey, on the other hand, was being really fucking annoying. She had a comment about practically everything they looked at. Most of them weren't flattering, and the ones that were flattering were...well, sort of too flattering. It was just... It was uncomfortable, okay? She knew Tracey was watching her, or at least it felt like she was watching her, and, from all that she could tell, probably having rather, ah, pervy thoughts, and it was, just, really, really awkward. Almost...humiliating? No, that's not the right word. The point is, she didn't like it, and she wished she would stop.

When Tracey suggested she try this one dress on, she almost pulled her wand on her. Fitting rooms in clothing stores like these were a foreign concept to magical society — she was saying Melantha should change right in front of her. Daphne, at least, rolled her eyes at that one, but still, she just wished Tracey would shut the fuck up.

Apparently, the universe thought the careful what you wish for lesson hadn't sunk in yet, because at that exact moment Susan and Hannah walked into the store, Blaise trailing in a few paces behind them. God fucking dammit.

It was Blaise who spotted them first. Flouncing over, he first hooked Tracey around the elbow, slipped up to their huddle at the racks to grab Daphne with his other arm. 'Here my girls are,' he said in an overly-smooth, consciously-dramatic voice. 'I'd wondered where you'd gotten off to.' Which would have seemed extremely out of character to Melantha last month but, like seemingly every Slytherin ever, his personality was vastly different depending on present company — polite disdain with traces of condescending sarcasm for most everyone, but light teasing and, how to put it, affection for his friends. Blaise had always seemed distinctly unremarkable to her. Not tall, but not exactly short either. He was strong enough she'd noticed in pick-up games before that quaffle throws from him tended to make her hands sting, but he wasn't noticeably bulky.

Honestly, he'd always made her vaguely uneasy, and no, not in a racist way — though, come to think of it, it was a bit strange just how dark he was, considering she'd seen a picture and his mother wasn't really at all. Now that she'd learned a little bit about elemental magic, and knew she was sensitive to fire magics, and since Sirius had informed her last week the Zabinis were lilin...and then explained exactly what lilin were... Anyway, she now knew that was why: she'd been able to feel the fire magic in him, but hadn't known what she'd been feeling. It still made her feel a little extra anxious, she guessed was the word, but at least now she knew why.

Daphne sniffed slightly, an expression of false disdain slipping onto her face. 'Here I wasn't aware I was your girl.'

At his other side, Tracey said, 'Yeah, mate, back off.' She started sharply poking at his stomach, but he hardly even seemed to notice.

'Oh, come, you two, you know I'd never get between you. Except—' His brow narrowed with a frown, though with a smirk still twitching at his lips, he slowly looked at Tracey, then Daphne. '—I sort of am between you right now, aren't I?'

'Prat.'

'Wait, what?' Melantha only realised she'd said that out loud when everyone turned to glance at her. Oops.

'What, you didn't know?' That was from Susan — she and Hannah had apparently caught up with Blaise quickly enough to catch most of that. Melantha hadn't known this until recently, but there
were apparently two different kinds of Noble Houses: those who descended mostly from Continental mages, be they Norse or Gauls or Romans or Greeks or whatever, and those who traced their origins to native Gaelic tribes. House Bones and House Prewett were both the second kind, and Susan mostly looked it. She had the far more rounded face and the vivid green eyes, though in her case slightly shaded toward hazel. Her hair was a little odd, though. Melantha knew from that pensieve memory that Susan's father had had dirty-blond hair sort of like Daphne's, though the light-coloured parts less a bright gold, more a duller silver-ish; Susan's mother had had hair such a deep, vibrant red it'd looked fake, which was apparently something magic did sometimes. Susan had somehow gotten both — lighter and darker spots here and there throughout, but cast in shades of red and pinkish-blonde. It was one of the weirder traits she'd ever seen in someone before. Not that it was bad, exactly. Just sort of weird.

'Erm...' How had she missed that? They'd all been meeting a couple times a week, and they were now three full weeks into the term, and she'd entirely failed to notice two of them were together? That was... How?

Tracey apparently thought the problem here wasn't confusion that she hadn't noticed earlier, and more confusion about exactly what was going on. Either that, or she was pretending. Because she was strange. 'See, we shag. A lot.'

A slight smirk on her face, Susan said, 'They have practiced their silencing charms to perfection.'

'Half of my wardrobe is well-acquainted with her bedroom floor.'

'Daphne's father is worried she'll scare off any proper suitors for her.'

'Not lying about that one, either. I'm scary.'

'Well, maybe they're just feeling inadequate. I wouldn't want to compete with you.'

'Yes, I wouldn't want to compete with me either. I know I don't have a silver tongue, but that's just because I prioritise its talents for other things.'

'I've heard. Your silencing charms weren't always perfect.'

'Are you two done?' That was Hermione cutting in, in an exasperated-sounding voice, but with a slight smile on her face. Tracey and Susan looked at each other for a moment, then shrugged and nodded.

'Crude as always,' Daphne said with the slightest of sighs, 'but nowhere inaccurate.' Tracey's lips stretched into a smirk.

'Since when did that happen?' When everyone glanced at her again, Melantha shrugged. 'I dunno, just, a lot of boys seem to like you, and it'd be a funny thing to point out, just to mess with them.' Not even lying. She could almost taste the comical despair on Seamus's face already.

'Since...' Daphne frowned, blinking to herself, then glanced around Blaise to Tracey. 'Er, how long now, exactly?'

'I dunno. A year, thereabouts?'

It was Hannah who said, 'About a year and a half.' Melantha remembered Hannah as a tiny, squirmly little thing with bright blonde hair up in pigtails. That was obviously a few years ago now. For one thing she was tall. She had to be almost as thin as Melantha was, but she was probably one of the tallest girls in their year, if not the tallest, and she was probably taller than most of the boys. She was...
even taller than her mother already— Oh, right, Hannah was her therapist's daughter, awkward. She was still fair-skinned enough she was almost constantly pink in the face, but she wore her hair down most of the time now, running in a golden river all the way down to the small of her back. And considering how crazy tall she was now, that was a lot of hair. No idea how she dealt with all of that, honestly. 'I remember it was within a couple weeks of me and Susan, which was back in January of third year.' Oh, and she'd never asked, but by her accent, which hadn't any traces of the Celtic lilt most magical families preserved, Melantha assumed she had to be...wait a second...'

Yeah, I think it was something like that,' Blaise was saying. 'You two kept leaving me all on my lonesome, it was awful.'

But Melantha was mostly ignoring him, looking back and forth between Hannah and Susan. Hadn't she just implied...? Susan obviously noticed; she glanced quick at Hannah, then said, 'We don't talk about that.'

Before she could ask why not, Hermione slipped closer, uncomfortably closer, and whispered in her ear. 'They broke up. During the Yule Ball, actually, it wasn't pretty.'

Oh. Well. Come to think of it, after disappearing for the loo for a couple minutes near the end of the night, Hermione had come back with that familiar worried face of hers. Melantha just hadn't thought much of it, because, well, there'd been a lot going on that night. Okay, then.

'Anyway,' Susan said, 'now that we've gotten filling in the new girl out of the way, what's everyone doing in here?'

Daphne shrugged, worming her way out of Blaise's grip with the same motion. 'Melantha's short on things to wear, apparently.' She pointed at a plastic basket (conjured by Hermione) on the floor at Hermione's feet, filled with half-folded articles of clothing. Hermione had actually had to expand the basket once already.

Speaking of which, note to self: never go shopping with Hermione or Daphne ever again. She didn't think the pink had entirely left her face since walking in here, and neither of them were showing any signs of slowing down. They'd even said something about dropping into Twilfitt and Tattings quick after, seriously...

Susan raised an eyebrow at that — she knew it was a bit odd to need this much all at once, and how awkward she was being about it didn't exactly make it less suspicious — but she just turned to Melantha, gave her a long, flat stare. And not just at her face either; Susan's eyes seemed to be tracking a slow line all the way down to her toes then slowly back up. Which was really making her feel a bit—

...Tracey and Susan...tiny yet delicious.

She fought to hold back her sudden need to squirm.

And Susan was finally talking instead of silently staring, thank god. 'You don't have some moral objection to skirts or dresses or anything, right?'

'Erm...no?' Moral objection? Weird way to put it, but okay...

Without a word, Susan turned and drifted off toward the rack Melantha knew from memory bore mostly dresses of thin acromantula silk — or maybe substitute materials much like it, she wasn't sure.

Alright, then. That had been uncomfortable as all hell.
It was maybe only three minutes later when she came up with a new note to self: never go shopping with Susan ever again. And it just kept going and going. It wasn't very long before Tracey and Blaise and Hannah left, but Daphne and Susan stuck around. And Susan just wasn't stopping. She wasn't being all awful and crude like Tracey had been, but she wasn't shutting up, either. It was just...compliments. Lots and lots of compliments. She wasn't even drawing attention to them or anything either, just sort of casually tossing them out with almost every sentence. Honestly, Melantha was trying to ignore it all. It just made her uncomfortable, okay? She couldn't help the instant assumption Susan was lying for...some reason...and even if she weren't lying, even if what she were saying was true, it was just...somewhat awkward.

Yes, all right fine, she had admitted in the privacy of her own head that she looked sort of nice, okay, but hearing someone else say it was still just...just weird. She had absolutely no idea how to react to it. Outside of the rare academic context, she couldn't remember anyone ever complimenting her for anything, ever, so she didn't know how to deal with this, it was like someone was talking a foreign language at her. She was pretty sure there was some way or another she was supposed to be responding, even if just to tell Susan in a not-arse-ish way to quit it, but she really didn't know. So she just sort of...stood there, trying not to fidget, or...

It was bad.

Finally, mercifully, it was over. With the aide of a featherweight charm, they brought the basket over to the clerk — the woman looked distinctly irritated with having to deal with so much all at once. While the clerk flipped through the pile of cloth, muttering darkly under her breath, Daphne said, 'What were you three thinking of doing for lunch? I was going to meet Tracey at that café on Gardenia.'

Susan gave a light shrug. 'I didn't have plans. You two?'

'Oh, er.' Hermione glanced back at the pile of clothes on the counter, started biting her lip in an expression Melantha recognised as thinking-face. 'Yeah, I can shrink all this. Sure. Mel?'

She sighed; she had no particular objection. Sure, she'd had no idea there was a café on Gardenia — which had to be one of the streets in Hogsmeade, with the exception of High Street they were all named after flowers — but it wasn't like she had anything else to do. 'Alright, fine.'

A slightly crooked smile on her face, Susan said, 'Good. See you there in a few. I've gotta get some ink quick.' She stuck her hands into the pockets of her cardigan, and wandered off without another word; after the slightest hesitation, Daphne wiggled her fingers in a wave good-bye and followed a couple steps behind.

After a few minutes filled only with the rustle of cloth and the muttering of the clerk, Hermione let out a slight humming noise. 'That was interesting.'

Well, interesting was certainly a word for this morning, Jesus. But she somehow doubted Hermione had had the same experience she had. 'What do you mean?'

'It's nothing,' she said with a shrug.

'It's obviously not nothing.'

'If you didn't notice, I doubt you would want me to tell you.'

'If I didn't notice, I doubt I'd want to keep going not knowing, if it's that interesting.'

Hermione hesitated for a moment, frowning at her. Then she glanced quick at the clerk. 'It's no big
deal. Susan just likes you is all.'

She blinked, staring up at Hermione. It didn't take a genius to figure out what Hermione meant by that — Melantha certainly had enough information by now to fill in the blanks. It took her some moments to find her voice again. Even then, all she could manage was, 'What?'

'She was flirting a bit. It's no big deal,' Hermione added after another glance at her face. Must not be looking pleased, she guessed. 'She flirts. Most of the time, she doesn't even mean anything by it, just teasing. Don't get all worked up over it. It's just interesting, is all.'

Melantha just grumbled, turning back to stare at the pile of clothes she'd be paying for shortly, and wow, it was ridiculous how much they'd ended up with. Alright, fine, she was sort of buying an entire reasonable-person-sized wardrobe all at once, so it wasn't that weird, and she couldn't even say there was anything in there she hated. She had, after all, simply vetoed any suggestions she hadn't...maybe "liked" wasn't the right word, since it would still feel odd admitting in her own head she legitimately liked half of this stuff, but something like that. Rather like everything else that'd happened today. Nothing bad, exactly, just...a lot to deal with, and mostly with things she wasn't used to dealing with. Too many things.

Oh, yes, this was just turning out to be the most fun Hogsmeade visit ever, wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

[It's all in your head.] — *In case anyone's planning to yell at me, Hermione is talking about mood disturbances during menstruation. Yes, there are people who have legitimate PMS/PMDD related issues that are (to varying degrees) purely biological/hormonal, but the "PM" stands for "premenstrual" — you know, in the one to two weeks before the bleeding part. Hermione is, for the most part, correct.*

Twilfitt and Tattnins — *Yes, canonically said just to be in London, but in this they have a second location in Hogsmeade, and a third in...wow, have I really not needed to name that settlement yet? Well, in Ireland, anyway.*

Delechit — *This will probably never come up again, and I doubt anyone cares, but the stress is on the second syllable. It's delectable + chit, and pronounced like it.*

Maïa — *French, pronounced roughly "my-uh"*

Kyrke (IPA: /kɪɾ(ə)kɛ/, roughly "ker-kay") — *Brïwn rendering of Circe. The original Greek was Kírkê (Κírkê, "keer-kay"). In Latin-descended languages, when a "k" sound was followed by a front vowel ("i" or "e"), the consonant tended to lenite, exactly what to varying from language to language, hence the modern Latinate English pronunciation of something like "sir-see". That didn't happen in Brïwn. Instead, they moved the accent to the last syllable (which wasn't unusual at the time, and in Greek-borrowed words eta tends to steal the accent), the now-unaccented vowel eventually centering. Which is still wrong, but wrong in a different way. And yes, I really did spend the time thinking that out, I am a crazy person.*

*Just for the record, all the historical shit Draco said is headcanon accurate. Also? No,*
that wasn't some weird set up to Draco/Hermione happening. I'm not entirely sure I'm going to go the direction I have for Hermione in my head or not, but that is definitely, definitely, **definitely** not happening. And that's not me deflecting or whatever. 
*Draco/Hermione will never be a thing in any of my fics. Ever. My solemn vow to you on this day.*

*Until next time,*
~Wings
December, 1975

Lily had finally done it. She'd mastered it. It was so easy, so smooth, she barely had to think about it anymore.

She took a step, shrouded in her own magic, stepped into what the Egyptians had called xaįvut-imanjuti, the hidden shadows, the places between, the nowhere that was everywhere. It was a dark and empty place, nothing but vague impressions of obscure colour. Then the world exploded back into being. A glance at her surroundings told her she'd succeeded again: a second ago she'd been in an abandoned room on the third floor, and now she was high in the Astronomy Tower. It had been so easy. Over a year of practice, and now she barely even had to think about it. She didn't even need proper shadows as a medium anymore. She'd mastered it.

She grinned to herself.

Just for fun, she started skipping around the castle. Wherever she thought there would be no one to see her, floor to floor, wing to wing, tower to tower. As easy as taking steps. She even slipped into Slughorn's quarters, the ones inside the Slytherin dorm, just to see if she could — it was possible to ward against shadow magic, after all. She'd never even been there before! This was far too fun. She felt amazing, basking in her own power, feeling almost giddy with it.

And here all she'd had to do was convince herself she didn't exist, but at once carried the world within. A state in which nothing was everything, distance was an illusion, and time was a lie. And she could go anywhere. Instantly. There were limits, but...

Sometimes, she really loved being Lily Evans.

She was knocked out of her euphoria when, even while stepping out of shadows, she tripped over something, abruptly crashing face first to the floor.

She pushed herself up to kneeling, feeling distantly mortified. Nope, she wouldn't be sharing this moment with Sev later. He'd find it far too funny.

It was around then she realised she wasn't alone. Which was weird. She was in some tiny storage room, on the sixth floor, always empty as they usually were; she hadn't expected anyone to be here. She could hear him grumbling behind her, in pain and annoyance. Not too unreasonable, she guessed, since she had just appeared out of nowhere and stepped on him. A voice harsh and slightly nasal, saying 'What the hell are you doing, you idiot, fuck...’

But a familiar voice. Lily blinked, frowning into the darkness. She could sense the faint glow of a
magical soul against the background song of Hogwarts, but she wasn't used to it yet, still better with voices. 'Black? What are you doing in here alone?'

Black fell silent. She could almost feel him staring in her general direction. 'Evans?'

'Yeah.'

'Did...?' He broke off for a second, a frown audible on his voice. 'Where the bloody fuck did you learn shadow magic?'

Turning to sit on the floor facing him, she shrugged. Realising he wouldn't see it, she sighed; she drew her power up, laid an illumination charm into the floor in front of her. 'I don't see how that's your business.'

Black blinked in the glare of the floor's blue-white glow, and Lily couldn't help staring at him for a second. Why would Sirius Black be sitting in a dark room alone, apparently crying? 'I wonder if McGonagall or Dumbledore would feel it's none of their business. Or, hell, the DLE. Shadow magic is restricted, you know.'

'Then I'm sure they'll be interested to know how you identified it so easily.' There was really no point in denying what she'd been doing, it was an obvious lie. How else would someone move around like that under the famous wards of Hogwarts?

But Black just rolled slightly bloodshot eyes. 'Please, like they'd have to ask. Everyone in my family knows at least something illegal.'

Good point. 'I read about it, if you must know.'

'What in? Everything you could actually learn it from is restricted, too.'

'I didn't say where from I got the book, now, did I?'

Black just snorted, faintly amused. If anyone was going to just laugh off her dabbling in dark magic, she guessed it'd be a Black.

'You didn't answer my question, by the way.'

Confusion crossed his face, but only for an instant. 'I don't see how that's your business.' Exactly repeating what she'd said a moment ago, even imitating her inflection and characteristically muggle accent a little. Prat.

She shrugged again. 'Just curious.' Letting a smirk cross her face, she said, 'See, it's the alone part that's confusing me mostly. Here I thought Marlie was finally warming up to you like. Thought you'd at least take advantage of the end of term.'

Somewhat to her surprise, Black rolled his eyes, said, 'I don't know where you get your information, I haven't been trying with Marlene at all.' Except, hadn't he? Hadn't he been trying to shag Marlie since, what, third year? He'd been almost as annoying about it as Potter with her. Not quite as annoying, but almost. The denial felt odd.

No point in making a thing about it, though. She'd mostly been teasing anyway. 'Just tell me to piss off then. It's not like we're friends, you don't have to tell me. I'm just curious.'

Looking vaguely uncomfortable, he said, 'That curiosity. You've been spending too much time with Ravenclaws.'
'The Hat did almost send me there, you know. Poor thing had trouble deciding on a second choice.'

She should have known that only that, implying Gryffindor had been the second choice, would have been enough for Black to figure it out. He might act like a stupid, brash Gryffindor most of the time, but he had been trained from childhood to hear the unspoken. 'I guess I should be surprised you almost went to Slytherin, but I'm really not. Thought it was a bad idea because of the blood purity stuff, right? Hat does that sometimes.'

Yeah. Whoops. Well, not like that was an enormous secret. 'Thing said if it sent me there there'd be literal murder in the dorms before I graduated.'

One eyebrow tracking up his face, Black said, 'Which were you supposed to be, victim or victor?' Interesting word choice.

She pulled her lips into a crooked smirk, consciously showing teeth, letting her power loose its bounds for only a moment. She didn't usually do that, kept it in tight, since she'd noticed when she let it free the metal tang of ozone followed her around, mages eyeing her with either fear or lust, depending on their personal opinion of her — sometimes both, actually. It was just more attention than she usually wanted. Again somewhat to her surprise, the reactionary flare in Black's magic looked less like the former and more like the latter. 'You know, it didn't actually say.'

Black shook his head to himself, chuckling under his breath, a vague, helpless smile on his face. For a second, she considered reeling the fluttering tendrils of her magic back in, but it oddly enough seemed to be easing him a bit, so...it could just stay out, she didn't mind. Made her breathe easier, honestly, it was annoying to hold back all the time, like consciously taking half-breaths, all day every day. Still smiling a little, he said, 'I just don't want to go home is all. No big deal.'

And Lily abruptly had no idea what to say.

The situation would be complicated enough without even having to explain how exactly she knew it was complicated enough. Lily knew far more about the inner workings of House Black than he probably realised. She'd been told some of it indirectly from Narcissa via Severus — hell, even Regulus had let on a little — but most of it Lord Black had simply told her. In vague terms, but enough to read between the lines. But she wasn't sure she could explain that. She wasn't sure if Black even knew about the Circle of Agastya, and the fact that she was... Well, not a member exactly, she was too young, but associated with them, anyway, that was supposed to be a secret. Even to most of the Circle. She was to be Lord Black's eyes and ears in places and with people he would never be trusted, the spy that everyone saw but no one knew. It was all planned out. She and Sev were even now working on the very public and completely fabricated meltdown of their friendship, designed intentionally to play right into the Light's sensibilities. If it went as planned, Dumbledore and his Order wouldn't suspect a thing.

Well, from reputation, Sir Moody probably would, but he doubted everyone and everything. From what she'd heard, she'd honestly be more worried if the day the Order welcomed her came and he wasn't suspicious of her at all.

The point was, she knew things about Black's situation, and she couldn't possibly explain how. And it made this very awkward.

So. Reciprocation instead. That was doable. 'I know how you feel.' Black blinked up at her, so she sighed, said, 'It's my sister, mostly. We don't get along anymore. And my parents...' She wasn't sure how to finish that sentence. 'It's uncomfortable at home, these days. Just, instead of shutting myself up in a dark room crying to myself, I guess I practise illegal magic.' She half-expected him to try denying the crying part, but who knew with Black.
He was silent for a short moment. 'You know, people never talk about how difficult it must be for the nonmagical family of a muggleborn. I'd imagine it's even worse with a sorceress in the house.'

Thankfully, with the exact shade of the light she'd made, that embarrassing blush probably wasn't noticeable. 'I don't think I'm a sorceress yet.'

'That's the word, isn't it?' he said, smiling a little. 'Yet.'

'Careful, there. Flattery might get you somewhere. And by somewhere I do mean the Hospital Wing.'

Black just laughed at that, a hard, barking guffaw. Then he turned slightly more, erm, serious, giving her a weird look. 'It's funny, you know.'

Well, yes, that's why she'd said it, but she got the idea he was talking about something else. 'What's funny?'

'He doesn't know you at all. Listening to him talk about you...' He trailed off, shaking his head to himself. 'He has no idea.'

Oh. He was talking about Potter. Well, obviously Potter didn't know her at all. She couldn't remember them ever having a single legitimate conversation. He'd just been disturbingly obsessed with her from almost the moment they'd met, for some reason she'd never managed to figure out. She smirked at Black again, shrugged. 'Not liking what you're learning?'

Giving her an odd, teasing look, Black said, 'He wouldn't, no.'

It was obvious what he was implying, but Black was an infamous flirt, so she just brushed it off. 'Anyway, now that my curiosity has been sated, I'll be going about my business.'

He snorted. 'Nosey little twit.'

Even as she pushed herself to her feet, she cast a dispel at her illumination charm with a thought, throwing the tiny room into darkness. 'Self-righteous prat.' She drew her power up, again wreathing herself in shadow.

But before she could step away, Black said, 'Happy Christmas, Lily.'

She couldn't help frowning at that. For one thing, the thought of a pureblooded member of a Noble and Ancient House saying "Happy Christmas" to a muggleborn was a little odd. For another, she didn't think he'd ever called her by her first name before. But, shrugging it off, she returned the favour with the second half of the traditional Yuletide exchange: 'And may peace shine on you, Sirius.'

And with the barest force of thought, Lily stepped into the places between, and was gone.

September, 1995

Standing alone in the bathroom, arms wrapped loosely about her chest, Melantha furiously tried to regain control of her own fucking stupid lungs.

This was stupid. This was so stupid. What the hell was she afraid of? It didn't make any sense. Worst case scenario, if this went as wrong as it possibly could, the absolute most awful of all possible worlds, what did she even think would happen? It didn't make any sense. It was completely
unreasonable to be freaking out like this, she was being *fucking stupid*, and she wished she would just stop.

It was Sunday. The morning after she'd gone on that confusing and honestly a little terrifying sometimes Hogsmeade run with Hermione. She'd gone into one of the baths to clean up and change in private, as she always did now — actually, she'd almost always done that in the boys' dorm too, not any real difference. She'd taken a bit longer getting dressed than was reasonable. Nothing she was wearing was really that complicated. It was *Sunday*, for fuck's sake, she was just going to be hanging around doing schoolwork most of the day anyway.

Not what she'd normally be wearing on a Sunday, true. She was starting on her campaign to actively try to subvert her own stupidity. To do what she liked, what she felt like, without letting those years of conditioning from the Dursleys, the completely irrational fucked-up-ed-ness going on inside her own head, without letting anything else get in the way. As part of that...

Well, in her defense, she'd liked it, thought it was pretty, *shut up*, at the time. The one thing was, well, she didn't actually know what the word for it was, some sort of sleeveless, button-down thing, loose enough it wasn't awkward moving around with it buttoned closed waist to clavicle. It had that smooth, shimmery texture to it that instantly made her think of acromantula silk, but Daphne had said it wasn't really, just something made to look like it, a nice vibrant green colour she rather liked — she had a thing for the colour green, wonder why — with slightly lighter stitching in some weird curly patterns, fuck knows what those were supposed to be. Most of the problem she was having was the other thing. It was, oh, closer to white than off-white, for the most part, all soft and light, reaching to slightly past her knees. In case it wasn't obvious from her state of stupidly imminent panic, she did mean a skirt, yes, she was wearing a skirt right now, that was a thing she was doing.

Only white for the most part, of course. It was entirely possible the hem was embroidered with random flowers. Just, this wasn't a thing she'd really been able to admit, even to herself, until very recently, but she kind of had a *ridiculous* flower...thing. Ever since Petunia had started making her do the gardening when she'd been five or six or something, she didn't know, she'd just always liked them. It was just a thing. When Susan had found this thing during that humiliating shopping trip, and she'd agreed it was fine almost right away, Hermione had given her a really weird look — she'd hesitated way longer than that with almost every single thing. Just, she thought it was pretty, she couldn't help it.

Also? *Shut up*.

So, the problem she was having here was one she hadn't quite expected. She'd worn girly junk before. At Andi's *proper prissy pureblood princess pootcamp*, mostly, where she hadn't really had a choice, but still. She hadn't expected to have a problem. She'd gone in here, done the usual morning nonsense. She'd changed, feeling strangely...strange about the whole thing. It was hard to explain. Like, on the one hand, she felt oddly guilty, like she was doing something indescribably *wrong*, but on the other almost...excited? It was confusing. And she'd spent honestly a ridiculous amount of time staring at herself in the mirror, making repeated adjustments, assuring everything was sitting as it was supposed to. At one point, she'd taken a moment to smile at the fact that looking at herself in the mirror wasn't uncomfortable anymore. She meant, looking at herself, she *expected* to see Melantha Black, there wasn't that moment of disorientation, it was completely normal. That was good. She liked it. She'd eventually decided, yes, good, so it was time to go down to the common room. Right.

She'd almost had her hand on the doorknob when it'd abruptly struck her that she *hadn't* done this before. She'd worn girly things before, yes — when forced to, but she'd done it, honestly minded it way less than she'd been expecting. But that had been in private. Alone, with a few Blacks, at Andi's house. She'd never been all girly out in public before.
Everyone would see her.

Instantly, she lost control of her own stupid lungs, and her stupid vision started going grey at the edges.

And it was stupid.

She. Was being. So. Stupid.

What did she think would happen? She didn't understand her own brain. It made no sense! It made no sense. What was she afraid of? That people would realise who she was, freak out on her? From her experience, unlikely: the only people who'd been able to tell who she was so far were people who knew her really well, of which there weren't many. Well, and Dora, but she cheats. And even if everyone did figure it out, and it was all around the school by the end of the day, she couldn't honestly say she expected people to be all that awful about it. Far as she could tell, wizarding society was far more... How to put it, she hadn't gotten an unambiguously negative reaction from anyone at all yet, which had been entirely unexpected.

And, well, with what she'd been thinking lately, it'd have to come out eventually. These last days, she'd been half-seriously flirting with the thought of, just, staying like this. Forever. Not going back to being Harry Potter. Ever. Not something she thought about too deeply, because trying to think of what things would be like down the road was nebulously scary, but the thought had occurred to her. It would not surprise her if, a year from today, she was still a girl, and everyone knew just who she used to be. Everyone, public knowledge.

Even if they did freak out at her, what exactly did she think they were going to do? It didn't make any sense.

Slowly, far too slowly, arms crossed over her chest, gripping her own shoulders, forehead against the door, she forced her own breathing deeper and slower and steadier. Cursing under her breath the entire time, her own brain for being such a bloody mess, the universe in general for her pathetic excuse for a childhood, herself for being such a bloody useless fucking nutcase. She was fine, it was going to be fine, there was absolutely no reason to think everything wouldn't be fine, so she should stop being such a fucking crazy person, open the bloody door, and go the fuck downstairs.

Jesus, she was so ridiculous.

She twisted the handle, pulled the door open with a jerky yank, and walked out. Arms still resolutely crossed, a moment later she was drifting down the stairs, the downward motion and the steps necessary making the movement of the skirt about her legs far more obvious. Not that she minded, really. Honestly, it was sort of...well, this was going to sound weird. She wasn't exactly sure how the use of the word here could possibly make sense, but it felt kind of fun. Which was weird. The way the light cloth kept fluttering about her legs was, sort of, well, it was kind of the same feeling of movement and exhilaration she got flying — well, maybe exhilaration wasn't the right word, she didn't know what was. The feeling was far less pronounced, but it was definitely there. No matter how crazy it seemed even in her own head, it was nice, she liked it. She squeezed her arms tighter around her chest, resisting the inexplicable urge to, she didn't know, play with the thing or something. It was weird.

She was ridiculous even when she wasn't freaking out, seemed like.

Before too long, she was walking into the common room. She glanced about, helpless to stop a sudden flash of paranoia, but the place was mostly empty, rather early on a Sunday as it was, and nobody was giving her a second glance. Good. She spotted Hermione on a sofa, textbook and
parchment spread over her folded legs, so immediately headed off for her direction. Without a word, she came right up to the sofa and fell into a seat next to Hermione.

And winced at the sudden coolness of the sofa against her bare legs. Erm, rather higher up the back of her thighs than it should be — she hadn’t been paying attention, and the skirt had bunched up under her a bit as she sat, even the fabric in front pulled a little above her knees. Whoops. Trying not to think of how silly she probably looked, she leaned forward slightly, slipped both hands under herself, and smoothly slid her fingers along the sofa outward, straightening the skirt out. There, much better. She’d probably looked ridiculous doing that, luckily no one had been watching.

Hermione finally looked up from her book, gave Melantha a quick glance over, then smiled. 'Morning.'

She just hummed back at her.

For some reason, Hermione seemed to find that funny — at least, judging by what looked like traces of a wider smirk pulling at her lips. She didn’t say anything, at least. 'I don’t know if I told you, but there’s another study group meeting today, in the afternoon.’

'Don’t know if I can make it. I have a few things I have to do today.’ Hermione gave her a slightly confused look. 'Nothing big or anything. I’m supposed to, ah—’ She dropped to a whisper, even though nobody was nearby. ‘—meet my therapist after breakfast.’ Hermione just nodded at that. She knew Melantha had been talking to someone, but not who; considering how Hermione and Hannah had apparently been friends for a couple years now, she’d thought it wise. 'And I’ve got a duelling lesson with Dora later. And, ah, well…' Oh, this might go badly. 'I was gonna call my, ah, house-elves.’

An expression of faint distaste crossed Hermione’s face, but she just said, 'I had wondered if House Potter had any elves.’

Well, okay. That could have been much worse. She didn’t look happy, but she wasn’t going nuts either. 'Yeah, I didn’t know until I talked to Remus a bit ago.’

'Ah.’ For long minutes, there was silence. Or, at least, mostly silence — Gryffindor was slowly waking up, more and more people filtering into the common room, a few starting on their way down to breakfast. Just as Melantha was considering she should probably be thinking about going down too, Hermione said, 'What are you going to do about them?’

She didn’t really have to ask what Hermione was getting at. 'Ask what they want. Look over whatever oath they gave. And I’ll have to think about it. From what I’ve heard lately, the situation with house-elves is far more complicated than I thought.’

'Yes, it is.’

Melantha blinked, looked back up at Hermione, who was staring down at her book with something just short of a glare. 'Really?’

With a sigh, Hermione straightened her parchments, folded her book closed. 'Yes. My initial assertions pertaining to elf welfare were extrapolated from a flawed understanding of the sociological and legal framework within which the practice exists. Upon further research and reflection, I have reevaluated my position to one far more nuanced.’

A smile involuntarily pulling at her lips, Melantha said, 'Was that wordy mess you trying to admit you were wrong?’
Hermione's eyes narrowed slightly, her lips curling into the slightest of pouts — not that Melantha would draw attention to that, she didn't feel like being hexed this morning. 'No. My initial impressions were not incorrect. The error came in assuming the circumstances I had direct knowledge of — the physical abuse undergone by Dobby, the emotional by Winky — were representative of the practice as a whole. I have since been corrected.'

Melantha fought against her growing smirk, but she wasn't doing very well. Hermione was strangely adorable when she got into one of her uncomfortable rambles. 'Been corrected?'

An embarrassed flicker crossing her face, Hermione said, 'It's possible I said something to Susan that was offensive in retrospect, and she promptly called one of the Bones elves. Who then proceeded to yell at me.'

Yeah. Melantha couldn't help chuckling at that mental image a bit.

'I'm still not entirely convinced my original assertions were necessarily wrong,' Hermione said, her tone very slightly sharp. 'The prominent misunderstanding I had was in my assumption that my personal ethical framework developed in the context of modern Western society were necessarily applicable. What I had not fully conceptualised at that point was that the economy here functions on fundamentally different principles than I was familiar with. While nonmagical Western society is extremely individualist, magical Britain — and the significant majority of other magical nations, though to varying degrees — is far more collectivist. Things are conceptually different in ways that do matter.

'Take, for example, any magical person in any major profession in this country — Professor McGonagall, let's talk about Professor McGonagall. She doesn't get a salary.'

Melantha had honestly only been half-listening to Hermione by then, wondering if she should interject to get them on the way down to breakfast, but that statement snapped her out of it. 'What?'

Looking vaguely annoyed, Hermione shrugged. 'She doesn't. Her employment is under contract between Hogwarts and the Common House of Ross. A person's surname doesn't necessarily match the name of their House, by the way — Professor McGonagall is legally a Ross, Professor Snape is legally the Master of the Common House of Prince, and I'm aware of a few others, it's public record. Anyway, there is a regular payment made, but the money goes to House Ross, not Professor McGonagall herself. I asked her about it, and she said the head of her House, one of her cousins, has the full amount immediately directed to a Gringotts vault only she has access to, so there is little practical difference, but there is a legal distinction. Especially when you consider there is nothing saying her cousin must set aside her salary for her like that — he does it because he chooses to — and that it was originally the previous Master of the House of Ross who negotiated her contract on her behalf in the first place — Professor McGonagall has led me to believe she proposed the idea as an alternative to trying to marry her off, in fact.

'My point is, things are different here, and I did not take that into account when originally formulating my position. If anything, I have expanded my concerns to preventing abuse of this larger system, not simply the elves' place in it, or, if determined practical at a future date, dismantling the system entirely.'

Despite herself, Melantha couldn't help a rueful smile. She was just trying to get her own life together, wasn't really thinking more than a couple months ahead. Meanwhile, if she understood correctly, Hermione was contemplating revolution in her spare time.

That was perhaps the most Hermione thing she had ever heard. And, no, even she wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that. It just was.
But she didn't have much time to figure it out. She was promptly distracted from that train of thought.

'Bloody hell, how long have you two been up, anyway?' Ron walked around from behind the couch, clothes ruffled and short hair a flaming mess haloing his head. 'I don't know how you can—' And he froze in mid-step, staring down at Melantha. 'What are you wearing?'

She ruthlessly squashed down the automatic impulse to get all awkward and defensive. No. No, she wasn't going to apologise, not even a little bit, or even indirectly. Trying not to show how suddenly uncomfortable she was — she'd always hated being gawked at, and the particular circumstances only made it worse — she rolled her eyes, just said, 'I dunno, what does it look like?'

'I...' Ron seemed to struggle for words a moment, his mouth working silently. Finally, he managed, 'Why?'

'Because I feel like it.' She punctuated that by crossing her arms over her chest, raising a single, challenging eyebrow at him. She considered adding, Deal with it, but she doubted she'd be able to make it sound not stupid.

Before Ron even had a second to respond, with a teasing lilt on her voice, Hermione jumped in with, 'Besides, isn't she pretty?'

Melantha winced — not helping, Hermione. Not helping.

Looking distinctly awkward, Ron let out a coughing huff Melantha couldn't quite interpret. He opened his mouth again to say something, likely annoyed, and quite possibly annoying. Before he could start, his eyes flicked back to her. Then downward.

Ron abruptly turned away and stalked off, his ears visibly reddening.

For a few seconds, Melantha just watched him walk away, more confused than anything. The sudden turnabout was...weird. After a moment of thought, she started getting a suspicion she really didn't like. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. She was positive she wouldn't like it, if she suspected correctly, but, well, as she'd implied to Hermione yesterday, ignorance had never really done her any good. 'Did... ' She broke off, cleared her throat quick. 'Did Ron just, er...'

Her voice sounding completely casual, Hermione said, 'Check you out? Yes.'

'Oh my god...' Melantha leaned forward in her seat a little, covering her face with both her hands. She couldn't believe this. Well, okay, she could believe this, in retrospect, with some of the things Ron had said, but she didn't like to believe this. She wasn't even sure what she meant by that, whatever. This was just so mortifying. That Ron... He... Ergh, how was she even supposed to talk to him now, this was just so...

Objecively, she knew it was really no different than Tracey and Susan, who she could still...mostly talk to like normal. It was somewhat awkward, but sure. If anything, it was less of a thing than with those two, because as far as she could tell Ron had been...kind of blindsided? It wasn't like he was going to go talk to Dean and Seamus about how she was tiny yet delicious or anything. It was just... It was Ron! It was weird, okay, to have him, er, it was just weird.

'If it makes you feel any better,' Hermione said, smile still on her voice, 'he seems just as uncomfortable as you are. Which is actually quite rude of him, if you ask me. I'm inclined to give him a piece of my mind.'

Melantha groaned back at her. 'Haven't you done enough damage today already?'
'Hmm, hard to say. It's so early yet.'

She could only let out another groan. The twins had clearly been a bad influence on Hermione. She just wished she didn't have to be the one to suffer for it.

Melantha walked into the sitting room in McGonagall's apartment to find Ellie was already there. So she walked over to the fuzzy red armchair across from her, sank down to sitting. Trying not to notice the slightly crooked smile the woman was giving her.

Not that she really had to wait long to figure out what it was about. Folding her papers around in her lap, Ellie said, 'Well, don't you look nice.'

With a light scoff, 'Yes, that's the consensus today, isn't it.'

Ellie didn't say anything. She just tilted her head slightly, raising a single eyebrow at her. Waiting.

She was going to get it out of her eventually. She always did. But Melantha still let the silence hang for a few moments, arms crossed over her stomach, staring down at her knees. When she felt she was finally awkward enough, she said, 'It's just Ron. No big deal.'

'Aha.' That was all.

But even with that, the simple, knowing tone she'd put it in still made Melantha shift in place. 'It's not, really. Let's not talk about that.'

Ellie shrugged slightly, with an air of nonchalance, like it didn't really matter — an impression she didn't believe for a second. 'I don't believe you think things are as okay as you're pretending.'

Melantha tried not to roll her eyes at that. Of course things were awkward with Ron right now, but his best friend had just spontaneously turned into a girl, and in retrospect he'd never been great with girls who weren't Hermione — and, honestly, not even her most of the time — so some awkwardness was entirely expected. He'd get over it eventually, everything would be fine. Nothing to talk about, really. 'But if you don't want to talk about it, I won't make you.'

At least Ellie had the decency for that.

Honestly, most of her meetings with Ellie, she had absolutely no idea where the time went. It just kind of... They were babbling, about stuff, and she mostly couldn't even follow the thread of the conversation herself, and then she would glance up and it was thirty minutes later, and it was weird. She would almost think Ellie was doing some kind of magic on her, but since she'd learned occlumency, and her ability to sense magic around her was growing noticeably more sensitive, she didn't think that was likely. It was just a bit weird.

At some point, they'd gotten around to the fact that, yes, she was wearing girly clothes right now, on purpose, wasn't that interesting. So then she got to try to explain that she wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as she would have expected herself to be a few weeks ago. Slightly more self-conscious than she normally was, maybe, but not that much worse than normal. It was...actually sort of... No, she wasn't sure "fun" was quite the right word. It just... She liked it, okay? She wasn't even entirely sure how to explain what was going on in her head. She just felt ever so slightly lighter in a way she couldn't quite put words to it, almost like someone had hit her with both a featherlight and a cheering charm, but significantly underpowered, so it was hardly even noticeable. It was weird, and slightly creepy when she took a moment to think about it, not that she could explain why she thought it was slightly creepy either, so she was mostly trying not to think about it...which was hard to do when Ellie was asking her about it, but still. Sure, she'd noticed a couple people give her awkward
looks, and she'd bumped into Susan on the way out after breakfast, and the smirk she'd given her had made her feel rather uncomfortably exposed, but mostly it was nice.

And, no, Ellie, she wasn't being evasive or anything. She really just had no idea why. Did there have to be a reason?

'What do you mean, Susan seemed pleased with herself?'

Melantha blinked at that question, thinking back to what she'd just said. 'Ah, right, well. Halfway into picking through that store, Susan and...’ She gave Ellie an uncomfortable glance, but finished the thought. ‘...ah, Hannah showed up. Susan ended up staying. She was actually the one who pointed this out,’ she said, picking at her skirt a little with a finger and thumb. ‘The whole thing was uncomfortable. Hermione said she was...’ Oh, well, no, she didn't even want to think about that topic.

But Ellie somehow knew exactly what Melantha had almost said anyway. Her lips protruding slightly from a barely-repressed grin, she said, 'I don't even need you to finish that sentence. I am very familiar with the ways of Susan Bones.'

'Right, well.' Melantha gave a shrug, trying not to wince at how awkward the motion felt just doing it, couldn't imagine how uncomfortable she looked. 'Ah, Hermione told me she and Hannah used to, ah...'

'Oh, not even just because of that. I've known her since she was very young.' At what must be a rather peculiar look from Melantha, the woman shrugged. 'I'm sure you've heard she only has Amy — er, Amelia, I mean, her aunt. Well, Amelia is definitely a career woman, so she couldn't be around all the time. We were friends back in our Hogwarts days, and she knew I was taking care of Hannah anyway, so she sort of made a habit of leaving Susan with me. That's why Hannah and Susan have known each other for so long, I practically half-raised her.' Ellie gave another casual shrug. 'She calls me Auntie.'

Oh. Well. If it wasn't awkward enough she was friends with her therapist's daughter, it turns out she'd also known a second since she was in bloody nappies. And this second, according to Hermione, liked her — that is, liked her liked her. And here she was talking to her kinda-sorta-not-really-mum, and she'd had no idea. Just. Jesus.

'I'm only telling you this to try to make this easier on you.' Oh, easier! Of course! 'You don't really have to start from the beginning, so to speak, and try to explain every bit of what she was like. Because I already know what she can be like. If she was teasing you, or flirting with you, or both — and knowing her, to be honest, I entirely expect she was — I already know exactly what that looked like. I already know what happened. So you might as well go right to telling me about why you're so obviously uncomfortable about it.'

Melantha didn't say anything. She just leaned back in her chair, rubbing at her face with both hands, trying to stop herself from sighing too obviously. It wasn't like she was going to straight refuse to talk about it or anything. She just... It was incredibly uncomfortable for one. And even then, she really didn't know what to say. She knew "it was uncomfortable" wasn't good enough an answer, but she didn't really have much else.

Ellie apparently realised she was having trouble coming up with anything to say, because she started talking again before Melantha did. 'Okay, let me frame it this way. Forgive me for putting it bluntly, but you were Harry Potter. I can't imagine for a second you've never had people fawning on you before. And in ways far more direct and egregious than I'm sure Susan was. Some people just have no restraint, seemingly, I've noticed it before. I can only imagine some of the unwanted attention you've gotten over the last couple years. I'd think this would be nothing unusual for you, and perhaps
even far less annoying than the worst you've gotten.'

'It's different.'

'Okay. Different how?'

'It just—' Melantha dropped her hands to again cross her arms over her stomach, but still kept her eyes on the ceiling. And no, she was not avoiding looking at Ellie, that was silly talk. 'It's just, it's far more complicated, is all.'

'More complicated how?'

She let out a long sigh, lifting her head to let it fall against the back of her chair a couple times — with how padded the thing was, that really wasn't as satisfying as she would like. 'I guess part of it is just...I can't ignore them as easily.'

Ellie let that hang, only for a second, before asking, 'What do you mean?'

'This is probably going to make me sound kind of horrible, but it's just a thing.' Honestly, sometimes she felt like she sounded like a horrible person a lot of the time, but she was well aware it was possible that was just her perspective and stuff, blah blah. 'I mean, I have fangirls, you know. They're... They're kind of awful. I mean, they don't even know me at all, it's just stuff they read in books or rumours they heard, none of which is even close to accurate. You'd be amazed how many commonly known "facts" about me are just plain made up.' Or, after talking like they'd been for a while now, maybe it wouldn't amaze her. Whatever. 'Occasionally there'll be a more mercenary one, who's being nice to me entirely because everyone else buys that bloody nonsense, after the social trump card they could get for being *Harry Potter's girlfriend.*' She heard the bitter derision on her own voice. 'They're all awful.

'But, see, the thing is, they're easily ignored. Since I'm not really friends with any of them, and have no reason to be around them, I can simply avoid them without too much trouble. And I can usually avoid, er, thinking about it, I guess, because, well, it's not real?' She shrugged to herself a little bit. 'I mean, it's all made up, so I kind of...don't take any of them seriously, at all, which I guess is kind of terrible of me, but what else am I supposed to do about it? I've heard people talking all jealous like about it, but it'd let them have it all if I could, in a second. I'd really prefer everyone just leave me alone.'

Sounding completely casual, Ellie said, 'And the present situation is different.'

'Yes.' Melantha paused a moment, biting her lip, staring up at the ceiling. 'I mean, I *could* avoid them, Tracey and Susan, if I really wanted to, I guess. Hermione wouldn't be happy with me, ditching out on the study group like that, but it's not *impossible.* And I don't really want to. I rather like the study group, I guess, they're entertaining enough people it makes homework not entirely boring — and there's something I didn't expect myself to ever say.' She thought she caught in her peripheral vision Ellie smiling a little at that. 'And I can't just dismiss it all, because, well, I'm not Harry Potter right now. Whatever they're working on, they *are* getting it from *somewhere,* not just lies made up by other people. It's harder to ignore. It's...' She trailed off, then gave a helpless shrug, not really sure where she was going anymore.

Ellie let that hang. Maybe she was thinking, maybe she was letting Melantha think — honestly, she didn't know what Ellie was up to half the time, not that she guessed it really mattered. Finally, Ellie said, 'All right, they're harder to ignore. Who says you have to ignore them?'

Melantha scoffed, shaking her head. 'Like I know how to *not.* I mean, the hell am I supposed to...'
She scratched at the side of her head for a moment, frowning to herself. No idea what she was trying to say. 'I mean, that's really not something I know how to respond to at all. When they say something that's obviously, you know, I kind of just end up standing there not looking at them, I have absolutely no idea what to say.'

'Make something up, and if it falls flat, learn.' She looked down in time to catch Ellie shrug. 'You're not going to figure out how to deal with people if you don't try. As much as you may want everyone to leave you alone, well, that's just not how the world works.'

'Yeah, I know.' After a quick snorted laugh, Melantha said, 'Honestly, I don't even think I do want everyone to leave me alone. Just, you know, the people I don't like.' Ellie smiled at that. 'But I don't... I mean, what are they going for?'

Now frowning slightly, Ellie asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Tracey and Susan. They wouldn't be being like that if they didn't want something. I mean, that's why people say stuff like that to people isn't it? I can't imagine what Tracey wants, what with Daphne and all, maybe she's just being Tracey, but that still leaves Susan. What is she after? Cause, I mean, I wouldn't really know my way around anything, and I don't think I can handle, what, dating on top of everything else going on, I don't know.'

Ellie was giving her a look. Not entirely sure what kind of look it was, but definitely a look. 'What makes you thinks she's after anything?'

'Erm.' Melantha just blinked back at her for a long moment — that was sort of obvious, wasn't it? 'Isn't she?'

With a little shrug, Ellie said, 'Susan's a flirt. I asked her about it once, and she said she mostly just does it because she likes making people feel pretty, and for very little other reason.' Then, with a slight smile, 'Besides, it's fun. Try it yourself sometime.'

She suddenly remembered what Hermione had said, when she'd told her about it: *Most of the time, she doesn't even mean anything by it, just teasing.* That sounded a sort of odd motivation to her, but what did she know? It wasn't like she'd ever done it before. Maybe Tracey and Susan had been so amused with themselves they'd been giggling inside the entire time, really she'd have no way of knowing. At least, she guessed that seemed possible, that they weren't angling for...something, she didn't know. They just made comments, and sometimes stared, but they weren't... She didn't know exactly. She could allow it was possible they were just playing around. Especially since she now had two people who'd said that was exactly what they were doing. So. Definitely possible.

Everything was just so bloody confusing these days.

But anyway, Ellie had just said something, should respond before the silence got too awkward. 'Like I'd even know how to do that anyway.'

'That is what practice is for, you know.' She rolled her eyes, but Ellie said, 'I wasn't joking. No one knows how to handle social things like this by nature. Everything has to be learned — obviously, since even language itself has to be learned. This is a language you don't speak now, sure. But you'll never figure it out without practising, without trying. And you might learn something about yourself along the way.'

For a second, Melantha just stared at her. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'Are you telling me to go flirt with Susan Bones?'
Ellie smirked a little, but, thankfully, said, 'No, that's not what I'm saying. But, then, I guess I'm not *not* saying that, either.' Nope, thankfulness retracted. 'I think you coming here was actually rather well-timed. You weren't entirely alone at home, true, but it was a comparatively controlled, limited environment. It was not a bad place to be while you were working through the initial disorientation of your situation, and it served you rather well. But, far as I can tell, you're mostly through that now. Do tell me if I'm wrong, but it sounds to me you are now far more comfortable with *what* you are.

'You've gotten back down to equilibrium, basically. But that doesn't mean you're *done*. You have still barely begun to explore *who* you are. And how do you do that?' Ellie gave a wide, over-exaggerated shrug. 'You interact, with the environment and people around you. You experiment, with every experience that appeals to you, and sometimes ones that don't. And in how everything moves you, you find yourself. And just when you were stable enough to maybe actually handle it, here you are, right in Hogwarts, surrounded by dozens of other people your age, in the midst of the same interacting and experimenting.

'So, no, I'm not telling you specifically you should *flirt with Susan*. What I am saying is that you're a teenager. I think it might be good for you to try to act like it, and see what happens. You just might learn how to actually enjoy yourself, however unlikely that may seem to you now. You won't know until you try.'

Ellie had a talent, Melantha thought. A talent for taking an entirely terrifying idea and making it seem perfectly reasonable.

Maybe she was just a bit neurotic, she would admit that. And she knew Ellie wasn't *just* talking about flirting, or whatever — she was talking about *everything*, going out and doing things just to try, life and all that. And she guessed, well, she'd even come to a similar conclusion herself, not that long ago. That she'd do exactly what she felt like, and just tell the stupidity in her own brain to fuck off. A similar conclusion, but a bit more limited: Ellie was basically saying she couldn't necessarily know if she might feel like something or not until she knew what that something was actually like, which wasn't actually a bad point. She could see the logic. Hence, reasonable.

But, neurotic. She couldn't help trying to follow things to where they were going, if that made sense. Like, say she did...flirt back, or whatever, just to, as Ellie had put it, learn the language. There were potential consequences to that she couldn't predict. And she wasn't entirely sure she would be okay with where they might go. It wasn't the first step she had a problem with so much, if this made sense, but the twentieth. And how awkward things might get if she got to the fifteenth or sixteenth or something and then ran off scared in the opposite direction like a crazy person.

And yes, she was confusing herself a little bit with this metaphor. But the point was there.

'I don't know,' Melantha said, giving a little helpless shrug. 'I don't know if I want to get too wrapped up in anything. There's a lot going on.'

'Things are like that sometimes. That doesn't mean you shouldn't get *wrapped up in anything*, as you put it. There's nothing wrong with a pleasant distraction — it can even be good for you.'

Melantha frowned, looked down from the ceiling to blink at Ellie for a moment. 'Okay. And now you're telling me to, what, go date Susan Bones?'

A smile pulling at her lips, Ellie said, 'I'm just talking in the general case. You're the one who keeps bringing up Susan.'

As expressively as she could possibly make it, Melantha rolled her eyes.
'But, no, I'm not saying that. Right now, you are taking an entire realm of human experience and dismissing it, out of hand, for what I'm sure you must realise are very flimsy reasons. I'm not suggesting you go date Susan. I'm not suggesting you go date anyone. All I am suggesting is that you don't...' Ellie trailed off, pausing for just a moment. '...that you don't allow yourself to use the complexities of your present situation to make excuses, to limit your options before you've even started considering them. I'm simply suggesting you evaluate what appeals to you honestly, and decide whether you want to pursue whatever it is based on a rational determination of what you have the spare time and effort for. But I don't think, with where you are now, you should be dismissing anything out of hand. Life is not that simple.'

Melantha let out a long sigh. See? Like that. Sounded perfectly reasonable, but in essence perfectly terrifying.

Katie collapsed to the floor right next to Melantha, her breath just as hard and heavy as hers. 'I'm sure you—' Her sentence was broken with a gasp for air. '—know this but — your cousin — is evil.'

Melantha didn't really have the air to respond right now, so she just nodded.

From that first day, Dora had said "physical conditioning" was on the list of things they'd be working on. On the face of it, she could definitely see the logic. In a one-on-one duel, if there was any significant gap in skill the fight tended to be over almost immediately — it didn't even take that much of a gap, really, only needed one trick to win. But if the two were more evenly matched, well, they could go on for some time until one ended up coming out ahead. And, well, in larger battles, those could go on for some time. The now-famous Battle of Hogsmeade back in the previous war had apparently lasted for hours, and there were people who had been fighting for practically the whole time. At lesser skill levels, it wasn't uncommon for people to mostly stand in one spot, flinging spells at each other from behind shields, but at higher skill levels, the sort of running and skipping around Melantha had seen in that pensieve memory was far more typical. So, endurance was critical.

Melantha and Katie were now learning training with Dora was even worse than with Oliver fucking Wood. This girl was completely insane.

Okay, it didn't sound that bad just saying it, what she'd made them do. At the end of their lesson for today, she'd said they were going to "do sprints", and had ordered the Room to reshape itself a bit. Into a hardwood-floored hall maybe...ten, twelve metres wide? Whatever, not huge. And Dora had demonstrated what she wanted them to do: just run from one end of the room to the other, back and forth, over and over. Though she had some particular rules about it. She wanted them to get as absolutely close to the wall as they could before turning around each time. And she didn't want there to be a gradual slow down at either side — full speed, plant-and-pivot, full speed. She actually had them practise that maneuver a couple times first, it was a little awkward. And she didn't want them to gradually fade out either. She wanted them going as fast as they possibly could, from the very beginning to the very end, until they just couldn't do it anymore. And if they started slowing down, she'd give them encouragement not to.

At the time, she hadn't said what this "encouragement" was going to be. It wasn't until, after she'd long lost track of how many tiny little circuits she'd made, that she'd found out. And that was only because the stinging jinx aimed at her heel had passed close enough she'd been able to clearly feel the charge of magic in the air.

So now Melantha was lying on the ground, completely out of breath, drenched in sweat, shaking with exhaustion, and covered with dull aches from a dozen stinging jinxes.

Yeah. Dora was completely insane. She'd thought having her silly, carefree cousin as a teacher
would have been relatively easy. Turned out, there was actually a strict, intense disciplinarian in there. Who knew?

'Oh, please, I'm not that bad.' Melantha heard a shuffle nearby, looked over to see Dora had slumped to sit on the floor near their heads. If she'd had more energy, she would have been tempted to curse that smile off her face. 'You two have it easy, with it being me trying to shape you up. You have no idea how hard Alastor worked me. I pulled this same exercise from my time with him, actually, except he was sending serious hexes and curses at me the entire time, not just if I started slowing down. He expected me to keep up a full sprint just like you were, but to also deflect all that shite at the same time. With both hands, too, I had to switch my wand hand every time I turned around. That was fun, let me tell you.'

Melantha winced at the very idea of that — Dora was teaching them charm deflection, but it was not at all easy. The bit of magic itself was easy, so easy it didn't technically require a wand. A wand made it easier, of course, but it wasn't strictly necessary. The difficulty mostly came in aiming it. See, charms moved rather fast, and they had to catch the damn thing on their thin little tiny wand, while halfway through the circular flourish necessary to redirect it. It was not an easy thing to do. Which was why it'd been so easy to get her revenge for Katie's mockery the previous day. Katie had instantly retaliated, of course, but still, worth it. She couldn't imagine trying to properly aim to deflect something while also sprinting at full speed. That was, just, impossible, entirely nuts.

Half the time, she thought she was brilliant for thinking up asking Dora to help her learn to handle herself. The other half, she wondered if she hadn't made a terrible mistake.

A few minutes later, she and Katie were mostly recovered, Dora gave them their "homework" — practising a list of spells in their spare time, mostly — and they were done for the evening. But while Katie went trailing out of the Room immediately, Melantha stayed put, grabbing Dora's elbow to keep her from leaving. Dora obviously got the point, and waited for the door to close behind Katie before opening her mouth. 'Yes?'

Melantha let go, shrugged. She started wrapping her arms around herself, but then she realised just how sweaty and gross her vest was, and stopped. Blech. 'I just had something somewhat complicated to ask you, is all. Not sure if we'd want Katie overhearing.'

Her head tilted a little, Dora frowned at her. 'Okay. And what is that?'

'I was wondering if you could teach me shadow magic.'

'Honestly, the strength of the expression of shock on Dora's face confused Melantha a bit. It wasn't that crazy of a suggestion was it? Where did you even hear about shadow magic?'

'Where did you even hear about shadow magic?'

'Well, she'd never quite let go of the slight feeling that she shouldn't be reading her mother's personal journals — they were personal, after all — but she hadn't been able to help herself. 'My mother kept these journals in school, and I've been reading them. She taught herself some shadow magic starting in, oh, about third year, and the stuff seems really useful.'

Dora let out this weird noise, somewhere halfway between exasperation and helplessness. With some surprise, Melantha noticed her hair, which had been a riotous pink, was fading to a far paler tint, and looked like her face was even slackening a bit — she'd seen before Dora intentionally shifting for effect, but she'd never noticed her emotional enough she'd actually lost control of it. 'I just—' Dora let out a harsh sigh. 'No, I can't teach you that. I mean, I know shadow magic, though I'm not great at it, honestly, but I'm not allowed to teach it to you. It's against the law.'
'Oh.' She'd thought that was a possibility. Her mother had written something about it being restricted magic, and also not entirely understanding why it was restricted magic, since it wasn't really all that dangerous. Somewhat risky for the practitioner, yes, but no more inherently harmful to others than any other branch of magic. But also incredibly useful, hence Lily teaching it to herself, and Melantha's interest in learning it. Oh well, it wasn't her only idea. 'How about runic casting?'

She didn't need Dora to actually respond — she made another odd noise in the back of her throat, which was answer enough. Both hands running to her hair, Dora said, sounding oddly beleaguered, 'No! I can't—' Dora broke off, rubbing her face with both hands for a moment, taking a long breath. When she dropped her hands, her hair had taken more of a sharp blue colour, but her face was back to normal. Good, it'd looked vaguely disproportionate for a moment there, it was always creepy when Dora did that. 'Shadow magic and runic casting are both Category II magical arts, Melantha. They are restricted, I can't teach you those. Well, I mean, I could,' she said with a slightly awkward shrug, 'but only within the context of a formal apprenticeship. And, I'm sorry, but I just don't have the time for that. And, well, I've just joined the Aurors a year ago, I'm not sure they'd be pleased with me spreading restricted magics around already. I can't.

'If these are things you really feel you have to learn, I can go check the registrar for you. Chances are, there'll be someone on the list who'd be willing to take you on for a dark arts apprenticeship. Actually, since you'd need to tell them your real name, if only for the purpose of the parchmentwork, I'd be shocked if there isn't. So, that's an option, if you really want. But I really can't do it myself. If I did, we could both go to Azkaban for it. I'm sorry.'

Melantha sighed. That was somewhat disappointing. Shadow magic and runic casting were just so bloody useful. She really couldn't see why they were restricted. Well, okay, they were both rather risky for the person actually doing the magic, and the spell effects gotten through runic casting could be rather unpredictable, but they weren't themselves bad or anything. Runic casting wasn't even technically a branch of magic — it was simply another way of doing magic. It would be like calling all potions dark, or, hell, all wanded spells, didn't really make sense. Her mother had left enough notes on it she thought it'd be possible to teach herself from them, it'd just be somewhat risky. Especially since she didn't really have anyone to practise with, like her mother'd had. So, disappointing.

But she asked for the list anyway. Might as well. Maybe she'd get lucky, and there'd be a handy name on there. Though she could only imagine what the headlines would be like if it was suddenly a matter of record, as these things were required to be by law, that Harry Potter had entered a formal dark arts apprenticeship with anyone. The country would probably go nuts.

And then she was alone. She grabbed the clothes she'd been wearing before from where she'd left them — she'd come early to change into something easier to move around in — and left the Room. Then she paced in front of the wall, until the door again appeared. Dora had still been in charge, so to speak, so she'd needed to reset it. Once she was inside, she peeled off her clothes, trying not to pay attention to just how gross they were now, and stepped into the shower the Room had helpfully provided.

She spent probably longer than strictly necessary simply allowing the hot water to fall against her lower back, the backs of her legs, her head leaned lazily against the tile, trying not to shiver as her aching muscles untangled themselves. That felt far too good.

Some minutes later, she was dried off and dressed, again in the whatever-this-was-called and the skirt she'd been wearing most of the day. It was pretty, shut up. At her command, the Room flowed and twisted around her, turning into a carpeted sitting room in reds and blacks, warm under a gently flickering fire. She sank into the armchair, letting out a sigh at the sudden flood of relaxed relief from
not being on her feet anymore. Dora was going to kill her one day, she swore.

Then she let out another sigh. This was going to be awkward.

She delayed for long minutes, sitting there. She wasn't sure how many exactly, but for quite a while, surely, not wanting at all to have these conversations. But she eventually forced down her discomfort, and opened her mouth. 'Tisme, Nilanse.'

It was one of the weirder things she'd ever felt. It was like her magic — not all of her magic, really, just a part of it — suddenly burst into activity, glowing with incandescent song. Marking her location, she guessed, for anyone who knew how to hear it. An instant later, there was the sharp pop of house-elf apparation, one so near after the other she could hardly separate the two. And then she was being stared at by impossibly wide, bright orange-yellow eyes.

The two were both what she'd expected and not what she'd expected. They were both definitely house-elves, with the same diminutive height and slight frame, the same greyish, somewhat knobbly skin, narrow ears and bulging eyes both disproportionately large, fingers similarly long. But they were also a bit...different, by house-elf standards. For one thing, they were both wearing clothes — not exactly human-style clothes, but that's definitely what they were. It was sort of obvious they'd made them themselves. It looked like they'd taken some bits of spare cloth, cut them into the proper shape, then let them fray a bit at the seams, or maybe just cut them apart a little, then plaited the pieces together instead of stitched, so instead of even seams they had lines of braids so tiny and fine she assumed that only could have been pulled off through magic. It was interesting. Oh, and, both had what she recognised as the House Potter crest over their shoulders, but that wasn't as surprising, she guessed.

Tisme, as she assumed the one in front had to be, wasn't even holding herself as house-elves she'd seen before. The smaller, smoother-faced elf behind her, who she assumed was Nilanse, had the more skittish, shy sort of thing going on, almost seeming to be hiding behind Tisme, peeking out with wide eyes a somewhat darker shade, more toward red. But Tisme was standing straight, shoulders back, hands folded behind her back, steadily meeting Melantha's gaze. It was weird.

For a moment, Tisme just stared at her, looking faintly surprised. 'Strange.' Oh, good, at least she still had the high, squeaky sort of voice most elves seemed to have. She didn't know what she'd— 'You are Lily's boy.' Oh, and there she goes using proper grammar. Just had to throw her off again, of course.

Melantha shifted in her seat for a moment, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. 'Ah, well, sort of?' To her amazement, Nilanse giggled at that. No, really, a house-elf, giggled! She seemed to catch herself immediately, her face going red and ducking back behind Tisme's shoulder. But it was still weird.

But Tisme just nodded, seemingly shrugging off the oddness that the same person she probably remembered as an infant boy was now a teenage girl. Then she dropped almost gracefully into a bow, saying, 'My name is Tisme, Lady Potter, if it—'

'Don't—' Melantha immediately bit off what probably would have been considered an order, but Tisme stopped anyway, watching her as she shuffled a little in her seat again. 'You don't have to do the whole titles and propriety thing, it really just makes me uncomfortable. You can just call me by my name, if you want. Ah, Melantha, by the way.'

It could be her imagination, but as Tisme straightened again she thought she fractionally relaxed. It was so slight it was hard to tell, though. 'All right, Melantha.' Well. That wasn't so hard. 'I know elvish names can be difficult for humans sometimes. Your grandfather used to call me Treasa, if you prefer.' That was...slightly easier to say, she guessed. She wasn't sure what to say to that, so she just
nodded. 'And the silly little imp behind me is Nilanse. Lily called her Nuala.'

A few seconds later, at Melantha's urging, the two of them had settled on the couch across from her — Treasa transfigured the thing some inches shorter before getting on with a sharp snap of her long fingers — and they were babbling off. She noticed two things almost immediately: Nuala was entirely unsure of herself, one step away from nervous rambling, and Treasa was completely obsessed with Melantha's grandfather. She had been taking care of him since quite literally before he was born and, far as she could tell, he'd quickly become Treasa's favourite person in existence, and he still was now, nearly twenty years after his death.

Melantha couldn't decide what to think about that. Her immediate impression was maybe pitying, but she gradually started suspecting, again, the situation might be more complicated than she'd thought.

Nuala was in the middle of babbling about something, some tangent off the subject of oaths and such — according to Treasa, for the last couple centuries Potter elves had only taken the standard family loyalty oath used for any member of any House in various situations, none of the extra lines elves sometimes had to give, apparently somewhat common a thing in dark and neutral houses who weren't complete fuckheads. But anyway, she was saying, 'The other elves, at the Wizengamot, they are always telling stories, they aren't knowing how—'

The younger elf was cut off when her mother sharply poked her in the leg. 'They don't know.'

Nuala blinked her huge red eyes, looked up at Treasa. 'But those mean different things!'

'Not in English, they don't. You never say isn't knowing, only doesn't know.'

While Nuala grumbled a little, Melantha couldn't help asking — she'd noticed before all elves seemed to have their own peculiar dialect, there had to be some meaning behind it. 'If they mean something different, what's the difference?'

Eyes going wide again at being directly addressed, Nuala glanced at Treasa for a second, who gave her a subtle little nod. 'Is like...' Nuala frowned to herself a second. 'See, there are things that a person is, that are part of them and they always are, but then things that are just what they are now, not the same. If someone is not knowing something, that's what they are now, they just never learned it, but they could if someone told them. If someone does not know something, it is...they can't learn it, they know nothing about it, they will never understand.' Thin shoulders rose in a shrug. 'They're different.'

Treasa picked it up, saying, 'There are major differences between the grammar of English and Elvish. Most elves, they see little cause to try to learn to speak properly, and most humans see little cause to correct them. Lord Charlus—' Technically, she knew, that was the appropriate way to refer to a former Lord of the House, so Melantha hadn't commented. '—said it is one way some humans like to feel better than everyone else. He said how a person talks, how they present themselves, it reflects on their intelligence. If elves don't talk correctly, it is easy for humans to think we are stupid, and easy because of that to think they are better. So, Lord Charlus — he was a little younger than you at the time, I think — he said that everyone, human and elf and veela and goblin, should learn to present themselves well, so no one can easily dismiss them.'

It was comments like that that made Melantha unsure how to feel about Treasa's enduring devotion to her long-dead master. He just seemed like such a good guy. It was confusing.

And that just made this whole thing incredibly awkward. She'd been half-intending, going into this meeting, to free the both of them by the end of this conversation. But she wasn't entirely sure that was the right thing to do anymore. Treasa, at least, would much rather stay a Potter elf than be free.
Nuala she wasn't so sure about — she was younger than Melantha by roughly half a year, so she didn't have the same history in the House as Treasa did — but, well, freeing her but keeping Treasa would be essentially equivalent to forcibly separating a fourteen-year-old from her mother, which...yeah, she didn't feel like doing that.

But, well... Certainly it couldn't be too bad for them to, just, stay Potter elves, could it? She meant, she was the only Potter around right now anyway, she was the only person in a position to make them do anything, and...well, she'd most likely just be sending them back to the Wizengamot, since she didn't really... So it didn't really matter so much? Whatever, she was confusing herself.

Fuck, she should have done this later. Dora had worn her out worse than she'd thought, she was so tired.

She did ask them — ask, not order, she was being careful not to phrase anything as a command, just in case — to tell her if they needed or wanted anything. Treasa looked faintly relieved at that, so, that would just have to do for now. She'd revisit the whole idea of house-elves later when she had more energy to think about it.

And a few minutes later, she wasn't even entirely sure if it wasn't Treasa in charge of House Potter anyway.

As long as she was straightening all this out today, she'd decided to call Dobby and get it over with. After another moment of light and song, Dobby snapped into exist— Oh my god, he was still dressing like a crazy homeless person, wow. Brightly colourful but somewhat shabby clothes all comically mismatched, and, just, too many socks. It looked like he'd even taken a sock, a bright white one with what looked like tiny blue pixies, magically animated to dart around at random, cut off the toes at one end, and slipped the thing over his left ear. Like leg or arm warmers or something, but a sock over his ear. He... Dobby was just the weirdest person of any kind she'd ever met, that's all. Just so weird.

Dobby had gotten out, in his familiar voice, 'Harry Potter sir calls—' before he was cut off by Treasa suddenly stepping right in front of him, tiny hands on her tiny hips. Melantha couldn't tell what they were saying — that light, musical-sounding language they were speaking must be Elvish — but by how Dobby was quickly going from confused, to sheepish, to obsequious, she had a weird feeling Treasa was, she didn't know, laying down the law or something.

Melantha abruptly remembered reading somewhere house-elves, when allowed to organise themselves without outside interference, were strictly matriarchal. She had the awkward feeling Treasa was, ah, putting Dobby in his place, so to speak. Er. Whoops? She leaned a little toward where Nuala was still sitting on the couch, asked, 'Ah, what is she saying to him?'

Looking only slightly uncomfortable now to be talking to Lady Potter — blech — all by herself, Nuala said, 'She is telling him Lord Charlus's rules.'

'About speaking proper English you mean?'

'Well, that's one thing,' Nuala said, shrugging a little. 'There are lots. I think they must seem really strange to this Dobby. He said he's a Tuğesi.'

Melantha blinked — the fuck was that second consonant, the hell. 'Ah, Tu- erm...' 'It's a clan, La– ej, Melantha. A long time ago, almost all of them went to bad families, with bad wizards. Inghams, Fawleys, Gaunts, Lestranges, Blacks, Malfoys, Longbot—' Nuala broke off, shooting Mel a guilty glance, started shifting in her seat again. 'Ah, I, I'm knowing the Blacks are
good now, but, back then, ah...'

Smiling to herself a little, she said, 'It's fine, I got what you meant. I was more surprised by the Longbottoms being on the list, actually.'

'Ej, well, in the beginning, Miss, the Longbottoms weren't so nice. They have been for a long time, yes, but the first Longbottom was a Dark Lady, very scary.'

'What, really?' The little elf met her frown with only a slow, serious nod. 'Huh. I hadn't heard that.'

'Oh, yes. They used to rule their own kingdom. Lots of land, both sides of the Irish Sea. It was a long time ago, but they did.'

...Huh. She'd somehow never heard of that before. Interesting. She'd have to ask Neville, just out of curiosity.

She was distantly amused an elf knew more about British history than she did.

But anyway, Treasa and Dobby were still going. The mood had at some point turned slightly more solemn, short repetitive phrases passed back and forth. Very similar phrases, actually. Wait a second... 'Erm, what are they doing?'

Nuala watched them for a moment, then, sounding slightly pleased, said, 'Oh, she's leading him in the family oath.'

'She's what?'

Nuala blinked, turned to look back up at her, looking slightly scared, burning eyes impossibly wide. 'Is she not supposed to?'

Bringing both hands up to cover her face, Melantha let out a long sigh. Fuck it. 'Do I even need to be here?' She had to wonder how Hermione would feel about an elf, at her own volition, directing another elf to take what basically amounted to a magically-enforced vow of eternal loyalty to a third party. It was really quite strange at the face of it. They hadn't even asked her! They were just doing it! Would they even notice if she just got up and left?

Sounding somewhere between relieved and cheerful, Nuala chirped, 'Nope!'

Poor little thing looked very confused when Melantha burst into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

xağīvut-imanjuti — Hey, look at that, I made up some Ancient Egyptian. This is pronounced roughly "ha-ghee-vooot ih-man-yoo-tee" (Egyptian, IPA: /χa.'bɪ::bɒt ,ɪ.mɐn.ˈju.ti/). The "ğ" is the same sound as an r in French, btdubs, if you know that, and the "x" is the same place, but devoiced. But, you know, I am sort of guessing a bit. Even experts don't perfectly know what Ancient Egyptian was actually like, so the pronunciation and grammatical decisions I made aren't guaranteed to be correct. (If you're a nerd too, and want to check my work, it's supposed to be the plural of ḫ3.y.b-t ñ.mn-t.) And, no, I'm not explaining what this actually is yet. It'll come up later. In both fics, actually.
In headcanon, Lily developed a form of magesight starting a few months before this. Which not very many people know, she even stripped it from that memory Mel saw (though there were a couple traces she missed, it was intentionally not obvious). It's not important enough to describe, really, just thought I'd clarify.

Not sure if/when this will come up, so I'll just explain now. Some of you might be confused by this, considering I've said in TLG that people don't hold very much magic at all, they just channel it from somewhere else. Lily is using a bad metaphor. She's gotten to a point that she's channeled enough magic often enough that it's gotten so easy a part of her is always in motion, wants to always be doing something. If she doesn't hold it back, magic just slowly trickles through her, out into the air, sort of like a living wellspring of ambient magic walking around. She can stop it by, so to speak, sticking a finger in the dike, but it's vaguely uncomfortable, like having caffeine jitters but forcing yourself to remain completely still. This is something that happens to all powerful mages eventually, but Lily's self-taught wandless magic inadvertently accelerated the process.

In case the following ramble hasn't made it clear, in my headcanon understanding of the magical British legal system and economy only Houses and similar institutions are legally independent entities. From a technical standpoint, the Lord/Master of the House owns all the House's property, and has nearly complete legal power over the members of their House — there are limits, but they are few. While this is the way the law theoretically functions, exactly how it is exercised in practice varies House to House. In McGonagall's case, becoming a Hogwarts professor was her idea, and she arranged the terms of her own contract with Dumbledore, and her uncle (and later cousin) never once touched her salary, so she was in control start to finish, despite the legal fact her uncle had sole authority over the entire process. Having that much of a hands-off approach is entirely the Lord/Master's prerogative, and not all are as permissive as McGonagall's uncle (though, in the modern day, many are).

It should go without saying McGonagall's history here is somewhat different than that told by Pottermore. That's not a mistake, it's intentional.

Treasa — I'm not an Irish expert by any means, pretty sure this is something like "tress-uh" (IPA: /ˈtɾɛ.ʃə/), but "trahs-uh" (IPA: /ˈtɹæs.ə/) is also possible.

Nuala — Pretty sure that's "noo-luh" (IPA: /ˈnʊ.ə.ə/)  

Tuğesi (IPA: /ˈtu.ɡɛs.ɛ/) — Sorry, Mel, you have no chance in hell of pronouncing that correctly.

You might be thinking the "murder in the dorm" exchange between Sirius and Lily was familiar. Refer to Mel's re-Sorting back in chapter nine, when Mel says nearly the same thing to the idea of being put in Slytherin. The Hat wasn't making a Gryffindor joke there — the Hat was simply remembering its conversation with Lily, and it'd thought the parallel was funny. And, no, that's not a retcon, I meant to do that. I'm only making shit up as I go some of the time.
Until next time,
~Wings
May, 1975

'Come on, Lily, it's not that difficult.'

Lily flicked a quick glare over at Sev before turning back to stare at the pebble on the table in front of her. 'I don't see you managing any advanced shadow magic.'

'Advanced?' he repeated, his voice that familiar mocking drawl. 'So far as I am aware, this is considered an intermediate skill at best.'

Didn't really have a response for that — he was right. She had mastered walking through shadows months ago, yes, but this was hardly an advanced application of the discipline of shadow magic. If shadow magic were a class at Hogwarts like Charms or Transfiguration, it would probably be OWL-standard, taught in fourth year or so. She had advanced skill with it by now, but it wasn't advanced in itself.

What she was attempting now, following the same metaphor, would be NEWT-standard. Early NEWTs, probably sixth year. Of course, that wasn't anything to feel too special about. If she were to take her NEWTs right now, she'd still expect to get Outstandings in Charms, Potions, and probably Runes — her Chinese was weak, but they didn't always test Chinese, so it would depend. She'd probably even pass Transfiguration, but she wouldn't expect an Outstanding. Struggling with intermediate magic wasn't something she'd done in a while now.

Speaking of tests, they had OWLs next month, and she'd be completely shocked if she got anything less than a perfect score in Charms. Especially since she could do all the ones that would probably come up in the practical wandlessly. Not that she would actually do them wandlessly — she tried to keep secret exactly how good she was at that, it made people weird. Potions was another potential perfect score. Which was kind of funny: she and Sev had told their friends they were revising for the Potions OWL. They'd somehow managed to successfully hide the fact they'd been playing with Mastery-level stuff in their spare time for roughly half a year now.

But, of course, no shadow magic at all was taught in Hogwarts — no school in Europe taught it, actually, though it was a common skill in certain other cultures — and it was entirely possible she could be sent to Azkaban if anyone found out. Unlikely, but possible. So, she guessed knowing any intermediate shadow magic at all was sort of unusual. But it was still comparatively elementary stuff.

This thing she was trying now, though, just sounded so damn useful. She could pull herself into shadows just fine, and even carry anything she wanted with her, as long as it wasn't too big. This
little trick was to push something else into shadows, and sort of anchor it to herself, so it would follow her around, there-and-not-there. Once she mastered it, she could theoretically carry all of her belongings at all times, carefully tucked away someplace nobody could see them, but that she could reach with just a twitch of thought. She’d read a Nineteenth Century account of a Kemetic master of the art, and it just sounded incredible.

Unfortunately, this stupid pebble just insisted on continuing to exist. Very frustrating.

Lily tried for another long minute, trying to convince herself that the pebble didn’t actually exist, but was at once part of her, that it was simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, and then convince the pebble of that, but it really wasn’t working. And it was giving her a headache. She gave up, leaning back in her chair, rubbing at her face with both hands. Shadow magic was hard. No wonder they didn’t teach it at Hogwarts. ’I’m giving myself such a headache.’

For a second Sev said nothing, the air in the room split only by the sound of him slowly turning a page. Finally, voice low and casual, ’And here I’d gotten the impression you didn’t mind exposing yourself to situations sure to leave you with a headache.’

She blinked, turned to look at him where he sat at the opposite side of the little table. He wasn’t looking up himself, still reading some Potions text or another — or pretending to read, his eyes weren’t moving. ’I get the feeling you’re talking about something specific.’ She was pretty sure exactly what he was talking about, actually.

Still forcing a casual air, Sev turned another page. Which was interesting, since he hadn’t been reading at all. ’Perhaps I’m wrong. Suffering Black’s presence has never been anything less than agonising for me. But then, I am neither a Gryffindor nor an attractive girl so—’ He turned a page again, the movement significantly sharper, the parchment snapping in the air. ’—perhaps I am wrong.’

Oh, this conversation. This was going to be fun.

Ever since their first day here, that whole Gryffindor–Slytherin rivalry thing had made things difficult. She’d long managed to find a few friends who didn’t care, but most of the other Gryffindors thought she was odd for spending so much time with Slytherins and Ravenclaws. And, well, Potter had been entirely obsessed with her right away, yes. She still didn’t understand it, but there it was. So, he’d decided to take it out on Sev. Potter and his friends had been hexing him practically daily for years now.

Which they could only get away with because she and Sev let them do it. In the beginning, Sev wouldn’t have been able to fight off Potter and Sirius by himself, but by now he probably could. It would just be a little suspicious for him to be quite that good all of a sudden, it wasn’t worth it. Lily had fantasised a couple times about sneaking into the boys’ side of the dorm and murdering those insufferable arseholes in their beds more than once, but that was problematic for a whole list of other reasons.

She had slapped Potter down once, though, back in fourth year, when he’d had the gall to hex Sev right in front of her. Even after cursing him badly enough he spent a night in the Hospital Wing, the idiot was still obsessed with her. He was just completely insane, she had no other explanation.

And, well, she had been spending a fair amount of time with Sirius lately. Not a lot, of course, but some. Part of it was a conscious decision, yes, but he honestly wasn’t as bad as she used to think he was. Far as she could tell, he was only jumping onto Dumbledore’s coattails because his friends were. Well, sure, he had some very Light opinions when it came to some things, but he was obviously still a Black. She’d met enough by now she could recognise the mindset.
She could understand Sev wasn't very happy about it. The staged implosion of their friendship they were planning even included Sirius and Potter, partially from convenience, partially to make absolutely sure it got back to Dumbledore's people. It was likely not going to be very fun for him — nor her, though most of her trouble would be from withholding the urge to curse Potter, or Pettigrew, or Sirius, one of them. And after that, if they wanted to meet, they'd have to do it in secret. Which wouldn't even be too hard to arrange, with a whispering charm they'd both learned, and her shadow magic. And she'd have to make friends with several people he simply hated — not that she liked them much better, honestly — which she knew couldn't be making him happy. It was understandable.

But it also wasn't helpful. And, really, he'd consented to Lord Black's plan just as she had. Hadn't he realised this would be part of it? In all likelihood, probably even more than just being friendly with these self-righteous arseholes. That had to have occurred to him, surely. She decided to point it out. Extremely bluntly. Which he usually didn't take well to, but she didn't feel like dancing around this particular topic. 'Tell me, Severus.' She slid her wand back up her sleeve, crossed her arms, watched how he tensed slightly with the use of his full first name — she almost never used it. 'Did you really think I'd be able to pull this off without marrying one of these berks?'

Sev twitched, barely noticeable, then glanced up to stare at her, eyes dark and steady. She could almost see him analysing the same set of opinions and traditions and biases, following the same logic, coming to the same conclusion. A faint hint of distaste on his otherwise empty voice, he said, 'I suppose I didn't think of it.'

'I sort of shot myself in the foot,' she said with a little shrug, 'studying dark magic and all. And my opinions on creature–being law, that sort of thing. The latter is already well-known, and I doubt I can get all the way through the war without the former getting out. And I'm simply too powerful. Just being a muggleborn willing to resist won't be enough for them to trust me. If you know a better way, please, I'm all ears.'

By the expression on his face, she knew he had no better idea than she. 'Still. Couldn't it have been someone else?'

She resisted the urge to flinch, and instead just stared flatly back at him. 'Would you rather it were Potter?'

His eye twitched, and she had to hold back a smirk. 'No, I suppose I wouldn't. I just don't like it.'

'Sirius—' He scowled slightly at the use of the given name. '—can actually be rather entertaining. It's the Black in him, I expect. Besides, I don't even know if it's going to be him — he's flirted a bit, but we've just been practising Transfiguration, mostly.' She'd been mildly surprised at how good he was, but she probably shouldn't have been. Remus had told her he was an animagus already. 'But, no, I don't really like it either. I still find it odd how it's expected to marry straight out of school. It's weird. And I know it'll make things easier if I play into their expectations, but that doesn't mean I have to like the idea of essentially whoring myself out. Anyway,' she said, shrugging a little, 'I don't really see how it's your problem.'

Sev gave her a look, eyebrow tracking up his face. 'I'm just thinking ahead. If we both survive this war, I'd prefer your husband to be someone I can remain in the same room with for more than five minutes without curses being exchanged.'

'Oh, Sev.' She shook her head, letting her face slip into a sad sort of smile. 'What do you really think the chances are we both survive?'

He didn't answer. He knew as well as she.
Melantha couldn’t help remembering that rather odd bit from her mother’s journals at this particular moment.

It had been an unsettling thing to read, true. She’d gotten hints from earlier entries that Lily had been part of the Circle of Agastya, or at least was going to eventually become part of it at a later date, the very same alliance of anti-Voldemort dark mages she’d overheard Sirius mention to Kreacher some months ago. Apparently, Sirius hadn’t known anything about that. After reading that, she’d asked about it in one of her frequent mirror-calls to her godfather, and he’d said he’d had no clue at all.

But, then, he’d also said he wasn’t particularly surprised — Lily’d usually been quiet about it, but she’d had political views that were not exactly common among the Order of the Phoenix, and she’d known (and used) all kinds of magic that she really probably shouldn’t’ve. Since she’d been aiming that magic at Death Eaters, and to great effect, and since she’d been legitimately licensed by the Ministry to practise those magics — which was weird, since she’d definitely learned them illegally, Sirius assumed Dumbledore had pulled strings — no one had particularly cared. He also didn’t recall his father, the same Lord Black Lily mentions repeatedly, ever saying anything negative about Lily in particular, but it had always been his mother who’d been absurdly anti-muggleborn, his father had never said anything too bad. Not surprising, since Sirius’s mother had been a vocal Voldemort supporter, while seemingly unaware her husband had been leading a secret organisation specifically re-formed to oppose him.

Must have been a fun marriage, there.

On the other hand, after telling him she thought her mother and Snape had faked the end of their friendship to trick the Order of the Phoenix into liking her, Sirius told her he’d actually known that already. Apparently, he’d found out in seventh year they were still meeting secretly, and he’d just agreed not to tell anyone when Lily asked. Which, if that was true, sort of made Mel wonder why Sirius apparently hadn’t known Snape wasn’t legitimately a Death Eater — turned out he’d never been, even before he went to Dumbledore he’d been a spy from the beginning, just for someone else. And if that wasn’t a fucking crazy thought. Was anyone actually on the side they claimed to be on?

But none of that was really why that one entry had been very weird to read. She’d wondered before exactly why her parents had ended up getting married. It hadn’t really made sense from the little she’d known about them. Or, at least, the little she’d known about Lily — from what she’d written, she had not had a high opinion of Mel’s father, not even a little bit. True, she hadn’t gotten up to seventh year yet, when everyone had said James’d changed, and Lily’d given him a chance, but she honestly wasn’t sure, just, not being a complete arsehole anymore would’ve been enough. Her negative opinion would’ve had six years to solidify by then, she’d've had no reason to give him a chance. Unless, of course, she wanted to pretend to fall in love with such a good, respectable Light wizard, just to convince Dumbledore and his people that, no, really, she was totally on their side. That made sense. A crazy sort of sense, but sense.

With how Dumbledore kept going on and on about love and redemption and all that nonsense all the time Mel just knew he must have fallen for it. So damn hard.

She was a bit conflicted on how exactly to feel about that. On the one hand, it was a little odd to read her mother had been just that coldly calculating about it. Of course, not gleefully so — it was obvious she’d sort of hated the idea — but she’d obviously still done it. And there was the additional oddness that her original target, so to speak, had been Sirius. She could only assume something must have come up to make him no longer a good choice, because it was very clear Lily'd had a much higher opinion of Sirius than she’d had of her future husband. Much higher mostly in that it wasn’t actually negative. And, with what little Mel knew of James, which was admittedly more than she’d
known of Lily until just a couple months ago, she didn't see much reason for that to have changed any time soon, or at least not as soon as it would've had to.

It was a little odd to realise Sirius could have easily been her father, if things had gone a little differently. In fact, if she were reading Lily's journals without already knowing she later married James, she never would've guessed in a million years that's who she'd eventually ended up with.

But on the other hand...

Her mother had successfully tricked Dumbledore, okay. Dumbledore. Tricked him so well he'd even apparently pulled strings at the Ministry to prevent her getting arrested for using dark magic to kill people! The people in question were Death Eaters, but still. She didn't even really care how she'd done it, that was still just...completely awesome all by itself. So, she wasn't entirely sure how to feel about it.

And, well, at least love potions hadn't been involved. Erm, so far as she knew, anyway.

She couldn't help remembering that entry, sitting here in an empty classroom, watching Neville try to vanish the pebble on the desk in front of him. She realised that made her Snape in this situation, but she didn't really care.

And Neville was having just as much trouble with the vanishing as Lily had had with her shadow magic. They'd been working on vanishing for a couple weeks in class by now, and Neville just wasn't getting it. He was staring at his little pebble, his eyes almost cross-eyed in his focus, fingers tightly gripping his wand, traces of sweat visible on his face. He'd been straining against this pebble for the last five minutes, and there it was, still stubbornly there.

She knew Neville was a bit disappointed with his own lack of progress. After weeks of effort, he'd finally managed to vanish those snails McGonagall kept passing out. And those were even animate — performing any magic on anything alive was more difficult. But it turned out McGonagall had been giving them training wheels for their entire time in her class, and they'd never noticed. The snails were conjured, and conjured materials were much easier to vanish than the real thing. Since they were conjured, the snails weren't even technically animate, instead inanimate magical constructs that seemed animate.

Hermione said this wasn't new, McGonagall had always been doing that. Back when they'd just been transfiguring, she'd give them their target object already transfigured to look like what they were given, which made the transfiguration easier. Sometimes, they'd even been conjured on top of that, which made the transfiguration easier again. She'd switch them to the real thing after a bit of practice, but she started them with fakes. Which was a neat trick, Mel guessed, since she'd never even noticed. Hermione had only noticed herself by accident: back in second year, she'd been a bit sleepy one day, and in a fit of silliness had decided to put a colour charm on the thing she'd been meant to be transfiguring, then had been shocked when the dispel she'd used to remove the colour charm had somehow done the transfiguration for her too.

So, Neville could vanish conjured snails just fine. He could even vanish rather larger objects as well. But only if they were conjured. True vanishing he hadn't managed so far at all. Not that he wasn't trying. She could feel it. Not that she could really explain what it felt like, though. This magic sensing thing she had going on was still very new, she wasn't entirely sure what it meant all the time. But every once in a while, Mel could feel it on the air, the fluttering of power emanating out from Neville, but seeming weird and unfocused. She couldn't explain how it felt unfocused to her, it just did.

Magic was just really fucking confusing sometimes. She'd learned by now not to overthink it.
was entirely convinced that was the sole reason why she was better than Hermione at certain things. Sometimes it was better just to roll with it. Not all the time, not even most of the time, but sometimes.

And now she thought she even knew why Neville was having trouble. It was a suspicion she’d had before, but now maybe she had a way to test it.

Mel pulled out her own wand, pointed off to her side. She readied a more powerful dispel — it wouldn’t do anything in here, it was a convenient charm to test things with. She placed two of the fingers of her left hand on the inside of her right forearm, and let the spell go. Yes, she could feel that, though she’d have no idea how to explain exactly what it felt like. A vibration, sort of? But not...not a physical vibration, exactly, but if it wasn’t a physical vibration then what the fuck was it? See, this was why she didn’t overthink these things. She slipped her fingers up to her wand just above her grip, then cast the same charm again. It felt pretty much identical up here, if somewhat stronger. Same frequency, but greater amplitude, if that made any sense at all.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out another of the pebbles she’d swiped on her walk down by the lake this morning. Again, she put her fingers on the inside of her forearm, and vanished the pebble. It’d been a bit of awkward mental gymnastics to pull that off in the first place — she essentially had to believe with everything she was that there was no pebble, then force out some of her own magic to go convince the pebble of that — but she’d mostly gotten used to it already. Learning Transfiguration did weird things to your head. Sometimes it seemed really strange that they’d all gotten so great at self-delusion.

Though, come to think of it, that sure explained quite a bit about magical society right there.

She pulled out another pebble, and this time vanished it with her free fingers on her wand instead. As she’d thought, it felt the same on her arm and on her wand, just somewhat stronger. She assumed that was because this wand was a good match for her. Actually, from how certain charms and transfiguration in general had gotten just barely noticeably easier all of a sudden, she suspected it was a better match than her old one, but she had no way of knowing that for sure. If Neville’s wand was a bad match, as she’d suspected since the moment he’d first told her back in second year it’d been his father’s, she’d expect it to feel different.

She wasn’t entirely sure how it would feel different, but she was playing by ear here.

‘Neville?’ He jerked slightly at her voice, glancing up to meet her eyes. ‘I have an idea. Can we try something?’ He didn’t say anything, giving her a weird look, but he did nod. So she got up from her chair, walked over to crouch slightly at his side. She rolled up the sleeve of his wand arm a bit, placing her fingers around the middle of his forearm. She glanced back up at his face, about to tell him to try it again, when she noticed he was avoiding looking at her, shifting in place a little, his cheeks going noticeably pink.

Oh, right. She was a girl now. She guessed this was slightly awkward. Erm. Whoops?

She shook the thought off. ‘Try vanishing the pebble again.’

‘Er...what are you doing?’

With pure force of will, she ignored just how uncomfortable he sounded. ‘Testing a theory. Do it.’ After a long pause, he reoriented his wand slightly, a look of concentration struggling to overtake the awkwardness. Nothing happened, but Mel could feel the fluttering of magic under his skin — at least as strong as hers, actually, which she was slightly surprised about. Then she let go, moving to his wand instead. ‘Okay, again.’ Still seeming very confused about what she was up to, he tried again anyway.
Ah, there. The difference was obvious. Power was still moving through his wand, she could feel that, but it felt...different. All broken and stuttering, completely wrong, it was no surprise the pebble wasn't obeying. Just to confirm, she did the same with him casting a dispel. The force of the magic running down his arm was actually greater than when she'd tried with herself, she noticed, but the magic passing through the wand didn't mirror it perfectly. The spell still worked, of course, she could feel the same pattern she had with hers. There were just little sparks of interference worked into it, and right at the beginning there had been an odd moment of...she couldn't describe it as anything but static, this weird chaotic noise before the proper vibration of the charm had set in. His wand was fighting him.

Called it.

'Yeah, I thought so.' She straightened, moving and turning a bit to lean against the edge of the desk. 'The problem isn't you. It's your wand. I bet you'd be just as good a wizard as I am if you had one better matched to you.' She didn't realise until after she'd said it she'd just indirectly called herself a wizard. Whoops, you're a witch now, stupid, ha ha.

Neville moved his yet-uncomfortable gaze from Mel, instead giving his wand a sad sort of look. 'Are you sure?'

She shrugged. 'I'm not an expert or anything, but I can sort of feel magic a little bit these days. Coming down your arm, it's just as strong as mine. Maybe stronger, even. But when it gets to your wand it just sort of...falls apart? Whatever, it's not working for you. You're not a weak wizard or anything, Nev. It's just the wrong wand. You know what Ollivander says, about wands choosing wizards and all that.'

For long moments, Neville just stared at the bit of traitorous wood in his hand, looking almost heartbroken. She guessed she could sort of understand that. She'd never even touched her parents' wands — though apparently they had survived their owners' deaths, Sirius had mentioned they were both in the family vault — but if she were told that one of them really didn't like her, especially after using it for years like Neville had, she probably wouldn't take it well. Eventually he spoke, his voice low and small, forcibly reminding her of first-year Neville shaking in Potions class. 'I always thought it might. Didn't want to believe it.'

'Well, there's not a lot you can do about it. Your grandmother was sort of an idiot for giving you that one in the first place.' Neville glanced up at her, looking a mix of baffled and offended. 'Hermione tells me kids almost always inherit the magic of their mother. There are exceptions, but almost always. Something about the kid being surrounded by the mother's magic for nine months, stuff transfers over. Did you try your mother's wand? It might be better.'

With a slight grimace, Neville shook his head. 'No, Gran just gave me this one, told me it was my father's and I should be glad to have it. I think...' He trailed off, a distant cast falling over his face. 'I was told one of the— Mum's was snapped.'

Oh. Well. Never mind, then. 'I don't suppose she'd let you go to Ollivander's.'

'Probably not, no. I've even asked before, but...' He gave a helpless shrug.

She sighed, shaking her head to herself. She really had no idea what Neville's grandmother could possibly be thinking. This was just a fucking stupid thing to do. She was crippling Neville magically for no good reason. It was just so stupid. And really, from little hints Neville had dropped here and there in their little practices over the years, and mentions she'd read more recently in Lily's journals, it was very obvious Neville took after his mother more than his father. There was the Herbology thing for one — Lily had mentioned once that Alice could make flowers grow from seeds just be singing
at them, which sounded *completely awesome*, she wished she could do that. Come to think of it, could Neville do that? She'd never asked. Alice had actually been Lily's partner for practice duels a few times, since she had a lot of the same intuition for it — which was unsurprising, she did become an Auror. Neville wasn't as good as Mel herself was, true, but once he did get defence charms to actually work for him he was pretty quick with his casting, even rather clever sometimes. Though, come to think of it, his father had been an Auror too, never mind. And even with his badly-matched wand he'd always been significantly better with charms than transfiguration, something Lily and Alice had—

...  

Something Lily and Alice had had in common.

Something *Neville and Mel* had always had in common, ever since first year.

...

She was having a very strange idea.

'I'm having a very strange idea.'

'Erm.' Neville stared up at her again, once more looking distinctly confused. 'What do you mean?'

'I might have a wand you can use.' She ignored the instant question from Neville, instead stood up, slipped a little from the desk. She could just run up and get it, but they were on the ground floor, that would take a bit. Hermione would not be happy with her for doing this but, really, who did it hurt. 'Dobby?'

After a moment of warm song, there was a little pop, and the familiar green-eyed elf was standing in front of her. She was somewhat surprised to notice he was dressed entirely differently than last she'd seen him, now in pretty much the same odd, braided clothes Treasa and Nuala wore — obviously, Treasa had gotten at least that much across. The socks were still there, though, layered thick on both feet and another stuck over his ear again. She guessed he just wouldn't be Dobby without those. In that same over-excited squeaky voice of his, he said, 'Can Dobby be helping Miss?' Well, at least he'd cut down on the usual silly obsequiousness on her name. Though, she had to wonder how much that had to do with the fact that he had trouble pronouncing *Melantha*. It was the *-nth-* that bothered him, he must have stumbled on it a dozen times that one conversation.

Mel smiled to herself a little. 'Now, is that how you're supposed to be talking these days?'

He wilted slightly, shoulders and ears drooping. 'Tisme is not being happy with Dobby, ooh no,' he finished in a low mutter, shaking his head to himself.

She had to bite her lip to keep herself from laughing. It was probably terrible of her, but she couldn't help finding the idea of stern little Treasa berating Dobby for his poor English a bit funny. She was *so* going to hell. 'She is a bit much, isn't she?' Dobby nodded his head at that, so sharp and quick she was half-convinced he was going to tear something. She had to bite her lip again, so hard she was a little surprised she didn't taste blood. 'Anyway, there's a wand in a box in my trunk. Mind getting it for me?'

A brilliant smile suddenly appearing on his face, Dobby popped out of existence. Hardly two seconds later, he reappeared, a thin wooden box cradled in his hands. After handing it off to her, he asked if she needed anything else, sounding almost smug. Weird. Then, with another pop of elf apparation, he was gone.
Oh, wait, she thought she got it. If she'd interpreted Dobby's mindset correctly — which honestly wasn't that hard for her, when it came to house-elves — he was internally bragging to himself that, the very first time she'd ever called any of them when she'd actually wanted something, she'd called him instead of one of the original Potter elves. Really, she'd only done it because she'd known he was already at Hogwarts. She knew apparation was more difficult at distance, and Treasa and Nuala were both still with the Wizengamot in Wales. And he probably knew his way around here far better than they would, would certainly have already known where her stuff was. Calling him over the others had just seemed the thing to do. But whatever.

Anyway, right. She moved back toward Neville, set the box down on the desk. 'Try that one.'

Giving her a suspicious look, Neville slipped his own wand away, reached for the box and lifted off the top, revealing the warm, pale wood underneath. 'Whose is it?' he asked, voice just as suspicious as his voice.

Mel wasn't going to answer that. If she told him, he'd probably refuse to touch the thing. Besides, she was slightly surprised he didn't recognise it. How many times had he seen her cast with that thing? Honestly. 'Doesn't matter. Nobody's using it. Go on, pick it up.'

Neville shot her another wary glance, but didn't say anything. He reached for her old wand, and the second his fingers touched the wood, she felt it. It was very odd. It was a heavy, warm tingling, like she were suddenly standing a few feet away from a fire, and she swore she heard the barest traces of phoenix song, almost inaudibly quiet, but there. Neville let out a high, startled gasp, slowly wrapping his fingers around the wand, lifting it gradually up in front of him. Staring levelly at it, with an odd sort of befuddled wonder about him, as though he'd never seen anything quite so strange nor beautiful. 'What...?'

She didn't answer. Instead she hitched up his sleeve again, put her fingers against his arm. 'Give me a dispel again.' It took him a moment to respond, blinking absently, but he finally did. With the second one, her fingers touching her old wand, she knew instantly the match wasn't perfect. There was still the slightest bit of interference. But it was better, much better, which would just have to do for now.

Which Neville proved a moment later when, on his first attempt, he successfully managed to vanish that stubborn little pebble. He let out a sharp laugh at that, the noise so loud and sudden she jumped. But then she just smiled, shaking her head a little, and watched Neville stare at her old wand in his hand with a wide grin. At least the thing was making someone happy.

'Holly and phoenix, by the way,' she said into his startled glee, only half-sure he was even listening. 'You can keep it, but I may need to borrow it for a bit at some point coming up here. I won't need it for long, you can have it back again after.' It was looking like a certainty now that she'd have to have a meeting with Fudge soon. As Harry, under metamorph-assisted polyjuice, which...she was starting to feel that was just going to be awkward. But anyway, that would actually be in the Ministry, and they checked the wands of visitors against Ollivander's sale records, or something. Whatever, they could match a wand to a name somehow. It'd be a bit hard to explain exactly why Harry Potter would be carrying around Melantha Black's wand, was all.

Neville blinked at that, the words obviously making it through to his head a bit slower than usual. 'Ah. Why? Whose is it?'

Well, she just knew this was going to be uncomfortable. She knew from her lessons with Andi that people didn't share wands. It simply wasn't a thing that was done. Anyone letting someone else even hold their wand was a massive sign of trust. Letting someone else actually use their wand? Usually only the province of immediate family or exceptionally close friends. And, ah, lovers. But Mel wasn't even using the thing anymore, it barely counted as hers now, so she didn't think it mattered. She
doubted Neville would see it that way, though. 'It's, er, you know. Mine. Or, my old one. Harry's, I guess.'

The instant wave of...well, horror didn't seem quite the right word, but it wasn't far off either. Anyway, a look crossing his face, Neville quite nearly slammed the wand back into the box, his hands flying away from it. 'Mel, I— I can't—'

'Take it.' She must have said it a bit sharper than she'd meant to, because Neville flinched, pulling even deeper into his chair. She sighed with a shrug, gave her old wand what she knew had to be a sad look. 'It's not my wand anymore. It refuses to work for me, ever since this girl stuff started happening. I'm not using it, it'll just sit in my trunk collecting dust. Just— Just take it, Neville. At least someone will get some use out of it. And besides... She looked back up at Neville, gave him as much of a smile as she could manage at the moment — she'd be lying if she said she liked the idea of handing her old wand over to someone else, but it really would do him more good than it would her. '...with how messed up things are these days, I'd feel better knowing you have a wand that actually likes you.'

It took long moments, Neville staring at her with a shifty, wary look. But, slowly, his fingers went back to her former wand, visibly shaking just a little, wrapping around, lifting the thing up. Looking at the smooth, pale wood with an almost reverent cast to his eyes.

She had absolutely no idea what to think about that.

Chapter End Notes

Kemetic — Usually, when European mages say "Egyptian", they mean the ancient civilisation up until the collapse of the old monarchy. This is the term for the modern people. In some situations, can also refer to any people part of the supranational Kemetic Union, which actually includes a lot of countries across Africa and the Middle East, but primarily just modern Egyptians. "Kemet" is what the ancient Egyptians called their own country, though mispronounced — it would have been closer to Kūmit (IPA: /'kuː.mɪt/, but that is a guess (they didn't write vowels for the most part). In the modern language, it's Xēmi (IPA: /'xe.mi/) which is less of a guess (taken from Coptic, they did write vowels by then).

[Was anyone actually on the side they claimed to be on?] — Just wait, Mel. You don't even know the whole story yet.

[But it turned out McGonagall had been giving them training wheels for their entire time in her class] — This explanation was invented entirely to explain why the fuck McG started their vanishing lessons with snails. That makes absolutely no sense. That, and it's consistent with how magic works in my headcanon. So bleh.

[under metamorph-assisted polyjuice] — Don't worry, this will be explained when it actually happens, a few chapters from now.

I just noticed recently LeighaGreene, in the opening of the third part of her Mary Potter series, gave me credit for helping her work shit out in these embarrassingly nerdy PMs we traded back and forth like crazy for a bit. Like, you think my notes at the ends of chapters are bad, holy shit. Anyway, I'm not at all sure I deserve that. I wouldn't be
surprised if she helped me more than I helped her, honestly.

So, you should all go read her stuff. If you like my nerdy good times, I can't imagine you'd be opposed to hers. Do it. You know you want to.

I'll shut up now.

Until next time,
~Wings
September 1995 — Undoing

Chapter Summary

Mel doesn't know what she believes anymore. And she's not convinced that's a bad thing.

Chapter Notes

Plenty of paraphrasing and a few direct quotes from Half-Blood Prince, though I have modified canon details, which can be assumed to be headcanon for any other fic I may write that actually has Tom in it. We're apparently supposed to believe Voldemort was an evil little shit from the very moment he was born and, sorry JKR, real-life people simply don't work that way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Watching the pensieve-reconstructed image of Merope Gaunt doing her absolute best to meld with the dirty stone wall behind her, Melantha thought to herself that she'd never pitied anyone quite so much in her life.

The Parseltongue her father was throwing at her came as an oddly sharp hiss, the closest Mel guessed the language had to screaming. Though, it did sound a bit odd listening to Parseltongue in the memory of someone who wasn't a Parselmouth. It didn't have the magical undertones it should, sounding almost empty, lifeless. Sort of like listening to Luna speak it, only worse. But she understood it just fine. Hissing and spitting at his terrified daughter about squibs and blood-traitors, hands going right for her neck, and Mel couldn't help thinking this pathetic excuse for a human being was some kind of inverse Vernon or something.

She felt sick, watching this. She didn't want to be here.

When Ogden finally went for his wand, separating them with a quick revulsion jinx, Mel was only disappointed the Ministry stooge hadn't hit him with worse.

A few moments later, Dumbledore was drawing her out of the pensieve, the odd sensation of shifting movement only making her feel worse. The instant she was slammed back into her chair, she pushed herself to her feet, walked a few steps around and stood, hand against the back of the chair, knees shaking so badly she was distantly surprised she was managing to stand. She was flushed, uncomfortably hot, far more sweat running than she thought was entirely reasonable, her stomach tight and twisted, nausea clawing all the way up to the back of her mouth.

But despite the physical stuff, much like those panic attacks she got sometimes, her head seemed oddly empty.

She took a few long breaths, trying to force the sickness back enough to speak — and was distantly thankful Dumbledore wasn't trying to talk to her, was giving her a moment. Once she thought she was slightly better, she called, 'Dobby?' The pop was immediate, and Dobby was spouting off his
usual over-excited greeting, but she honestly wasn't paying too much attention. 'Could you get me some ice water, please?' Two swift pops later, and she cautiously took a few sips of the almost painfully cold water. She touched the glass to her forehead, sending her whole body into shivers that she couldn't decide were pleasant or not. At least she wasn't so uncomfortably hot anymore, the nausea slowly settling down.

She had no idea why this was happening. It didn't make a whole lot of sense. The only thing she caught that made any sort of sense at all was that random thought she'd had of Vernon. She guessed...the situation did remind her of her own horrible excuse for a childhood. A little. Merope had obviously had it worse than she'd had. She didn't know. She'd just been stuck between thoughts of pity for Merope, and hatred for...whatever her father's name was, she hadn't caught it, hovering memories of Vernon, she didn't know. She hadn't liked it.

She couldn't imagine what Dumbledore could possibly have been hoping to gain by showing her that. She could only assume either Merope or Morfin were one of Riddle's parents. Lily had written an entry in March of her fifth year that said only *Lord Thomas Gaunt is Lord Voldemort*, with no more explanation than that. Mel had done the research herself, out of curiosity. Gaunt was one of the Noble and Most Ancient Houses, but had stopped attending the Wizengamot out of protest at some point in the Nineteenth Century — apparently it'd only become illegal that recently to curse muggles whenever people felt like it, classy. The title had been vacant after that until 1944, when it'd been reclaimed by the openly halfblooded Thomas Gaunt. From what Mel could find reading about him, he'd actually been reasonable for the Lord of a Dark Noble House, Mel had been shocked to find she agreed with pretty much everything the book she'd checked had said he'd done in the Wizengamot. Or at least the things she knew enough to understand, anyway. It was weird.

Oh, and why was it weird? Thomas Aïpitos Fionnlagh Gaunt's name had been changed on claiming the title. Before then, his legal name was Thomas Marvolo Riddle.

Yeah. The idea was extremely confusing, she'd been trying not to think about it.

She couldn't imagine what the point was. But she was already annoyed at Dumbledore for subjecting her to this. Sure, he couldn't have known how she would react to...that kind of thing. She wouldn't have guessed. But she still wasn't happy.

When she opened her eyes, she quickly found Dobby in front of her. An incredibly worried-looking Dobby, staring up at her with absurdly wide, quivering eyes. Trying not to sigh, she said, 'I'm fine, Dobby. Thanks.'

Dobby gave her a level, doubtful look — he obviously didn't quite believe her, no matter how odd that gaze of canny distrust seemed on an elf. But he popped away without any protest.

Seconds later, Mel was again slumped in her chair. Weathering a blank, steady stare from Dumbledore. She ignored that, though, and just took a few more sips from the glass before again pressing it to her forehead. She was starting to get rather cold, just short of shivering, but she'd take this above that nauseating heat any second of any day. Before he could ask, she said, 'I'm fine, go on. Which one had our buddy Tom, then?'

He didn't speak right away, staring at her, eyes still chips of unyielding ice. But then he shifted slightly, leaned back in his own chair. 'The girl, Merope. She, her brother, and their father were the last of the Gaunts, a wizarding family with a history stretching back to the earliest days of magical Britain. They were an extremely influential family once upon a time, in fact — there's an old saying that in modern English would go something along the lines of, *So leads the children of Gaunt, so follows Ireland.* The family weakened over the generations, increasingly showing a propensity toward instability and violence only worsened by centuries of marrying their own cousins.'
She couldn't help it. She did try to hold in the snort of laughter, she really did. It just didn't work. Dumbledore didn't respond more than to just raise an eyebrow, so Mel shrugged back. 'I'm sorry, sir, it just seems that's a problem all the Noble Houses have, not just the one. Sirius showed me my father's family tree once, it curves back on itself after a few generations, ridiculous. Apparently that's why Noble Houses almost always have so few children these days too.' The number of miscarriages Andi had had was actually rather horrifying. Without magical assistance developed over centuries dealing with such difficulties, Dora would probably have been another one. Sort of surprised Andi had felt so comfortable telling her that, actually, but she hadn't used Andi specifically as an example to make her point. She figured that sort of thing probably wasn't something you went blabbing about to people outside the family.

'Yes, well, you likely have a point there.' Dumbledore sounded a bit awkward admitting it — which was a little strange, he was the first High Enchanter known to be from a Common House in history, what did he care — but at least he had the honesty not to deny it. 'However, as far as I can determine, after retreating to near-total isolation starting in roughly the Nineteenth Century, the family fell into a bad habit of having children with their aunts and uncles, their parents, their siblings. That, at least, the rest of the Noble Houses don't allow.'

Oh. Well. Yes, okay, that was gross. Ech.

'By the time of the early Twentieth Century, a once-powerful family had been reduced to three sorry individuals, living in abject poverty while retaining the sort of arrogance that strikes one as dreadfully inappropriate for their current state. And all half-mad, to the extent Marvolo could treasure a few family heirlooms loosely proving descent from famous mages centuries passed rather more than his own daughter. Rather telling of a mindset frightfully common among some people in this country, I would think.'

And at least Dumbledore had the honesty to admit that too. Doing surprisingly well in this conversation so far. Mel wasn't entirely sure what to say here, so she just decided to prod the conversation onward. 'I have to admit, that is not where I imagined Voldemort coming from.' Mel had already known, information provided personally by He-Who-Smells (thank you, Dora), that his father had been a muggle — oh, whoops, his father couldn't have been Morfin then, ha ha — but this wasn't even close to what she would have expected for his mother.

An absent sort of smile on his weathered face, Dumbledore shrugged slightly, gleaming beard shifting over his chest. 'Nor would most anyone, I would imagine. His father was closer to what most would expect, though the muggle version of the same socioeconomic position.'

'The man on the horse, right? The same one Morfin attacked.'

For a short moment, Dumbledore said nothing, just staring at her. Was... Was he surprised she'd put that together? She thought she might be mildly insulted. It hadn't been that hard. He-Who-Smells had told her he was named for his muggle father, Morfin's taunting of Merope had made it quite clear who his target had been, the woman with Riddle had called him Tom — seemed pretty obvious. Was his opinion of her intelligence really that low?

Well, in all fairness, she hadn't exactly made a very good showing of herself her first few years here. Really not the point, though.

The look of what she was trying to convince herself wasn't surprise shifted into a wide, brilliant smile — which just made her think it *more* likely it was surprise, not helping. 'Very good. Yes, that was Tom Riddle Senior—' Of course it was, that was *bloody fucking obvious*, Jesus... '—the handsome muggle who used to go riding past the Gaunt cottage and for whom Merope harbored a secret, burning passion.'
Oh, no. Mel did not like his tone. She knew where this was going, it was obvious. There was no way in hell the elder Tom had willingly agreed to whatever led to the existence of the younger Tom. Probably a potion of some kind — she’d bet Merope had been having such trouble there because her wand hadn’t been suited to her, and many potions didn’t strictly require wandwork. Getting the proper ingredients would have been difficult, but not impossible. Dumbledore’s tone on that last bit there was just... It was hard to explain. Too...sympathetic? Pitying? She wasn’t sure. She just knew she wasn’t going to like this.

And Dumbledore had been doing so well for a bit there. Oh well.

Dumbledore was silent a moment, probably waiting for her to say something, but continued when she didn’t. 'Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban—' Ha, safely, right. '—once she was alone and free for the first time in her life, then, I am sure, she was able to give full rein to her abilities and to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years.

'Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and fall in love with her instead?'

This entire thing was putting a bad taste in Mel's mouth. Not necessarily the subject matter, though that was bad enough. Dumbledore was just being so... Okay, on the one hand, she knew he'd apparently planned out these conversations. She'd noticed it, when he'd told her about the prophecy, and her reacting unexpectedly had thrown him slightly off. What the way he'd planned this conversation said about his opinion of her...wasn't very flattering. He was being rather condescending, leading her through the simplest leaps of logic in the history of ever gently by the hand. It was annoying. Add to that the sympathetic tone he had going on. Yes, Merope had had a shitty, shitty life up until that point. That did not excuse the slightest bit what Mel was sure she'd done next. But she answered anyway. 'Some kind of compulsion, probably through a potion.'

'Very good.' And there was that half-pleased, half-surprised expression again. Seriously? That was obvious. 'Personally, I am inclined to believe she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to—'

'Romantic?' She only noticed afterward, by the soft mutterings of disapproval between the portraits of old Headmasters and the faint shock on Dumbledore's face, that she'd even said it out loud at all. Whoops. 'You're joking, right? There is nothing romantic about raping someone with a love potion.'

She was startled rather badly when a note of high, smooth song suddenly pierced the air, slowly flowing into a soft melody of soothing fire and liberating wind. She could be imagining it, but Mel almost felt like she heard a voice, whispering at the very edge of audible. Definitely not in English, though. It sort of reminded her of Parseltongue, meaning carried on currents of magic, but not quite the same thing. Seemed more a jumble of impressions than actual words. The fluttering voice told her to see-with-clear-eyes, and hold-oneself-apart, and carry-fire-for-guilty. That the evil shall burn under the inescapable flame of the righteous, yes, but at the right time, and in the proper way.

It was only as the tightness in her chest and throat eased and the clenched muscles in her limbs relaxed that she realised, yeah, she had been a bit suddenly angry there, whoops. She glanced over her shoulder toward the source of the voice to find exactly what she expected: Fawkes on his perch a short distance away, glowing softly with inner fire, gazing steadily at her with gleaming, black eyes.

For a moment, she considered apologising to him, but in the end didn't. She had nothing to apologise for: they agreed. He was just reminding her to save her anger for the ones who deserved it.

She would admit she might be a little bit sensitive when it came to love potions. But then, she thought her perspective was entirely reasonable. She'd first heard that love potions actually existed,
and weren't just muggle myth, when Lockhart had mentioned them, back in second year — and even then, she'd had little reason to take it seriously anyway, since it was Lockhart. It wasn't until early in third year, when Hermione had gone on an incensed rant on the topic, that she'd started seeing the whole thing as problematic.

It hadn't seemed like too big of a deal to her at the time, but she had agreed with Hermione that, yes, slipping someone a love potion should definitely be illegal. She didn't really feel there was a legitimate question about that, she honestly did not understand why it wasn't illegal already. When she'd learned that same year that they'd been on the Potions curriculum until Snape had removed them in his first year teaching — supposedly, he'd even gotten into a huge argument with the Board of Governors and the Department of Education, saying he didn't care if they were going to be on the OWLs or the NEWTs, he simply refused to teach them no matter what they said — and the only reason their use was currently banned at Hogwarts was because Snape had repeatedly insisted until they were, well, that might have been the very first time Mel had felt even the slightest bit of respect for the insufferable arse. According to Hermione, that was a large part of why the selection of Potions texts in the library was comparatively thin: anything that contained instructions on making a love potion Snape had had moved to the Restricted Section.

Mel still found the idea that it had been Snape to do all that slightly surreal. Apparently, even unrepentantly dark wizards had standards of decency.

And then there was fourth year. Oh, boy, fourth year. That Hufflepuff third-year, whatever-her-first-name-was Goshawk. She'd just randomly come up to her, and asked-without-asking her to go to the Yule Ball with her, sort of heavily suggesting Mel should ask, if that made sense. When Mel had just awkwardly brushed her off, Goshawk had seemed suspiciously surprised. She asked-without-asking a couple more times, gradually more directly each time, before Mel had successfully slipped away. They hadn't put it together until later. Since it had been obvious whoever had put her name into the Goblet of Fire hadn't had her best interests at heart, Hermione had talked her into a few precautionary measures. One of them was not accepting any gifts either unsigned or from someone she didn't already know at all ever. That morning, an unfamiliar owl had brought her a light, plainly-wrapped package, with no indication anywhere who it was from — she'd thrown it away as soon as she'd gotten back to the dorm to grab her books. When she'd mentioned the weirdness with Goshawk to Hermione, she'd immediately thought it suspicious, and they'd retrieved the package, finding a collection of these bite-sized wizarding pastries Mel had seen a million times by now. Hermione had immediately cast Scarpin's on them, sorting through legitimate baking ingredients to isolate what were clearly ingredients from a potion.

It could be somewhat difficult to determine exactly what a potion was with Scarpin's, since it only revealed which ingredients were used, and no further detail. Ashwinder eggs were used in all sorts of potions, yes. Moonstone was as well. However, the only potions the two were used in simultaneously were love potions.

Mel wouldn't have been able to anticipate ahead of time just how horrified she'd been. It'd obviously been that little Hufflepuff who'd tried to dose her. When Goshawk came with her hints, Mel would have said yes. She would have been ecstacy to say yes. And, once she'd been ensorcelled, Goshawk could have kept her at her mercy as long as she wanted. If Mel had been brainwashed into thinking she loved her, all doubt and distrust obliterated with seductive magic, why, would she ever refuse to eat or drink anything she was given? Doubtful. As long as Goshawk could keep her potion schedule up, Mel would have been essentially enslaved to her every whim. And she would have liked it, she would have wanted it. There was no telling what Goshawk could have gotten her to do. In all likelihood, Mel would have done anything she was asked, and loved every minute of it.
She didn't doubt Hermione would have figured out what was going on almost right away, and quickly rescued her. But the thought was still completely horrifying. If, after those couple of visits she'd taken, she hadn't already known the elves basically loved her — the chances of anyone convincing one of them to slip anything into something she would eat were incredibly low — she'd have probably been too paranoid to eat anything before figuring Scarpin's out herself.

Honestly, she tried not to think about love potions these days. After that little epiphany of hers, just how cavalier most mages were about love potions seemed completely terrifying. Seriously, nobody seemed to think it was a big deal. According to Hermione, Missus Weasley had even said Mister Weasley had only ever asked her out in the first place because he'd been under the influence of a love potion she'd brewed! And no one seemed to think this was a problem!

So, no, she wasn't going to just sit here and let pass Dumbledore even implying there was anything romantic about dosing someone with a love potion without comment. But how to comment? Hmm... 'Sorry. Anyway, I guess I see where Voldemort got it.' Ah ha, yes, there we go.

Dumbledore's face was entirely blank by now, just watching her. Which was interesting. Just what was going on in that fluffy old head of his? 'What do you mean?'

Making it seem as casual and unconcerned as possible, she shrugged, and said, 'What's the difference between a love potion and the imperitāns, honestly? Other than one being legal and the other not.'

Nope, no idea what Dumbledore was thinking at all. His eyes on her were hard and level, hard enough she half-expected to feel his magic pulling at her mind, but she couldn't get any sense of emotion off him at all. 'This is guesswork, but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband—' Mel managed to hold back her disbelieving scoff. She'd admit she was hardly the most experienced person in the world when it came to such things, but if that was what love was she wanted nothing to do with the stuff. '—could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion.'

She saw the direction Dumbledore was trying to go with this: in short, that the emotional motivations behind using a love potion or using the imperitāns were different. But, really? She didn't think so. At least, not to a degree that was meaningful. They both involved magically stripping someone of free will, enslaving the victim to the whim of the user. She wasn't an expert in what love was really like — the closest examples she had personally were probably in her friendship with Hermione and now whatever the proper word was for what was going on with her and some of the Blacks, but that was only in the last few months. But even she knew better than that.

It just seemed too selfish. She couldn't imagine someone who actually cared about another person would do that to them. It just seemed fundamentally wrong on a level she couldn't quite put words to. Anyone who would use a love potion only cared about themselves. That's the only way it made sense.

It was obvious he wasn't quite done, in the middle of a breath to continue on, but she cut in anyway. 'And you're positive she didn't just run out of ingredients? Ashwinder eggs are expensive, and not everyone even sells them. They're hard to get.'

For a long moment, Dumbledore continued staring at her with the same hard eyes. Then the strength of his gaze lessened somewhat, almost seeming to go slightly out of focus, as though not really looking at Mel at all. She had the very distinct feeling Dumbledore was reevaluating how to handle himself with her. Good — if he'd thought she wouldn't resist the condescending, over-idealised way he'd been talking this evening, he really didn't know her at all.

Although...come to think of it, a year ago she probably wouldn't have said any of this out loud. She
probably would have thought it, but she doubted she would have had the...the bravery, she guessed, to just come out and say it. She had long ago developed the habit of avoiding confrontation of any kind, just going along with what people said whenever possible — conditioning from the Dursleys, she assumed. Apparently, she was starting to break it. She could only think that was a good thing. Not that she'd go out and start anything, but she couldn't imagine standing up for herself could be a bad thing, especially in ways so mild as this.

Eventually, Dumbledore shifted, the familiar warm smile pulling at his wizened face. 'I cannot deny that is possible. It was only supposition. I was not personally there — in fact, I did not know of Merope Gaunt's existence until over a decade after her death — so I cannot speak to the facts.

'What I do know for certain is that young Merope was in London, late in Twenty-Six. She was seen by a number of residents of Knockturn Alley. Some knew her by name, but for the most part she kept to herself. All the accounts I've collected agree she was clearly pregnant and desperate for gold — she even sold the locket, to the infamously unscrupulous Caractacus Burke, for a miserly ten galleons.'

Mel rolled her eyes at that. A relic of one of the Founders of Hogwarts, by itself easily worth a ridiculous fortune, bought from a destitute pregnant woman for the equivalent of, oh, roughly twenty-five hundred pounds. Yes, that sounded like Knockturn Alley.

'In the end,' Dumbledore said, prodding again at the pensieve, the blue-silver memories swirling and contorting, 'young Merope Gaunt could not save herself. But she survived long enough to leave her son behind. This memory is my own.' Here Dumbledore paused for a moment, giving Mel a look, his head tilted slightly. 'I'll admit, I'm curious what you'll make of it.' And he gestured at the pensieve.

Gritting her teeth, Mel reluctantly touched her fingers to the peculiar substance.

After the usual disorienting fall into the past, Mel found herself standing in a reproduction of a slightly rundown, old-fashioned London street. By the clothing on the people walking around, the few puttering vehicles she spotted, she figured they were at some point in the interwar period, or possibly early in the Second World War — that was a span of roughly twenty years, but she didn't know enough about history to be more specific than that.

After a little bit of looking around, she spotted the second Dumbledore. He was barely recognisable. In her head, Dumbledore had always been the old Grand Sorcerer, all extremely aged and subtly powerful. From her estimate of what year they were in, she knew Dumbledore would have had to be somewhere between forty and sixty — which, with how mages aged, meant he looked...maybe thirty. She realised with a start this was even before Dumbledore was Headmaster, he would have had McGonagall's job at the time. Dumbledore's face was smooth and unlined, his hair a deep brown, noticeably tinted reddish where the light caught it, that extending from the top of his head cinched in a knot at the back of his neck before tumbling a short distance further down his back, that from his face, much shorter than the present-day version's beard but still unusually long, sporting a thin plait running down from each edge of his chin. Weird, but okay. He held himself differently too, back straight and shoulders back, walking down the muggle street with a stride powerful and confident, hints of his frame visible through his clothes — an obviously magical-origin suit with curving lines and baggy sleeves, in a vibrant purple just a few shades off Wizengamot plum, so distinctly non-muggle it was a large part of why she'd recognised him in the first place — seeming far more solid and muscular than she ever would have expected from the far slighter man she knew. Not extremely bulky or anything, but it was noticeable.

Somehow, it had never occurred to Mel Dumbledore might have been a handsome man once upon a
time.

The both of them followed the younger Dumbledore down the road, turning through a slightly-rusted gate into a little courtyard, the bare, hard dirt speckled in a few places with sad patches of browning weeds. All under the shade of an angular three-storey building of plain reddish-brown brick, crumbling slightly at the edges. The sign she noticed proclaiming just exactly what this place was raised an involuntary shudder, the memory of Vernon's voice weaving horror stories of what goes on in orphanages — which she knew now, intellectually, were all complete shite, but that knowledge alone couldn't stop the shiver of old terror running through her. She forced it back, though, and followed the Dumbledores into the building.

The three of them were led through a hall of chipped and scuffed — but sparkling clean, which Mel couldn't help frowning at — tiles of black and white by a middle-aged woman with a tired face and a sharp voice, stepping into a small room filled with fraying furniture and a scratched desk littered with barely-organised papers. The woman, who'd been named so far only as Missus Cole, settled in behind the desk, nodding the younger Dumbledore into the rickety-looking chair on the other side.

For a moment there was silence, Cole fixing Dumbledore with a steady, canny look. If Mel had to guess, the frankly ridiculous suit had cued her in that something odd was going on here. After letting the silence pass for a while, Dumbledore said, 'I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future.'

Mel couldn't help being somewhat impressed with Cole: she was not buying his Dumbledorean half-answers a single bit. She asked him what school this was, where this school was, exactly how they'd heard of Tom, exactly how any of it was going to be paid for, how it'd been decided he would get the economic assistance Dumbledore had brushed off the previous question with. And she was not letting up. Mel hadn't been impressed with what she'd seen of this place so far, but at least Cole gave a damn, that was obvious already.

And she had not been pleased when Dumbledore had gotten her to stop with what was obviously a compulsion. And here she'd thought Dumbledore was all big on muggle rights. Oh well.

And when Cole went for the gin, obviously disoriented, offering some to a suddenly cheerful Dumbledore, Mel was even less impressed.

Cole went through the story of Merope — though she didn't use the name — showing up at the orphanage New Year's Eve, giving birth to a son shortly later, and then dying shortly after that. Which would have been the first Dumbledore had heard even indirectly of Merope, Mel knew. 'He was always an odd child,' Cole said, even as she poured herself yet another glass of gin. 'Quiet, even when he was an infant. And he never got along with the other children, always sitting by himself. With a book, once he was old enough. Oh, the books that boy goes through, you wouldn't believe. Martha keeps borrowing books from family and friends for him, but she can hardly keep up.'

The young Dumbledore was beaming again, that familiar twinkle in his eye — Mel just knew he was thinking he'd found an imminent Ravenclaw. 'What sort of books?'

Cheeks now visibly pinking, Cole shrugged. 'Not children's books, if that's what you're asking. Books about history, and languages, and culture, and that sort of thing. All sorts of books. No, he was always different from the other children, and, well, you know how children are.' 'They bully him?'

After a moment of hesitation, Cole shook her head, saying, 'No, I don't think it ever got that far. At least, not that I saw. They were never nice to him, certainly. And, that's over now, anyway. These
days...’ Cole trailed off, frowning to herself. After a moment of silence, her eyes flicked to Dumbledore, suddenly sharp even through the increasing haze of alcohol and what Mel assumed were lingering effects of the compulsion. 'He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?'

'Definitely.'

'Nothing I say can change that?’

'Nothing.'

'You'll be taking him away, whatever?'

'Whatever.' A distinct worried tone had entered Dumbledore's voice — he clearly didn't like Cole's sudden change in attitude.

Cole leaned back in her chair again, a faintly unpleasant cast to her face. 'He scares the other children.'

'What do you mean?'

She shifted in her chair for a moment, eyes unfocused up at the ceiling. 'Well, there have always been, ah, *incidents* around Tom, with the other children. When he was younger, it was different — he didn't get along with the other children, and they thought him an acceptable target for, you know, the things children do. I considered stepping in a few times, doing something about it, but I figured he would have to learn how to deal with that sort of thing on his own eventually. And I doubted they would have stopped anyway, just done it when I wasn't watching.'

Mel found her opinion of Cole lowering significantly.

'But, recently it's been different. Before, Tom wouldn't retaliate. Oh, he *tried* a few times, certainly, but he has no friends here, he's outnumbered. But somehow he...’ Cole was silent a moment, shaking her head to herself. 'That's the only way I can make sense of it, that he's getting revenge, but I don't know how he does it. I don't even know *what* he does, sometimes. Billy Stubbs used to steal his books, he's not the nicest kid, I'll admit that. And Tom *said* he didn't do it, but I can't imagine Billy's rabbit gutted and hung *itself* from the rafters — and Billy certainly never touched his books again, did he? And Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop, oh, those two were *nasty*, I'm not going to try to tell you they weren't. I can't tell you how many times the other children and even the staff have complained about them. But last year, we went on this trip, see, and those two and Tom disappeared for *hours*, we'd thought we'd lost them. They came back, Tom said they'd gone exploring, but Amy and Dennis haven't been the same since. The complaints stopped, but they just...'

'Those are the major incidents, but there are others, little things. It's unsettling. I don't think many of us will be sorry to see the back of him.'

Before long, the four of them were walking through the halls of the orphanage again, passing harried-looking staff, numerous children wearing identical greyish, simple clothes. Before long, Mel confirmed her original guess on why this place was so spotlessly clean — they passed a couple of the kids on their hands and knees scrubbing at the floor. Mel was temporarily choked by a sudden upwelling of empathy. She couldn't help feeling the oddest sense of solidarity with this kids, it was all just too subtly familiar. She could almost feel the phantom pain and stiffness in her knees, the acrid smell of bleach, Petunia's sharp voice ordering her to do it proper if she wanted to eat tonight.

She shook her head, shoving the distracting memories back. Supposed to be doing something here.

The three of them were guided into a small room — though it seemed to expand to accommodate the
extra memory-visitors, neat pensieve trick — containing a little bed on a steel frame, a tiny little desk
and chair, and a plain, scuffed wooden wardrobe. And, save for a couple old books on the desk,
absolutely nothing else, not even any drawings or decoration of any kind. Sitting on the bed, leaning
against the wall with a book open across his legs, was who Mel knew was the future Lord
Voldemort.

Not exactly the image she was sure Voldemort would love anyone to see. He was a fair-looking
child, sure, with a smooth and rounded face, slightly-mussed hair a shocking black, seeming tall for
his age even sitting, if somewhat thin. But there was just something vaguely pathetic about him.
Sitting in this tiny, sad little room, atop his thin bed sheathed with threadbare, colourless blankets, his
clothes cheap and plain. A subtle sense about him, in the way he watched with wary eyes
Dumbledore walk into the room, Cole closing the door behind him, an indistinct feeling of a wild
animal cornered by predators.

This was far too familiar as well. Mel really did not like the feeling of sympathising with *Tom
fucking Riddle*.

Dumbledore introduced himself, held out his hand to be shaken. Riddle gave it a long, wary look
before reluctantly taking it, Dumbledore turning his head to get a better glimpse of the book in his lap
as they shook, a small smile twitching at his lips. Mel was startled when the older Dumbledore at her
shoulder spoke for the first time since entering the memory. 'Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in
case you were wondering.'

'Er.' Mel blinked, turned to glance up at the real Dumbledore. 'Should I know what that is?'

'Not necessarily. Eighteenth Century philosophical treatise about the nature of morality. A rather
famous one, enough I'm sure you could ask Miss Granger if you're curious. It's very advanced for an
eleven-year-old, though.'

Mel just shrugged, turned back to the memory playing out.

'I am Professor Dumbledore.'

'*Professor?'* Riddle stared at Dumbledore in the chair before the desk, eyes slightly narrowed. Then
something weird started to happen. Pensieves, Mel knew, retained all senses the person whose
memory it was had. If a deaf person gave a memory, for example, there would be no sound. If
someone had an *extra* sense, that was preserved too: in this case, sensitivity to magic. It was an odd,
slippery feeling rising in the air, just short of visible. Mel didn't know enough to say what it could
possibly be, but she did notice Dumbledore tense a little. 'Why are you here? Did she—' His eyes
flicked to the door for only an instant. '—get you in to have a look at me?'

That familiar warm smile on his face, though seeming ever so slightly more forced than usual,
Dumbledore shook his head. 'No, no, nothing like that.'

Riddle's eyes narrowed a little further. 'You're lying.' Mel couldn't help thinking that, at a certain
level, Riddle was probably even right. She assumed Riddle thought Dumbledore had been sent to
find out if he was mad or something, that he was trying to figure out how much truth there was to the
negative things he'd been told. Which, of course, she was sure Dumbledore *was* doing — that just
wasn't why he'd come in the first place. 'She wants me looked at, doesn't she.'

The odd feeling in the air intensified a bit, warm and slippery and— Oh! Mel knew what this was
now. Riddle was somehow threading some kind of compulsion into the air, without even the need of
a wand. Interesting. Also very creepy an eleven-year-old kid could do that, but still interesting. The
younger Dumbledore blinked slightly at the instinctual magic, but otherwise didn't react.
If anything, Dumbledore resisting his compulsion just made Riddle even warier. Almost scared, actually, judging by the slight flicker his eyes had taken. 'Who are you?' His voice was still level, though, the same silky smooth thing it'd been laying the compulsion in the first place.

'I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school — your new school, if you would like to come.'

'A school? I suppose that's an interesting word for it.'

'An interesting word for what?'

Riddle didn't answer, just frowned at the strange man, sitting still and silent on his bed. If she had to guess, Riddle was mostly confused. The crude mental magic he had going on here, assuming Dumbledore wasn't fighting it off completely, probably told him Dumbledore was telling the truth — he'd picked up has half-lie earlier, after all. But the truth, Mel could admit, didn't really make much sense. How would any school have heard of him? Especially that long ago, the education system was very different back then. His wariness was understandable.

'Hogwarts is a school for people with special—'

'I'm not mad.' Riddle said this with the clear sense of something he said very often.

Dumbledore tilted his head slightly, adopting an expression of polite bafflement. 'I never said you were.' Yeah, Riddle looked not at all impressed with that. 'Hogwarts is not a place for mad people. It is a school of magic.'

'I—' The suspicious cast to Riddle's face abruptly vanished, the silky smoothness of the compulsion in the air dissipating more gradually. He looked down at his hands, spread open over his folded book, his expression seeming a blank sort of wonderment. 'It is magic, then,' he said, his voice sounding half-pleased, half-relieved. 'What I can do.'

'Oh?' Dumbledore just sounded innocently curious, but Mel didn't believe it for a second. 'And what is it you can do?'

'Well, this for one.' His eyes narrowing slightly with concentration, the book lifted from Riddle's lap, drifted over to settle on his desk with the others, the motion surprisingly easy and fluid. There were people in Mel's year who couldn't levitate anything that gracefully with their wands. 'I can tell when people are lying. Animals do what I want without having to train them. I can know what they know, but only the snakes really talk, for some reason.' Mel didn't miss the flash of surprise cross Dumbledore's face. 'And, well...' A smile twitching at his lips, Tom looked down again, focusing on his right hand. After a short moment of silence, there was a burning flash in Dumbledore's sense of magic, and little tendrils of blue sparks ran across Tom's fingers, running up to his wrist before disappearing again under his skin. Over the light crackle of electricity, a clear note of fury on his voice, Tom hissed, 'I can make them stop.'

— he didn't think he could do this anymore—

— why did they always do this to her? what did she do to deserve this?—

— he just wished they would stop —

— she would give anything if it would just stop —

Mel shook her head, forcing herself again to pay attention to the memory before her.
Not that this part of the conversation particularly mattered. Dumbledore was giving Tom his acceptance letter and supply list, then giving him directions to Diagon Alley — Dumbledore had originally offered to accompany him, but Tom had immediately turned him down. Which Mel guessed she couldn't exactly blame him for. She knew that whole slightly spacey, avuncular little act of Dumbledore's simply rubbed some people the wrong way. Slytherins almost universally hated it on first exposure, from what she'd heard, and with Tom being perhaps the most Slytherin of Slytherins that he wouldn't have taken it well the first time they'd met was not surprising.

Honestly, this whole characteristic facade of Dumbledore's — because it was, Mel knew, all an act — was increasingly starting to bother her too. The combination of the few things Dumbledore had told her she'd by now confirmed were completely incorrect and the whole general sense of being talked down to just made it far less palatable than she'd used to find it. She couldn't help thinking Dumbledore was lying to her half the time, or at least somewhat bending the truth, all while being graciously condescending about it, and Mel couldn't figure out why he kept on doing it, and it was really starting to bother her.

She could abandon the script entirely and just ask, she guessed, but she somehow doubted she'd get a straight answer if she did.

And then something even more ridiculous happened to make her doubt Dumbledore even further. Because this just wasn't bad enough, apparently.

The wardrobe, the scratched and scuffed cheap piece of crap that contained practically every single one of the eleven-year-old Tom's earthly possessions, spontaneously burst into flame.

Tom leapt off the bed and to his feet in a single motion, seeming somehow too smooth, too easy, like he'd glided over and down. The expression on his face was easily interpretable as one of pure horror. Wild, sickly magic rose in the air as Tom whirled on his heel to again face Dumbledore, lips curled into a snarl and eyes dark and sharp—

And he stopped, the magic decaying away, the fear and rage wiping from his face instantly to leave smooth blankness. He stared at Dumbledore for a long moment, taking in the warm, gentle calm about him. Then he looked over his shoulder back at the wardrobe for a long moment — taking in, Mel realised, the clear fact that, though the wardrobe was on fire, it wasn't burning. He turned a level, calculating look back on Dumbledore, waiting. Mel could practically feel the confusion and wariness boiling within, the sense that he shouldn't have passed off this strange man as a threat so easily, wondering what the point of this could possibly be. What was he trying to achieve here? What did he want from hi—

Tom blinked, abruptly jerked his head aside to break eye contact, the slightest traces of a frown crossing his face.

Oh. Well.

'I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe.' Even as Dumbledore spoke, a faint rattling sound rose in the air, tiny and muffled.

Tom's frown tightened slightly. He not-stared at Dumbledore for another moment, then turned around to step to the door of the wardrobe, the illusory flames vanishing even as he approached. After a slight hesitation, Tom opened the door, revealing the contents — a couple extra sets of threadbare clothes identical to what he was already wearing, two pairs of plain, identical black shoes on the bottom (though one pair was unusable, tattered with worn holes, one sole split in half all the way through). On the top shelf were a few more ratty old books, a couple random trinkets Tom had just found lying around somewhere, by the look of them. The rattling was coming from a thin box of
scuffed and dented tin. Tom pulled it out, hesitated another bare moment, then set the little box on his bed, tipping the lid open. There was just a bit of cheap junk inside. Nothing really that surprising — Mel would think them just more things Tom had found randomly lying around, like the others on the same shelf. Obviously she would've guessed wrong, judging from how Tom and Dumbledore were acting.

Then he stood back, hands crossed behind his back, and stared blankly at the wall. Clearly avoiding looking Dumbledore in the eyes.

'You will return them to their owners with your apologies.' Oh, they were stolen, then. All right. 'I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts.'

Tom didn't say anything for long moments. He simply stood, staring in Dumbledore's general direction. Coldly watching eyes slightly narrowed by an almost undetectable frown. Evidently realising Dumbledore was waiting for some response, he said in a level, noncommittal tone, 'Yes, sir.'

'At Hogwarts, we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have — inadvertently, I am sure — been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school.' Tom's frown intensified only slightly, eyes again flicking to his wardrobe. 'You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic — yes, there is a Ministry — will punish lawbreakers still more severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws.'

'Yes, sir. I understand.' And he did understand, Mel could tell. She could see it in his eyes, the way he held himself. The way he was still avoiding the younger Dumbledore's eyes. He'd taken the lesson in perfectly well.

Mel just wasn't sure it was the lesson Dumbledore had been trying to teach.

When the pensieve spat them back out again, Mel returning to her body in her chair in the Headmaster's office with a hard start, she took a moment to think over what she'd been shown. All the little details of the very first interaction between Dumbledore and the future Lord Voldemort. The context this meeting was in. And she came to a very quick conclusion: none of it made sense. 'Why did you show me this, Professor? What are you trying to tell me?'

Dumbledore, light blue eyes in his aged face staring back at her steadily — she had to resist the urge to look away — gave her one of his slight, warm smiles. 'There is much we can learn about a person, looking at their past, where they came from.'

'She stared back at him, trying to not to frown too much. 'I really doubt I came away with the lesson you wanted me to learn.'

'What lesson is that?' asked Dumbledore, voice light and curious.

'I don't know what you wanted me to take from that. Especially since what I learned is that I can't trust you, and I really doubt that's what you wanted.'

Dumbledore stared at her for a long moment, the warm smile from before gone, replaced with an empty, flat kind of look. Analysing her, she knew, trying to figure out what was going on in her head. She gave off as few clues as she could. Forced her mind into glassy smoothness, fought off the...well, she didn't know what that hot, tight feeling gradually growing in her chest was, but whatever it was she kept it off her face, staring back at Dumbledore as level as she could. Finally, he said, 'What do you mean?'
'I don't doubt you try to do the right thing.' She felt she had to say that. Because it was true — she didn't think Dumbledore was a bad person or anything. She'd be willing to bet his intentions were almost always honourable. He was bloody Dumbledore, after all. She just...

She'd admit that, at some point early on in her time at Hogwarts, she'd stumbled into the line of thinking that a lot of mages seemed to have, that automatic assumption that Dumbledore was always right. But the simple fact of the matter was that he wasn't. In second year, he'd told her she'd gotten Parseltongue from Riddle somehow. But that wasn't true — her mother had been a Parselmouth, so she'd in all likelihood inherited it naturally — and it was entirely likely picking it up the way he'd suggested she had was impossible. He'd apparently thought until very recently that Sirius had, in fact, been guilty. It was obvious Dumbledore had anticipated how these conversations of theirs would go, had planned them out, but occasionally stumbled slightly as she responded in ways he hadn't expected — though, it was possible that mistake was mostly due to her recent and very intentional shift in attitude, she'd let him have that one.

And, probably the biggest oversight she knew about personally, he'd sent her to the Dursleys. Ellie had said, at one point, that the situation there had been bad enough she almost certainly wouldn't have stayed there for very long at all were the arrangement legitimate. In both the muggle and magical world, there was a government office that oversaw the affairs of children in situations like hers, and the Dursleys would never have been able to retain custody of her like that — and would very likely find themselves in prison. But, since the arrangement hadn't been legitimate, those interviews and inspections and such had never happened. And Dumbledore had either never checked she was okay for himself — and had ignored the implications when she'd requested to stay at Hogwarts over summer that one time, the only time she'd worked up the courage to bother — or he'd known just how bad it was and left her there, thinking the blood wards were worth it. Speaking as the person who had actually gone through it, she could say no, it wasn't worth it, nothing was worth living like that, absolutely fucking nothing. These days, that it had been Dumbledore who had sent her there, bypassing the law and ignoring her parents' wishes, made her rather angry, so she usually tried not to think about it.

And now, watching how Dumbledore had handled the eleven-year-old Tom Riddle the first time they'd met...

No. Melantha wasn't sure she could trust his judgement at all.

But anyway, she was supposed to be explaining, she'd trailed off for a moment there. 'I mean, I know you mean well. I know there are people out there who don't think so, think you're some nefarious secret villain or something, and I honestly think they're a bit nuts.' The slightest of smiles twitched at his lips at that. 'But, let's take what I just saw as an example. You came to a bad conclusion very quickly, and then did things that only made it worse. I'd bet Riddle learned the opposite of the lesson you were trying to teach him.'

Now Dumbledore's bearing turned simply curious, leaning forward in his chair slightly, head tilting a little. 'What do you mean?'

Mel sighed, rubbed at her head a little bit, trying not to look too annoyed. Did she really have to explain this to him? It seemed really obvious to her. Okay, maybe she had a slightly different perspective than he did, but it wasn't that hard. 'You found a kid who was using magic to force people to do what he wanted. Then you came along, a far more powerful wizard, and immediately used magic to force him to do what you wanted — threatening him with destroying everything he owned, and he probably guessed you'd been reading his mind just by the fact that you knew those things were in there in the first place — and you implied with your speech about the Ministry that the law was on your side. You taught him you can get away with whatever you want as long as you're
powerful enough. Was that what you wanted him to learn?"

'No.' Dumbledore actually looked somewhat surprised, eyes widening slightly, again leaning back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. 'How should I have handled it, then?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. But that wasn't how you do it.'

'I admit I could easily have made a mistake.' Oh, wow, that was a rare thing for Dumbledore. 'I was far younger then—' Never mind. '—and was perhaps overzealous in my attempt to prevent future bullying among my students.'

The flare of annoyance was instant, but she quickly repressed it. The slight tick of Dumbledore's eyebrow meant he'd probably noticed anyway. 'Yes, because reinforcing the idea to a formerly bullied kid who stopped his own problems by becoming a bully himself that bullying works was definitely the way to stop him from bullying in the future.' The look of polite bafflement on Dumbledore's face only made her more annoyed. She held back a sigh, shaking her head to herself.

'How is that not obvious? You forced him to do what you wanted by proving you're more powerful than him. What else was he supposed to learn from that?'

Dumbledore hesitated before speaking, only for a moment, eyes taking her in with a calculating glint. 'I would argue the motivations are different.'

'The motivations are irrelevant to the person being pushed around. They don't care why you're trying to force them — they just know they're being forced.' She knew the Dursleys had only been as awful as they had because they found magic terrifying, perhaps even evil on a fundamental level. It was possible they even thought trying to essentially beat it out of her as they had been was for her own good, depending exactly what their opinion of magic was. There was logic to it. But that didn't mean she had to like it, or forgive it.

It'd taken her a long time to start legitimately hating the Dursleys. As in, she hadn't turned it around in her head that way until one time talking to Ellie just a couple weeks ago. But, now that she'd started, she didn't know if she'd ever stop. She had a lot of good reasons to hate them, and it was hard to ignore it when she was still dealing with the consequences every day.

But anyway, right, still talking. She really didn't like this conversation, she was having trouble focusing. 'Besides, if we're talking about motivations being decent, then Riddle should get a pass. Sure, I won't deny Riddle went a bit further than he probably needed to, but the only reason he did the things he did in the first place was to get people to stop being mean to him. He said it himself: I can make them stop.'

And now Dumbledore was looking faintly sad and disappointed, his head shaking only slightly, silver hair gleaming in little flashes as it caught the light at different angles. 'Even should we believe his motives justifiable, I wouldn't believe that enough to excuse him.' When had she said it was enough to excuse him? Dumbledore was the one saying motivation mattered; she was trying to say that sort of coercion was bad no matter the motivation. She wasn't excusing him. She understood, that was all, that didn't mean he was right. 'No matter his motivations, he caused significant harm, while I was acting to prevent harm. In everything Tom said and did that afternoon, he demonstrated an almost pathological inability to forgive, and our ability to forgive is one of the—'

Melantha didn't hear anything past that. She wasn't paying attention anymore. At first, she'd been thinking she might comment about the causing or preventing harm part. It was easily arguable Dumbledore had actually made things worse — pushing Tom the way he had would have only set him more solidly on the road to becoming Lord Voldemort — so his actions didn't hold up that way either. But it was worse than that.
It actually almost shocked her, how quickly it happened. One second, she was only somewhat annoyed with Dumbledore, trying not to show it too much while also doing her best to ignore the lingering nausea from the pensieve. The next, she was entirely furious. It rose from somewhere deep within her like a raging fire, filling her with almost painful heat, her ears suddenly blocked with a harsh roar. That tooth that had always bothered her stung as her jaw clenched, her fingers tightening on the arms of the chair.

No. No, he was wrong. She could already see where he was going with this thought, and he was wrong. Forgiveness was not something he should be handing out like lemon drops. That kind of forgiveness was too cheap, it didn't mean anything. And it could easily go too far. There were evils that should not be forgiven. There were people who should never be forgiven.

And it wasn't even all anger. She'd been being forced to be honest with herself enough that by now she could tell without having to think about it. It hurt. She'd admit it hurt. Because, she knew from that memory, other things she'd learned, she knew she really wasn't that different from Tom. In his situation, she doubted she'd have done much differently. Even in her own, she wouldn't forgive. She knew she never would. Even before she'd started hating them, she wouldn't have been able to imagine forgiving them, and now that she actually did it was impossible. It would never happen. She couldn't. And she couldn't think forgiving them would be a good thing. They shouldn't be forgiven, they didn't deserve it. Perhaps she was too close to it, too invested, but she couldn't help it. She would never forgive them.

It hurt rather more than she'd have expected it would. Sure, she'd become rather disillusioned with Dumbledore recently, but that didn't mean she didn't respect him, that his opinion of her didn't matter. She cared. And this... If he was actually consistent about these sorts of opinions across different people, he would have little reason to think better of her now than he had eleven-year-old Tom Riddle. Hell, the only reason she'd never done anything to the Dursleys when she'd been younger was because she couldn't. Dumbledore probably didn't know how she'd prayed for something, anything, back when she'd been six, seven. If her magic had answered, she'd have been no different. He'd think just as little of her. And honestly, if his judgement of such things was consistent, even if she'd never been able to act on it, he probably still should think little of her.

And it hurt.

Hot and shaky with searing fire, Mel pushed herself to her feet, the room around her oddly blurry as she walked woodenly to the door. The knob wouldn't turn at her touch, her hand slipping around it uselessly. She felt her magic give a harsh flinch — because that's what the fire was, she belatedly realised, her magic rising in unconscious response to her emotions. She considered drawing her wand to cast an unlocking charm, but she doubted that would beat whatever Dumbledore was doing. She drew in and out a long breath, desperately trying to hold the tendrils of flame back from lashing out, a battle she was convinced she was quickly losing, her magic too fast and hot and slippery, and the trouble she was having focusing really wasn't making it easier. 'Let me out.' Her voice was surprisingly level saying that, she hadn't thought she'd have managed.

'I'm not sure that would be wise, Melantha.' The soft, calm tone he was using was only making her angrier. Her magic flinched again, and she felt it actually leave her body, but she grit her teeth and clenched her fists and yanked it back as hard as she could, barely managing to hold boiling flame in an invisible cloud around her, crackling at the air. That had been close. 'We should at least clear up this misunderstanding we're having before we part for the night.'

Misunderstanding, right. The problem wasn't that she didn't understand. The problem was that she did. Partially, anyway. And partially was enough. She turned half around so she could look at Dumbledore, meet his consciously blank expression with her...well, she wasn't sure what her face
would look like right now, she couldn't guess if she was properly holding it back or not. 'It's fine. I'll still show up next time. I just need to get away.' She thought for a second, and added, 'And talk to Sirius.' She'd been intending to do that anyway, but now she had extra reasons to do it, and if Dumbledore was really so concerned about her right now he could just ask Sirius about it later. That eventuality might be enough to get her out the door.

Apparently not.

Dumbledore was saying...something. She wasn't sure what. She was having trouble paying attention, his voice didn't sound right, all blocked by the roar in her ears, and she was having trouble making him out visually as well. Whatever. Didn't matter. It was obvious he wasn't opening the door anyway, which was annoying. She really didn't want to be here right now. The fire kept straining against her control, and it wasn't getting any easier, it wouldn't get easier until she left, could clear her head, the border was already fraying a little bit, magics mixing together in a nauseating soup, tendrils stretching out and filaments stretching—

When Mel realised what was happening her magic flared with a furious roar, the cloud around her pulsing slightly out of her control. She tasted smoke and blood, heard a series of ominous cracking noises. Her magic lanced through her in a wave of heat and hurt and light and betrayal, and Dumbledore twitched in his seat as his legilimency probe was scorched through. She barely managed to force past her clenching throat, 'Don't d—do—' before she had to stop, wiping irritably at her flushed face.

She was distracted for a moment by the wetness on her fingers. Erm. Was she crying? Since when? Huh, hadn't noticed.

The thought made her want to be here even less. She wanted out, very, very badly. Her magic throbbed eagerly within and around her, giving her an odd thought. She turned away from Dumbledore, faced the exit again. Thinking of her mother, how she'd written several times magic was a matter of power and will and focus, it was far less complicated than people tended to make it, Mel thought of her power flooding the air around her, at once something beyond herself and part of herself, focused as hard as she could on her will to get out of here, thought of nothing else, and put her hand against the wood of the door, pushed the thought down her arm and out as she would any wanded spell, forcing her will on the world outside.

The door didn't unlock so much as it blew open. She didn't think anything broke, but as she felt the familiar sense of a rush of power stream through her both sides of the double door sprang apart and swung away from her with satisfying speed, all the way around to slam against the wall on either side of the entry, where they solidly stuck themselves. Mel walked out, taking the rotating stairs down, the faintest trickling of relief touching her as the gargoyle at the base stepped out of the way. Dumbledore had decided to let her go, apparently.

The fire within didn't dissipate until she was on the seventh floor, approaching Gryffindor Tower. She slowed somewhat, wrapping her arms around her stomach, taking a moment to collect herself. She didn't entirely understand why she'd gotten so angry.

Dumbledore's irrational insistence on forgiving people who'd done horrible things was annoying. She could come up with three really bad examples off the top of her head. He would have known, he'd suggested as much, Riddle had opened the Chamber of Secrets, attacked a few students and killed Myrtle — he wouldn't have been able to sufficiently prove it, but he'd known. And what had he done? Stood back and watched Riddle escape with no consequences. He knew the Death Eaters who'd gotten off with the imperitāns defence were lying, but he'd let them get away with it. He was the High Enchanter, for fuck's sake! It was his job to ensure justice was done, but he'd done nothing!
Was still doing nothing, letting people he knew were Death Eaters walk free even after Voldemort had returned! And then there was Snape. He wasn't actively cruel to students or anything — though he did push it outside of class at times — but he certainly wasn't a good professor. Cold and condescending and unhelpful. Hermione had looked it up, and the average OWL scores among Hogwarts students had dropped precipitously over the first few years after he'd taken over, and never recovered. The NEWT scores were less affected, but he only took O students in the first place — which decreased the number of people who could potentially go into things like healing. Sure, there were other schools in Britain, but Snape was still responsible for a noticeable drop in the applicant pool for jobs that were extremely important. And Dumbledore knowingly let him do it. He even actively defended him at every turn!

And let's not forget the serious bullying problem this school had. Disproportionately, though not only, Slytherins against students of other houses. They hardly ever got punished for it at all. Sure, Snape almost always protested whenever it came up, denying his students had any hand in any wrongdoing. Which, sure, was a blatant lie. But he was their head of house, wasn't he? Defending his students, speaking for them against accusations from the rest of the staff, was part of his job.

All things considered, McGonagall was actually a rather terrible head of house. Hermione had talked to people from other houses and had come quickly to that realisation. Sprout and Flitwick would always act in defence of their students when they were facing punishment for anything — usually not denying any fault like Snape did, simply trying to moderate whatever the punishment was. On the other hand, the member of staff a Gryffindor was most likely to be punished by, not just with points taken away but detention and stripped privileges, was McGonagall, and she didn't go easy on them either. McGonagall and Flitwick both had a blind spot for bullying within their house, but Flitwick at least did his best to defend his students from mistreatment at the hands of non-Ravenclaws. In cases of inter-house conflict, Flitwick, Sprout, and Snape would all stand on their students' side, insisting the opposite be punished and their own student held innocent — sort of acting as their barrister, if that made sense. McGonagall was liable to punish all parties equally, no matter the circumstances. She usually wouldn't even ask for details.

One other tidbit that had completely shocked her was that other heads of houses had meetings with their students regularly. At least once a year, more depending on individual circumstances. Snape apparently had monthly interviews with all his first-years, asking questions about everything from their educational goals to their hobbies and home lives. It was entirely possible that, had Mel not argued with the Hat and been sent to Slytherin, she would have gotten away from the Dursleys sooner. Hermione, after asking permission, had related the story about how Tracey had not exactly been in a very good situation at home — being a halfblood in a Noble House where the majority didn't approve of such things had not been fun — and had finally caved to his questioning and told Snape about it shortly before the end of first year. She didn't know what Snape had done or said, but she and her mother had been moved out of the family manor and into the home of a more liberal cousin within the first week of summer. By the way her pureblood supremacist relatives almost seemed scared to even look at her, Tracey could only guess Snape had very successfully threatened them. Tracey's experience was one example, but not even close to the only one.

Ask a Slytherin in an honest mood about Snape, and they'd admit that, yes, he was an absolutely awful teacher, but he was the absolute best head of house anyone could ask for. Any Hufflepuff would have similar things to say about Sprout — her teaching wasn't exactly well-regarded either, though not as widely hated as Snape's classes. Many considered Flitwick their favourite professor, since he generally managed to make his classes the least boring, and while Ravenclaws didn't think he was a perfect head of house, they had very few complaints. (The blind spot she'd mentioned earlier was the biggest one.)

Rare was the Gryffindor who could say anything of the like about McGonagall.
So, maybe she could forgive Dumbledore for going easy on Snape somewhat. He did look after his Slytherins, even outside of school. And he needed him on hand as his spy in the Death Eaters and other unsavoury groups in the country. And, well, from what Lily had said in her journals, Snape had never even been a real Death Eater in the first place — not that Mel was sure Dumbledore knew that. So she guessed she could give him a pass on that one. She wasn't happy about it, but fine.

But the point still stood. How much damage had been done to innocent people because Dumbledore had decided to let earlier crimes pass, doing nothing to stop the same people from doing more, or worse, down the line? Hermione had once said something, about how Dumbledore was well-known to hold a belief in the afterlife — a rarity among mages, who for the most part were completely irreligious. She thought his behaviour made sense in that context. From what he'd written about his personal beliefs, she thought Dumbledore, during the war and in the immediate aftermath, had been making conscious choices to risk the lives of people he thought would arrive in a paradisaical afterlife so he could potentially redeem others who would otherwise face oblivion. Mel had thought that was silly at the time. It was somehow both unfeeling and irrational, it was weird. But she couldn't help increasingly thinking these days that it really did make a weird kind of sense.

And she very much didn't like it.

And, yes, she'd been honest with herself when she'd thought she'd likely have done little different than the eleven-year-old Riddle had in the same situation. If she'd had her magic consciously available to defend herself with, she couldn't even imagine what she might have done to the Dursleys. And, yes, being told, however indirectly, that she should forgive the Dursleys for what they'd done to her, that the fact that she couldn't was somehow a moral failing of hers, a sign of something very bad... That had hurt. He almost certainly hadn't done it on purpose, but it had still hurt.

By why had it hurt so much? Why had she been so angry? She didn't understand it.

It wasn't until she was giving the password to the Fat Lady that she thought she'd figured it out — if Ellie hadn't insisted she learn to examine what she was thinking and feeling more honestly, she probably never would have. It wasn't that she was hurt, exactly. It wasn't even really anger. Sure, both of those were in there somewhere, but they were part of something else, not what was actually going on.

She felt betrayed.

Not even necessarily betrayed by Dumbledore specifically. It was very complicated, hard to explain. It was a lot of little things, piling up in the last few months, contradicting very strongly with what she'd originally been told, what she'd believed. And she didn't like it.

From even before she'd entirely entered magical Britain, she'd been told all kinds of things. Dumbledore: the greatest wizard alive, champion of all that is good and just. Hogwarts: best school of magic in the world, no other place you'd rather go. Slytherins: evil little berks, every single one, with no redeemable qualities at all, don't bother with them. Dark magic: all of it is completely dangerous and horrible, and will eat you up from the inside out, don't even think about touching the stuff. The Dark Houses, properly called the Ingham–Monroe alliance, in the Wizengamot: backward bigoted idiots, have absolutely no good ideas at all, all of them are evil.

She now knew every single one of those was false. Hogwarts being the best school of magic? Foreign mages laughed at the idea — in reality, Hogwarts wasn't even in the top ten. Slytherins were all completely evil? Yeah, it was simply impossible to hold on to that idea after befriending Tracey, Daphne, and Blaise. Sometimes cold, and sometimes unnervingly vicious, but not evil. All dark magic was bad? Well, yes, some of it was completely terrible, and should never be used ever, but
there was a lot of dark magic that was no more inherently harmful than what they were taught in class. Just because the Wizengamot had decided to make something illegal at some point in the past didn't necessarily mean it was bad. And everyone in the Dark Houses were all terrible? Even assuming they were generally, that obviously wouldn't apply to everyone in the House — like with Tracey's stuff, there were people in House Davis who didn't give a fuck she was a halfblood, not everyone in a House were exactly the same. But even so, the political philosophy of the Ingham–Monroe alliance wasn't actually bad. Scratch their disdain for muggles and their crazy self-important oligarchic nonsense (which was seemingly universal across most of the Wizengamot anyway), and Mel thought she agreed with them for the most part. More than she did the Light Houses, anyway.

And Dumbledore? He was probably the most powerful and knowledgeable sorcerer in Britain, yes, but Britain was a single country in a big world. There were greater out there. And he made mistakes, he had his own prejudices, just like everyone else. Nobody was perfect, not even Albus Dumbledore.

And it was just... She didn't know.

It just seemed like, for years now, absolutely everybody had lied to her. Not with any nefarious intent or anything, she didn't think — most of the lies she'd been told were told to her by people she was pretty sure believed them to be true. But they weren't. She'd been wrong, about so many things, and things weren't as black and white as they'd seemed, and...

If this made any sense, she almost felt like she'd been betrayed by reality. She'd thought things were a certain way. And they weren't. And she felt stupid, and helpless, and betrayed. Perhaps more than was entirely reasonable, but she couldn't help it. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, and it was confusing, and she had absolutely no idea what to do about it. Except mirror-calling Sirius, but she'd been planning to do that before, and she wasn't really sure what she was going to say to him anyway. What could he really do to help, honestly? Everything was just so complicated, and she didn't understand. She didn't understand how she, how so many other people around her, could have been so fundamentally wrong about so many fundamental things.

She didn't know what she believed anymore. And she wasn't even convinced that was a bad thing. Was it better to believe in a lie, and be perfectly happy about it, or be stuck with an unappealing truth, and be confused and conflicted? The first might seem nicer when you're there, but she didn't think it was better.

As she was sitting in her bed a moment later, enchanted mirror in her hands, curtains drawn and silenced, she decided that not everything was turned around. Though, she supposed this was in a way an older thing turned around in the first place, but not the point. This was one thing she knew was true, without reservation. It wasn't something she was completely, one-hundred-percent comfortable with all the time, but it was definitely true. And even if it did make her uncomfortable sometimes, she couldn't deny it was nice. It wasn't something she was used to, but she didn't mind it. And she was getting used to it, she thought. Slowly. Like everything else.

Well. There was nothing else to do about that. She'd been thinking about it already, but the decision wasn't even really that hard.

She sighed. She was thinking too much today, she had to stop. She was making her own head hurt. With a swipe of her fingers and a muttering of her godfather's name, she activated the mirror.

It took a few minutes before Sirius answered, longer than usual — but that was fine, it gave her a little more time to calm down the rest of the way. When his slightly worried-looking face appeared in the mirror, she caught an image of the Black family crest worked into a dark stone wall in the background, which she recognised from his office at the Wizengamot. That would explain the delay, then, probably busy. Whoops. She usually called later at night, she might have interrupted
something. Oh well. 'Are you alright? What happened?'

For a moment, Mel was confused by his instant assumption something had happened, but then she remembered she'd been crying...for some reason. Not really sure, her head was confusing these days. But anyway, he could probably tell just looking at her, that would explain it. 'Ah, no, I'm fine. I just...' She had absolutely no idea how to explain what was going on. She really didn't. She wasn't even entirely sure she wanted to. After a moment of thought, she decided to ask, 'What do you think of Dumbledore?'

Sirius just stared at her for long moments, surprisingly canny grey eyes level on hers, clearly thinking about something. His answer? What could have happened to bring up this question? What this question had to do with anything? Eh. Finally, he said, 'He's a great man, there's no doubt about that. I'm no longer convinced he's a good man.' Sirius gave a little awkward shrug, the expensive dress robes Mel knew he hated wearing shifting over his shoulders. 'Don't get me wrong, I think he tries to be a good man. I don't question he has good intentions. It's just, well—' Sirius looked distinctly uncomfortable. Mel had to wonder at that. '—he makes mistakes. And, with someone as powerful as he is, both magically and politically, making even a small mistake has serious consequences. And, well, he's used to always being right. People have been telling him he's always right for decades. So, it isn't easy to convince him he's made a mistake. It's hard.

'But I'm not gonna go fighting him or something. We're on the same side on enough things I'll still call him an ally. I just won't follow him blindly as I used to. I'm not sure I can completely trust him, I guess.'

'Ah.' Melantha nodded to herself, her eyes absently trailing over to the curtains surrounding her in deep red. That didn't sound much different from what she'd been thinking. All right, then. At least she wasn't alone in thinking it. That made her feel slightly better.

'Is something wrong, Mel?'

'It's fine,' she said, shaking her head a little. 'I just don't think I can completely trust him anymore either.'

'Did something happen?'

'It's nothing, don't worry about. He's just not who I thought he was, is all.'

Sirius didn't at all seem to believe her it was nothing. But, mercifully, he changed the subject.

They talked about random shite for a little bit. What Sirius was up to in the Wizengamot — apparently, he was making plans to seriously fuck shit up in a couple weeks, involving announcing a few unexpected alliances and proposing his own alternative to the nonsense creature–being reforms being discussed. (She knew Sirius had about zero interest in all this government junk, but apparently he could enjoy it if he was making a nuisance of himself. Which just sounded like Sirius being Sirius, honestly.) Then stuff about what she was up to at school — when Sirius started teasing her about Susan and Tracey, which was technically old news but she hadn't mentioned it to him until just now, she said she'd go out and buy a dog whistle if he didn't shut up.

And she thought that was long enough. She was fully off that...whatever that was, that weird episode she'd had there. Seriously, why had it affected her that much? Weird. Anyway, she figured that was good, she could actually bring up the topic now and be mostly calm about it. Probably. 'You know, I've been thinking.'

Sirius just gave her a curious look, didn't even seem to consider making a bad joke as he usually
might have. Must have noticed she was being more serious than usual. While she figured out how to say what she wanted to say, she found herself getting distinctly uncomfortable with him staring back at her, she had to look away, staring at her hand not holding her mirror as she picked at fuzz on the covers. Wow, this was awkward. At least she wasn't doing this in person. Doubted she'd be able to get the words out then.

And she was being silly. God, she was so silly most of the time these days. Honestly, she'd been silly about a lot of things her whole life, that wasn't really the point. She took a breath, let it out in a slightly aggravated sigh. Just spit it out. 'I've been thinking about, you know. Staying a Black. Or becoming one for real, I guess.'

There was a short pause. But she ignored it, staring down at her fingers, trying to convince herself she wasn't nervous. No, that tickling in her head wasn't there, she could totally meet Sirius's eyes if she wanted to, her stomach protesting was probably just because she was hungry. She was fine. After a few seconds, Sirius said, 'Why?'

Ah, damn. Did he have to ask that? She wasn't really sure how to respond, exactly. It was just sort of...not the kind of thing she was really used to talking about. Or comfortable talking about. At least, with anyone who wasn't Ellie, she was adjusting to her by now. She just fidgeted in place for a moment before shrugging. 'I dunno. I guess I just don't see much point in... Well, I'm the only Potter, you know. It's not really much of a family with only one person in it, is it? You idiots are my family now, so...' She shrugged, trying to ignore the heat on her own face right now, nope, that wasn't there, not happening at all. 'It just seems the thing to do.'

A silence. A longer silence. She considered glancing at the mirror to catch the expression on Sirius's face, but she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know. Finally, after what felt like minutes, Sirius spoke. 'Well, there's some things we'll have to work out.'

'Like what?'

'You're talking about dissolving a Noble House here, Mel. There's a lot to account for. There's the financial stuff to consider, that's not too complicated, but then there's the elves—' Melantha winced; she'd somehow managed to forget about them. She really wasn't sure what they'd want to do. '—and a few legal things that could be potential issues. We'd have to consider where exactly in the family tree you should be adopted into, it's complicated. And then who we should nominate for ennoblment.'

She frowned at that. 'Huh?'

'The number of seats in the Wizengamot is constant. When a Noble House is removed for whatever reason, a Common House is elevated to a Noble House to take their place. In situations like this one, you or someone speaking for you would nominate a Common House of their choice. Which doesn't necessarily mean they'll get it — the Wizengamot can choose to ignore you, and they have to confirm any selection in any case. But the nominated House usually does get it.'

Come to think of it, she really hadn't put much thought into this at all. At least, not about this sort of thing. She just... It just made sense, didn't it? What was the point in staying a Potter if she was the only one? It wasn't like she was particularly attached to the name. Or the title either, certainly. Honestly, that she wouldn't be a (future) Wizengamot member anymore was more a bonus than a downside. And there actually were Blacks, and they were perfectly fine with having her around, some of them even went out of their way to have her around — Sirius saying her room would be hers as long as she wanted it for the rest of her life, for example — and seemed to like her well enough. And, to be honest with herself for a moment, they didn't annoy her nearly as much as she usually pretended they did. Dora and the triplets could be a little much sometimes, sure, but she didn't
actually care that much. She wouldn't mind being stuck with them for the rest of her life.

It just hadn't occurred to her how much work it would take to make this happen. Whoops. So she immediately said, 'Oh, well, never mind, I mean, I didn't really think about that, I just thought, well —'

'Mel, shut up.' She jumped at that, turned to the mirror to find the image of Sirius's face giving her a crooked smile, seeming somehow teasing and warm at the same time. Sirius could do that. 'I didn't say I wouldn't be happy to have you. There's just things we have to think about, and some of it is sort of complicated, so it might take some time to arrange everything. That's all.'

Oh. Well, now she felt kind of silly.

Just for an instant, an awkward expression split Sirius's smirk, quickly replaced with a blank sort of curious look. Weird, but okay. Sounding somewhat hesitant, Sirius said, 'So, you've been thinking about stuff, then? Future stuff, I mean.'

It didn't take a genius to figure out what he meant. Feeling uncomfortable all over again, Mel's eyes again flicked over to the curtains. She guessed he really did have to know, but that didn't mean she was comfortable talking about it. All these people, asking her questions, so annoying. 'I...' She trailed off right away. Okay, how exactly should she say this? This was just so weird. Erm... 'I honestly have trouble imagining it. Going back to being Harry, I mean. Of course, I can't really imagine what I'm going to be doing two, five years from now either way. Not really the point, though. I just...' Not really sure that made a whole lot of sense, and still not looking anywhere near him, she gave a helpless shrug.

But, somewhat to her surprise, Sirius didn't ask about that at all. At least, not directly. Instead, he said, 'You've been doing better, then?'

She didn't even have to think about that. She was still half-convinced she and many of the people around her were completely insane. She still had trouble with a lot of fucking basic things on a daily basis. Her whole life was, just, really weird and complicated, and she didn't think that was going to be changing any time soon.

But she was starting to think she didn't really mind weird and complicated.

So she smiled, and just shrugged again.

Chapter End Notes

Aipitos (Greek: Αἰπυτος) — An intentional reference on Tom's part to a character from Greek mythology, whose mother happens to be named Merope.

[when Hermione had gone on an incensed rant on the topic] — I'm far from the first one to point this out, but I simply do not believe the same person who gets all deep into moral outrage about a whole list of things in magical society would accept the existence of love potions, much less get all bashful and giggly about them as she does a couple times. Pull the other one, JKR.

imperitāns — Latin participle of verb meaning "command/rule", which is obviously imperius in canon. This isn't an incantation, by the way, just the name.
[with what was obviously a compulsion] — *Am I the only one who noticed Dumbledore, who's supposed to be the good guy, casually fucked with the mind of a muggle just to get her to stop asking annoying questions?*

[Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*] — *Only slipped in because the idea that my version of Voldemort might be intimately familiar with Kantian philosophy, especially ideas like the categorical imperative and his Rechtsstaat, simply amuses me. That Mel takes the more deontological stance in their argument later is a happy coincidence, I only noticed that as I was writing it.*

[wasn't actively cruel to students or anything ... but he certainly wasn't a good professor. Cold and condescending and unhelpful.] — *I've mentioned to people in PMs before, and I think in an author's note somewhere, that Snape's behaviour in the background of this fic is different than in canon. If only because Snape's behaviour in canon is absolutely unjustifiable, he's an evil bullying fuckface, and his motivations and history are weird and inconsistent. I doubt I'm the first to say this, but Snape's character makes no sense.*

*By the way, this is the last pre-written chapter I have of this fic. Updates will be cutting back to every other week, alternating with *The Long Game* (though there are a few more pre-written chapters of that left, once it's caught up I mean). At least, theoretically — my insomnia has been being a huge bastard recently, I'm actually several days behind schedule atm, we'll have to see how that goes.*

*Until next time,*

~Wings
October 1995 — Bad Ideas

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Melantha fell to her usual seat in the Potions classroom. And she sat there, trying to seem casual, innocent, like she weren't planning anything unusual.

Apparently she wasn't doing great at it: Hermione was giving her curious looks. But she ignored that.

Before long Snape was storming into the room, his silly robes whipping behind him all dramatic as always. Without any introduction at all, he jumped straight into a very short lecture on the potion they were about to be brewing. The very first thing he said was that, despite common wisdom that even showed up in some supposedly authoritative texts, the memory-enhancing Morgen's Draught was not invented by that Morgen. It was formulated in the Eleventh Century by a woman named Morgen verxGwenvrewi, of what is now the Noble House of Tugwood — the potion being attached to the far more famous Muirgen Êimhir Aodháin was completely erroneous, an idiotic mistake made by people who apparently didn't realise it's possible for two entirely different people living six centuries apart to have the same first name.

Come to think of it, Snape was kinda funny when the person he was insulting was, well, not her.

And then he was going on about how this was one of the more complicated potions they'd done thus far. It involved a small bit of wandwork, yes, though not a whole lot. The thing that would likely screw up a lot of them was that it involved essentially creating two potions at the same time, and then mixing them. That meant there were approximately three times as many places to make mistakes. He didn't expect any of them to do very well, but they might as well get their inevitable first couple spectacular failures out on an example of a two-part potion that didn't have any particularly dangerous ingredients in it. Excluding the ashwinder blood, anyway — anyone who sets the classroom on fire will find themselves in detention for the rest of the week. And then he let them get to it.

Mel was absolutely positive that, last year, she would have made a complete disaster of this potion. But this wasn't last year. She had her mother's journals now. She hadn't originally thought to look at her Potions writing, but Lily had mentioned in her diary several times that Potions was one of her best subjects — and, actually, that she'd mostly been able to keep up with "Sev", and fuck if it wasn't hard to think of her mother's best friend Severus and the aggravating Professor Snape as the same person. But anyway, reading her Potions journal had given Mel all kinds of tips and tricks and shite. And, starting today, she was going to actually use them.

She'd love to see how Snape would handle grading a potion she'd made that was actually good.

So. She was basically making two potions. Looking over the instructions, the active ingredients in one seemed to be flitterbloom and ginger, and the other was the ashwinder blood and moondew. The
blood and moondew was going to get hot. Very hot — ashwinder fire could easily get above three hundred degrees, and while the blood on its own shouldn't get quite that hot, pewter melted at around two hundred. According to Lily, the outsides were almost always charmed against heat, but the insides couldn't be, so they didn't interfere with brewing. She'd need to borrow a second cauldron anyway, so she should definitely make sure she picked up a bronze one, hers was pewter. Okay.

By chance, she bumped into Neville at the cabinet with all the school cauldrons. She noticed he was holding a pewter one. She snatched it out of his hands, pressed a bronze one at him instead, told him to use it for the ashwinder half, then walked off with her own.

Okay. She should probably do the cold half first, since it didn't really matter if she let it sit. She pulled out her little cutting board thing she'd had since literally first year, then flicked out her wand, and hit it with a quick series of scouring charms, and then an imperturbable charm. Which was something she really should have been doing from the beginning, to lessen the chance of contamination, but Snape didn't explain these things.

She had a similar thing to do with her knife. Like an idiot, she'd bought silver utensils back before first year — she hadn't really seen a reason not to, and she'd been perhaps revelling in the novelty of actually having money a little bit too much. But silver was a very reactive metal, and was thus terrible for, well, almost anything. There were exceptions, where getting tiny bits of silver in the potion was actually desirable, but usually. But there was a charm for that too. She dithered for a second over her knives before picking what looked to her like a peeling knife but was probably called something else Potions-wise, aimed her wand at the blade, and muttered, ‘Lāminam attinē.’ She'd never used this charm before, but by the unusual slipperiness that felt entirely unlike metal, the edge feeling somehow even sharper than it had a moment ago, she was pretty sure it'd worked. She put a similar imperturbable charm on her left hand, but that one they'd actually been told to do years ago, that wasn't new. All right then.

Hermione was giving her a very strange look now.

In the middle of each table were piles of flitterbloom and moondew and knotgrass. The flitterbloom was easy to pick out: they were long, flat, narrow leaves, about the same length and width as her arm from elbow to fingertip actually, in an odd purplish green. After a bit of picking through them, she drew out two that didn't look shrivelled at all. Now, this part she could actually do pretty well, she didn't even really have to think about it — after a decade in the Dursleys' kitchen, she was rather good with a knife. She laid out one of the leaves on her cutting board, quickly dragged the tip of her peeling knife down the center of the leaf, neatly splitting it in half. She folded the thing over, made a few more cuts through both layers, following the veins whenever she could. A couple dozen more quick cuts and she had a bunch of little strips of flitterbloom, each roughly the length and half the width of her middle finger. She tipped them all into her pewter cauldron, then repeated the whole process with the second leaf. There.

Now for the more complicated part. She pulled out her own bottle of honeywater, dribbled the thin liquid over the leaves until they were mostly covered. Not completely, but mostly. Then, after a moment of shuffling around through her potions kit with her imperturbable hand, she found her jar of powdered ginger — which always struck her as unreasonably large, but she was more used to what would be needed in a kitchen, potions used a ridiculous amount of ginger by comparison. She read over the instructions in their textbook again quick, then reached into her bag to confirm she'd remembered a procedure she'd found in her mother's second-year Potions journal correctly, tipping the book open to the right page without actually pulling it out, so Snape wouldn't see it. (Sirius had been nice enough to go steal the rest of Lily's journals for her a couple weeks ago now.) All right then. She had remembered it correctly. Okay.
And it was then Hermione realised what she was doing. 'Er, Mel? You want ginger root, not powdered ginger.'

Well, yes, that was what the instructions in the book said. But she wasn't listening to it on purpose. 'Yeah, I know. I'm doing it different.'

Hermione gave her a doubtful frown, and hesitated a long moment, clearly trying to decide how to go about what she wanted to say in a more politic way than whatever had immediately occurred to her.

'I'm not going completely crazy, Hermione. I know what I'm doing.' She shrugged. 'At least, I think I know what I'm doing. I read about this in my mother's old school journals.'

'Oh.' The doubtful look on Hermione's face entirely vanished at that. Hermione did actually know about those journals, and Mel had even copied out most of the fifth year academic books for her — receiving a copy of the personal notes of a former Head Girl had made Hermione adorably ecstatic, really. 'What are you doing different, then?'

Mel couldn't help smiling a bit. 'Here we're supposed to slice the flitterbloom and ginger, cover with honeywater, then hit it all with a dissolving charm, right?'

'Right.'

'Well, which do you think is better: dissolving and mixing everything all at once, or—'

'Gradually.' Hermione blinked down at her ginger roots, then glanced at her textbook, slightly frowning to herself. With a sigh, she reached for her wand, vanished her partially-diced ginger, then grabbed a jar Mel was positive was the powdered version. And Mel just grinned at her. Including the charm on her knife, that was two she had on Hermione in a single class. She never had better ideas than Hermione in Potions, this was great.

Hermione: thirty-one thousand six hundred twenty-four; Melantha: two.

Yes, she was entirely making that number up, but she felt that was about the picture. It was still fun.

She noticed with a glance Ron wasn't paying attention, was still plodding along — still slicing his flitterbloom. She found it a little ironically amusing Ron would be the only one of the three of them actually following directions.

Anyway, potion. She slapped a sticking charm on her jar quick, it could be hard to grip things well with imperturbable fingers. She flipped up the cap, and started sprinkling ginger over her flitterbloom and honeywater, until she had only the thinnest of layers across the entire surface. Then, she hit the contents of her cauldron with a dissolving charm, being careful to underpower the thing by quite a bit. She swapped out the jar for a long-handled stirring spoon — she forgot until the last second to put an imperturbable charm on this too, stupid silver — and folded over the greenish mixture a couple times. Then she covered it with ginger again, underpowered dissolving charm, folded some more. Now it was turning noticeably pulpy, the leaves falling apart, the whole thing a vibrant green. Another layer of ginger, underpowered dissolving charm, folding some more. Again. And again.

She smiled to herself as the green gradually faded out, turning more and more purplish. By the time she'd hit the bright, warm purple colour and the thick syrupy consistency the directions said she was going for, she figured she'd used significantly less ginger than the recipe called for. But she stopped anyway — when magically augmented, ginger had invigorating properties, using too much would probably just give the person concentration problems on top of their improved recall, which wasn't
really helpful. She shot a preservation charm at the thing, and there, that was done.

Now for the annoying part.

Using moondew in potions was always a little awkward, because it usually required coating petals from the flowers in latex from the seedpods. Which she assumed had to be annoying for the people growing the stuff — the seedpods were flowers earlier in the life of the plant, and the proportion between seedpods and flowers had to be right, and everything had to be kept fresh, and there was no way that was easy to arrange. Getting the latex out was annoying by itself. Mel grabbed one of the little dark green fruits, sliced a gash in the side of the thing with her peeling knife, then squeezed it between her imperturbable fingers and the knife blade, the milky white substance lazily dripping into her little glass bowl. Once she thought she had most of it out, she vanished the remains of the seedpod, picked through the couple tiny spoonfuls of latex with the tip of her knife. Ah, there was a seed, she plunked the tiny spherical thing out onto the cutting board, along with a second one she found a moment later. Those she vanished too. Nope, not a short smooth process at all, really. And she had to do it three more times before she thought she had enough.

Peeling apart the blue-black flowers, coating both sides of each petal in a thin layer of the latex before throwing them one by one into her borrowed bronze cauldron, was easy, sure. But god, it was slow, tedious as all hell. She really wished there was an easier way to do this but, unfortunately, there wasn't. Imperturbable charms were one of the few things that wouldn't mess with moondew, it was so annoying.

Once she'd finally gotten all three dozen petals coated and done — ugh, took forever — she vanished the tiny bit of leftover latex. Goddamn finally. She grabbed a little handful of knotgrass, tore the shoots apart into a jumbled, fibrous mess, added a little more when it didn't look like quite enough, left it all sitting on her cutting board. Alright. Good.

Now for the fun part.

Mel walked over to one of the cabinets, measured herself out some ashwinder blood. This was one of the ingredients students were not only not expected to have, but also not allowed to keep — it didn't really do anything sitting by itself, but as soon as it touched anything organic this shite got really hot really fast. Sitting in a glass bottle? Fine. Stone or metal, also fine. But if it touched cloth, or paper, or skin? Yeah. Not good.

Come to think of it, it was sort of odd ashwinders even had blood at all. Ignoring the problem of how exactly flesh and bone bodies could possibly hold this stuff in the first place, she'd been under the impression they were a sort of self-propagating magical construct, not actually biological animals at all. Eh, they had eggs, she guessed it wasn't that weird for them to have blood too.

Then she was back at her cauldron. This was going to be interesting. She took a long breath, steeling herself, then poured the thick liquid gleaming red-orange in a thin drizzle evenly over the petals. The magic in the blood flared to life, a fluttering of energy and motion she could almost taste washing over her, instantly starting to glow a bright orange, the moondew sizzling and spitting, heat suddenly sharp on her fingers, her forearm. It was hot enough she could feel it on her face even, forcibly reminding her of sitting in the chairs in front of the Gryffindor common room fire over winter break.

She shook her head, flicked out her wand again, pulled up a handful of shredded knotgrass. Firing off a charm of binding and sealing every couple seconds, Mel sprinkled the little green bits over the glowing orange soup, the grass sizzling as it hit, throwing tiny multicoloured sparks. She kept slowly adding knotgrass, firing charm after charm, until the waves of heat floating from the cauldron shifted entirely into pale, eerily shimmering steam, until the orange-red surface was wreathed in the thinnest layer, almost unnoticeable, of writhing rainbow lightning. There.
A silent flick of her wand dispelled the preservation charm on the cold half, and she poured the entire contents of the pewter cauldron straight into the bronze one. There was a sudden flare of intensified steaming, an audible snap as the binding charm layered into the knotgrass immediately set to work. Mel pulled out her stirring spoon again, renewed the imperturbable charm just in case, then set about gently mixing the swirls of red and purple. She kept slowly stirring until the shiver of rainbow sparks cackling along the surface had vanished entirely, then pulled the spoon out, let it drip a few seconds, carefully set it on her cutting board.

There. Now she just had to wait for the weird magical reaction thing to run down and the potion would be done. She cleaned up a little, even as she kept a constant eye on her cauldron, started up stirring a little more whenever the rainbow sparks had again spread to cover the entire surface. But it was basically done.

A few minutes into the process, there was a loud hissing, far louder than any of the little spats of it here and there from people making the potion properly. She glanced over her shoulder to see Seamus had obviously melted his cauldron — hadn't thought to grab a bronze one, apparently. Snape had the mess cleaned up in an instant, preemptively vanishing everything before a potentially dangerous chain reaction could start up. And then immediately settled into flatly tearing Seamus into tiny pieces with his tongue. Mel rolled her eyes at one point, when Snape had said something about even Longbottom knowing he shouldn't use pewter for anything involving ashwinder blood, just how much of an idiot was he?

Shortly after, when she was looking away from her potion for a moment, Neville caught her eye. He glanced down at his borrowed bronze cauldron, then mouthed, Thank you. Mel just smiled, shot him a quick wink.

Then frowned to herself when his cheeks went rapidly red, and he jerkingly looked away to focus on his potion. Huh. Okay, then.

Within fifteen minutes, class was over. She handed over the bottled sample of her potion, looking the exact appropriate pale blue colour, all smooth and flawless. A look at the other samples in the box, she saw she was one of exactly four students who had gotten it perfect, in fact — one was Hermione, and while she hadn't seen for sure she assumed the other two were Daphne and Malfoy.

It took everything she had not to grin at the flat, disbelieving look Snape gave her potion as she set it down. Tee hee.

Though the not-grin was entirely wiped away when Snape immediately followed the essay assignment with, 'Black, stay behind.' Shite. Hermione and Ron — and, to her surprise, Malfoy — gave her a variety of reluctant, worried looks, but Mel just waved them off. What could he really do to her, honestly? How worked up she always got over Snape was really very silly, in retrospect.

And within a few seconds, they were alone in the room.

With an air of detached casualness Mel didn't believe for a second, Snape delicately snatched her sample out of the box, glided on over to her table. He set the bottle down in front of her, then glared down at her with hard, dark eyes. He sort of seemed to be trying to loom over her a bit — and not even entirely ineffectually, since he'd already been significantly taller than her before she'd suddenly gotten shorter, and she was still sitting down. But she just stared back up at him, trying not to fidget. Voice level and cold, he said, hardly above a whisper, 'What is this?'

'A Draught to Improve Active Recall, sir.'

His eyes narrowed slightly, and Mel had to withhold the urge to shrug — well, it was. After another
short silence, he spoke again, now with a tangible note of scorn. 'Am I supposed to believe your second X-chromosome came with an extra twenty IQ points?'

Melantha just blinked at him for a second. That was a lot of muggle terminology all of a sudden. But okay. It occurred to her this was the first time Snape had even hinted at the suddenly-a-girl-now thing — not exactly what she'd expected his first comment on the topic to be. 'No, sir.'

'And just where did you learn how to apply Fiscella's process? I know Granger didn't tell you — that girl hasn't an ounce of creativity — and it's not something I teach until sixth year.'

Nope. Nope, don't smirk. Bad lips, behave. Really no reason to taunt him more than necessary, would just make everything worse. 'From you.'

His glare intensified, but Mel was currently too amused with herself for it to bother her too much — she was finding this situation all too funny at the moment. He was silent for a long moment before finally spitting out, 'Explain.'

She hesitated for a second, then reached over to pull her mother's second-year Potions journal out of her bag. She folded it over to the proper page, then held it up for him to see. 'This is your handwriting, isn't it?'

All traces of expression wiped from Snape's perpetually sharp face in an instant. Which... Okay, with a normal person, if they were glaring at her and then stopped, that would be something of a relief. But the total, absolute, inhuman blankness that came about Snape was, for some inexplicable reason, one of the scariest things she'd ever seen.

Well, okay, excluding things like basilisks and dragons and Dark Lords, that was cheating.

For long seconds, Snape just stared at the old notebook. Long enough Mel started second-guessing herself — he wasn't going to try to take it away or destroy it or something, was he? Finally, after what felt like forever, he said in a voice just as level and detached as his face, 'Get. Out.'

She was standing in the hall shortly, the door slamming closed behind her with sudden force, some silent charm from Snape. She let out a sigh, shaking her head to herself.

Yeah. That was a great idea. Idiot.

'Well, if this isn't an unusual sight.'

Mel internally winced. She hadn't looked up from her work, but she'd heard that voice enough times recently she still recognised it: Susan. 'And what's so unusual about it?'

For a moment there was nothing, only the familiar low white noise of the enchanting lab. Then she heard a shuffling of cloth, a few clinks of clay striking stone, and Mel had to hold back a sigh. Susan had just sat in the bench across from her. Great. 'You're hardly ever alone — I can probably count the number of times I've seen you without Maia around on one hand. And here of all places, didn't know you were interested in enchanting.'

Mel sighed. Technically, she wasn't particularly interested in enchanting. But it wasn't like she was going to explain what she was actually doing. Susan's aunt was the goddamn Director of Law Enforcement.

Since Hermione was off doing...who knew, honestly, Mel had decided to do some preparation work. She'd gone down into the enchanting lab on the second floor. She'd hardly ever been in here much. It
was a sizeable room, larger than most classrooms, lit bright enough of a white it gave her a headache sitting here too long, a few long tables and benches down the center, supplies and tools along the walls. There were always a few students in here, working on this or that, the air filled with the light sounds of people quietly conferring with each other, always one or two people working while muttering under their breath, the light scrapes and puffs of carving, the occasional noisy groan of stone or metal being shaped. The place was mostly empty today — there were a few NEWT students she didn't know off in a corner, a couple fourth-years sitting another table over. And no one had really paid any attention to her.

Which was good, because what she was doing was sort of illegal. Not illegal by itself, but a step on the path to doing something that *was* illegal, so she doubted people would be happy if they found out anyway. She'd scoured through her mother's third year journals until she'd *finally* found her musings on how exactly she should go about teaching herself runic casting. To do it properly, the user had to learn how to feel magic — not just in the passive magic sense sort of way, but in a way that Lily said was far more tactile. Since Lily had actually been able to do wandless magic since she was, what, seven or something, she'd been rather better at it than most adult mages were already, but even she hadn't known the proper skill. Her wandless magic worked by essentially grabbing her own magic, yanking it up out of her body, twisting it into the shape she wanted, and forcing it out into the world. Runic casting, on the other hand, involved grabbing *ambient* magic, forming it into runes drawn in the air, and *then* channeling her own magic through the runes. That even Lily had apparently had trouble with. She'd been able to grab her own magic perfectly fine, but training herself to reach for something outside of herself had been more difficult.

But there was a trick to that, the method that, apparently, was used to teach runic casting in places this was actually taught. The basic idea was to set a special kind of containment field to then trap a charm inside of — there were a short list of recommended charms to use for it, but she gathered it didn't matter a whole lot — and, well, just sort of grab at it, and try to draw it back into herself. Which, since the captured magic would be far denser than any ambient energy, it'd be far easier to detect and interact with. After a bit of playing around with it, she should *eventually* be able to do it with any magic just floating around, and she'd have taken the first steps to figuring out runic casting. That was the idea, anyway.

Also apparently, it was very possible doing this would inadvertently help her do basic wandless charms as well — Lily said "Sev" hadn't had any luck with wandless magic before, but after playing with runic casting a bit he could do a few basic charms. Which was a cool bonus, but not really the point.

The easiest way to make this containment field, her mother had decided, was to anchor it on a door frame somewhere. Luckily, Mel had even found in Lily's Runes journal the exact enchantment she'd used to do it. So Mel was even now carving the needed runes into little ceramic plates, each roughly the size of her hand. She had three of them done already, had only two left.

So it was *now* Susan had to come and bother her. Obviously.

'I am allowed to do things without her, you know.'

'Oh, I know.' She glanced up quick to see Susan was giving her the slightest of smirks, laughter visible in hazel eyes. 'You just hardly ever do. It's unusual, is all.'

'Mm.' A few more strokes finished off the glyph she was on, the tapered edge of the Belês rune looking slightly awkward, but it wasn't like it really mattered. She swapped out the tiny little carving blade for the only other tool she was using at the moment: a little metal stylus, tiny runes carved down its length describing spells of sealing and binding. Mel traced the rune quick, covering the
abraded surface with a clear, protective glaze the little stylus had conjured for her. Then she switched back to the knife, and started on the next one.

Fuck, this was so tedious. The script took thirty-six glyphs in total, each of which took her about three to eight minutes to carve — some Belê's characters were more complicated than others. That meant it took roughly three and a half hours to do the whole script. And that wasn't counting the couple times she'd made an unrecoverable mistake at some point — which was really fucking easy to do — and had had to start over entirely. And she had to do it five times. She had managed to get three of them done properly over the last week or so, but that'd taken twelve hours of frustratingly tedious carving and carving and carving and carving...

There was a reason she didn't particularly like enchanting.

Susan was nice enough to wait for Mel to finish carving this rune — herself tapping at one of the little clay discs she'd brought with her, clearly deciding how to space out the runes for something — before saying anything else. 'What are you working on?'

Setting down the stylus again, Mel closed her eyes for a second, holding back a sigh. 'That doesn't sound like your business.'

'I suppose it doesn't. I'm just curious.'

'If I didn't tell Hermione what I'm up to, what makes you think I'm going to tell you?'

Before starting on the next rune, she glanced up quick. To find Susan staring at her, her own enchanting temporarily forgotten, blinking in evident surprise. Mel had to think about that for a second, and then felt like slapping herself. Susan probably hadn't put together that, if she were in here working without Hermione, it was entirely possible Hermione didn't know what she was up to. The admission that she had consciously not told Hermione what she was working on hinted at the obvious (and correct) conclusion that Mel was hiding it from her. Which, she knew immediately, was only going to make Susan even more curious.

Mel couldn't help groaning to herself. God fucking dammit.

And, her head tilting slightly, Susan's surprise shifted into a very obvious smirk. Just. Fuck. 'Well. Someone's being a bad girl.'

Swallowing down any urge to, she didn't know, yell at Susan or something, she ground out, 'What makes you say that?'

She shrugged with a light hum. She was obviously trying all of a sudden to give off some sort of nonchalant bearing or something, like this didn't matter, like she weren't interested. Which Mel didn't believe for a second — Susan really wasn't doing that good a job of covering the traces of her aggravating smirk. 'Maïa can be very persistent about worming her nose into her friends' business. Don't get me wrong, she's precious, and she means well. She only looks because she cares, and only tries to interfere as she almost always does because she's trying to help. But—' The smirk twitched on her face for an instant before settling back to almost-invisibility. '—by now I know what it looks like when someone's hiding something from her they don't think she'll approve of.'

Mel put down her enchanting crap, rubbed at her face for a second, trying very, very hard not to let out a frustrated sigh. This was just the perfect thing that could have happened. Like she needed Susan Bones of all people messing with her right now. 'You're not going to tell her, are you?' Honestly, Mel was pretty sure she could win that argument — she did have good reasons for doing this, after all, and it was rather idiotic that it was illegal anyway. She'd just rather not have it at all.
And there Susan was smirking, eyes dancing with very clear amusement, lips pulled wide enough her teeth were showing. Whatever was about to come out of her mouth, Mel was certain she wasn't going to like it. Her voice light and teasing, Susan said, 'I dunno. What's in it for me if I don't?'

Yep, there it was. Mel stared back at her, forcing her face level, trying to keep herself from fidgeting. 'I'll speak to you ever again.'

'Well, I guess I shouldn't say anything, then. I'd hate to fail my Defence OWL.'

'Mm-hmmm.'

'Oh, Muirgen, Mel.' She jumped at the sudden change in tone, Susan's voice louder and noticeably exasperated. That'd come from nowhere. 'Whatever I did to make you so uncomfortable around me all the time, tell me what it is, so I can fix it. This is getting annoying.'

Mel couldn't help sighing a little. Yes, she guessed she was being a bit more weird and awkward than usual, had been around Susan and Tracey for a couple weeks now. She just couldn't really help it. It was just... She had absolutely no idea what she was doing, she was uncomfortable, and it was awkward. Shoving down the feeling that she should be apologising for...something, she didn't even know, really, she gave a little shrug back. 'I dunno. I'm uncomfortable a lot of the time.'

The only response from Susan was an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

'I dunno, I just...' She hesitated for a moment. Which was stupid. It was entirely within her rights to make this sort of request. It wasn't even that unreasonable. She was really starting to wish she would just grow a spine already. Or at least have it available more consistently. 'If you could maybe scale back on the teasing a little bit, that'd be great.'

'Oh.' Susan stared at her for a moment, blinking to herself. Obviously, not what she'd expected to hear. Which Mel thought was a bit ridiculous, honestly, she should have seen that one coming, but whatever. 'Well, sure, I can do that. I don't mean anything by it, you know.'

'I know.' Of course, she mostly only knew because Ellie had explained so, but she would not be sharing that little detail, thank you. 'I'm just really not used to that kind of...that kind of attention, I guess.' Which was only partially true, she guessed, but close enough.

And now Susan was giving her an odd confused frown. 'Really?'

Okay... 'Yeah, really. Why?'

'I— But...' Susan stared at her for another second. 'But you're so adorable!'

Nope. Nope, she was not enjoying this conversation at all. Mel let her face fall into her hands, trying not to groan too loudly. And, no, she wasn't intentionally trying to cover her face or anything. It's not like she was blushing or something. She meant, that would just be silly, of course not. God. 'Susan...'

'What? Am I not allowed to say you're adorable either? Maybe give me a list of things I can't say. That'll probably make it easier.'

Mel really wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not. That would probably require looking at her, which would require uncovering her face which, nope, she didn't feel like doing that right now. Fuck, she was so ridiculous... 'I got one. Tiny and delicious, let's not say that.' Wow, she managed to get that out without stuttering. She was slightly impressed with herself.

And, yes, she realised that was a really low bar she was setting, but she had to work with what she
'Ah... Maïa told you about that, did she?' Susan actually sounded a bit awkward all of a sudden, would wonders never cease. Mel just nodded, which was slightly awkward with her face still in her hands, but whatever. 'Sorry about that. That's just a thing Tracey and I do, we don't mean anything by it. And, in my defence, Tracey came up with that one. But, sure, I can, er, stop that. If it was that counterproductive.'

Mel frowned, dropped her hands to look up at Susan. She was focused on her little clay disc, sketching out the runes for whatever enchantment that was she was about to do, looking...oddly uncomfortable. Odd for Susan, anyway. Well, odd for Susan recently, at least. She vaguely recalled Susan being far more shy back in first or second year, but she'd hardly ever talked to her back then, it was possible she was confusing her with someone else. Or just remembering entirely incorrectly, she guessed, she really didn't know. 'What do you mean, counterproductive?'

With a little shrug, Susan said, 'I was trying to get you to stop being all shy and quiet and all. Teasing works for that sometimes, to get a reaction. Doesn't work with everyone, of course. There were a few weeks in third year where Lisa was too humiliated to even look me in the eye. Thought Lily was taking it just as bad, when I was working on her last year. But then she dragged me into a closet, so apparently not.'

'Erm.' So, Susan was trying to get people to be less shy and awkward by...intentionally making them uncomfortable. Yeah, that made a lot of sense. Fuck, she was just completely surrounded by crazy people these days. Not that that was too much of a departure from usual, to be perfectly honest, but not really the point. But anyway, she had another question to ask before she got too off track with her random silly thoughts. It'd be a bit insane for her to have somehow not noticed after over a month of hanging around both of them, but she'd managed a few weeks without noticing Daphne and Tracey were together, so who knew.

Daphne and Tracey were sort of weird, when she thought about it. In the Slytherin dorms, most people got their own room. Well, at some point last year, Tracey had just moved in with Daphne. Daphne's room had only ever had one bed. They were sleeping together, at a boarding school, literally every night. Supposedly, the staff all knew about this, and nobody had a problem with it. She'd long grown accustomed to the idea that magical society was a bit different about some things, but that still struck her as odd.

But, right, 'Are you and Lily, er...'

'No, no,' Susan said, giving a light little shrug. 'She's just snogged me a few times is all. Not that I was complaining, mind, but no.'

'Oh.' Erm... Okay, then.

'I've been free since Hannah ditched me back in December, actually. Well, mostly free. Nothing serious, anyway.'

Mel shifted in her seat a little, tried to focus on her enchanting again. Why the hell was Susan babbling about this to her? She was so weird.

'And, no, that wasn't a suggestion.'

'Susan...'

'Mostly.'
She sighed, reached to rub at the increasing dull pain in her head only to realise at the last second she'd picked up her carving knife a moment ago, just almost stabbed her own eye out. Jesus. Susan being...well, Susan was really not helping her headache from these bloody fucking lights in here. 'What did we just say about the teasing?'

Susan just smiled at her, soft and warm as spring sunshine. 'It's only teasing if I don't really mean it.'

Nope, nope, nope. Nope, Susan was not going to stop being a pain today. Nope, she was not dealing with this right now. Nope, that heat rising in her face again had absolutely nothing to do with anything, she wasn't some silly she-didn't-even-know, those were stupid lies. She was done. She'd gotten a few runes in today, that would have to be enough. As she started shoving her stuff back into her bag, not at all caring just how her sudden need to leave might look to Susan, she muttered, 'You are so ridiculous.'

'Yeah, I know.' And Susan didn't look repentant at all, just staring back at her, clearly amused with herself. 'I just wanted to get a last one out, by the way. I'm done now. I'll be good.'

Walking out of the room, Mel just shook her head to herself. Somehow, she really couldn't believe her.

'Sneaking out of school to meet an older woman. Such a naughty girl.'

Coming abruptly to a stop, Mel meant to let out a sigh, but it came out as more of a groan. 'Could you not do that? I've had quite enough of that sort of shite today, thank you.'

She hadn't actually been able to see Dora when she'd spoken — she assumed it was mostly because this dank little passage to Honeyduke's was so terribly lit, she wouldn't have expected to be able to see her much ahead of time. But by the way she suddenly snapped into existence only a few paces away, wearing the familiar blacks and reds of the Aurors and an entirely unfamiliar face (though Dora was almost always unfamiliar), there must have been some sort of magic hiding her. Mel hadn't noticed, hadn't even felt the magic melting away. But, well. Auror. 'Well, it sounds like you've been having a fun day.' She was smiling at Mel, yes, but it was a slightly muted smile, seemingly trying to not be too annoying. 'And just who has been bothering my baby cousin?'

Mel hesitated for a moment before deciding, what the hell, it didn't really matter if she knew. She said in a low mutter, 'Susan Bones.'

Smile twitching slightly wider, Dora said, 'Ah, yes, the little Bones. Really weird how different she is now. Not to say I think that's a bad thing, she's fun.'

'Different?'

Dora shrugged. 'Her first year at Hogwarts was my last. That summer I had that internship, and the boss asked me to keep an eye on her if I could, make sure she doesn't get into too much trouble. She was the quietest little thing you'd ever seen back then, but now since I properly joined she's been in to the office a few times, over the summers, and she's so completely different now. It's interesting. I'd like to claim it was my influence, but I was really not around enough for it to be.'

Mel rolled her eyes. Of course she would.

They didn't even bother walking the rest of the way to Honeyduke's — they were already past the wardline, so Dora just apparated them straight out. Mel had expected her to bring them straight to Grimmauld Place, had expected it enough it took her a confused moment to realise that's not where they were. Not that she was entirely sure where they were. It was a smallish, windowless wood-
panelled room, a few wardrobes and cabinets lining the walls, a table bearing dozens of little jewelry boxes, another table, this one littered with papers, with a couple chairs surrounding it in the middle.

Alright. Odd, then. 'Where are we?'

Dora gave her another smile. 'If I told you I'd have to obliviate you.'

'You're enjoying yourself, aren't you.'

Frowning in fake confusion, Dora said, 'Don't I always?' Well, good point. 'I'm not joking about the obliviate part, actually. It's a safehouse. We have a few of them, and only Aurors are allowed to know where they are.'

'Erm.' She blinked to herself for a moment, watched Dora pull a set of robes out of a wardrobe, lay them over the back of a chair. 'Am I even allowed to be here?'

'Technically not. But if nobody knows about it they can't complain.'

That...really didn't surprise her, honestly.

Thus followed one of the strangest experiences of her entire life. And, yes, she had been thinking that to herself sort of a lot lately, but this time she really, really meant it. Dora shifted her appearance around — which was always weird to watch anyway, the undulating ripple that always ran across her skin as she shifted from one person to another was subtly unnerving. She didn't change very much, just made herself a bit shorter, now only slightly taller than Mel. Then she just went ahead and shed her uniform right in front of Mel, not a care in the world. Mel wanted to look away, she really did, but she was far too curious about what Dora was up to, so she ignored the gradually increasing burn in her ears, and tried not to fidget. Besides, she was well aware Dora didn't give a fuck.

And then the really weird started. Even as she started pulling on the robes she'd taken from the wardrobe — rather decent dress robes, she guessed, mostly in blacks and reds — she started changing again. Into...well, her. Except, not really her. Not Melantha her, but... Oh, this was really fucking strange to look at. Somehow, this was making her even more uncomfortable than just Dora being nearly naked. As Dora finished up, looking at herself in a mirror, making minor tweaks to her appearance, Mel was choked by an odd, squirmy feeling in her chest and stomach. She couldn't explain exactly what it was. She almost felt like she was going to be sick, but she couldn't even say why. It just... She didn't like it. She really didn't like it.

Seeing her old body again, even if it wasn't her in it, was making her extremely uncomfortable.

Once she had her Harry Potter visage more or less correct, Dora plucked a hair from her...his... Er, which word was technically appropriate to use when Dora looked like that? She vaguely recalled Dora talking about how she really didn't understand how other people felt about this kind of thing, that it didn't matter to her a single bit which sex she happened to be at the time, comparing it to wearing different styles of clothing, one of which might be slightly more comfortable, but only slightly. Mel honestly had to wonder if Dora was really a woman, a man, or both, or neither, or whatever, she really had no idea.

Her silly older cousin was really quite confusing when she thought about it.

But anyway, the Harry-who-was-actually-Dora moved over to a different cabinet, rummaged around for a moment before pulling out a small bottle of a thick, greyish-brown potion. Mel didn't have to be told what it was to recognise it, she'd taken it once before. She dropped the hair in, the potion bubbling for a moment, quickly shifting to a bright, vibrant fuchsia. And yes, she felt incredibly girly even using that word. She wasn't entirely sure why the word was associated with that particular
colour, since fuchsia flowers weren’t even close to always the same reddish-purple, but they were really nice, she liked fuchsia.

And yes, she felt even more girly just thinking that. Which seemed somehow inappropriate, considering what she was about to do.

And then her-silly-cousin-who-still-looked-like-what-Mel-used-to-look-like walked over to her, holding out the potion bottle. 'Go ahead and drink half of it. It should last long enough, but if it doesn’t it’s better to have backup.’ And there was her old voice, speaking in the vaguely Irish-sounding accent almost ubiquitous among the magical-raised, with Dora’s familiar bouncing tone. Very strange. Harry-Dora pressed the bottle into Mel’s hand, then walked away, shucking the robes over her head again.

For long seconds, Mel just stared down at the bottle. Rather strange she would be such a pretty fuchsia colour, really, she hadn’t expected that. Of course, she wouldn’t have been able to say what colour she’d have thought she would be, but still. Crabbe and Goyle had been such gross-looking colours, and Bulstrode’s cat hadn’t been any better, so she’d kind of assumed that was the way polyjuice always worked. It was rather pleasant, really. Pretty enough she could almost ignore the continued roiling in her stomach.

Fuck, she was being so ridiculous. Just drink the stupid thing. Not a big deal.

Steeling herself, she lifted the bottle to her lips. And had to stop before it even got all the way there. The strange, distracting sickness had flared even stronger, hot queasiness crawling all the way to the back of her throat. And she felt oddly shaky all of a sudden. Had no idea why, really, it didn't make a lot of sense. She was being, just, so ridiculous. She’d been Harry for nearly fifteen years, she couldn’t imagine what exactly the problem was. She had to stop being so silly and just drink the bloody thing.

She took a few long, slow breaths, trying to force it all back, trying not to be sick in the middle of an Auror safehouse over her silly brain shite which made absolutely no sense. She brought the bottle up again, shoved past the shake in her fingers, the sick in her throat, kept going until cool glass touched her lips—

A shudder ran through her, from the base of her spine all the way to her toes and her fingers, an explosion of the strangest tingling shooting through her head, her knees turning so shaky she was honestly surprised she was still standing. She tore the bottle away, holding it out at arm’s length, as though it were something volatile, dangerous. She took a few gasping breaths, somehow strangely short on air, enough she was even a little lightheaded.

She couldn’t. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t take the bloody stupid potion. She couldn’t. She couldn’t even really say why she couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

And she heard Ellie’s voice ringing in her head. Again, that seemed to happen a lot lately. 'You know, Melantha. You know what you’re feeling. You can tell me you don't as much as you like. You can pretend to yourself, maybe even so well you'll almost believe it. But deep down, you know. You don't have to admit it to me, but at least try to admit it to yourself.'

Okay. Fine. She could do that.

The thought of going back to being Harry Potter, being a boy, even temporarily, disgusted her. Completely disgusted her.

Which was really weird when she thought about it. There’d been a time not that long ago at all she’d been disgusted on an hourly basis with her own...girliness, she guessed. That she was a girl now had
really grossed her out at one point. This was like that, only, a hundred times worse. It was just... It was just not possible, she was completely incapable of making herself take this potion, she couldn't do it.

Of course, to be entirely honest with herself, it wasn't all the boy stuff. These days, she'd really grown to dislike the person she used to be. All passive, and lazy, and painfully shy, and... Sure, she wasn't doing that much better now, but she was trying. And she would occasionally get glimpses of someone who hadn't been beaten into submission by her bloody fucking awful life, very rarely would find herself speaking with her voice, and she loved it. She just... She fucking hated Harry Potter, and she didn't at all want to go back to being him. Even superficially.

But, that wasn't it. That little caricature of Ellie in her head was still giving her a flat look. One eyebrow slightly raised, disbelieving. As though she knew that wasn't the full story. As though Mel knew that wasn't the full story.

And, she realised, it wasn't. There was one thing in there that was just flat false. It was a lie she'd told herself, something she'd pretended to herself so well even she'd believed it. Because, she knew, it was what she thought she should have felt, should have thought, so she had to shove the truth down somewhere even she couldn't see it, had to pretend the freakishness didn't exist, had to pretend to be normal as well as she could.

She hadn't even admitted it to herself yet. She hadn't been able to. But as long as she was here, in her own head, alone, she...

She hadn't been disgusted. Not really. The reason she'd been so uncomfortable, those first weeks, was because she knew — no, she thought — she thought she should have been, but she wasn't. So she'd pretended to be. Because she was supposed to. She'd lied even to herself with it. Because she was supposed to.

Really, it didn't bother her that much. For quite possibly the first time in her life, she... Well, she actually liked how she looked now. She had complaints, sure, mostly to do with how she was still skinny as all fuck. Better than before, but she could still make out more of her ribs than she thought was probably healthy. If she were to be entirely honest with herself, part of her problem now skinniness-wise was...well, as Hermione would say, directly concerning secondary sexual characteristics. If she cut her hair and didn't open her mouth, she was sure she'd be able to pass for a younger boy rather well, her, ah, none of it was very obvious. But the point was, she thought she was more comfortable in her own skin now than she'd been before. Which, true, wasn't saying a whole lot, but not the point.

But, as long as she was really thinking about it, that it wasn't saying a whole lot was sort of the point. That she'd never really been all that comfortable before either really was sort of the point. It... It was really weird to think about, but...

Had she ever...

She remembered Dumbledore explaining it all to her, months ago now. That the distinctions between sexes weren't only physical. There were also differences in the texture of their magic — their souls, he meant, their minds. Normally, the two matched. But, rarely, the two wouldn't match. Not even that rarely. Since getting to Hogwarts, Mel had looked it up once, just out of curiosity, and while it varied a bit depending on time and place it was something like one in seven thousand people. Which wasn't extremely common, but not really all that rare, when you thought about it. There were, what, two-hundred twenty thousand people in magical Britain, something like that. That meant there were about thirty in the country right now. Apparently it was close to the same with muggles too, according to Hermione, so that meant there were, what, over eight thousand in the United Kingdom.
alone? It was a thing that happened. Mages around the world, and in some cultures even muggles, had been acknowledging it was a thing that happened for literally thousands of years. Dumbledore hadn't just been being crazy. Some people were born, basically, with a brain of the opposite sex of the rest of their body. It was a real thing.

She'd thought Dumbledore was going a bit insane at the time. And she'd been very annoyed with the things he was implying about her. And...

Well, that had been July.

She was really starting to think that he was right. It was a thing that happened, and it had happened to her.

She'd never really acknowledged that even in her head until...well, right this second, but she was starting to think it was very possible. Even likely. The evidence for it was everywhere, across her entire life. She didn't have a lot from when she was younger. The Dursleys had done a very thorough job of squashing anything they saw as freakish, and this definitely counted. By the time she'd been old enough to really remember she'd already been well-trained. And it...had just been easier to surrender to what they wanted. Little bits and pieces had snuck through, though. Things she'd even noticed before, but had never put into their proper context. Never stitched it all together to make a single picture. And, well, there was no fucking way she couldn't notice it now. She was an awkward little bitch, yes, but she was still more comfortable with...well, most everything, she guessed, just more now than she'd ever been. There was really nothing else to think about that, she didn't think. It really made all of it quite obvious.

She was a girl. She always had been. She just hadn't known it.

Or, at least, she'd lied to herself so well she'd believed she wasn't. It was hard to tell the difference sometimes.

She was becoming increasingly convinced, even as she stood here and thought about it with this stupid bottle of polyjuice in her hand, that that was the truth of it, that's what was going on here. And...she didn't think she minded all that much. She was fine with it. Another reason to hate the Dursleys, she guessed, but she was fine with it.

Fine with it to the point that the idea of taking this potion, of going back, even superficially, even just for a couple hours, was completely, totally, irrepressibly repulsive. She couldn't do it. She sincerely doubted she'd even be able to keep the potion down if she tried. She just couldn't.

And there Dora was, again dressed in her Auror uniform, unfamiliar eyes an unnatural orange staring at her from under shoulder-length hair an equally unnatural deep violet. Her expression seeming half-confused, half-concerned. 'You okay, Mel?'

'I...' She took another long breath, cut a glance at the offending potion bottle, still in her hand. 'I can't.' She really didn't know how to explain her problem past that. She couldn't. It was a physical impossibility, an immutable law of the universe. It just was not going to happen.

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Dora stared silently at her for another moment, eyes narrowing slightly. Then, 'It's one of those things, isn't it. One of those things that, being me, I don't get.'

Despite the not-pleasant mood she was in right now, she had the weirdest urge to laugh at that. 'Erm, yeah, I guess so.'
With a long sigh, sounding almost teasingly exaggerated, Dora took the bottle back from her, shaking her head to herself. 'You couldn't have told me beforehand, of course,' she said, wandering back to the cabinet, even as she vanished the potion and bottle all at once. 'Making me waste polyjuice here, so terrible.'

'Erm, sorry.'

'I'm joking, Mel, it's fine. Plan B.'

Mel blinked. 'There's a Plan B?'

'There is now. I made it up just a second ago.'

Somehow, that did not inspire confidence.

If someone had asked her, she really wouldn't be able to say why. But, watching this, she couldn't help smiling to herself a little. They'd apparated their way into Grimmauld Place to meet Sirius, who would be going with them to the Ministry. And neither of them looked like themselves — well, Dora never really looked like herself, but whatever. Dora had given Mel another bottle of polyjuice (apparently, the fuchsia colour was Dora, it was the same both times), this time having her turn into herself. Or, at least, an appearance that was supposed to be Nymphadora Tonks Black for today. Significantly taller, which was slightly awkward, but Mel wasn't having too much trouble with that, those same unnatural gleaming orange eyes and vibrant purple hair. Looking in the mirror, she'd decided she actually liked the colourful hair thing, it was fun, she could sort of understand why Dora always did that. Wearing Dora's Auror stuff, one of Dora's wands strapped to each forearm, since she apparently had two. And she was going to be Dora the next couple hours.

It still hadn't been fun getting the potion down. But it'd been much, much easier than the other one.

Dora, on the other hand, was being Harry. The same pale-skinned messy-haired green-eyed twig of a boy she recognised from years of looking in mirrors. She'd even conjured glasses to go with it and everything. Watching her was, of course, rather awkward, but she was trying not to think about it. Dora had what Mel already thought of as Neville's wand more than her own, which she'd had to borrow for the occasion. Neville had been perhaps too eager to let her have it, she'd had to clarify more than once she was only borrowing it, he'd get it back later tonight, and she'd most likely never need it again. That had been an awkward conversation.

And it wasn't just the polyjuice-assisted disguises either. Both of them had a little metal...thing, whatever, clipped to the top of the lobes of their ears, hidden under their hair. And these things were weird. Apparently, there was some sort of mind magic enchantment on them. They could sort of think at each other. The little things didn't send to each other all of their thoughts, just the ones they intentionally decided to communicate, through an awkward bit of reverse-occlumency, which was definitely not the proper term, just how she thought of it. Dora had said it was necessary, in case they needed to give each other cues — Dora would definitely need to be told how to respond to whatever Fudge was going to request, and Dora might need to inform her about people they could conceivably bump into. She'd gotten the hang of using the things rather quickly, but it still felt really, really weird.

And they had just gotten into Grimmauld Place. And Sirius had found them almost right away. And he was looking at Dora, who looked like Harry. And he thought that was her, they hadn't informed him yet. And... He was hiding it rather well, she would give him that, only a slight hitch on his smile, slight reluctance in how he moved closer. But she could see it.
Sirius was uncomfortable with the thought of Mel being Harry again.

For some strange reason, she found the thought rather gratifying.

'Hey, kit,' Sirius was saying, giving Harry-who-was-Dora an uncertain, hesitant look.

Which was not entirely undeserved, she guessed. Apparently, Dora was already going into imitating old Harry, and it felt rather odd looking from the outside at the tiny thin little boy with shoulders hunched — almost even turned inward, as though a second away from curling into a defensive cringe — face almost disconcertingly blank, expression wiped away to leave a distant, emotionless façade that reminded her less of the cool, self-possessed Slytherin (or Ravenclaw) cliché, and much more of the wary, half-terrified eleven-year-old Riddle. And the way his feet dragged across the ground, the way how, when he looked up at Sirius, it was only his eyes tipping up, his face still noticeably turned downward...

Had she really been like this? Was she still like this now? She didn't know, the thought made her really uncomfortable.

But anyway, Sirius was still talking. 'You doing okay?' he asked, his voice low and gentle. Because, obviously, "Harry" was not doing okay if he was looking like that. That would be obvious to everyone.

Which...if she really had looked like that all the time, she really had to wonder why seemingly nobody but Hermione had ever noticed before.

But Mel couldn't help thinking it was actually rather sweet of him. Sweet enough of him that... Well, not entirely sure what was going on with her right now, but she was feeling weirdly light and warm in her chest all of a sudden, which probably had something to do with what she did next. She didn't wait for "Harry" to come up with reply. She slipped past him and, before she could second-guess herself as she knew she would if she waited too long, threw her arms over Sirius's shoulders, wrapped around his neck — something she could actually do when she was this much taller. While Sirius hugged her back all slow and hesitant — he was probably just confused, that had been sort of weird and out of nowhere — she muttered, 'Love you too, Sirius.'

Mel was almost positive she'd never said that to anyone before. Well, maybe Hermione, at some point, and that had possibly been sarcastic, so excluding that. But, she realised even as she said it, she really did. Or at least she thought she did? She wasn't an expert on such things, but she was pretty sure. He just... He was a fun, funny bloke when he was in the proper mood, nobody could deny he was a fucking impressive wizard when he decided to be — it wasn't just anyone who could become an animagus as young as he had, or fight some of the more vicious Death Eaters, all decades his senior, to a standstill as she knew he had a few times — and she was well aware the only reason he was doing any of this Lord Black stuff, which everyone knew he hated, was because he could do a lot of good for his family, many of whom he'd never even met before and, ever since being cleared of all that idiocy he'd been stuck with, he'd been going out of his way at every turn to get her whatever he thought she needed. Which was still extremely strange to her sometimes. She'd never really had anyone...take care of her before. It was strange.

So. Even taking her out of the picture, he was pretty decent. Adding all the stuff with her on top of it... She guessed she'd just never thought about this before. But it was nice having him around. She wasn't going to deny that. So, she might as well tell him? Whatever.

Sirius jerked away from her a little, enough that he could look her in the eyes. And wow, she really was oddly tall, she didn't have to look up very far at all, this was weird. 'What are— Mel?'
She just smiled at him. That didn't take him very long to find out.

Dora-as-Harry spoke from behind her, in that very familiar voice — though, still somewhat unfamiliar, since she was in that accent most magical people had again. 'Yeah, little Mel is being Auror Black today. I was going to give her Harryjuice, but then she started having one of those silly freak-outs of hers. But that's fine, I don't mind wearing Harry for a few hours.'

Mel blinked to herself, turned to look over her shoulder at Dora. Wow, that sideways smirk of hers looked really strange on Mel's old face, just subtly wrong, it was weird. "'Wearing'?"

'That's how I usually think of it,' Harry said with an easy Dora-shrug. 'Like putting on different outfits, you know.' Immediately following, there was an intrusive thought, springing from the back of her mind, but that still had the subtle sense of being foreign, she couldn't really describe it. It vaguely reminded her of the Sorting Hat, actually, she could only assume the magic was similar. You two are being so adorable right now. Somehow, even though the thought carried no real tone at all — in fact, the only part of it that came as explicit English was "adorable" so it having a tone of voice was out of the question — she still knew the thought was mocking.

With a start, she realised her arms were still around Sirius's neck, his low around her back. She jerked away from him, probably a bit harder than necessary, took a few backward steps. The slightly confused look on Sirius's face gave her the strangest urge to awkwardly clear her throat like a silly person, she did her best to ignore it. The grin on Harry-Dora's face gave her the entirely understandable urge to smack...

Ugh, trying to decide what pronouns to use in her head for her strangest cousin right now was extremely confusing. The person standing right in front of her looked like a boy — the boy she used to be, which was an extra layer of weirdness — so a part of her brain was automatically thinking boy. But she knew this was actually her cousin Dora, so a part of her was thinking girl. But, well, she knew Dora had a very peculiar relationship with gender to begin with, so she had to wonder if, even when she was physically female, if Dora was technically a woman in the first place. Did Dora think of herself as a woman at all, even? She knew Dora had said at one point she could go from one to the other whenever she wanted, and she didn't really care too much which she was at any given time. She assumed Dora only spent as much time as a woman as she did because she legally was one, and possibly just because it was more fun to tease people that way. She wasn't sure it mattered to her otherwise. She didn't know, she'd never really asked, the concept was too strange to her.

Smack them, anyway.

Almost immediately, they were headed for the floo. Before sending Mel through first, Dora wandlessly hit her with some sort of magic — he'd just put his hand on Mel's arm, but she'd felt the subtle tingling of a charm crawling over her skin well enough. A certain kind of isolation charm, apparently, and when Dora explained why... That's why that always happened! Mel was so good with fire elemental magic because her own magic was unusually closely aligned with fire magics — apparently, that was a thing a person could be, though they'd never mentioned that in Charms or Theory class — so her magic caused a sort of interference with the magic of the Floo Network which, in her case, made her accelerate. So when she came out the other side, she was coming out too fast, and went stumbling. That's why that always happened! Jesus fucking Christ, why had no one ever told her this before?!

Grumbling to herself a little, she stepped through the floo to the Ministry of Magic. Which still wasn't a pleasant experience, all spinning like fucking crazy, a subtle sense of falling unsupported, but she hit the dark, polished wooden floor of her destination easily enough, smoothly walking out of the way. Well, that hadn't been so bad. She took a moment to look around the wide, arched hall she
found herself in — wood floors so dark they were almost black, walls a deep blueish granite, grates lined in gleaming gold every few metres spitting out or absorbing the occasional mage with a flash of green fire, gold and silver tendrils undulating across the ceiling in soft waves. After a moment of watching, she realised they were drawing words into the ceiling, dispersing, then drawing something else. Notices for employees and guests, looked like, but most of it was nonsensical to her. The hall was surprisingly empty, actually, only maybe a little over a dozen people total, spread here and there, but she guessed they were arriving rather late in the evening, not so unusual.

Moments later, both Harry-Dora and Sirius had joined her, and they went down the hall, Sirius and Dora next to each other in front, Mel trailing a little behind and slightly to the side — which was intentional, Dora had thought at Mel to do it, saying it was a bodyguard thing. Mel was trying not to watch Dora pretending to be Harry, because it was still making her very uncomfortable, and the fountain they stumbled across before too long gave her quite an effective distraction. Though, not a very pleasant distraction. Her first thought, once she'd gotten an idea of what exactly it was, was that Hermione would hate this thing. The man standing tall and straight, strong-jawed face turned upward, wand throwing water into the air pointed straight up to the ceiling, the woman next to him slightly curled aside, not standing quite as...impressively, she didn't know, her wand also pointed upward, but at a noticeably lower angle, shooting water across the little pool they stood in, at their feet a centaur, goblin, house-elf, the non-human-ness of their features cartoonishly exaggerated, holding themselves low and slinking, all three looking up at the disproportionately taller humans with matching expressions of awe and adoration a real centaur or goblin wouldn't be caught dead wearing...

Yeah. Should Hermione ever end up in charge of anything, Mel was positive this fountain wouldn't survive her first day in office. Mel rather felt she'd help her tear it down herself.

As they kept walking, toward a little golden arch beside a desk manned by a bored-looking younger man in a blue and white DLE uniform, Mel kept frowning at the fountain. The statue of the woman in particular. It just...bothered her. The way she seemed to be leaning in toward the man slightly, that she wasn't looking quite straight up as he was, face instead turned a bit toward him, and without the blank...determination wasn't quite word, but something like that, instead with a noticeable quirk to her lips. It bothered her.

Something wrong?

Mel started at the foreign thought intruding on her own, glanced around for a second to notice she was trailing behind slightly. She darted forward a little to catch up, shaking her head to herself. She forced her response out, which was sort of a weird sensation. Like forming a thought into water, which she then poured out of the hole in her head made by the thing in her ear — if she hadn't had that practice with occlumency she'd never have managed to figure it out as quickly as she had. Nothing. I think I just spontaneously became a feminist, is all.

Dora let out a snort, Harry's shoulders lifting for a moment in repressed laughter. Shaking his head to himself a little, Dora thought back at her, Yeah, a lot of people hate that thing. Being rights people continually complain about how unrealistic and unflattering the house-elf, goblin, and centaur are, and some of the matriarchal Houses have been lobbying to have the entire thing replaced for as long as it's existed. It used to be vandalised regularly, actually, they had to put custom wards up.

Mel just shook her head. That was so fucking stupid. Wouldn't it have been easier to just replace the thing than design special wards to protect it? Idiots.

It didn't help her mood that she was well aware it was mostly the Light Houses that would support the continued existence of that damn thing. It was the Dark that supported greater creature—being
rights — not the blood-purist faction, obviously, but the traditional ideology usually referred to as Dark — and most of the matriarchal Houses were either Dark or leaned that way. Even Houses that had once been matriarchal but weren't anymore, like the Blacks, were usually still Dark. It was entirely possible that, should anything related to it have come to a vote in the Wizengamot the last decade, her recently-fired proxy would have defended it.

If she ever met that arse, she'd probably be having words with him.

They passed the checkpoint easily enough. The bloke at the desk examined Harry and Sirius's wands quick, but just gave Mel a quick nod. Sort of pathetic security, when she thought about it — she was walking in here under polyjuice, but since she was in an Auror uniform they hardly gave her a second glance. Dora did warn her not to walk through the arch, which would apparently detect the polyjuice, but the Patrolman did let her go around it without comment. *They're not all that concerned about Death Eaters getting through, apparently.*

*We can't stop all Death Eaters from getting through security. They wouldn't be able to get to their offices then.*

Mel wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry more.

*It is a little hard to organise coherent policy to break a criminal organisation when the Minister, whose greatest financial backer and political supporter happens to be a high-ranking member of the same organisation, does his best to cripple any effort that would actually be effective. Just us Aurors could round up most of the Death Eaters in a long weekend, but that would require us violating enough intentionally obstructionist regulations their people in the Wizengamot and Ministry pushed in the first place we'd have to arrest ourselves too.*

Okay. Cry, then.

While the weird, gleaming lift stuttered its way up, Dora just kept thinking at her. *I mean, some of those rules are really fucking stupid. Bones has to sign off on any search warrant, which is a little odd by itself, but if the owner of the property in question happens to be a member of a Noble House, then we need the Minister's approval too. How does that make sense? He's not law enforcement. I could see an argument for requiring greater scrutiny — Noble Houses inventing shite about each other isn't unheard of — and I could see an argument for requiring the same approval from the High Enchanter if the accusation is serious enough — he's technically the head of the judicial system — but the Minister? He's a bureaucrat! What does he have to do with anything? And don't even get me started on nonsense evidentiary rules, and abusable trial procedure, and fucking idiotic restrictions on legilimency and veritaserum — or even less invasive lie-detecting enchantments! it's absolutely ridiculous to me we just let people lie on the floor of the Wizengamot or the secured courtrooms when it would be easy to—*

*Could you stop that? You're not making me feel better.*

*Right. Sorry.*

Mel shook her head. She guessed she shouldn't be surprised Dora had such a strong opinion about this stuff, but she somehow hadn't expected it anyway.

After an annoyingly jittery ride — you'd think mages would be able to magic up a lift that could go smoother than this — the doors opened on a moodily lit hallway, darker and narrower than she'd seen here so far. The floors were covered in thick carpet of deep purple, the walls dark wood that seemed to have a slight reddish gleam to it, the occasional door here and there a slightly darker shade, the trim at the floor and around each door frame made of curling silver and gold tracery. The
ceiling was some off-black something, she wasn't sure what, but deep red magical light was set into it, forming words in a curving script. Trailing along behind Dora and Sirius, it took her a moment to figure out what it was — not too surprising, since it was written in Brīþwn, and she'd never really gotten great with the language. Myrðin's famous speech to the Assembly of Free Clans at Inys Ðyvīl, now considered the first meeting of the Wizengamot.

Of course, not actually Myrðin's speech. One thing she'd managed to learn in History of Magic (from Hermione's notes, honestly) is that everything from that time period is distorted behind layers and layers of myth and legend. To the point modern scholars can seriously debate whether Myrðin even existed at all without sounding like crazy people. The Assembly itself certainly happened, the names of most of the clans (now Houses) in attendance are known — in fact, the "Most Ancient" Houses are called that because they were known to have been there — but most details are debatable. The text of the speech modern mages have wasn't actually written until centuries later. So, that's what it was supposed to be, anyway, she guessed that was the point.

The hallway was almost completely empty, being the end of the day and all. After walking down it for a little bit, however, then around a corner and down another, they came to what almost certainly had to be the door to the Minister's office. Mel could mostly tell by the four people in the blue robes and black leathers of the Hit Wizards hanging around outside. As they came closer, the four of them moving to acknowledge Sirius, something really weird happened to Mel. The thoughts intruding in her mind weren't just those weird not-quite-English impressions of meaning, but images as well, laid over what she was actually seeing. The faces of the Hit Wizards flicked by, each with a confusing burst of thought attached to them. Don't-know-this-one's-name-do-what-you-want; Elain-Tugwood-doesn't-like-me-but-Tugwood-is-Noble-House-don't-be-too-mean; Devin-Wood-Hufflepuff-two-years-above-me-call-him-Foxie-long-story; Ethan-not-boyfriend-oops.

She blinked at that. What do you mean, not-boyfriend-oops?

We're sort of shagging right now.

Er...

He may or may not say something flirty, if he does just say you're on duty. But smile-like, please, rather you didn't piss him off. He's good with—

Mel managed to slam up an occlumency barrier before the rest of the thought could get through. She dropped it a moment later to say, Right, right, I got it.

Okay. Having Dora's giggles inside of her head was a weird experience.

After giving polite greetings to "Lord Black" — and not addressing Harry, which she'd learned was actually appropriate when a minor was in the company of their guardian, if the guardian didn't directly introduce them — the four shot up Sirius and Dora with a variety of detection charms. Most of them were done silently, but Mel did recognise a comparatively lengthy incantation as one for polyjuice, which was a more difficult—

Wait. They were checking guests for polyjuice? But... Under the original plan, she would have been going in under polyjuice. She guessed Dora must have been planning to intervene, sweet talk them in without it or something.

But, put around this way, it wasn't like any of their detection charms really mattered. With how metamorph magic worked, there was absolutely no way known to detect its use, or even detect if someone was one or not, so they had no way to tell Dora wasn't actually Harry. Mel was just under polyjuice, which wasn't that hard to check, but they didn't even bother. Even the one whose name
Dora didn't know gave her a nod and an 'Auror Black,' so she guessed that could have something to do with it. Did they just let Aurors through whenever they wanted? Was a red and black uniform like a universal keycard to everywhere?

Hey, she had a plan to take over the Ministry.

As Sirius and Dora started walking into the outer office, the one Dora had called her not-boyfriend stepped half into her way. Giving Mel a crooked smirk that honestly was making her a bit uncomfortable, he said, 'Yet again, Tonks. It seems we only ever bump into each other at work these days. I'm starting to think I should volunteer to liaise with the Aurors if I'm ever going to see you at all.'

Mel hardly even had to think about a Dora-ish way to respond to that. Strangling the urge to fidget — forcefully reminding herself nobody even knew who she was right now, they all thought she was fucking Dora of all people — she cocked her head to the side a little, summoning that teasingly unimpressed quirk to her lips and brows she'd seen in their lessons a million times. 'Please. If you followed me around for five minutes you'd get your cute little bum cursed to bits.'

... 

What the fuck? What the fuck was that? Had that really just happened, had she really just said that? She'd even sounded like Dora, far too light and easy, it was weird. She'd clearly been spending too much time around the little nutcase, Jesus...

No one else seemed to think it was weird, though, the Hit Wizards all chortling among themselves. Of course, the reason she thought it was weird because it was in character, and they didn't...

Whatever, never mind. Anyway, Ethan was saying something, she wasn't paying a whole lot of attention, though she could guess the general idea by the way he was smiling at her, and Sirius and Dora were getting too far ahead of her, she had to catch up. After a second of thought, she knew what she was going to do.

And winced, somehow managing to keep her immediate reaction from her face. She was just torturing herself today, wasn't she.

Holding back how much she very much wanted to do the opposite, ignoring the protesting tingles racing across her skin, she slid closer to this Ethan bloke. Until she was only a couple inches away, until could feel the heat of his body radiating off him, the brush of his breath against her neck. Ugh, blech, this was uncomfortable as all fucking hell. She didn't stop moving, slowly slipping around toward the door, as she smiled just the couple inches difference in their heights up to him, speaking in a low murmur, putting as much of that Dora-esque bounce on as she could. 'Now, now, Ethan. Someone's being a naughty boy. Don't you know, that I'm—' She darted away, slipping into the room past him. '—on duty.' And she slammed the door shut in his face.

The only thing that froze the shudder wanting to walk up her spine was the secretary at the desk and the Auror — Leigh-friendly-but-don't-say-anything-if-he-doesn't — lazily laid out on a nearby couch. She mostly ignored the other two talking to the secretary, took a moment to gather herself again. That had just been uncomfortable.

But she wasn't alone with her thoughts for long. Don't worry, that was perfect.

It wasn't too mean?

Not really, and I'm mean sometimes anyway. Mel somehow managed not to laugh at that. It's actually kind of weird.
What is?

I'm trying to put the logistics together, just in case. But I can't figure out where I could have gotten a time turner from.

Mel did answer with a silent shut up, but she was well aware that, for some bizarre reason, she was smiling anyway.

Before too long, they were being ushered into the Minister's office. For a moment on stepping inside Mel could only look around. Not exactly what she'd expected. It was very...very green. Everything was green. The carpet was green, the chairs were green, the walls, made of wood finely carved seemingly to imitate random ridges of tree bark, had a noticeably greenish tinge. Even the books on shelves, the glass covering most of the wall behind him making a huge window overlooking that damn fountain far below, everything had a noticeable greenishness to it. It was...weird. She meant, she liked green, probably liked it more than was entirely reasonable, but this was just silly.

And Fudge was bouncing to his feet, bounding around to energetically shake hands with Sirius and Dora — the wary discomfort on Harry's face almost made Mel laugh it was too good — but Mel was really only half paying attention. She'd just noticed they weren't alone in the room with Fudge. There was a woman in plain dark robes sitting on a chair in the corner, arms crossed over her chest, staring out the window immediately to her right. Mel couldn't see her very well from this angle, but she could tell she was probably around Sirius's age, her short-cropped hair a pale, whitish blonde streaked through with darker brown here and there.

She had a sneaking suspicion she knew who that was.

Before long Fudge was done with his energetic greetings, guiding Sirius and Dora into chairs in front of his desk. He'd offered to get one for Mel too, but she'd decided to just stand behind Dora. That seemed appropriately protective anyway, that was supposedly why she was here. Then Fudge was back in his own chair and, with a double-take, seemingly remembered the woman was here at all.

'Ah, yes, yes, Harry my boy, this is Amelia Bones, she's the Director of Law Enforcement, you might know. I thought she would like to sit in for this.'

Yep. Guessed right.

Bones turned her head a little to look at them, and by the look on her face Fudge had quite seriously overestimated just how interested she was in this meeting. If anything, she just looked bored. She said a quick hello to both Sirius and Dora — weirdly, she used proper titles and everything for "Lord Potter", which Mel wasn't sure if anyone had ever done ever, but called Sirius by his first name. She glanced at Mel for a second, but looked away before she could even start wondering if she should be saying anything.

'Well, yes.' Fudge looked a little uncomfortable, seeming slightly deflated by just how unenthusiastic Bones was. But then he turned back to Sirius and Dora, yanking his politician smile back on his face. And...and he babbled. Seriously, it was bad. Mel couldn't even really follow all of it. He seemed to be talking about Voldemort, and Death Eaters, and how afraid everyone was — which was a bit silly, since not much had really happened yet. Other than raiding Azkaban which, yes, scary, had there been anything? She didn't think so. And he was talking about how people needed hope and all, and while it wasn't like he was going to be printing the prophecy which of course he knew about in the paper or anything, it would still be good for people to see—

"Harry" flinched a little, straightening noticeably in his chair. There's a prophecy?

Oh. She never had told Dora about the prophecy, had she? Whoops. Yes, there is.
You've heard it? Don't tell me what it says, just tell me if you've heard it.

Yes.

The whole thing?

Mel had to think about that for a second. She guessed it was theoretically possible for Dumbledore to have edited that memory of his, but...she really didn't think that likely. Yes.

Okay. I'm going to stop going easy on you in your lessons.

Wait, what do you mean, easy on me?

Not debatable. I'm not letting my baby cousin go up against a Dark Lord without beating you into shape as well as I possibly can. Not happening.

Mel just blinked at the back of Dora-Harry's head for a second. It was hard to describe really, but there was an odd sense in the thoughts Dora was sending her. A hint of...well, desperation she would guess. Maybe determination? Something like that. Hmm. All right then, fine. Sort of what she'd wanted anyway, she guessed. I'm not going to enjoy this, am I?

Almost certainly not.

At least she was honest about it.

Anyway, what do you want me to say to this prick?

Mel jerked, looked around the room. Sirius and Fudge were quietly going back and forth about something. Bones was looking out the window again, but glaring just barely noticeably, clearly not happy about something. Fudge was occasionally shooting "Harry" an expectant glance, eyes gleaming with a desperate kind of hope. Dora was just sitting there, frowning somewhat at her knees, seemingly thinking. I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention.

Good work there, Cousin.

Shut up.

There was a twitter of ethereal laughter in her head, and that felt really weird, nope, wasn't getting used to that any time soon. Our esteemed Minister here is saying, to boost morale, he wants you to make appearances with both him and members of the DLE. Not big productions or anything — though he'll probably want one or two of those — just you being places people can see. Places that look good for the administration, I mean.

Mel tried to keep the frown off her face, and most likely failed. Why the fuck would he think I would agree to that?

To be perfectly fair, he has no idea what you're like to begin with. It's very likely he believes the drivel printed about you in the Prophet, or whatever Lucky Lucy has been whispering in his ear.

Oh. Well. Yeah, that's probably all shite, then. And ha ha, "Lucky Lucy" wasn't very lucky these days, being on the run from the law and everything. She found that funny for some inexplicable reason.

But I'm pretty sure the reasons he gave are lies anyway. Keep up morale? Morale is fine. He-Who-Smells returned, yes, but then he didn't do anything. The Death Eaters were broken out of Azkaban,
yes, but then they didn't do anything — half of the guards even survived! People just aren't as afraid of them this time as they could have been. And in the DLE we're actually optimistic. We've already ID'd most of the higher-ranked ones, frozen all their accounts, seized all their assets, secured all their listed residences. They're on the run from us on one side and on the other our less savoury allies nice respectable people like Fudge haven't been told we're deputising. We've been bringing in the rank-and-file slowly but surely. It isn't going like last time.

Huh. That was mostly news to Mel. She hadn't realised it'd been going so well. She guessed the DLE was probably keeping it out of the papers, so as to give their targets less warning, and since Tom and his Merry Men haven't been making any big public attacks, she just hadn't known anything was happening at all. Well. That was good, then. So why is he doing it?

Self-interest. His top supporter and closest adviser, someone he's been calling a close personal friend for a decade now, was seen at a Dark Lord's resurrection, seen doing nothing to stop said Dark Lord from slaughtering a fourteen-year-old national treasure, and was then seen casting lethal curses at Aurors and Hit Wizards. And he wasn't the only prominent member of high society known to be there. The blood-purists in the Wizengamot, who make up much of Fudge's support base, even the ones who aren't Death Eaters themselves, have all got a lot of egg on their faces right now. Fudge will be extremely lucky if he's still Minister by the spring.

Mel barely managed to hold in a wince at the "national treasure" bit. She'd learned back in August that, those couple times she'd heard people refer to Harry Potter as a national treasure, they hadn't just been saying that — she legitimately was. There'd been a vote in the Wizengamot and everything, back in '83. It was an actual thing. There were a couple dozen national treasures as declared by the Wizengamot, something they'd started doing in the early Nineteenth Century, and only three of them were currently living people. (The other two were Bagshot and Dumbledore.)

The thought made her extremely uncomfortable. She preferred to pretend the entire concept didn't exist. Which was probably why she didn't actually know what all being considered a national treasure entailed — she simply didn't care to find out.

But anyway, she was having a silent conversation with Dora here. He wants to use me to save his own career, is what you're saying.

Yes.

She really didn't have to consider what to say to that. Tell him to go fuck himself.

Thought so. Harry-Dora drew in a long breath, forcing himself straighter in his chair, seemingly gathering himself for something difficult, uncomfortable. Mel recognised the feel of it easily, she still did the same thing herself daily. Fudge noticed, turning his eager smile on him. Voice sounding consciously confident, as though trying to sound more sure of himself than he really was, he said, 'Minister?'

'Yes, Harry?'

'With all due respect? You can go fuck yourself.'

Mel jumped, even as Fudge spluttered, face quickly going red, Sirius failed to hold down a burst of shocked laughter. Dora! I didn't want you to actually say it!

Yes, you did.

Well... All right, yes, she sort of did. But I'm going to get blamed for this.
How much do you care, really? And look at the boss.

Mel glanced her way to see Amelia Bones had hardly reacted at all. She was still sitting in the same spot, still staring out the window. She hadn't even moved. But, and it was so slight Mel could be fooling herself here, she thought she caught the traces of a smirk pulling at the woman's lips.

You're fine. 'I mean, Minister,' Dora was saying, 'why in hell would I ever help you? And that's what this is really about, don't think I don't know—'

'Now, see here, Mister Potter, I—'

'No, you see here. You think you can just bring me in here, bribe me into supporting your ministry. That's why Director Bones is really in here, isn't it, to hint at what sort of advantages playing along can give me later down the line. It apparently didn't even occur to you that I have no reason to like you. I find your politics abhorrent and your leadership of this government incompetent.' Looking over his shoulders, Mel noticed that Harry's hands on the arms of the chair had curled into fists, shaking just barely visibly. Erm... 'You have spent the better part of your time in office driving this country into the fucking ground, and I would rather die than help you save your own arse!'

Before a now thoroughly red and sweating Fudge could even get out a full syllable, Harry-Dora had sprung to his feet, whipped around the chair to head right for the door. Mel gave a quick glance at the other three in the room before deciding, yeah, she was pretending to be the bodyguard person here, it was her job to stick to Harry anyway, so she just followed him out on his heels.

She barely managed to catch the door before it slammed in her face. 'Dammit, would you watch it.' She closed the door once she was properly inside, cutting off what sounded like a blatantly insincere apology from Sirius.

Sorry. Yeah, it looked like that hadn't been acting — Dora had somehow gotten legitimately angry. Under the curious eyes of the secretary and other Auror whose name Mel had forgotten already, Harry-Dora was standing rigid in the middle of the room, hands clenched at his sides, taking long, consciously level breaths. Which was sort of weird to see, even ignoring the looking-like-what-she-used-to-look-like angle. Had she ever seen Dora show an emotion other than her usual cheerful, joking, slutty nonsense? She didn't think so.

Are you okay?

'I—' Harry cut off, cleared his throat. Sorry. I'm fine.

Something tells me that got personal somehow.

Yeah. There was no response for a moment, just silently staring at the door out. I just hate that arsehole. It kills me sometimes that any good I do reflects well on him. Honestly, I almost chose to do something else. Not just because of him, all the other blood-purists in charge too. You wouldn't believe the kinds of things they get away with. Some days I think we should be locking up people like him right next to the rest of the Death Eaters. Others I think it'd be better to just kill them all, just in case.

Wow. Nope, Mel had absolutely no idea what to say to that.

And only a little because she wasn't convinced Dora was necessarily wrong.

A few moments later, Dora had mostly calmed down, and they were walking back along that stupid pretty hallway. Joined, to her surprise, by Bones. She and Sirius were talking about...some Wizengamot thing, by the sound of it. By a few of the names dropped, she was pretty sure they were
talking about those creature–being law reforms Sirius had complained about a few times lately.
Bones even got in the lift after them, kept talking with Sirius as the doors slid close, the box started
jerkily descending.

And then Bones turned to face them, her hand slamming down on the control panel behind her with
a heavy clang. Mel felt a weird jittering of some kind of magic, a wandless charm, go running across
the metal surface of the lift, and the thing jerked to a stop, suspended between floors. For a moment,
Bones simply stared from one of them, to the next, to the next, glaring with hard, narrowed eyes.
Finally, 'I should arrest you, you know.'

'We've been over this, Amelia,' Sirius said, crooked grin wide enough to show teeth. 'I'm innocent,
remember?'

'Silence, Sirius,' she said in a low snarl, 'unless you want me to consider you an accessory.'

Miracle of miracles, Sirius actually shut up. She had to learn how to do that.

While Mel was still wondering what the fuck was going on, Dora had apparently figured it out.
She knows, she thought at her, even as Harry's shoulders slumped in defeat.

'I should have you arrested,' she said to Mel, 'whoever you are, for impersonating an Auror. That's
illegal, you know.' Before she could even think to say anything, Bones turned to not-Harry with,
'And I should have you arrested for impersonating a Lord of the Wizengamot. Now, I'm certain you
know that's illegal too, Nymphadora Tonks.'

Dora winced. 'That obvious, was it?'

'I should have noticed earlier, but your accent slipped while you were, if you recall, screaming at the
Minister. It's obvious from there.'

'Ah. Whoops.'

Glare narrowing even further, Bones loomed over Dora — Bones wasn't a tall woman by any stretch
of the imagination, but Harry was even shorter — her voice coming out in a low growl. 'Whoops?'

And Dora shrugged. Shrugged! 'You said you should have us arrested.'

Bones stared at her for another second, but only a second before letting out a heavy sigh, her voice
turning noticeably higher and smoother. 'Yes, yes. I assume all of this was done with the knowledge
and consent of all parties, so I doubt it'd actually make it to a conviction anyway. Besides, it made
my day. I'd been in there for an hour before you three finally showed up, him blathering on and on
about how to get the most mileage out of our endorsement by the Boy-Who-Lived. Doesn't he realise
I have better things to do?' She lifted her hand off the panel, the lift immediately stuttering into
motion. 'Such bloody stupid nonsense.'

'Yeah, I'll admit that was part of why I was angry with him. Dark Lord resurrected, Wizengamot at
each other's throats, radicals and militants on all sides inches from bloody revolt, and he's worried
about this idiotic shite.'

'Ridiculous.' The doors slid open to the floor the weird recorded voice helpfully labelled as the one
home to the Department of Law Enforcement. And Bones stepped out, muttering to herself about
incompetent bureaucrats, their idiotic priorities, and just where she thought they could shove them.

For a few seconds, as the lift trundled further downward, the three of them stood in complete silence.
Mel couldn't hold it in for very long, though. 'Okay, what the hell was that?'
Smile wide on his face, Sirius said, 'That, my dear, was Amelia Bones. Famous Auror, best damn Director of Law Enforcement you could ever ask for, and an enormous pain in the arse to have an actual conversation with. Could never take a joke, that woman.'

Mel just blinked at him. My dear?

'Are you saying she's too serious for you?'

'Yep, still my favourite cousin. And no, I wouldn't mind if she got more Sirius. She can get Sirius whenever she wants. In fact, back in fourth year, she got quite a bit of Sirius out by the Lake one weekend.'

'What? No! You're fucking kidding me!'

'Yeah, I'm kidding you.'

'Good. I can't imagine Bones doing anything like that. And, wait, isn't she something like eight years older than you?'

'Yep. That's some Aurorly awareness right there, dear Cousin.'

Harry-Dora grumbled, rolling her eyes to herself.

'That did happen, though. But it was her sister.'

'Bones doesn't have a sister.'

'Her sister-in-law, I mean.'

'Oh. Which one? Probably—'

'Elizabeth.'

'Yeah, Elizabeth. Oh, that's delightful,' Harry-Dora said, sending Mel a quick smirk. 'Isn't she little Susan's mother?' Mel wasn't entirely sure why Dora was smirking at her like that. Was that supposed to bother her?

'Er, I don't know, is she? Maybe.'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Well, Susan didn't exist yet at the time, did she? You can ask Lily when we get back, I'm sure she'd know.'

Now Dora glanced at her again — not with a smirk, but with something looking far more...worried? 'Er...'

'I know you o virtuous you never had these sort of escapades, but I can assure you she remembers every one of the other girls I've done anything with. Teases me about them incessantly, I tell you.'

The lift doors opened to the Atrium just then, and Sirius started walking out, but was stopped with Dora's hand on his arm. Sirius turned around, giving her a slightly confused frown. 'What?'

'Sirius...-' Dora hesitated a moment, glancing back at her. With the tiny bit of concentration she hadn't already had distracted by the other girls part, Mel noticed Harry's face was unusually pale. 'Sirius, Lily is dead.'
'I...’ For a long moment Sirius just stared down at Dora, slowly blinking, frown turning gradually deeper. Then he turned partially away, shaking his head to himself. 'Yeah, I—I know that.’ And he set off, leading the way into the Atrium.

Mel had no idea what to think about that. Well, about that, that she thought she mostly got. Sirius had had a dementor-induced brain trauma moment. He apparently got those sometimes, though Mel couldn't remember ever witnessing one. Just in case she ever was around for one, Ellie had described what they were usually like. Basically, the person would jump back in their head to before the dementor exposure, would be temporarily convinced it was years in the past. Only temporarily, never longer than a few seconds, followed by a few more seconds of confusion as they figured out it wasn't really whenever they thought it was, followed by a not very fun few hours, since remembering how you'd been stuck around dementors for, in Sirius's case, twelve years was not exactly a party.

She knew it wasn't very much fun being Sirius much of the time. He was doing a lot better than he'd been a year ago, supposedly, but he wasn't completely recovered. He still had moments. More than just moments, in all likelihood, according to Ellie. And... Really, she just preferred not to think about it. That might be kind of shitty of her, she guessed, but most of the time she simply didn't want to worry about it. It wasn't pleasant.

It was something else she was mostly hanging on. Sirius had said Lily, meaning her mother, teased her about other girls. Other girls. Did he mean girls other than Elizabeth, or girls other than...? Had Sirius just implied he and her mother...what, exactly? Part of her was distractingly, burningly curious.

But on the other hand...

His little episode had left Sirius noticeably diminished, shoulders slumped and head drooping slightly, seeming slow and so suddenly sad it almost hurt to look at him. She sincerely doubted he wanted to talk about this.

And for her own part...

No. No, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Morgen verxGwenrrewi (IPA: /mɔr.'ɡɛn\ vɛrx.g'ɛn.'vɛx.wi/ roughly "more-gain verh gwen-vray-wih") — lit. "Morgen, daughter of Gwenfrewi"; the "verx" is actually Welsh "ferch", but Mel is interpreting it as Brīþwn (which would properly be "verxy") because she actually knows a bit of that.

Muirgen Éimhir Aodháin (IPA: /'mʊr.ɹəɪ.i.ən\ l'e.ː.vəɾı.ən\ i.'ɛnən/ roughly "mih-duh-gen ay-ver ee-ghan", but Irish, guessing) — lit. "Muirgen, (daughter) of Éimhear, (daughter) of Aodhán"; pretty sure I got the the genitive cases right on her mother's and grandfather's names, but don't hold me to that. And, yes, this is supposed to be that Morgen's "real" name (it wouldn't have been exactly this at the time, Éimhear would be Emer and Aodhán Áedán for starters, but not the point).

The temperatures Mel are talking about are in centigrade. Ashwinders burn somewhere between six hundred and seven hundred Fahrenheit (~315-370 C). Pewter melts at somewhere between 340 and 450 Fahrenheit (~170-230 C), depending on the exact
alloy. You can see how that might be problematic. The outsides of cauldrons being charmed against heat is a thing to explain the use of pewter cauldrons when, really, almost any fire could easily exceed 400 degrees, pewter cauldrons seem like a terrible idea.

Lāminam attinē — Latin, "hold/preserve the blade"

[in some cultures even muggles, had been acknowledging it was a thing that happened for literally thousands of years] — This is actually true. Far more commonly real ancient cultures acknowledged the existence of minority sexualities, but a few even recognised transgenderism is a thing. People don't really change that much across space and time. They're all still just people. Anything psychologically/behaviourally that exists now and doesn't depend on very specific technological or cultural context most likely always existed. Whether people acknowledged it is a different story. Hell, there are people even today who don't think legitimate homosexuality exists, and we have behavioural evidence for that across quite literally the entirety of recorded history.

Yeah, a bit late, I'm sorry. My brain is fucking killing me these last few weeks, it's bad. If this chapter is extra blechy I blame that.

Of course, this sort of accidentally became the longest TRW chapter so far, which I did not see coming, so...whoops?

Until next time,
~Wings
October 1995 — Straightened Out

Chapter Summary

Things fall into place, and absolutely everything ever makes perfect sense.

Ah ha, just kidding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July, 1976

'Why is Sirius Black outside your house?'

Lily blinked at the soft hiss in her ear, fingers paused on the straps of her sandals. It was a clever charm, one Sev had found among his mother's books, squirreled carefully away where his sick excuse for a father wouldn't find them. It was, Lily was pretty sure, shadow magic, but bound in a simple incantation-based charm instead of cast freely, like could be done with many transfigurations. Even though Sev wasn't in the room with her, was likely waiting a couple houses down the street, she could hear him just as easily as if he were sitting right next to her, whispering into her ear. They'd been using it for over a year now, to keep in contact when it wasn't practical to actually meet. More often in the last couple months, since they'd successfully convinced everyone but Lord Black they hated each other now.

Luckily, it was one of those bits of magic that was considered subtle enough to use around muggles, so it never triggered the Trace. Though, since Lord Black had had one of his people add her house to the registry of magical residences, anything cast in the house wouldn't trip the Trace anyway. And not that Lily thought much magic she did would trigger when she cast it in the first place. Sev still needed his wand to do it, but all she had to do was focus, drawing forth her power and throwing her desire to talk to Sev out into the air around her, and the charm was cast. Since the magical traces of the charm turned out a bit sloppier this way, she thought it'd probably register as accidental magic, and minor enough it didn't require investigation. She had gone around in the summers doing magic whenever she felt like it, though careful never to use her wand, and she'd never gotten a warning from the Ministry. She assumed that was why.

The Ministry really didn't expect minors to be adept with wandless casting.

Lily focused now, casting forth a tendril of softly burning magic, distantly feeling the charm hit home with a sort of dull thunk. 'If he is, I didn't know about it.'

'He's here,' came Sev's voice, instantly and with a distinct sense of annoyance. 'Standing at the edge of the garden, staring at the front door.'

She couldn't help a crooked grin coming to her face. 'Why, you'd almost think he's nervous. Such un-Gryffindor-ish behaviour.'

There was a short silence. She would bet Sev was taking a moment to fight dark amusement off his
voice. 'I suppose we'll be postponing our study for tomorrow.' Or disappointment, that was also possible.

'Yes, sorry.' She finished tying her sandals, then got an idea. 'Hang on, I think I know how to partially make it up to you.'

'Oh?'

She started gathering the charms she'd need, twisting and shaping the form of two different spells, one grasped in her right hand, the other her left. 'How long until Sirius works up his courage and comes to the door?'

'Not long. Less than a minute, it appears.'

'My sister is home, you know. I think we should let dear Petunia answer the door.'

There was a short moment of silence through the charm. 'Yes, that does sound amusing.'

A smirk twitching at her lips, Lily stood from the little bench next to the front door, released the listening charm on her right hand, spreading it all around the walls, the floor. Then she grabbed at the dangling threads of the magic, plaited them together with the whispering charm tying her to Sev. Another advantage to wandless casting: she doubted Sev would have been able to do that nearly so easily, he'd never been great at that sort of trick. They really should teach this stuff at Hogwarts. She let go once she was sure the linked charms were stable, then released her invisibility charm over herself, head to toe. One of the first bits of shadow magic she'd learned, actually turning herself permeable to light, not the flawed chameleon trick of a disillusionment. It only worked on sight, not any other senses — which made it almost useless against other mages, since she never could completely hide the power wreathed about her — but she doubted Petunia would notice. She slipped away from the door a bit, turning a little into the dining room, and settled in to watch.

A short while later, and slightly to her surprise, the high tone of the doorbell sprung through the house. She hadn't thought Sirius would even know what a doorbell was. Practically before the air had stopped vibrating with the three simple notes, she heard a shrill yell of, 'Lily! Get that!' in what was unmistakably Petunia's voice. Lily stayed still, silent. A moment later, the doorbell rang again. An aggravated growl, a bit of thumping from above, and Petunia was soon stomping down the stairs, looking very much annoyed, arms all sharply crossed and brow all furrowed.

Lily had absolutely no pity for her. Petunia had been insufferable this summer. And for a while now, honestly.

The door was yanked open a bit too roughly, and Petunia had some angry demand half out of her mouth before suddenly cutting off. Lily peeked around the corner quick, and immediately knew why. Sirius was undeniably a handsome boy, after all, even people who hated him never claimed he wasn't. And all meticulously clean as mages always seemed to muggle eyes — cosmetic charms usually just turned out that way — and he'd even managed to dress passably muggle, if reflective of somewhat more wealth than was usually seen around here. It wasn't surprising Petunia was startled out of her rage.

Lily couldn't help smirking to herself. Petunia had started at university last year — or was it the year before now? — and had been talking about this prat she'd met there almost incessantly. From how she described him physically, he sounded the larger muscular sort of bloke, as rugby players usually were, and she kept saying it in a way to imply that, obviously, one would never find wizards like that, of course not. From a few people Lily had met, Petunia would be surprised, but not the point. Lily had just smiled at her, said that sort of thing wasn't even close to the top of her list, and walked
She had to wonder if Petunia was quite suddenly reevaluating her opinion. The thought amused her more than it probably should, but she was used to the idea by now that she wasn’t exactly the nicest person in the world.

Petunia gathered herself, quickly and smoothly enough Lily wasn’t quite embarrassed to be related to her. In a perfectly polite voice, even tinged slightly with warmth, she said, ‘Good morning. Were you looking for someone?’ Lily had to smirk again at the barest hints of an inviting tone on her voice. So predictable.

But Sirius had to go and be less predictable. It took him noticeably longer to respond than she’d guess. She risked another glance around the frame, noticed his eyes, slightly narrowed, glance around the walls and floor, following the lines of the listening charm she’d laid. The pleasant smile on his face threatened to twitch into a smirk, but he held it after a moment. And turned back to Petunia, his voice all deep and smooth — imitating his uncle Cygnus, Lily recognised the soft, seductive silk instantly. ‘Sirius Orion Lysander Black, at your service.’ Full name and everything, wow. It took everything she had not to let out a shocked laugh when he bowed, one of those formal ones with the half step back and silly hand-twirling and everything.

Sev’s voice again came as a hissed whisper in her ear. ‘Of course he had to show off, the self-important little—’

Lily threw up a quick silencing, long practice making the precaution effortless. ‘He noticed the listening charm. I think he’s doing it to amuse me.’

Sev grumbled a little more at that, but he didn’t argue.

It took long seconds for Petunia to answer. Even then, all she managed was a breathless something that sounded like, ‘Erm, well...’

‘I wonder, Miss, if it would not be too much of an imposition on your precious time to beg a favour.’ The slight emphasis on “your precious” and “beg” was obvious, all gently flirtatious. Lily slapped a hand over her mouth when the beginning of a cackle escaped, remembering a second later her silencing would have caught it anyway.

How pleasantly flustered Petunia was only made it better. ‘Oh, I’m sure it would be no trouble. Was there something you wanted?’

In an instant, the expression on Sirius's face switched from warm smile to mocking grin. ‘Is Lily in?’

It took maybe one second for Petunia to reorient herself as the conversation suddenly turned. Then another second to shake off the annoyed embarrassment when she realised Sirius had just been toying with her. Then another three seconds to realise, if Sirius was here for Lily, he obviously had to know her from somewhere, the most likely candidate being... ‘You’re— You’re...’ Petunia couldn’t finish the sentence, already stumbling a couple steps backward, her face previously reddened with a quick succession of different emotions paling instead.

Sirius flicked his wrist, the familiar dark wand falling into his hand. He gave it a smooth, lazy twirl between his fingers, smile transfiguring into a smirk at Petunia’s jerk of shock. ‘...dashingy handsome and indelibly charming, yes.’ He hadn’t said anything about magic, but he had pulled out his wand, so it was obvious he knew what was really going on here.

Sev grumbled at that. But, Lily was surprised and slightly impressed to notice, there was actually a
hint of sadistic amusement on his voice. Probably just because it was Petunia Sirius was playing with, they never had gotten along.

But she decided that was enough. Before Petunia could start screeching, Lily cancelled the invisibility and silencing spells around herself, and stepped fully into the hall. 'Honestly, Sirius, are you physically incapable of seeing a girl and **not** flirting with her?'

Sirius blinked at her, thick with false confusion. 'Why, is that bad?'

Lily exaggerated the roll of her eyes a bit, just to make sure it was visible. 'I was just about to go out for a walk anyway. Come on.' She passed Petunia without pausing to even look in her direction, stepped out into muddy summer sunlight. As she turned to close the door behind her, dismissing the listening charm with a glance, she paused a second to take in the look on her sister's face.

It was **very** hard to hold in a smirk at the way she was glaring.

Perhaps she shouldn't mess with her sister as much as she did. She was aware it wasn't improving matters. But she really couldn't help herself. Petunia was just such a bitch these days, she couldn't help but feel she was asking for it.

Before she'd even gotten to the edge of the garden, wet summer breeze tickling at her hair and her dress, Sirius trailing along behind her, Sev grumbled a quick goodbye, saying something about how much he definitely didn't want to have to listen to her side of whatever conversation she was about to have with 'this insufferable, childish prat'. Which Lily thought was an ironic thing to say, but fine. The whispering charm vanished with an almost audible snap, loud enough in her ears she glanced at Sirius quick to make sure he hadn't noticed anything.

She waited until they were out on the pavement, a few houses away from hers, before turning on her heel. Arms crossing slowly over her chest, she gave Sirius a level look. 'All right, then, what are you doing here?'

Sirius blinked at her for a second, an amused sort of smile gradually replacing the surprise on his face. 'I was in the area. Thought I'd drop by.'

'And just what cause would you have to be "in the area" of Lichfield, of all places?'

'Well, pretty much everything is in the area of anything, if you can apparate well enough.'

She could point out how illegal that was, but it would be massively hypocritical of her. So instead she just rolled her eyes again, ruthless fighting the smirk trying to twitch at her lips. 'Got tired of being stuck around your family, then?'

He didn't quite manage to entirely hide his flinch. Yeah, guessed that right in one. 'Why, Lily, I'm wounded. Can't I just want to see you?'

'If you were so lonely I'd think you'd go to Remus or Potter before me.'

The smile still lingering on his lips, again, visibly transformed into a smirk. 'Yeah, but you're prettier.'

She managed to stop herself from snorting. Well. He wasn't wrong. Besides, she'd been expecting something like this before too long. She had been encouraging him on purpose, after all. She'd thought he would wait until they got back to Hogwarts, but she guessed she should have known better than to expect patience from a Black. He was dancing around a bit more than she would expect though. 'You're being very indirect, Black. Harness those Gryffindor tendencies of yours.'
He grinned at her. She wasn't even sure why, exactly. Sirius could be a very silly boy sometimes. 'All right, then. I was wondering if you'd like to get lunch or something.'

'As a date, you mean.'

'Yes.'

She couldn't stop herself from asking. She was far too curious what he would say. 'I can't imagine Potter will be very pleased with you when he finds out.'

He kept grinning at her, his expression not hitching even a little. 'That sounds like his problem, doesn't it?'

She wasn't entirely sure what to say to that, at least without insulting someone. So she just smiled.

October, 1995

Melantha paced in the sitting room of McGonagall's apartments, trying her absolute best to not be nervous. And failing, yes, but still trying.

Not for the first time, she'd found something in her mother's journals she needed to ask someone about. She'd had suspicions for a few days now, but still hadn't expected to see her suspicions blatantly confirmed in Lily's own handwriting. She'd spent far too much time over the last couple days flipping through journals covering the next few months, to the point she was a little behind on coursework now. She'd figured out Lily's tone enough to tell if an entry would have anything particularly interesting in it or not — though, it was a bit unsettling how Lily could switch entry to entry from sounding like a newly-minted spy preparing for war, to a dark sorceress with a sense of humour rather more sadistic than she usually let people see, to a perfectly ordinary and at times even plain silly teenage girl, back and forth with seemingly no resistance. She'd mostly gotten used to that though. She'd long adjusted to the idea that her mother wasn't anything like what people had told her.

But, she was into late October of her sixth year now, and Lily and Sirius were still officially a thing. Officially and publicly a thing, publicly enough some of Sirius's cousins and their friends, not happy a member of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black (blech) was dating a muggleborn, had been finding opportunities to hex and even curse them. Well, hex and even curse Sirius, anyway — none of the attacks aimed at Lily had actually succeeded.

From reading between the lines, she was rather sure her mother had already been roughly as untouchable as Dora was now, at a significantly earlier age. She wasn't sure whether she should be impressed with or vaguely intimidated by the thought.

But nobody had told her this. Nobody had told her anything about this. She'd had no idea at all. Which just seemed...wrong, in a way she couldn't quite describe. She even thought Sirius might have told her some months ago that Remus had known Lily better than he ever had, she should go ask him if she wanted to know more about her. Which she was rather certain now was a huge fucking lie, considering she'd now read a reference in Lily's journals to snogging Sirius in the Gryffindor common room. She didn't understand why Sirius would lie about that, she couldn't help feeling a little hurt, yes, though she couldn't say exactly why she did. But she didn't understand why nobody else had told her either.

It made no goddamn sense. Did they think she would prefer a silly fantasy story of some idealised image of her parents over what had actually happened, what they'd actually been like? That... That
was just *stupid*. If her godfather and her mother had really been involved like this, she wanted to know. She'd half-convinced herself for a bit there she didn't really want to know, but that had been *stupid, of course* she did.

And if, as his slip in the Ministry seemed to imply, Sirius was *still* in love with her, Mel wanted to know that too, and what she had a feeling that could mean. It might not be fun to hear, but she still wanted to know.

See, Ellie? She *was* making progress.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the door *finally* opened, and Remus stepped into the room. He looked a bit surprised to be here, watching her warily, clearly wondering exactly what she'd called him for. She had almost called Sirius and asked him directly, but... Well, she just thought that would be more awkward than necessary, so she'd contacted Remus instead. Had asked him to come through her *patrōnus*, the first time she'd done that — Lily had mentioned using them to carry messages in her Charms journal, it wasn't hard. You did have to want the person you were sending it to to be safe and happy, so she wouldn't be able to use it with people she didn't like, but she thought Remus had a hard enough time of things for stupid reasons, so wishing happiness on him hadn't been difficult.

Still looking at her oddly, Remus closed the door behind him, walked over to settle into one of the almost overly plush chairs. Mel didn't follow him, she couldn't stop pacing like a crazy person. She wasn't even sure why she was doing this in the first place, really, she just couldn't stop. After a moment of waiting, Remus let out a sigh, low enough he probably thought she hadn't noticed. 'Okay, Melantha. Here I am. Was there something you wanted to talk about?'

'You know I've been reading my mother's journals.' She froze for a moment, blinking at the brittle sound of her own voice. That was odd. She didn't know why she sounded like that. She shook the thought off, went back to pacing.

Even in her peripheral vision, Remus looked uncomfortable, his shoulders slightly tense, face tipping away from her. 'When have you gotten up to?'

'October, sixth year.'

'Ah.' His wince was so sharp she heard it. 'Yes, I was wondering when this was going to come up. I just thought it would be Sirius you'd ask.'

She frowned at that for a second, remembering. When she'd brought up Lily's journals to him last month, he'd looked wary, awkward, as though dreading what she might be about to ask. She had the sudden feeling that, at that moment, he'd thought she was going to ask about this very thing. Which meant he'd known, and hadn't told her. Of course, she'd already known he must have, but, worse than that, he must have known she'd certainly find out eventually, and *still* hadn't told her.

A crawling, clawing feeling of anger started rising in her chest, her throat quickly thickening with it. Strong enough she felt something deep within sing in sympathy, a rising sense of inescapable heat she'd felt only a handful of other times. She tried to force down her magic as it awoke against her will, but it slipped through her mental fingers, tendrils of light and fire gathering into a thick miasma of power around her. Fuck, not again. She grit her teeth, yanking back on the energy pouring from her, but it *wasn't listening*, and she could feel it straining, jerking and twisting, consumed by mindless desire to vent her fury on something, *anything*, to release the sick tension in her, to just *burn something* in desperate hope that it would make her feel better.

That that mindless desire was *hers*, that it hadn't come from nowhere, she felt was quite beside the
point.

Nope, this wasn't working. Her magic wasn't listening to her. It was going to do something, whether she wanted it to or not. She might as well give it something harmless to exhaust itself on. She would feel rather guilty if she hurt Remus in an inexplicable moment of madness.

She thought of a possibility after a moment, and forced her will as hard as she could on the magic around her — sort of like that reverse-occlumency thing she'd done to think at Dora through that enchantment, not quite the same but similar. She wasn't sure if it would help, if it would make any difference at all, but she spoke the short form of the incantation anyway, 'Calōre vindicō' slipping between her lips as a strained sigh.

The magic resisted for only an instant, bucking convulsively under her command, before grudgingly yielding. Across metres to all sides of her, the air between her head and the ceiling was consumed with white-blue fire, blindingly bright and scorchingly hot, forcing her eyes closed and her face and shoulders stinging with heat, her hair and clothes absorbing so much it almost hurt where they met her. But she didn't stop, pouring rebellious power into it until her fury was entirely expended, only then letting the fire fade, a last burst of dry wind lashing across the room, papers on a desk in the corner fluttering.

And she was left standing in the middle of the room, dry air scratching at her now aching throat, trying to figure out what the fuck just happened.

Well, okay, the events themselves weren't that weird, fine. Her magic had gone crazy again. For some reason, that hadn't happened before the suddenly a girl now stuff. She thought she might know why, even if she didn't understand why the reason behind it had happened in the first place. She'd been having the weird thought lately that she was more magically powerful than she'd been last year. Or at least the strength she'd always had was easier to access. She had no clue why. Little things had hinted it to her. Transfiguration in general was noticeably easier than it used to be. Charms came out stronger — the amount of damage she'd been doing one lesson with these incendiary curses Dora taught her had come as more of a shock to her than the other two. Hell, that she could feel the tingling of some kind of magic in the soap, she hadn't noticed that before.

And that she was even having these weird episodes at all. That was new. She'd have to remember casting that spell to get rid of it if this ever happened again. It'd worked rather well, even the anger that had summoned it in the first place was mostly gone. She did rather like that spell. It was one of the elemental fire spells Dora had been teaching her, probably her favourite so far. Reading the entry on it in her fire magic book had been confusing, if only because it'd defined the same spell in so many ways. But then, it'd only done that because this spell could be so many different things. It could be selfish rage, directed to seek violent revenge. It could be righteous passion, liberating flame burning away all chains and bindings. It could be furious love, risen to protect something cherished. It was a fun spell.

So, she understood she'd been so angry she'd lost control of her magic. She understood why that particular spell had done a rather good job of venting that anger.

She didn't understand why she'd gotten so angry in the first place.

It didn't make a whole lot of sense. Yes, Remus had known things that he had consciously not told her. Yes, he must have known she would figure them out eventually on her own, but hadn't thought to warn her ahead of time. He'd even given a partial answer just a few weeks ago, very annoying. Yes, this was something he'd even done before — he hadn't told her he'd been friends with her parents, back in third year, she'd had to figure it out herself and ask him about it. No, she had no clue why she'd gotten quite that angry with him.
Maybe...

Maybe it didn't have much to do with him, Remus specifically. Maybe it was just because... Well, it had happened again. Nobody ever told her anything, even when the secrets they were keeping directly affected her. That had been a constant in her life, ever since very early in her childhood, when Petunia had either passed off her accidental magic — and she had to have known that's what it had been, with Lily as a sister — as an over-active imagination or just outright lying, punishing her if she showed any doubt. She hadn't even remembered that until recently, it was weird the things Ellie dredged up. But anyway, people always did it. It'd been slightly better recently, with people all the way up to Dumbledore actually starting to tell her things, but it still happened. And here Remus had done it. Again.

She was so fucking sick of this shite.

Mel took a long breath, calming the last vestiges of her fury, before speaking. She didn't look at Remus, afraid the anger would come back if she did. 'Sorry. How about you just explain, then.'

'I...' There was a sigh, a slight shuffling sound Mel knew meant Remus was passing fingers through his hair. 'I don't know how much you know about this kind of thing, so this may seem very strange, but I might as well just come right out with it, I suppose. Yes, as I'm sure you read, Lily and Sirius were together starting the summer after fifth year. As I'm sure I mentioned before, Lily and your father got together sometime in the second half of seventh year, I forget when exactly. But she was still with Sirius too.'

...

What?

Too consumed with icy shock to worry about getting angry again, she turned to glance at Remus. He was sitting there, in one of McGonagall's almost too-comfortable chairs, arms crossed over his stomach, resolutely not looking in her direction at all. Wow, he looked awkward. Not too weird, she guessed, considering the woah what the fuck sort of thing he'd just said. 'She...huh?' Nope, not her most articulate moment.

Remus sighed, lifting a hand to rub at his face. Still looking at the wall on the opposite side of the room from her. 'Understand, I never asked. Not really the sort of detail I wanted to know about my best friends, you see. But...' He frowned for a moment, then nodded to himself. 'An example that might get across what I'm talking about, from a few months before you were born, your parents were staying in a cottage owned by the family in Godric's Hollow. Sirius lived there too — though he was elsewhere rather often, after the Fidelius was put in place. Rather curious thing I noticed, looking around one time. One bedroom was obviously James and Lily's. Another was obviously Sirius and Lily's.'

That... That... She didn't...

She abruptly had the thought that Petunia was more right than she'd realised about her parents being freaks, and had to crush the mad urge to giggle.

Once she had control of herself again, taking another long breath, she stubbornly forced her thoughts into line, took a moment to process this bit of information. Okay. Okay. Even after her parents had been married, Lily had still been sleeping with Sirius. Which James had been aware of and okay with to the point that he'd lived with them. Come to think of it, since she'd already been told Lily had probably married James for more rational, self-interested reasons, it was possible it was actually the other way around — she'd been with Sirius, but had married James, and blah blah. Okay. She could
process that. She could. 'Does...' She cleared the weird stickiness out of her throat quick. 'Does that sort of thing happen often?'

'Depends.' Remus sounded almost as uncomfortable with this subject as she was. Which didn't make a whole lot of sense to her, but okay. 'People having lovers outside of their spouses, yes, that is very common, almost universal even. It happens all the time. On the other hand, the situation with your parents and Sirius...' Remus broke off, rubbing at his face with both hands for a few seconds. Then he straightened a bit, dropping his hands, and finally turning to look at her. She instantly recognised what he was doing, his face and voice dropping into the gentle warmth, but professional distance, of his teacher-giving-a-lecture persona. 'Let's just put it this way, shall we.

'Ours current marriage and family law were adapted from Roman law long ago. Tweaked at a bit over the centuries, but that is the original source. Roman law, at least at the time we adapted it, was very strictly monogamous. The Celtic tribes were not, not natively. Depending on which tribe you're looking at, whether polyandry or polygyny was more common varied. More generalised group marriages were not uncommon either. The point is, such things were widespread. Just because monogamy became law doesn't mean polygamy instantly vanished. It is extremely rare in Noble Houses, with the importance they put on producing legitimate heirs and all that nonsense. To this day, it still happens in Common Houses all the time. The legal situation can be complicated, but they still do it. They've even pushed almost constantly to have family law reformed, but since they have no representation in the Wizengamot it rarely gets anywhere.

'In fact...' Remus broke off for a moment, shaking his head to himself and laughing under his breath. 'Sirius and James and Lily's relationship was extremely controversial with the Noble Houses, and not least because your mother was a muggleborn. Though that did feature in those ridiculous articles in the Prophet, all screaming about a muggleborn sorceress ensnaring two upstanding purebloods from such respectable families.' The tone of derisive sarcasm had hints of a low snarl on it, Remus's lips peeling back from his teeth, a harder gleam coming to his amber eyes, just for a moment before he snapped back to normal. 'But anyway, the Prophet derided them at every opportunity, and they got constant sneers from other Noble Houses, but the rest of the country didn't care. Most of the people I talked to outside the nobility didn't understand what the problem was. I suspect it's part of why the three of them are so popular even to this day, that they were faced with all that opposition and still did as they pleased anyway.'

Mel stared at Remus for a long moment, her gaze met by his much calmer one, if still somewhat awkward. She watched him for a long moment before turning away to frown at nothing. And she waited.

It took some minutes for the confusing jumble of nonsense in her head to settle into a form she could actually understand. And when it did, it all took a shape that she probably wouldn't have expected had she had occasion to think about this possibility beforehand. (The answer Remus had given her was not what she'd thought she would hear, not at all.) Her final opinion on the revelation that her parents had been polygamists, basically, could be summed up as Eh, fuck it. She honestly didn't see how it mattered that much. Sure, it was...strange. But magical society was rather strange at times, wasn't it? It would probably take some time before she could talk to Sirius without feeling a bit uncomfortable. More uncomfortable than usual, anyway. But, well, she already would have been dealing with something similar just knowing they'd dated at all. This would take longer to get used to, sure, but not forever.

She abruptly realised what some of the things people used to say about her, Ron, and Hermione had been in reference to. If all this had gotten into the Prophet, it was probably yet another bit of common knowledge she'd managed not to pick up for so long. Those jokes made a whole lot more sense all of a sudden. Anyway.
In fact, she could see herself eventually coming to like the thought. If only because, with Sirius still around, it was almost like—

She felt her face, having just relaxed a bit with the decision none of this really bothered her, tightening into a frown again. That... Well, that wouldn't be an unreasonable possibility, would it? She voiced the thought before she could second-guess herself. 'Is it possible Sirius is actually—' And she couldn't even finish the question, dammit. It was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, she thought, and not really that much to stack on top of everything else, she was being so ridiculous.

Remus obviously got what she was asking anyway. 'No. Well, almost certainly not. In this sort of situation there are magics a woman would use to ensure any children are, ah, of her legal husband.' Somewhere behind her own uneasiness with this topic, she was darkly, almost sadistically amused by how viscerally uncomfortable Remus sounded, it was an odd combination of funny and adorable. She blinked with surprise when she identified the feeling. Huh. Maybe there was more of her mother in her than she'd thought. 'I won't deny it's possible Lily slipped but, this being Lily, I rather doubt it. There is a potion to confirm it, if you really want to, but James is almost certainly your father. Not that it would have made a difference, I suspect.'

Mel frowned, turned to look at him again. To find he wasn't even looking in her direction, once more resolutely staring at the wall. Yep, she was finding his discomfort oddly amusing all of a sudden. Huh. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, if tragedy hadn't struck, the three of them would have raised you together all the same. In all likelihood, you would have had two dads growing up. They would have claimed your father was James for legal reasons, even if, by some accident, it really were Sirius by blood. But, from what I know and what I remember, they wouldn't have taught you to make the distinction, if you understand what I mean. At least, not in private.' Remus gave a weak sort of shrug. 'That's how it usually works.'

Oh. Okay. So. The answer to Is Sirius actually my father? is Most likely not, though if Voldemort hadn't fucked up absolutely everything ever you would probably be calling both him and James "Dad" anyway. Right. Glad to have that not straightened out.

She again repressed the strangest urge to giggle like a crazy person. This was all just so ridiculous.

But, okay. She had to not get distracted by how weird all this was for a moment. She could take some time to process it later, but not right now. And she couldn't do it right now, because she had another question to ask. She had to gather herself for a moment, pushing down the odd tightness and shakiness in her throat, before she could get it out. That Remus was avoiding looking at her still made it slightly easier. 'Why didn't Sirius tell me any of this?' Oh, hey, her voice came out sounding mostly level, without the unsteadiness of...something, she wasn't sure what emotion exactly, something she had been worried might leak out.

Ellie had suggested dozens of times by now that she wasn't great at identifying her own emotions. She'd thought it was nonsense at first but, as with so many other things, she had to admit Ellie might have a point. She couldn't take the time to ferret it out just this second, though, it would have to wait.

Somewhat to her surprise, Remus didn't flinch at the question, with the awkwardness he'd approached practically this whole conversation with. Instead a sad, worried cast came over his face, his eyes somewhat unfocused, as though looking at something in his head rather than the wall he'd been staring at a second ago. 'You remember what I told you about dementors a couple years ago?'

Mel frowned. 'Most of it.'
'Whenever trying to figure out Sirius, what's going on in his head these days, you must remember he was in their constant presence for nearly twelve whole years. It is guaranteed there are memories that will now be simply gone, irrecoverable. With what you know about dementors, which would you expect to be the first memories to go?'

She followed where he was hinting instantly. And the horror fell over her a second later, much as those annoying charms Dora sometimes used, a hard wave of freezing water crashing against her shoulders, drenching her head to toe.

*He was too happy. He doesn't remember.*

At least, he didn't remember very well, and not very consistently. Mel realised that, in the lift at the Ministry, Sirius had fallen into thinking Dora-Harry was *James*, and he'd been talking about seeing Lily at home because, well, they'd both lived with her. So he remembered sometimes. The memories weren't completely gone. But they'd been picked and prodded at by years of mental assault by creatures of distilled despair, until Sirius could say, back in July, that Remus had known Lily better than he had, and *think it was true*.

That...

Considering what Mel now knew, that...

She thought that might be the most depressing thing she had ever heard.

Without even saying goodbye to Remus — she'd apologise for that later, she couldn't care right now — she walked out the door, heading out for the rest of the castle. She just didn't want to think about this right now. She'd go find something else to do. She'd go back and pick over this whole thing later, but she needed some time away from it. She could think about it more rationally later.

It was too terrible. She needed some time to process it. Remus would just have to forgive her.

Melantha took a long look over her setup, prodding at one of the her enchanted plates, before deciding it seemed good enough. It would probably do.

Despite how distracted she'd been lately by other things, she'd finally managed to finish the enchantment she'd gotten from Lily's Runes journal. It had taken a little longer than she'd expected — she'd started setting up once a couple days ago before realising she'd need to affix these bits of ceramic to the doorframe *somehow*, and the familiar wanded spell would interfere with the process. Luckily there was a runic form of a simple sticking charm that was only a couple characters long, so inscribing that on the backs of all five had only taken a little extra time.

She had wondered how Lily had possibly missed that, but flipping forward to where Lily was talking about actually doing it showed she hadn't. She just hadn't included it in the part talking about the enchantment for the containment field. So. Yeah, that one was on Mel, whoops.

She was in one of those abandoned classrooms all over the castle, this one in an isolated corner of the ground floor, a thick layer of dust covering all the desks and cabinets. She couldn't tell which subject this room had been used for, no identifying signs sticking out at her. Not that it really mattered. She'd used the sticking enchantment to adhere her five hand-sized ceramic plates to the doorframe. Two on either side, about a quarter the height of the frame from the bottom, then again two on either side, about a third from the top, then one on the top, as close as she could get to the middle. She'd needed to levitate over a chair to reach high enough for that one. Being so short could really be annoying sometimes.
They looked to be all in the right places, properly spaced. Good. She went around all five again, tapping her wand to each one to activate them — which meant she had to again hop onto the chair to reach the top one, she felt so ridiculous. As she activated the last, bending to reach the bottom-left, the containment field snapped into place with a flicker of sharp blue light. She stepped back for a moment, watching the field play against the air.

Yeah, that looked right. The runes on the plates were glowing ever so slightly, barely noticeable. The open air inside the frame bent and shimmered, like heat rising from pavement, an occasional band of soft blue light curving around the edge of the field before vanishing again. Looked exactly how her mother had described it. Okay, then.

Mel took a couple steps back, drew her wand. There were a few suggested charms to use for this, but she was almost positive this was the safest one. She cast a banishing charm, aiming for the blank wall on the opposite side of the hallway from the open door, directly through the containment field. Since she was considerably more mobile than the wall she was aiming at, she underpowered the charm on purpose — if the field didn't properly catch it, doing this would send her flying backward until she crashed into something, which wasn't something she really felt like doing to herself if she could help it. But she stayed perfectly still, no sensation of being shoved touching her at all. At the same time, blue sparks ran over the field, some of them fading but most persisting, gradually drifting toward the center of the frame, collecting in a ball of blue-white light.

She grinned to herself. It worked. Stupid fucking thing had taken forever to put together, but it worked. Perfect. Feeling much more confident now, she fired off a few more banishing charms, until the orb of pulsing light in the center was about half as wide as the doorframe. There, that should do it. She slid her wand back into the holster on her arm, and stepped back up to the field.

Now, she knew what she had to do here...theoretically. The entire point of this exercise was to teach herself how to feel magic that wasn't part of her, but in the world outside. And once she got better at feeling it, how to draw it toward herself, into her control, holding it in her fingers so she could carve into the air runes symbolising the spell she wanted. She knew how that would all work. In theory. Just because she knew what she was supposed to do didn't necessarily mean she knew how to do it. Lily's journal had been unhelpfully vague about that, talking about lights and tingling and song and will. But, well. She was confident she could figure it out.

Er. Probably.

But, when she did, she was sure that kind of control would help her should her own magic ever rebel again. So, there was that.

She realised expecting herself to control ambient magic when she couldn't handle her own all the time probably wasn't very realistic. But it wasn't like she was going to put all of her magic in this field or anything, so it should be considerably weaker. It should be fine.

She lifted a hand, hesitantly extended her fingers toward the ball of light. As she got within a couple inches, an odd tingling started, little pricks of sensation starting at the tips of her fingers and slowly travelling up to her wrist. It was sort of like static electricity, she thought. Not quite the same feeling, since it left more a soothing warmth in its wake than stinging pain, but similar. But, she knew, it wasn't the physical sensation she was supposed to be paying attention to, not exactly. She was rather certain she would know it when she felt it. So she pushed further in it. But even when her hand was entirely enveloped in the shimmering blue glow, all she felt was the tingling. She didn't feel the song of power her mother had described at all.

That she wasn't sure what such a thing should feel like was beside the point.
Okay. The magic probably wasn't dense enough yet. That was probably it. She stepped back, drew her wand, and fired off a few more banishing charms. This time, she intentionally overpowered them, just to cut down on how many times she had to do it. After a few castings, the blue-white light had expanded until it was several times the size, filling half the empty doorway, nearly touching the frame at the sides. She stopped there, putting her wand away again — she didn't know what would happen if the bound magical energy touched the doorframe, but probably nothing good.

This time, immersing her fingers in the field, she felt... Well, the tingling was still there, slightly more intense, running across her skin all the way to her shoulder. But there was something else, too. She... Well, she understood why Lily hadn't been able to describe it very well. Her fingers inside the light, extending half the way up her hand, were filled with an odd sensation of pressure and movement. As though the flesh of her hand had been replaced with wind, blowing in chaotic, unpredictable swirls of dance and laughter. God, she felt so silly thinking that, it was such nonsense. But she couldn't think of anything else to say.

It felt rather good, actually. It set her to smiling, and she couldn't really say why.

She pushed her hand into the light further, the weird sensation moving further up her arm, almost to her elbow. And she abruptly started feeling something else. No. No, this was what her mother had been talking about. It wasn't inside of her, or even touching her, not something she felt directly, but a sense of the light around her fingers she got in a way she couldn't describe. It was warm, almost oily smooth, though not really in an unpleasant way. It was bright, it was powerful, it was...alive. Like Hedwig sitting on her shoulder, Crookshanks pressing against her hand, Sirius's arms around her back. She couldn't describe exactly how, she just couldn't help thinking it.

As she focused harder on the odd feeling, a faint hint of blood appeared on her tongue, grass in her nose, and she felt her chest loosen, warming from head to toe, everything from her hair against her neck and face, her clothes against her skin, even just her awareness of her own body she wasn't usually conscious of, all of it more intense, more sensitive. Which would normally make her uncomfortable, but the giggling song rising in her head was pleasant enough she just couldn't care, what was probably a silly grin spreading on her face.

Yes. This was definitely it, the feeling of magic she was supposed to be growing more acclimated to, to find more easily. With how simply good it felt, she didn't think it would be hard to want to.

Okay. Okay. Focus, Potter, stop sitting around high on magic like a weirdo. Supposed to be doing something here. She reached out to the power around her hand, not physically, not in a way she could describe very well. She reached out with intent, focusing on the light around her hand, the giddy feeling that was magic, focusing as though there were nothing else in the world right now, with everything she had. And she willed the magic under control, willed it to enter into her fingers, pulled within herself to add to who she was.

She thought, maybe, she could feel it bend. Just a little.

As she focused on the magic, willed it to join her, willed it to yield, her hand slipped a little further into the light.

She was somewhat distracted from her focus, and it took her a moment to figure out what it was. Something on her wrist was growing warm. Not the pleasant, soothing warmth, but the stinging warmth that precedes burning pain. She blinked, looking down to her wrist, enveloped in embracing light. Her wand, she realised, that's what it was. Even as she watched, sparks sprouted around the underside of her wrist, not the blue of the captured banishing charms, but a sharp, angry orange-red. Clearly coming from her wand.
Oh. Er. She had the very distinct feeling that couldn't be a—

It happened too quickly to react.

With an ear-splitting, bone-shivering crack, the soft shimmer of the field shattered visibly into dozens of shards, and Mel was instantly blinded with orangeness and whiteness and blueness, frigid lighting crawling agonising lines from her hand up her arm across her shoulder into her chest, all surrounded by a faint sensation of falling, of lurching movement in no particular direction she could work out.

And everything abruptly went black.

The instant she woke up, Mel jumped, trying to push herself to sitting.

She immediately wished she hadn't. Pain leapt upon her as a piercing wave, running all across her right arm and shoulder, a duller pounding in her head and in her back, her chest and left side and hip. Even moving so little as she'd managed made her dizzy, the bright white she knew was the undifferentiated light of the Hospital Wing all she saw past the fog that took over all her senses, nausea clawing at her stomach and throat. She took a moment just laying there, waiting for the unpleasant mix of blech to diminish enough she didn't want to moan in pain or be sick quite so much.

She'd wondered how long it would take her to end up in the Hospital Wing this year. At least she'd lasted into October, if only barely.

'Yes, yes, I know dear.' She recognised the sharp voice as Pomfrey's fussing easily, having heard it so many times. Gentle but unyielding hands pulled her somewhat more toward sitting — which just made her feel even dizzier and queasier, not helping. 'Just take three potions for me and you can lay down again, come on.'

Mel grit her teeth for a moment, but obediently swallowed the potions pressed to her lips. Her sense of taste had thankfully been a bit dulled by whatever had happened to her, but she still recognised the potions by feel. The first, sending soothing tendrils of ice down her throat and into her stomach, was clearly an antiemetic, she'd taken that one a few times. Good thing Pomfrey had given her that one first, no idea if she would have been able to keep the others down without it. The second ran through her blood like lightning, her vision sharpening enough she could actually make out she was sitting on a bed in the empty ward, the ringing in her ears and the fog in her head vanishing along with the worst of the pain, leaving her feeling far more awake. She didn't know what that one was called, but she recognised it from times Pomfrey had said she'd had a concussion. Which meant she must have hit her head, she didn't remember. The last set her skin to tingling, the warm feeling along with it marking it as some kind of general healing potion. All right, then.

She could only imagine what Hermione would say to the fact that she recognised so many Healing potions just from what they felt like taking them. Probably nothing good.

Pomfrey released her, and she let herself fall back against the familiar crisp pillows, absently rubbing at her face with her left hand — the second potion had eased the stinging pain in her right hand and arm significantly, but she didn't feel like using it if she didn't have to. Mel closed her eyes, ignored Pomfrey chastising her for hurting herself yet again, and tried to remember just what the fuck had happened. Her head was still a bit fuzzy, and she was having trouble picking the events of the day apart. She'd had her usual Tuesday classes, she remembered, nothing too unusual had happened. She remembered dodging questions from the study group, slinking off to start teaching herself runic casting. The enchantment had worked, she remembered that, and she'd been playing with it, and...
Nope, she didn't remember. Not surprising, she guessed, if she'd hit her head somehow. Annoying, though.

She glanced over at the table to her right, already half-reaching for her wand — just to confirm she had it, she guessed, she could be a bit paranoid — and froze with her hand hanging in the air. *It wasn't there.* She looked around, seeing the dresser on her left was similarly bare, ran her hands over the bed on both sides, finding nothing. Okay. Okay, this wasn't good. 'Where's my wand?'

Pomfrey let out a huff, giving Mel one of her disapproving glares. Probably just cut her off in mid-sentence, Mel realised, but she didn't particularly care at the moment. Panic was already clawing at her throat, a hot buzzing in her head, which was *silly,* it was probably fine, Pomfrey just didn't want her casting anything yet, there was no reason to be going crazy. Pomfrey was silent a long while, as though trying to decide if Mel deserved to know, before grudgingly relenting. 'Professor Snape said your wand interacting with whatever experimental spellwork you were attempting induced cascading interference — that's what burned your arm, and sent you flying back against the wall, I'm told.' Mel blinked, glanced down at her right arm. It was mostly healed already, but she could see dozens of thin, switchbacking pink lines, as though she'd been swarmed with lightning or something. Huh. 'It is possible your wand was damaged in the process. He will return it once he's confirmed it's safe.'

'I...' She blinked to herself for a moment, thinking through the significance of what she'd been told. She might have irreparably damaged her wand somehow. Snape was doing something to check. Which meant *Snape had her wand.* That was an unpleasant thought, both of them. Unpleasant enough she would rather not think about it, really, it was better just to—

Wait.

Wait a second.

If it was Snape who had explained to Pomfrey what had happened — she'd have to take Pomfrey's recitation of Snape's word it was "cascading interference" or whatever, she didn't remember and didn't know what that was in any case — if Snape had been in a place to take her wand to do whatever to check it, that meant... That meant it was probably Snape who had found her. Which she guessed wasn't that weird, since she had been rather near the dungeons. But...that wasn't good. Someone else might not have been able to guess what she'd been doing. "Experimental spellwork" was an obvious assumption, but not the exact thing. But, since Snape had done *this exact thing* with her mother years ago, he'd probably recognise it instantly.

Runic casting was restricted dark magic.

Snape, the single person in the entire castle right now who disliked her most, almost certainly knew she'd been attempting it.

*Snape knew she was practising dark magic illegally.*

She let out a sigh, rubbing at her face again. God fucking dammit.

Luckily or unluckily, she wasn't sure which, she wasn't given too much time to stew in her sudden anxiety. She'd only been sitting there a few minutes, not listening to Pomfrey hiss recriminations under her breath as she wandered back and forth doing...whatever it was she did in the ward most of the day, hardly even had time to start getting bored before she heard the door swing open, the soft steps and sharp swishing of cloth she recognised as Snape walking without even looking. Great. This was going to be fun.

'Poppy. I need a moment to speak with Miss Black.' Even though he still hadn't walked into sight,
Mel couldn’t help a little flinch. His voice was so hard and cold Mel had the strange urge to shiver, as though someone had left a door open in winter, which was ridiculous. No human should be able to do that with the power of his voice alone.

'Oh, of course. I'll just be—'

'In private.'

Pomfrey hesitated for a moment, and Mel had a short flash of hope. *Tell him no, tell him no, tell him no, tell him— 'If you think it necessary, Severus.' —no, damn it! I'll be in my office if you need anything.'

Only a second later, Snape was standing over her bed. Which was not a pleasant experience, Snape standing over her like that as comparatively helpless as she was, his sharp face unnervingly clear of all expression, only eyes showing anything, bright and unyielding as ice. It didn't help when, with two gestures of an open hand, the curtains slid around, sealing them off from the rest of the ward, the tiny snap of a silencing barrier following an instant later. After a short hesitation, he put up another paling, Mel could tell by the tingle of magic racing through the air, but she didn't recognise it.

Being stuck with Snape, out of sight and behind a silencing, would be bad enough. But that he'd done that wandlessly was just making it worse. It was rather easy, since he taught a subject as light on active magic as Potions was, to forget that Snape had talents elsewhere. Mel also might have forgotten that, yeah, the idea she'd gotten of how good a wizard Snape was from her mother's journals was likely a bit outdated. That had been twenty years ago. It'd been rather idiotic of her to think he wouldn't have improved in that time.

It abruptly occurred to her that Snape wasn't just the most prattish of the professors. If she didn't count Dumbledore, he was quite likely also the most dangerous.

In retrospect, that she'd ever managed to convince herself, back in first year especially, that Snape had been trying to kill her was really quite stupid. If he ever did decide he wanted her dead, she'd be a splatter on the ground before she realised anything was wrong.

Her brain must still be a bit foggy right now, because that thought instantly put her on a weird tangent. Why hadn't Riddle managed to kill her yet? If he'd really wanted her dead, either in first year or in the graveyard, or probably even second year, he should have been able to pull it off. Hell, with just the magic Dora had taught her in a few lessons, she'd have been able to kill herself in his place without hardly trying. She could only assume he'd been trying to accomplish something else. But...what?

'I wonder—' Oh, shite, should really stop worrying about the Dark Lord trying to kill her (maybe?) at some point in the future and focus more on the dark sorcerer standing over her right the fuck now, ha ha. '—why the Dark Lord and his followers must put so much effort into trying to kill you, and others give so much to prevent it, when it seems you are determined to end your own life by the sheer power of your own stupidity.'

Okay. Yes, that made her angry. She wouldn't deny that, that would be a lie. That sensation of tense heat climbing up her chest and into her throat, setting her teeth to grinding, her fists to clenching, that was definitely anger. And normally she probably would have done something stupid here. She didn't know, yelled back at him or something. But that had obviously never done her any good before, and usually just got her in trouble. But she really had no clue what to say to that that wouldn't be stupid, so she fought the urge to say *something*, kept her lips resolutely closed. And just returned his flat stare.
It could be her imagination — Snape was inexpressive enough when he chose to try it could be hard to tell. But she thought she noticed the barest flicker of surprise cross his face. He stared in silence for another moment, then reached into a sleeve. Mel flinched when his hand reappeared with a wand between his fingers, but relaxed a moment later when she realised it was hers. 'I went over the runework, tested the integrity of the varnish. I would advise having Ollivander take a look at it within a few years, but it will hold for the meanwhile, so long as you do nothing further to damage it.' Every motion slow and smooth, he set her wand on the table to her right, touching tip first before gradually being laid level.

She knew what she should say, here. She wasn't even necessarily opposed to it, since it occurred to her, belatedly, that Snape hadn't been obligated to do that for her. He could have told her to get it checked, passed it off to someone else, or just not said anything at all, and watch and laugh as it exploded in her face or something at a later date. He needn't have gone out of his way to do it himself. So. Fine. 'Thank you, sir.'

Huh. She could still be imagining things, but that slight tightening around his eyes probably meant that hadn't been the response Snape had been expecting again. What, had he expected her to yell at him or something? For what? Well, sure, she guessed she could be suspicious he had done something to her wand, but she'd mostly adjusted to the idea Snape was on their side. He seemingly hated every single person in the Order, exactly how much varying person to person, but he was on their side. (Of course, he seemed to hate just about everyone.) So...that'd just be stupid.

But, she guessed Snape had never had that high an estimation of her intelligence, so that it would be stupid might have even part of why he would expect it. Whatever.

'In case you weren't paying attention, now is when you try to convince me to keep what I have learned of your activities to myself.' Mel opened her mouth to say something, she wasn't even sure what, but Snape kept talking before she could, voice slightly sharper. 'And do me the courtesy of not insulting me by pretending I'm not intelligent enough to put together what you were trying to do. Unless you would prefer I inform Dumbledore his precious little champion has been practising dark magic in her spare time.'

Mel considered her response to that. Getting angry again wouldn't do any good, of course, but that didn't mean she had any idea what she was doing in this conversation. The fuzziness still lingering in her head wasn't helping her come up with ideas. 'I know both you and my mother did the same thing when you were here, and he didn't do anything to you.'

His gaze tightened into a glare for just a second. 'He wasn't as invested in us then as he is in you now, and would have been less inclined to intervene had he known. You see, we weren't so foolish as to get caught.' Snape reached into a pocket of his robes, pulled out an indistinct, hand-sized something. With a flash of crackling magic, the something expanded, a shrinking charm falling away, and Mel could see Snape was holding the ceramic discs she'd spent so long enchanting. Though they were hardly recognisable now, cracked and bent and charred grey and black and an unexpected blue. He dropped the bundle onto the bed, Mel jumping when the hard weight struck her legs. 'You have been. Unless you truly believe Dumbledore will ignore your misguided attempts to teach yourself restricted dark arts. If that be the case, we have nothing further to discuss.'

Oh, well, yeah, he did have a point. She doubted Dumbledore would just let her study whatever she wanted, especially since it was sort of illegal. And she had just proven she couldn't do it without hurting herself. So. Whoops. But she still didn't — Ah, there, something not entirely stupid to say. 'No offense, sir, but what do you care? I mean, why are you giving me the opportunity to convince you not to tell him in the first place? I'm not sure what there is for you to get out of this.'
Snape raised an eyebrow at her, silently staring for another long moment. Then he leaned somewhat back, no longer looming quite as directly over her, his arms coming up to cross over his chest. 'I disagree with the consensus opinion at present that certain magical arts, runic casting included, should be restricted in the first place. I make no secret of that. Regardless, it is current law, and I am under some obligation to respect that. Not much of an obligation, one weak enough I can be convinced to ignore it.' His eyes narrowed very slightly. 'And I must admit I find myself curious what you will say in your defence."

Mel turned away, picked at the shards in her lap. They felt oddly brittle, as though the warped edges would flake and crack at the slightest touch. She wasn't sure exactly what could make ceramic do this — heat alone wouldn't have — but she guessed magic could do unpredictable things sometimes. She ran her fingers along the charred and distorted runes, trying to decide what to say. When she stumbled on an option, something within her instantly rebelled at the notion of actually saying it. To Snape of all people. But it was the truth and, if she was picking apart Snape's opinions and motives well enough, it probably would get him to drop it. 'I'm tired of being useless.'

She wasn't looking, but she felt Snape's intensified focus as an almost physical weight, crushing force threateningly suspended inches above her. Voice an empty whisper, he said only, 'What?'

'I understand now. Just how...not very good I am.' It would be hard not to realise it, after watching that memory of her mother fighting Riddle, her writing about casting wandless magic with hardly a thought that Mel wouldn't even know how to go about by any means. She understood comparing herself against Lily Evans of all people wasn't exactly fair, but she was also being slapped around by Dora and even Katie somewhat regularly these days, so. 'I'm useless, and I know I'm useless. And this war is going to be starting up again soon here, and I'm going to end up being dragged into it one way or another. I always do end up mixed up in things, it seems like, whether I want to be or not. And with how useless I am now, someone will probably end up having to save my stupid arse or something. Again. And I just...' She shrugged, shaking her head a little — and very consciously not looking anywhere near Snape's direction, she did not want to see him right now. 'I don't know. I'm just tired of it.

'I've been getting lessons with Dora, yeah. She's an Auror, you know. That's been helping a bit, but. I have my mother's journals, and she talks about runic casting and shadow magic, and they sound really useful, so I thought I'd look into it. Dora refused to teach me, gave me a whole thing about Category II magical arts, blah blah. So I thought I'd do it myself, but...' She picked up one of the shards of ceramic, turning the warped and blackened surface around under the glaring Hospital Wing lights. 'Yeah, that didn't turn out the way I'd hoped.' The shard clattered back against the rest, one of them noticeably cracking, a puff of dust released from the impact. She snorted, shaking her head to herself. All those hours of work, and this was all she'd ended up with. Useless pieces of shite.

For a long moment, there was silence. Mel sat there, still not looking at Snape, and tried not to squirm. She was sure he was staring at her, and she already felt stupid, and she really didn't like him, and it was not helping. Apparently, she was awake and coherent enough by now for his gaze to set her skin to crawling, the familiar shaky queasiness she sometimes got when people wouldn't stop just looking at her slowly making itself known. Awesome, just perfect.

Finally, after what felt like fucking hours of agonising stares, Snape spoke. His voice was back to something rather like usual, close to normal volume, sounding almost casual but still with that omnipresent hint of a sneer about it. 'While I can't honestly claim to disapprove of your motives—' She blinked to herself, trying to think if he'd ever said anything that close to a compliment to her before. '—your methods leave very much to be desired. Anyone with a functioning brain could have told you a wand would interfere explosively with a containment field of that type.'
The realisation crashed over her, and she felt like slapping herself. Because he was right, that should have been obvious. That type of containment field worked by, essentially, disassembling whatever spells were brought into it, reducing them to base energies. Any self-powered enchantment, a wand being only one example, would have resisted the effects, producing undifferentiated interference in the interstitial media of both enchantments. Which was a lot of big words and complicated concepts, but it was something they'd specifically talked about in Runes last year, so she mostly understood it. Her wand should be able to radiate off most interference without much trouble, but Ollivander was far and away a better enchanter than she was, she wouldn't even joke otherwise. So her enchantment had failed first, releasing both the energy powering it and the energy it was containing in one rather impressive boom. That should have been obvious, she shouldn't have let her wand anywhere near the fucking thing. God, she was such a bloody idiot sometimes...

But anyway, Snape wasn't done chastising her. 'I am willing to pass this off as an isolated mistake, to believe you have learned not to play with magics beyond your abilities. I reserve the right to reverse this decision at a later date, and report what I know to the Headmaster or McGonagall, should I discover you have been experimenting with either runic casting, shadow magic, or any other art foolish children should know better than to muck about with. And don't even think to hide it from me — I will know. Understood?'

That increasingly familiar flare of scorching heat and clenching anger clawed at her chest again, but significantly weaker this time, she managed to catch it before it could slip through her skin. She took a long breath, focusing on the feel of cool air through her throat. It wasn't an entirely unreasonable request. This was illegal magic she'd been trying to learn, Snape really shouldn't be keeping it to himself in the first place. But she couldn't just leave it. She had to do something.

And then she blinked, straightening against the pillows a little, as quite possibly the strangest idea she'd ever had occurred to her.

Only a few days after saying she couldn't teach her, Dora had sent along a list of everyone licensed in various dark arts, runic casting and shadow magic included but not solely those two. She'd been unsurprised to find a certain name on the list, but she hadn't seriously considered doing anything about it. And she was having the weirdest idea.

She turned to glance up at Snape, finding him standing above her. The issue seemingly settled, all traces of anger or mockery were gone from his face, leaving him looking more bored than anything. As though he'd much rather be down in the dungeons doing...well, whatever he spent his time doing down there. She hesitated for the barest moment, then shoved the thought past her lips before she could stop herself. 'Couldn't you teach me?'

Snape went very, very still. It was rather creepy to watch, really. It was as though he were suddenly made of very life-like stone, a statue placed there to look passively down at her, not moving even to breathe. After long seconds, he finally unfroze, just enough to speak. 'Did you really just ask me that?' Somewhat to Mel's surprise, the only emotion she heard on his voice was disbelief. She would have expected a little anger or derision or something.

'Erm.' She frowned up at him, trying to figure out what the big deal was, and drawing a massive blank. Maybe because her head was still a little fuzzy, maybe just more Snape weirdness, whatever. 'Yes. Shouldn't I have?'

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A slight tremor worked up his chest, ending in a tiny huff — Mel realised after a moment that was a shocked laugh, so thoroughly repressed she'd almost missed it. Huh. 'You realise we are talking about Category II magical arts, here.'

'Yes?'
'So you realise, of course, that the only way I can teach you is if I make you my formal Dark Arts apprentice.'

'I...' Well, that had been sort of the point, okay. She realised it was a bit insane, and they'd probably both have to resist the urge to curse the other at one point along the way — or several, honestly — but she had known what she was saying. 'Yes.'

Snape stared at her for a long moment, face still blank, eyes completely unreadable. 'Why should I?' Then he turned on his heel, dismissing the palings around her bed with a wave of an empty hand, and walked out of the ward, shaking his head to himself.

Mel grabbed her wand to vanish the useless bits of ceramic on her lap, then settled back into her bed with a sigh, feeling strangely exhausted. Okay, then. She guessed she was supposed to take that as a no.

She'd have to try a new idea, then. As soon as she came up with one.

Chapter End Notes

_Lily constantly using wandless magic at home — Things Petunia says in the books imply Lily would use magic when she was home from school all the time, apparently without any consequences. The Ministry being terrible at detecting wandless magic is partially magic theory worldbuilding stuff, but partially just to explain that._

_Calōre vindicō — The multiple uses of the magic Mel hints at are actually present in the meaning of the incantation. Calor literally means "warmth", but can be used poetically for passionate love or zeal, and vindicō can mean "I vindicate" (it is where the English word comes from), but can also carry meanings of punishment and vengeance (which also comes from the same root), but also liberation and deliverance, or protection. All possible meanings are intended. If the description seems vaguely familiar, Charissa cast the same charm silently in chapter 22 of TLG._

_Polyandry and polygyny — Respectively, a woman having multiple husbands and a man having multiple wives. Polygyny is, as you'd probably guess, far more common in recorded history, appearing in almost every developed society at some point, but polyandry also appears here and there, with hints it was more widespread prehistorically. Roman writers mention the Celts of modern-day England practised polyandry, in fact._

_Here, have a chapter, where things start going seriously sideways. Happy muggle baby carpenter day._

~Wings
Tom frowned as his proximity ward tingling in the back of his mind pulled him from his reading. Another one of these useless idiots come complaining to him, no doubt. They'd been getting gradually more impatient, and more bold with their impatience, and it was really growing quite annoying. He'd thought killing Yaxley would have cowed them for at least a little bit, but—

He blinked as more information filtered through the ward, straightening in his chair a little. It seemed Severus was coming to see him. This might actually be interesting, then.

He folded closed and set aside his book, pushed himself to his feet. He walked through the sitting room, featherlight and silencing charms keeping his pacing silent, and came to the door to one of the three bedrooms in the apartments he'd taken over in a back corner of the Malfoys' ridiculous manor. Honestly, he couldn't imagine how a single family, even a Noble House, could possibly require this much space. Most of the reason he'd decided to move in with the Malfoys in the first place was because he'd thought it'd do Bella good to be near her sister. It certainly hadn't been for the pleasure of Lucius Malfoy's company. So, of course, Narcissa had had to vanish only a few weeks later.

That Tom understood why the woman had done what she had, and had even known it was going to happen beforehand — people seemed to have this strange idea he needed eye contact to know their thoughts — didn't make it any less annoying.

A quick silencing worked over the door, and he pushed it open a sliver. It took only an instant to confirm Bella was still asleep, the bedcovers a disorderly mess about her to the extent he could barely even make out her figure. Good, then. It'd been difficult enough getting her to sleep at all lately. A person could only use dreamless sleep so often without risking further damage to one's mind, and so often was simply not enough.

For a moment, he fantasised about flying off to Azkaban, destroying every last dementor in the place. He could follow it up by tracking down all of the Lords of the Wizengamot who supported the continued use of the cursed things. Which was a majority, of course, but he didn't much care. And they wouldn't be allowed to die slowly, oh no...

He shook his head to himself, closed the door again, worked a more permanent paling into its surface. No, now was not the time for revenge. He had other things to focus on. It wasn't likely, but he couldn't discount the possibility there was something he could do to heal the damage done to her mind. He was rather confident he'd exhausted all options back in the seventies, but there had been original research in the decade and a half since, and it was possible, however improbable, that someone, somewhere, had made a useful breakthrough. He could execute his vengeance when Bella was whole again.

Besides, killing them was too simple. He'd had a far more interesting idea percolating in the back of
his head the last couple weeks. And, oh, it was delicious.

Pain ends with death. But shame never dies.

A moment later, he was opening the door out into the hallway. Even with his momentary distraction, he'd managed to time it perfectly — Severus had only been a couple steps from the door. He started at Tom's appearance, and was halfway into a bow, something likely obsequious touching his lips when Tom cut him off with a sniff. 'There's no need for that, Severus, we're alone.' Tom turned and walked back into the sitting room, his former apprentice and triple agent trailing along in his wake.

Sinking again into his overstuffed chair, Tom idly wondered if Dumbledore had any idea how many apprentices in the Dark Arts he'd had over the years. Most of them hadn't been properly registered with the Ministry, after all. Bella had been, so he certainly knew about her, but Severus had said neither Dumbledore nor Lord Black had ever discovered he'd stumbled on the talented young man back in '74, and had started teaching him in secret right away. Severus had said Lily had probably figured it out — Lord Black had only learned his real name, after all, because Severus had introduced him to Lily in the first place — but he didn't think Dumbledore had any idea. And Severus might well be the most talented, and the one Dumbledore was most familiar with, but he wasn't the only one. Tom had a fair few former students out there, most of whom hadn't even known of his Voldemort scheme, and as far as he knew no one had yet managed to put that together.

Not surprising, he supposed. Dumbledore still thought his interest in teaching had been a ruse.

And it seemed, no matter their disagreements and the intervening years, his teaching had stuck rather well: Severus was glancing around the room, his eyes focusing especially on the books and journals strewn across the tables and shelves, arrayed around Tom's chair. He wasn't sure how many Severus could read, as many of the titles weren't in English, but he was probably observant enough to fill in the blanks. 'You're attempting to cure Bellatrix's backlash again.' Yes, definitely observant enough.

Ritual magic could be an extremely finicky beast. Much like any other magic, it required a great degree of focus to keep the energies involved in line, the mind cleared of all extraneous thoughts. While the concept was similar, the risks were different. In simpler, instantaneous spells, if a person's mind wandered the spell would be weaker, not function quite properly, or at worst fail completely. Rituals, on the other hand, involved a far greater volume of magical energy. When that energy was not properly channelled or contained, well, they tended to fail far more spectacularly.

One of the more common consequences was damage done to the caster's mind, scorched and cracked from being flooded with far too much power all at once. The most common symptom, though hardly the only possible, was a loss of all ability to control one's emotions. Such people were volatile, and in the worst cases were a danger to themselves and others. And there was no cure. There wasn't even a treatment, no known way to alleviate the problem even a little.

And Bella hadn't been exceptionally stable to begin with. Although, in all fairness, that she'd been as mentally well as she'd been was nothing short of a miracle. House Black and many of their closest relatives were infamous for a dark, irrational rage that seemed to be genetic — one of those lesser consequences of inbreeding, he believed. And Bella had not had a pleasant childhood. Almost as bad as his own. Considering her history and predispositions she'd been born with, she'd been remarkably level-headed, to the degree he'd been quite impressed once he'd known her well enough to have the full picture of it. That sort of will and mental resilience was not something commonly found.

Even though the backlash from her failed ritual had been comparatively minor, it had been the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. After some months, she'd learned to redirect it quite effectively. She couldn't prevent the all-consuming surges of rage, or joy, or lust, or hatred, springing to life from the slightest of stimuli, or perhaps for no reason at all, but she could direct them in ways
that suited her purposes. He'd assumed it was a mind magic trick, taking the flood of emotion and simply bending it, since it couldn't be smothered entirely. And it had worked, for a time. There had been a few unfortunate incidents, but for the most part Bella had had a precarious sort of control of herself.

After fourteen years of dementor exposure, she didn't even have that. In fact, she'd deteriorated. On top of the emotional instability she'd already had, and the usual issues anyone subjected to long-term dementor exposure developed — more than once, she'd been convinced it was actually May Seventeenth of '74, but he didn't know why she kept locking on that particular date — she'd also been presenting signs of psychosis. Most often, voices whispering painful lies in her ears, and an almost constant paranoia over the Lestranges plotting to harm her, but the occasional episode that was much worse, to the point there was little he could do but put her to sleep and wait for it to pass. That was a potential consequence of ritual backlash he hadn't noticed before.

It'd been long enough since her rescue he would have expected her to start improving at least a little bit. But she wasn't. He didn't know what he would do if she didn't...

He had absolutely no idea how to deal with this shite. Hence, research.

'You wouldn't happen to know anything I don't.'

The slightest of frowns touched Severus's eyes. Tom was amused despite himself — Bella and Severus never had gotten along. 'I was never especially interested in ritual myself, but, so far as I am aware, there have been no pertinent developments in mind magic. I could look into it, if you wish.'

Ah, but he would, wouldn't he. He might not care much for Bella, but the subject matter itself would interest him. Tom was almost certain Severus would have gone into Healing, if everything had gone as planned. Which he also couldn't help but find amusing — he doubted most anyone would have seen that coming. 'Unnecessary. I have greater knowledge and more resources than you, and fewer demands on my time. If the problem can be solved, I am far more likely to be the one to do it. And I doubt it is why you came to see me.'

Severus nodded, a distinctly annoyed impression falling about him. Distinct to Tom, anyway — he doubted anyone less familiar with his face and his magic would have noticed. 'My information is incomplete but, near as I can tell, Greyback is moving.'

Of course he was. Tom had practically guaranteed it when he'd told him not to.
themselves, and he was growing quite tired of it.

Tom shook his head, trying not to look too weary, and opened his eyes again. 'It seems Fenrir Greyback has outlived his usefulness.'

With the slightest traces of a whining sort of tone Tom knew he would curse anyone for even implying existed, Severus said, 'I still don't understand why you deigned to humour that beast.'

'Like far too many European mages, your fear blinds you.' Tom caught the simmer of repressed rage behind his eyes, and Severus opened his mouth to say something — something annoying, he'd expect — but he didn't pause long enough to give him the opportunity. 'Perhaps justified fear, more so in your particular case than most, but still fear, animal and unreasoning. There are other magical nations, all through the Americas and a number of places in Africa and Asia, that have far less restrictive regulations concerning werewolves. And, interestingly, in these nations the incidence of both lethal werewolf attacks and unintentional infection are far, far lower. If our illustrious politicians truly wanted, in all their wisdom, to limit the damage lycanthropy perpetrates on our society they would recognise this evidence for the condemnation it is, and amend our laws. But they don't. Instead, from what I hear, blinded by their fear and their hatred, they are even striving to make it worse! Consigning werewolves to poverty, and hopelessness, and desperation — that does not fix anything.

'I once thought Greyback could have been the vanguard of, oh, revolution, we'll call it, to force necessary change the Wizengamot are too stupid to pursue without external motivation. It has been clear for some time now that I was wrong. He has grown far too irrational, with every move does his cause more harm than good. I shouldn't have elevated him, it was a mistake. I'll have to find someone else.' He stared at Severus, still looking very subtly unhappy, and spoke again, keeping all traces of amusement off his own voice. 'In another life, this Remus Lupin friend of yours—' Severus's eye twitched. '—could have worked. But he is far too firmly timid, too firmly passive. Too firmly wedged up Dumbledore's arse.'

Before he could stop himself, Severus let out a snort of shocked laughter. Somehow, Tom managed to keep from smiling — he'd always found surprising young Severus far too much fun. But Severus adapted well enough. Cold derision nearly dripping off every syllable, he said, 'Perhaps he enjoys the company.'

'That is a very impressive extension enchantment, when you think about it.'

Tom couldn't help but smirk a little. Watching Severus attempt to control his expression was just too amusing.

He let his eyes fall closed again, sunk back a little into his chair. What to do about Greyback? There was absolutely no doubt he would have to do something. There was no telling what Greyback was planning, but it was certain whatever it was would inevitably set creature–being law back a few decades. He knew where Greyback and his people were staying, of course, so actually finding them wouldn't be difficult. It was just how to get rid of them that was problematic. He'd rather his hand wasn't seen it — he'd always found surprising young Severus far too much fun. But Severus adapted well enough. Cold derision nearly dripping off every syllable, he said, 'Perhaps he enjoys the company.'

A slight frown pulling at his brows, he straightened somewhat in his chair, the logic he'd stumbled on bouncing back and forth in his head a few times. That would work, wouldn't it? They would
certainly act on the information, and considering the relationship they had with the Ministry they were very unlikely to share that information with the authorities beforehand. Would probably clear out Greyback's people and come bragging about it afterward. That Greyback had decided to settle in their territory would only enrage them further. And she would almost certainly take up arms herself, so only by improbable bad luck would they fail, and they should be able to pull it off with comparatively low loss of life. If they field enough people, they'd do better than the Ministry — unless they sent Aurors, which they probably wouldn't. They were a very good choice, almost perfect. He wasn't sure he wanted to give quite this sort of victory to their movement, but...he didn't think they'd do anything too bad with it. And it would only make the Wizengamot more leery of them, which should limit any moves they make in the future. All right, then.

He opened his eyes, quickly met Severus's. There was the slightest jolt, as though Severus expected an attack, but he ignored it. Tom was certain he'd lost the greater part of the young man's loyalty when he'd killed Lily; he was also certain Severus knew he knew that, and knew Severus knew he knew he knew that. Neither of them had said anything about it, though, even obliquely, and he was inclined to keep it that way. For now. And, really, he wasn't planning on forcing a confrontation with Severus. There was nothing to gain from it, and it would need to be a high price indeed for the possibility of his death to be worth it. His former apprentice was still far too entertaining. 'Would it be possible for knowledge of his whereabouts to somehow find its way into the hands of Ni Ailbhe's people?'

Severus didn't react to the name much more than to blink, frowning to himself so slightly Tom barely noticed it. Then, slowly, a cold, vicious sort of grin started pulling at his lips.

Síomha Ní Ailbhe was a name Tom had only started hearing in the last few years before his incapacitation — unsurprising, since he thought she'd only been fifteen or so in '81. Even then, her name had been widely bandied about as a future sorceress, her power so obvious from so young that she'd been attracting attention before she'd even started school. Upon his return, he'd been impressed, though not particularly surprised, to learn she'd been recognised as a sorceress for some years now, and had already developed a reputation as a dark witch who should not be crossed unnecessarily. Recently, she'd taken over leadership of a populist movement among certain Gaelic Common Houses advocating independence from Britain; they tended to be rather Light on creature–being law, and had something of a vendetta against Greyback specifically, which was convenient at the moment. Rumours that Ní Ailbhe, who had been adopted into her clan as an infant, was in fact the youngest daughter of the Night Queen of Ireland were still whispered out of her presence, even though they hadn't been publicly confirmed either way.

Rumours Tom knew to be true. Shortly after the girl had started attending the magical academy in na Caoimhe — her adopted family were commoners, so she hadn't gone to Hogwarts — he'd had one of the most peculiar experiences of his life. There really were no words to describe a Dark Lady millennia old, a Dark Lady who happened to be old enough and powerful enough and dangerous enough people had once worshipped her as a goddess, appearing to him with the express purpose of threatening him, that he would leave her daughter alone, or else. In his sleep. There was a reason she was also called the Queen of Nightmares, after all.

He hadn't actually been intending to harm Ní Ailbhe. But he'd certainly remembered to avoid anything that could even on accident after that. Some dragons should be left sleeping. He wasn't an idiot.

Tom suspected the Night Queen had created those rumours in the first place — he'd be astounded if he'd been the only person to get an unwelcome guest in his dreams. He had to wonder if that had been her intention. Not that it particularly mattered, it was just interesting to think about.
The point was, Ní Ailbhe was competent, and she could command enough wands to eliminate Greyback without too much trouble. And her people would be skilled, motivated, and merciless. So, that sadistic glee on Severus’s face was perfectly understandable.

Some minutes later, and it was obvious Severus was angling for permission to leave. He was being subtle about it, of course, but not subtle enough. He probably thought he’d hid that nebulous undercurrent of anxiety he’d been carrying everywhere for months as well, but the young man simply wasn’t as good at hiding his feelings as he thought he was. Well, not from Tom, at least. The student still hadn’t surpassed the master.

He could have ended Severus’s quiet suffering at any moment, but extended the conversation with pointless blathering about an article he’d read in an alchemy journal lately instead. Finally, when he felt sufficiently tickled, he said, ‘Did you have something else to tell me, Severus?’

Somewhat to his disappointment, Severus straightened slightly, tensing. Honestly, silly boy. One would think by now he’d have learned he had very little to fear from Tom — if running off to tell Dumbledore how he intended to respond to the prophecy hadn’t gotten him killed, he couldn’t imagine why Severus thought he was in such danger from him now.

Well, to be perfectly honest, he could imagine. It was likely Severus was now seeking his vengeance for Lily, and it was likely Severus knew he knew that, that Tom was simply choosing not to act on it because he didn’t feel particularly threatened. (There were other reasons, but he believed Severus gave greatest weight to that one.) Which was new, granted. Even in those months after surrendering to Dumbledore, he didn’t think Severus had intended ill toward him quite as thoroughly as he did now. He guessed he was just mildly disappointed Severus was handling this new game of theirs so badly. He thought he’d taught him better than this.

After a short moment, Severus collected himself again, took an instant to consider his words. Or, more likely, decide what information he was comfortable with giving up — he was well aware Severus wasn’t telling him everything. Where Potter was, as an example. He claimed Dumbledore had secreted him away somewhere, knowledge of exactly where trusted to a select number he was not among, which Tom was just short of certain was a lie. A sheepish sort of look crossed his face, which instantly made Tom suspicious. Mostly because, as subtle as the expression was, it felt entirely honest. ‘It’s nothing, Master, in fact—’ With a helpless, humourless smile touching his lips, Severus leaned into a hand, propped up with an elbow on the arm of his chair, hiding half of his face as he rubbed at his forehead. ‘—it’s rather stupid.’

‘Oh?’ An obvious gambit, here, Tom saw what he was doing. Severus was attempting to distract him with something that he was legitimately uncomfortable about, some personal issue that Tom would find interesting enough to let him off the hook. Which left Tom feeling rather ambivalent. On the one hand, he was still disappointed that, distracted by his paranoia, Severus still hadn’t realised his question had been a dismissal. On the other, this trick would probably work with most people.

‘It’s...’ With a slight breath of incredulous laughter, Severus shook his head. ‘The Potter boy has seemingly developed an inexplicable desire to become my apprentice in the Dark Arts.’

For a second, Tom could only blink at that. He’d rather gotten the impression Potter hated Severus quite a bit. Then a grin started pulling at his lips, so suddenly and so powerfully he couldn't even attempt to stop it. The thought of Dumbledore’s little propaganda piece learning restricted magic from Severus that Tom had taught him in the first place was simply priceless. It was too good, enough for Severus to be entirely forgiven for his idiocy in thinking he needed the distraction in the first place.

And the fact that this implied Severus was in direct contact with Potter, when he had already claimed he had no idea where the boy was, a significant mistake. Tom could pass it off because it was just
For a moment, Tom wondered if it would be a good idea to suggest Severus consider Potter. Just to annoy Dumbledore. Or perhaps, with a bit of effort and a few bribes, he could manufacture a false identity for himself and get properly registered with the Ministry and everything, and arrange things to get Potter as his own apprentice. It would be rather difficult to hold back any gleeful cackling should he ever stumble across Dumbledore while wearing that face, but it would be entirely worth it.

He even seriously considered it for a few seconds — and not only because he could thoroughly horrify Dumbledore by letting him discover it afterward. He had to admit to himself he would not at all mind properly educating Lily's son. From what Severus had said, the neglected child had not gotten any of the specialised attention mages of their natural talent truly needed.

In the end, he decided against it. It would simply be more effort than he was willing to invest at the moment, especially when he had to focus on healing Bella. He might reconsider at a later date, should the boy fail to find anyone to teach him. 'Did he ask well?'

Now Severus's face was touched by a slight churlishness. Again, entirely honest, if suppressed. 'No, he did not. It didn't even appear he realised what he'd asked.'

Tom clicked his tongue, shaking his head to himself a little. Disappointing, if not surprising. Apprenticeships were weighty business to most mages, backed by millennia of accumulated tradition, and were not something taken lightly. Raised muggle and kept comparatively ignorant as he had been, that Potter didn't understand this was not unexpected. Tom knew he himself had found the whole thing strange at first. The first time he'd asked his old mistress, and been a bit too casual about it, she'd even slapped him. But Euše was just like that sometimes, he guessed. Hmm, he wondered how she was doing, he hadn't checked in in a couple decades now. But, about Potter, 'I suppose he'll have to ask better, won't he?'

Severus met the thought with a disdainful sniff. Which really just amused Tom further.

'—so if her son starts being especially nice to you, that's why.'

Mel tried not to look too annoyed at that. Blaise had already been being almost disturbingly friendly with her in the first place. The thought that this political nonsense Sirius and Blaise's mother were getting up to would just make it worse was... Well, she still wasn't sure most of the time how to react to people being nice to her, not something she had a whole lot of experience in dealing with. Which she realised was depressing, but she couldn't really help it. 'All right. Thanks for telling me, I guess. Is Andi gonna be joining this little alliance of yours?'

The little image of Sirius in the middle of the mirror gave a light shrug. 'Well, I suppose that's up to you. House Potter is still formally allied with the Light, but if you'd like her to renounce that I can pass the word along.'

'Yeah, sure. Do that.' As far as Mel understood what Sirius and Lady Zabini were pulling here, they were basically starting a new political party. It was somewhat more complicated than that, but that was the gist of it. Primarily organised around support of more liberal creature-being law, but also against what Sirius insisted on calling the " unholy alliance" of the Light and pureblood supremacists. He didn't think Sirius and Zabini expected to get very many others to join them, and it would probably only be a temporary alliance; the point was more to make a statement, one which could basically be summarised as "the Wizengamot is full of shite."

Since they were already working on the preparatory work to dissolve House Potter, it wasn't like she
would be part of it for very long either. But, since she entirely agreed the Wizengamot was full of shite, she might as well use the proxy she had there to say so as long as she still had a seat. Plus, she liked to imagine how ignorant idiots would react to someone who spoke directly for their precious Boy-Who-Lived essentially giving the administration a huge slap in the face, it was fun.

You know...

It had never quite occurred to her to care about that sort of thing. What people thought about her, she meant. At least, not in any serious sort of way. She was aware quite literally every single person in the country, and probably a fair number in other magical nations as well, knew who she was. An inexplicably terrifying thought, but true. Mostly, she'd just been annoyed at the fact that people were thinking about her at all, and how much of what they thought was complete shite, but she never...

She meant, she'd gotten annoyed at them believing things about her that were wrong, but had she ever done anything about it, anything to correct the record? No, she hadn't. She'd just ignored them. Which hadn't done anything to change their minds. After listening around for these few weeks, listening to people talk about someone they didn't realise was present, she'd picked up here and there that... Well, people hadn't thought very well of her. At all. People had assumed that, before Hogwarts, she'd been off in hiding somewhere, getting special anti-Dark Arts training, and all those stupid stories people went blathering about all the time. And, sure, the more ridiculous aspects of those stories people normally didn't believe, but the basic idea, yes. That Mel hadn't even heard of magic before she'd turned eleven wasn't common knowledge. Why? Because she'd never bloody told anyone. The Weasleys, Hermione, a few other people, but not very many, and not enough that it'd spread very far. And the people who did hear it, she'd heard, didn't believe it anyway. Why should they? It was explicitly contrary to everything they'd heard before, and Mel herself hadn't come out and said so, so why should they believe it?

Harry himself. Whatever.

And, since everyone thought she'd been getting private lessons pre-Hogwarts — and partially, she assumed now, just because of who her mother was — it was assumed she was far better at magic than she really was. Well, these days she was probably starting to catch up, but still. But then she didn't show that level of skill in classes. So, everyone assumed she was underperforming on purpose, either out of laziness or condescension. That she would do something crazy like walk around casually casting *patrōnī* as a fourth year only further convinced them.

It didn't help that she had been, she'd admit, extremely antisocial. She hadn't really meant to do it, but she realised now she'd kind of been...er, unpleasantly standoff-ish? It'd seemed like arrogance, was the point. Combined with what they thought they knew about her, it was like she thought only certain people were worth her time, and she didn't have the time of day for anyone else. That she was just shitty at dealing with people, had absolutely no idea even how to have basic everyday conversations most of the time, that possibility seemingly wasn't a consideration. The possibility that their precious Boy-Who-Lived was— She had— That—

Ergh, stupid fucking brain, just thinking it isn't going to hurt you!

The possibility that Mel being as withdrawn as she had been (and still was, slightly less so) were signs of abuse, signs that she had never learned how to deal with social shite like an ordinary fucking person because her sick excuse for a family had never let her, that simply never occurred to them. Of course not! She was the Boy-Who-Lived, obviously she was going to be a spoiled, pampered little prick. Come on.

Oh, and what people assumed about her beliefs was really starting to bother her too. She'd been less aware of that in the past, true, but it was starting to get obvious now, and she was finding it
increasingly annoying. Short version: everyone thought she was in Dumbledore's pocket. Which was annoying, because half of Dumbledore's political and moral beliefs were perfectly fine, yes, but the other half were *completely vile*. So, if having Andi as her proxy give the finger to Dumbledore and these arseholes pushing this disgusting creature—being law shite would get people to change their minds about that one at least a little, all the better.

But...she should really do something about all that. It *mattered* what people assumed about her, it really did. It affected a lot of things, not least how they treated her when they happened to be in the same room at the time. She should really work on fixing that.

Which made this convenient timing, she guessed. She was fully aware she was already in the process of reinventing herself. People's perception of her would change no matter what she did, when this eventually came out, there was no preventing that. She might as well try to correct some of the blatant lies filling people's heads as long as she was at it.

Not that she was entirely sure what she was reinventing herself as anyway. It could be very confusing being her, lately. She'd been taking a bit of Ellie's advice and just...feeling and reacting, as things came, and trying to not overthink it. Which didn't work most of the time — she was far too used to her old shite to stop second-guessing herself *instantly* — but she thought she was doing a little bit better, maybe? At the least, she would sometimes do something, or think something, or say something, and then think to herself, where the hell had *that* come from, she hadn't been aware she wanted that, or liked that, or thought that, or whatever. Rare moments, but they did happen.

Frowning to herself a little, she turned back to stare at Sirius in the mirror. He was talking about...honestly, she'd lost track, hadn't been paying attention. Oops. But...she hadn't had a weird thought. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know. Well, okay, she *did* want to know, though she wasn't entirely sure *why* she wanted to know. She wasn't sure what difference it made. But...she guessed she was just curious? Sure. 'Hey, Sirius?'

Sirius broke off whatever ramble he'd been doing in mid-sentence, giving her a slightly worried look — apparently, putting together just now she'd sort of spaced out there. 'Yes, kitten?'

Hmm. She'd really have to ask him one day why the hell he called her that. Ask again, at least: she had tried once, but he'd just smirked at her and said something about having his ways, which had really been worse than no answer at all. 'I got something of a weird question.' Sirius raised an eyebrow at that, waved for her to continue, the gesture half cut off at the bottom of the mirror. 'Do you know what my name would have been? If I'd been born a girl, I mean.' She'd learned from...somewhere...that mages couldn't tell sex before birth, so...

For a second, Sirius blinked at her in silence. Then, his eyes narrowed a bit, he gave a light shrug, and said, 'I do, actually. Why do you ask?'

'Just curious, I guess.'

He shrugged, with a very clear feeling of shaking off his confusion, a fresh smile pulling at his lips. 'It was, ah, Hazel. Elizabeth Augusta Hazel, technically, but your mum mostly called you Hazel.'

Ah. Okay. She saw her mother would have kept the plant name theme from her family. Mel's second middle name she hadn't known she had at first was Ashley, which was more plant stuff, and Dudley was even related. So that didn't really come as much of a— 'Wait, what do you mean, mostly called *me* Hazel?'

An uncomfortable sort of smirk crossing his face, Sirius said, 'She was entirely convinced you were going to be a girl, you see. As far as I can remember, she never said *why* she knew that, she just did.
They picked a name for if you were a boy, sure, but Lily really seemed to be...humouring the idea, I guess, more than anything. She was rather confused when you were born.'

'Okay, then.' Yeah, that was...odd. Well, okay, never mind, after a second of thought she might know what had happened there. There were magics to detect if someone was male or female, yes — they worked by seeking out those same slight differences in a person's magic Dumbledore had mentioned a while ago. However, they didn't work to figure out someone's sex before birth, maybe because the mother's magic got in the way. That seemed like a reasonable guess to her. Lily being a ridiculously powerful witch, crazy good with wandless magic and everything, she'd probably felt it past her own magic; since she hadn't been able to say how she knew, she'd probably done it entirely unconsciously, hadn't even known herself where the knowledge came from. And, since Lily hadn't known why she'd thought she was going to be a girl, it hadn't occurred to her to check Mel's magic to make sure she wasn't messed up the way she was pretty sure now she had been. That made sense. A weird kind of sense, but still sense. 'And, Elizabeth? Not, like—'

'No,' Sirius said, shaking his head, 'not the same Elizabeth. At least, if you're thinking of the one I think you're thinking of. You mean Elizabeth Prewett, right?'

'Bones, yeah.'

Sirius brushed that off with a flippant wave of his free hand. 'No, not the same Elizabeth. You would have been named after your aunt Elizabeth.'

'My...' For a couple seconds, Mel could only stare at Sirius, trying to make sense of that. Did he mean a more distant aunt? Some mages used family words for absurdly distant relatives sometimes... 'Did– James didn't have a sister, did he?'

'Half-sister, technically.'

'What?'

Sirius shrugged. 'Old Charlus got married just out of Hogwarts like most everyone else, you know, to...' He trailed off, breaking eye contact to frown off to the side. 'What was her first name?' He shrugged again, said, 'Oh well, can't remember. She was a Fawley, anyway. She died just a few years later, don't know if I was ever told what from, when Elizabeth was only one or two, I think. He didn't marry my aunt Dorea until, oh, ten years later, or so. By the time James was old enough to remember, Elizabeth was already in third year at Hogwarts or something. And, well, they never really got along too well. Partially the age difference, partially just very different people.'

Huh. That was...new. She'd had no idea she had another aunt out there somewhere. 'Where is she? I mean...'

'Oh, she was killed, back in Seventy-Nine. Not sure who did it, but it was probably one of the Inner Circle, or maybe even Voldemort himself. She wasn't on the level of someone like, say, your mother, but she was still a dangerous woman.'

'Was she in the Order?'

Looking slightly amused despite himself, Sirius shook his head. 'Circle, I learned recently. She did a lot of warding and runework for them. Oh, she was an enchantress, by the way. It was actually your mum's idea to maybe name you after her. I thought it was a little odd at the time it was Lily suggesting it, when it didn't even occur to James, but I guess it makes sense in retrospect. With them both being in the Circle and all, Lily might have even known her better than James did.'
Oh. Well. So, her half-aunt she hadn't known about, who she would have been named after had she been born a girl properly, had been a dark witch, and powerful enough a one Sirius thought it possible He-Who-Smells had decided to take her out personally. So...how many ridiculously dangerous dark mages was she closely related to now? She'd lost count. But, that thought didn't really matter. That was all she'd wanted to know, she could finish the thought she'd almost had there a second ago.

She didn't really know who this Hazel Potter person would have been. Who she should have been, without the Dursleys and all the crazy shite that had happened over the years fucking everything up.

But she was trying to figure it out.

'You're doing it wrong.'

Giving her a flat, annoyed sort of look, Morag said, 'Well, you do it then, Professor.'

Mel rolled her eyes. With a flick of her wrist, her wand fell into her hand, drifting to point down and to her right. Wrist twisting to put the back of her hand outward, wand turning upward in a circular swish, a blue-white shield charm snapped into existence in front of her.

Morag's mouth dropped open, eyes wide with shock. Er... She glanced around the room quick to see the rest of the study group had stopped their own practising and muttering as well, every single one silently staring at her. Er, what did— 'Did you just cast that silently?'

Oh. Erm. Whoops?

Trying to ignore the tingling awkwardness running along her neck, Mel shrugged, relaxed her grip about her wand, the shield fading out of existence. 'It isn't that hard, really. Practise it enough times, and you just have to focus on the wand movement and what you want to happen, and it works pretty easy.' She let her wand hand fall back to her side, imagined the familiar curve of blue light as her wand swished upward, the shield obediently snapping into place. She relaxed her grip again, the shield again gradually fading out. 'See? Not that hard.'

Of course, probably the only reason she thought it was "not that hard" was because Dora had trained her and Katie to get a shield charm up faster and faster and faster, and there was a point past which it was simply impossible to say the incantation aloud and still get it out in time. It'd been tricky getting it to work silently, but way easier than deflection. She couldn't do everything silently, or even very many things at all yet, but the basic shield charm was one of the first she'd learned.

By the expressions on the faces of Hermione's little study group all around her, they didn't seem to agree with the "not that hard" part.

While everyone gradually went back to their own practising, Morag visibly worked to shrug the thought off. Since Bill was mostly teaching them to detect and diffuse runic curses and such, he hadn't been talking much about actual defensive charms. The problem was, that was what most of the OWL would be composed of, and there were a lot of them the average person in the class couldn't really do. Bill had given them a list of charms they should be able to manage by the end of the year, and told them to practise on their own time — there wasn't a lot they could do to prepare for his classes anyway, and he consciously held off assigning them any homework so they could use the time they would normally spend writing essays for him preparing for the OWL instead. He said that, if they really ended up having problems, he could set up extra practice sessions outside of normal class times to give them some pointers, and either way he'd be scheduling a few shortly before the exams themselves to make sure they were all caught up. He just thought teaching them to handle
dangerous enchantments was more important, despite the fact it most likely wouldn't turn up on the OWL at all (sorry, Ravenclaws), so he was focusing all their efforts in class on that.

Mel could cast every charm on the list already. Some of them she'd picked up as early as third year, a few she'd tried out once she'd seen them on Bill's list, Dora had taught her two or three, but most of them she'd learned with Hermione in fourth year. She wouldn't be surprised if Hermione had gotten a lot of those charms they'd studied from an old spell list for the OWLs in the first place. But she was the only one in their study group who could do all of them — she didn't think Hermione or Susan were behind by much, but they were missing a few. So, occasionally, they would go to one of the larger abandoned classrooms somewhere on the sixth floor, and work on a few of the charms on the list.

Today they were working on *prōtege*. Basic shield charm, not hard, she thought she'd learned this one in...third year? She'd definitely known it in fourth, but she thought she might have learned it earlier. It really wasn't all that hard, was the point. Casting a shield powerful enough to stop curses from Dora without shattering, even the ones that were supposedly blockable, *that* was hard. Casting the shield at all, not really. And most of them had been able to cast it already. Only Lily and, interestingly, both of the Ravenclaws were having any trouble with it. Lily had immediately claimed Susan as her teacher for the day — Mel was reminded of Susan saying something about Lily dragging her into closets, had to wonder how much learning would actually get done there — and Hermione had taken to helping Lisa. So Mel was stuck with Morag.

Not to say she didn't like Morag. Well, not to say she *disliked* Morag. She was just a bit...loud. And far too energetic and...intense, she guessed? It just made her uncomfortable, was all.

But anyway, Morag was focusing back again, moving her wand to a textbook-correct starting position, frowning to herself a little. 'Okay. How do you space the incantation in that annoying swishy-thing when you actually *say* it?'

Mel blinked. Well, yes, she guessed not using the incantation when demonstrating wasn't at all helpful, was it? It wasn't that hard though. It was best to put the 'Prōte—' with the swirly, swishy part, then end with the '—ge,' finishing the syllable just as her wand came up. She held her magic back from flowing though, so nothing happened, easier for Morag to see what she was doing. She did it again, with exaggerated slowness, then a last time at full speed, this time actually letting the shield snap into place in front of her. 'Like that,' she said, even as the soft blue glow faded away again.

'All right.' Frowning to herself, Morag took a long, slow breath. Then she brought her wand through the proper swish, the syllables of the incantation falling exactly where Mel had put them, every bit of the whole thing conspicuously precise. Ravenclaws. When her wand came up on the last syllable, the shield charm obediently snapped into place, a bright smile spreading on Morag's face.

Mel wasn't pleased though. It only took her a second of looking at it to see the problem. In an instant she had her wand pointed toward Morag, and with a twisting jab shot a stunning charm at her.

The sharp slash of red light struck Morag's shield, and with a flash of purple-white the flimsy thing shattered into a million useless pieces, sending Morag stumbling back a few steps from the force of the failing charm. She managed to recover her balance after a couple seconds, immediately straightening to glare up at Mel. 'What was *that* for?'

'It was too weak. It wouldn't have stood up to practically anything. I could have cursed you right through it if I'd wanted to.' That stunning hex even would have worked, if she'd just overpowered it a little. It really had been a pathetic shield charm.
For a moment, Morag just glared at her; it could be her imagination, but Mel thought she saw her teeth grinding. Mel fought off the urge to fidget and just crossed her arms and stared back, tried not to look too uncomfortable. Forced through clenched teeth, voice tense and hard, Morag asked, 'How do I make it stronger, then?'

Mel felt a sliver of tension lift from her shoulders, cleared her throat a little. 'Well, you just have to...' She frowned to herself, thinking. How the hell was she supposed to explain this? It hadn't taken all that much effort for her to figure out how to increase or decrease the power going to a spell — that little bit of occlumency she'd learned just made it even simpler. Far as she could tell, it was mostly an emotional and a...tactile thing, she guessed. It wasn't easy to describe.

Well. The basic way to do it with a shield charm specifically, then. 'You just have to be a bit more, I don't know, forceful about it, I guess. Remember, magic responds to emotion more than anything. You're going to be using this to block curses from people trying to hurt you, so putting a little bit of that desperation to protect yourself into it really helps.' She demonstrated the spell again, being a bit lazy and casual about the swish and the incantation, and even held back her magic a bit, underpowered it enough Morag could probably see the stuttering lines of instability worked into the blue glow. Then she did it again, making the swish quicker and tighter, snapping out the incantation louder and harder, as though actually racing against an incoming curse — this time, when the shield popped back into existence, it was a solid wall of sharp blue-white light, looking a thousand times more durable. Letting the charm fade again, she turned to a slightly baffled-looking Morag, said, 'Like that.'

'So, I'm supposed to make myself afraid of people cursing me just to practise it?' she said, giving Mel a doubtful look.

'I can keep hitting you with stinging jinxes until you get it right, if you like.'

'No, I'm good, thanks.'

Mel just shrugged — gathered from her lessons with Dora, and how quickly she'd improved with shield charms and the like, she really thought that was the best way to learn this sort of thing, but she wasn't going to argue the point. It wasn't like she wanted to hit Morag with a couple dozen stinging jinxes or anything. Well. Not very much, anyway.

And once everyone had learned the basic thing, of course Hermione had to put her right in the spotlight again. See, she knew Mel was having these lessons with Dora, so knew she'd probably have a couple extra tricks. And she wanted her to teach them to the study group. Of course. Grumbling inside her head, trying to ignore the uncomfortable tingling of so many eyes so closely on her, she just obeyed. There were only a couple, really. The basic shield charm the way it was taught only blocked charms from the front, but all it took was an extra little twirl in the wand movement, a bit of extra power, and the shield would come as a hemisphere completely surrounding the caster instead. Very useful against area of effect spells — with how much power those took to cast, they weren't something the average person had to worry about very often, but just in case.

And then Hermione was having her test everyone's shield charms. Both to get practise casting more powerful shields and adapt to the unpleasant experience of one breaking, she assumed. By the look she shot Tracey as she suggested it, Mel thought she might have been proving a point from some argument Mel hadn't been present for, but... Fine, whatever. It's not like it was that big of a deal or anything. Hermione had everyone form a circle around her — which made the back of her neck itch, but oh well — and she turned toward Hannah, who had volunteered to go first, and shot a somewhat overpowered stinging jinx at her. And blinked with surprise when the shield held. It hadn't looked
solid enough to take that. It shattered easily enough under the stunning hex she followed it with, though. While Hannah recovered, shaking her head with a slightly dazed expression on her face, Mel turned to Lily next to her and—

'Where did you learn that?'

Mel blinked, glanced a few people around the circle to find Susan giving her a very weird look. Not the usual weird kind of look she gave her sometimes, but more a...confused and surprised sort of thing she guessed. 'Learn what?'

Quirking her lips a little, Susan turned her wand toward the ground. A quick twist, a jab, the incantation slurried so severely it was a single syllable, sounding something like "spet", Susan cast a stunning hex into the floor at her feet. 'That.'

'The... The stunning hex?' She really thought that was a basic spell a lot of people learned...

'No, no, that particular variant of it.'

'She's right.' Mel glanced around again to see Daphne nodding, also giving her a weird look — though, more a calculating sort of thing, she guessed, but she'd hardly ever seen Daphne look visibly confused, or even the slightest bit surprised. Daphne turned her own wand to the ground, gave it a few little twitching flicks, then a tight little swirl Mel recognised as the textbook wand movements for the same hex. 'That's what it's supposed to be. You did something else.'

'It's a D.L.E. variant,' Susan said, 'what the Aurors and Hit Wizards and everyone use. They stole it from somewhere, Kemet or something, I can't remember for sure where. Dame Savage taught me a couple summers ago, that's how I know it. Where did you learn it?'

Mel shrugged, making the motion as casual as she could. She'd had no idea the quicker version Dora had taught her was a special DLE thing. Honestly, she hadn't even known there were such things. 'Ah, I've been getting private lessons from a cousin lately.'

She heard Lily mutter something about, 'where you disappear to.' Mel nodded at her quick — it wasn't the only thing she "disappeared" for, but it was one of them.

But Susan was still frowning at her. 'But then how would—' Then her face cleared, and she nodded. 'Ah, I get it. Tonks is a Black, isn't she. She's the cousin?'

'Yep.'

'Not sure if I should be feeling jealousy or pity right now.'

Well, it seemed Dora hadn't lied about having met Susan before.

Now that they'd sated Susan's curiosity, they went back to it. It wasn't too hard to shatter most of their shields — they hadn't really gotten that much practise in yet, most of them, those lessons with Dora were starting to make this sort of thing unfair already, and Mel was starting to understand she was just ridiculously powerful anyway. Susan and Daphne's were harder, and Hermione's she had to overpower her stunning hex quite nearly as far as it would go to beat. She couldn't break Blaise's at all, at least not without tipping into truly dangerous curses, but she wasn't particularly surprised by that. Blaise was a member of a race on the average more magically powerful than human mages, if anything he was cheating more than she was.

And, she knew, her magic in particular would be less effective against him. He was a being of fire magic, and as strongly aligned to that element as she was, she'd learned, even when she cast the most
It wasn't until it was getting close to dinner time when they finally called an end for the day. Good, Mel was actually hungry. Which was sort of weird, feeling hungry when she'd had both breakfast and lunch today already, but she wasn't complaining. Everyone trailed out of the room rather quickly, chattering to each other about...whatever it was normal people talked to each other about. Honestly, she'd been trying, and she still didn't understand happy people most of the time. But anyway, Hermione unsurprisingly had a few books to gather up quick, so Mel hung back, sitting on one of the slightly dusty desks, half-listening to Hermione babble on about what they should do for their next practical session. Academic rambling from Hermione, at least, she was used to hearing.

Oh, Jesus, she wanted to work on bludgeoning and blasting curses next. Maybe Mel should finally surrender and introduce them to the Room of Requirement — she doubted McGonagall would be happy with them leaving a classroom in ruins, no matter how long it'd been sitting unused. Or maybe she could get there and set the room up ahead of time, so she needn't give away the secret of the place? Hmm...

Hermione picked up her bag, finally moving for the door. She'd hardly moved a couple steps before she jumped. 'Oh! Erm...' An uncertain look on her face Mel couldn't quite read, her eyes flicked between Mel and the door a few times. What was over there that she—

Oh. Susan hadn't left. She was leaning against the wall, about a foot to the left of the door out. Had she been waiting this whole time? Quite a bit of patience, there. Even Mel had trouble not getting annoyed with Hermione sometimes. And what the hell was she still doing here, anyway? Everyone else was already gone.

The soft, pleasantly amused smile on her face was giving Mel a very weird feeling.

'I'll just, ah...' Hermione glanced between them a couple more times, lip between her teeth, and before Mel could even think of what to do, Hermione had said, 'See you at dinner, Mel,' and had shot across the room and out, closing the door behind her before Mel could follow, leaving a still-smiling Susan in the way.

Traitor.

Feeling far too silly and self-conscious standing in the middle of the room where she'd jumped up at Hermione's flight, Mel trailed back again, coming to sit on the same desk she'd been on a moment ago. After only a second or two, she had to look away from Susan, doing her absolute best to ignore the unpleasant tingles racing across her skin, to not shift and fidget like a crazy person. That smile was making her uncomfortable, she couldn't help it. 'What?'

'Samhain's coming up in a couple weeks, here.'

Hallowe'en, she meant, but most purebloods didn't call it that. Not everyone called it Samhain either, actually — some called it Taxwyð, which she knew was the same thing in Brīþwn, but she had no idea why some people said Taxwyð and some people said Samhain. Far too confusing sometimes, mages. But, anyway, felt like Susan was waiting for her to say something, but she had absolutely no idea what. So she just said, 'Yes.'

'You know a couple days before is a Hogsmeade weekend?'

She frowned, reigned back the urge to turn that frown to Susan. She knew looking at her would just make her more uncomfortable, so, no. 'I know.'
'You weren't planning anything, were you.'

'No.' Honestly, Mel had been planning on not doing much of anything around then. It was a useless, childish thought, but she sometimes wished nobody had told her her parents had died on Hallowe'en. She'd kinda liked the holiday before, but now it was practically impossible to enjoy anything connected with it. She could never keep herself from thinking unpleasant thoughts. It really didn't help that mages could never let the day pass without talking about Voldemort and idiotic Boy-Who-Lived stuff, she couldn't stand it.

'Good, then,' Susan said, a tone of almost smug cheerfulness on the edge of her voice. Mel fought to keep her eyes from rolling, she didn't see what was so good about— 'We're going out, then.'

'I—' Mel finally turned her frown to Susan. Only to find her still leaning against the wall, arms crossed under her chest and head slightly tilted. Still smiling at her all soft and confident, eyes uncomfortably steady on hers. 'I... Are you asking me out?'

Susan broke eye contact to quirk her lips again, humming up at the ceiling. 'No, not technically. I'm gonna do that eventually, but not right now.' Her eyes turned back to Mel's, smile tilting into a crooked smirk. 'I'm just informing you I will ask you out later, and you're going to say yes.'

She...

Huh? Did that make sense in some weird alternate reality Mel wasn't familiar with? Shaking her head to herself, she turned away, started to run a hand through her hair — and was instantly stymied when the plait she'd forgotten she'd charmed it into stopped her fingers after only a couple inches. Stupid thing...

Pulling her fingers from her hair, wrapping her arms around her stomach instead, viciously ignoring the unpleasant prickling running along her arms and back, and that odd warmth which was definitely not her blushing that was nonsense no such thing was happening, she flicked her eyes back to Susan. Who was still smirking like anything. Just... 'What have I done to give you even the slightest impression I would ever say yes?'

'Hmm, I don't know.' And Susan shrugged. Just...shrugged. That... She... 'Just a feeling, I guess.'

'What, do I not get any choice in the matter?'

'Of course you do. God, she was really starting to hate that smirk, Mel had to look away before...well, something, she didn't know what. 'You're just gonna say yes. That I know that ahead of time doesn't mean you aren't gonna decide to do it by your own will.'

Nope. She didn't know how to respond to this. Just, not at all. That prickling was only getting worse, and she was feeling far too unpleasantly warm for no apparent reason, and the feeling in her stomach she had recognised easily enough as hunger had been replaced by something shifting and blech, she had no idea what that was, and her head might as well be filled with static for all she could manage to think right now. And she was entirely positive Susan was still standing over there smirking at her. Nope, no idea what to do at all.

Other than pray Susan would just go away, of course, but she'd already been doing that.

She didn't know how long later, she heard some shifting from that direction, probably Susan standing straight again. 'Well, that was all I had to say. See you tomorrow, Melantha.' She put a weird, slow emphasis on Mel's name, she couldn't say what kind exactly, but whatever it was it would have made Mel shiver if she hadn't ruthlessly repressed it. There was a click and a long creak as the door
opened, and she knew Susan was gone.

Once she was sure she was alone, Mel released a long sigh, let her face fall into her hands, rubbing helplessly at her eyes. She was so very, very, very screwed. She just...

She had absolutely no idea how to deal with this shite.

Chapter End Notes

Síomha Ní Ailbhe — Woah, Irish name, what are you doing in here? Síomha (IPA: /ʃiː.vˠə/, roughly "shee-vuh") is the given name, Ailbhe (IPA: /əlˠi.ə/, roughly "all-vuh") is a surname, and the Ní is the same thing as Ó, but for a girl. And yes, this is a minor character in TLG, they're the same person.

na Caoimhe (IPA: /n̪ˠə.ˈkiː.ə/ roughly "nuh key-vuh") — Shortened from "Anacal na Caoimhe", which unless I'm extremely mistaken should mean something like "Caoimhe's Refuge". The name refers to Caoimhe Ní Bhláithín, a semi-historical figure and culture hero to Irish mages (exactly what she got up to may or may not come up later). The town is very old, but was mostly a tiny overlooked village under Bréifne, later Bréifne Ua Ruairc (modern day County Leitrim). In the decades after the Statute the population quickly exploded, and by now it's the largest all-magical settlement in the Celtic Nations. By the way, Hogsmeade is still the largest all-magical settlement in Great Britain — "Great Britain" only includes England, Wales, and Scotland :P

Night Queen of Ireland; Queen of Nightmares — In case you're wondering, this is the Morríghan. Yes, she's a real person, and yes, she's been around for a very long time. Immortal humans are rare, but they do exist. Well, technically, both Dora and Tom are also immortal, so I guess... Whatever, not the point. And no, she won't be appearing in this fic. I just thought I'd confirm.

For the record, Severus calls Mel "the Potter boy" because Tom doesn't know she's a girl now. He has actually managed to keep a few secrets from him — if only because Tom doesn't really care enough to invest the effort necessary to ferret them out — and that's one of them.

Euše (IPA: /eʊ̯.ʂɛ/ roughly "ew-sheh") — The Melīx sorceress Tom mentioned he apprenticed under back in chapter eight.

Hazel — Believe it or not, when I originally came up with this name for a different fic it didn't even occur to me until hours after I'd picked it that Hazel and Harry start with the same two letters. Something I've seen other writers go out of their way to do, sometimes to the point of absurdity, I did completely by accident. Whoops?

[and Dudley was even obliquely related] — The "-ley" is from Old English lēah, meaning "woodland" or "glade" or "clearing" (farmland especially). The "Dud-" is from an older given name Dudda. Hence, "Dudda's glade" or "Dudda's farm". Similarly, "Ashley" (æsc + lēah) would literally mean "ash glade". And, ah, "Hazel" is a tree, obviously, one of the sacred trees in Celtic myth.

Taxwyð (IPA: /tə.ˈjə.ið/ roughly "tah-gwith") — Depending on context, the Bre̞fnw name for the month of November, or the festival of October 31st / November 1st
specifically (Samhain is the same, but in Gaelic). Cognate to Welsh Tachwedd.

Blech. Writing felt off to me, but could just be my head being shit, dunno.

Reminders: since Tom thinks the prophecy is already fulfilled, he sees very little point in killing Mel; since he believes the plan he created Lord Voldemort for will no longer work in the present situation, he doesn't really see much point in doing that anymore either. Both of these came up back in chapter eight, but since that was a long time ago I thought I'd clarify.

Neither this fic nor TLG will be ending any time soon, but I've still been considering what I'm going to do afterward. At the least, I can have the next fic ready so I can go right to updating without needing a break in the schedule to get things straightened out. Expect a poll on my other profile in a few weeks.

Until next time,
~Wings
Chapter Summary

Melantha is getting quite sick of being so pathetic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December, 1976

'Miss? Are you alright, Miss? Miss!'

Lily drifted to a halt in the middle of the hallway, held back by a hand on her shoulder. She looked that direction to see an unfamiliar man. Green Healer's robes, that was obvious, but didn't recognise him. 'What?'

Giving her what might be a concerned sort of look, hard to tell, the man said, 'Are you alright, Miss?'

Lily blinked. 'I'm fine.'

The man gave her what was definitely a disbelieving look, and glanced behind her. Frowning a little to herself, Lily followed his gaze.

Oh. Well. She hadn't been paying a lot of attention, walking through the Saint Mungo's hallway. Why exactly did they call Mungo a saint? She never had figured that out. Anyway, she hadn't been paying attention, just heading straight to the room number she'd... Oh, er. Hopefully nobody went back and figured out what she'd done to the receptionist, she could probably get in trouble for throwing that kind of compulsion around like that. Whoops. But she'd just been walking, lost in her head.

So she hadn't noticed the line of black char she'd carving into the floor and ceiling, shards of glass scattered below and glowing fog clinging above, those little floating lights shattered by the magic swirling tight around her in an uncontrollable storm. Even as she stood there, another in front of her broke with a light popping noise, followed by glass tinkling against the tile floor.

Lily turned back forward, closed her eyes, took in a long, slow breath. Through the terror, through the rage, through the confusing whatever-that-all-was turning her mind into a black and red mess, she couldn't help feeling faintly embarrassed. She didn't think she'd ever lost control this badly before, not since she'd been very young. After a few seconds turned inward, breaths forced calm and even, she could almost see it, tendrils of power slipping away from her. She reached out for them, intending to pull them back in, and immediately recoiled, a shudder working up her spine. Her magic was hot and black, and furious, raging out at the world around her, forcing it to heel, insisting she would not break, she would not bend, screaming hatred and death at anyone or anything that would even dare try, lashing out to prove she would not tolerate this offense, something would burn for this insult, she would not, she would not, she would not—

Lily grit her teeth, clenched her fists, and yanked back on herself as hard as she could. Her power
was drawn back into her, thick enough and energetic enough she was bloated with it, her head
going thin and dizzy. Dizzy enough she stumbled, she might have fallen if the Healer's steadying
hands hadn't fallen on her shoulders. She stood a few more seconds, breathing, just to be sure she
was in control again. Seemed fine. She opened bleary eyes, quickly finding the Healer in front of her.
'Sorry about that.'

He smiled at her. Not too easily, with a sense of confusion, relief, a bit of ruthlessly suppressed fear.
But a smile still. 'That's all right. You got bad news, I'm guessing. You'd be surprised how often
things like this happen here.' He looked over her shoulder again, along the corridor behind her. 'If
usually not so extreme...'

Letting out a long sigh, Lily glanced behind her. She drew up the fire within, racing eagerly against
her fingers — if it was so eager to do something, it might as well repair the damage it'd caused. Lily
twisted the ball of energy into a slew of repair and cleaning charms, and threw it out around and
behind her. The scorch marks on floor and ceiling were instantly burnished away, cracks here and
there sealing themselves, glowing, multi-coloured fog separating into spheres of distinct shades,
shards of glass springing around them to assemble themselves into gracefully-curving, rounded
shapes, the many fissures vanishing as though they'd never been. Once all the damage she could see
— and even, she knew, some she'd left around the corner toward the elevator — had been repaired,
she turned back around to the Healer. 'I might have missed some, but that should be most of it.'

She blinked at the look of stunned shock on his face. What was so—

Oh. Her wand was still up her sleeve. She'd forgotten to pretend to be a normal person. Er. Oops?

Ignoring the stares from the Healer and a few other people through the hallway, Lily pushed past
him, and continued on toward Sirius. It only took a couple more minutes, a few more turns through
the meandering hallways before she got to the right door. She hesitated for just an instant. A part of
her couldn't help being a little scared of what she might find. A somewhat larger part was worried
Sirius wouldn't want to see her — he wouldn't be in here if not for her, after all. But she swallowed
down the cold stone in her throat and firmly reached for the handle.

And glared at it when it refused to turn. Stupid door was locked. She gathered an unlocking charm
in her hand hardly without thinking, but then hesitated again. It was likely the hospital had some sort
of security measures she couldn't see, that would allow in hospital staff and keep out anyone else.
Considering exactly what had happened to him, that wasn't a bad precaution to take. And, well, it
was sort of rude to just barge in. So she knocked instead.

After a few seconds, the door was pulled open a sliver by a completely unfamiliar woman. Middle-
aged, freckled face, bright blue eyes, short blonde-red hair. No idea who that was, but she couldn't
be related to Sirius, looking like that. 'Who the hell're you?'

For a moment, Lily could only blink at the woman. Her accent was extremely, well, muggle-ish.
Probably somewhere in the southwest, but she couldn't tell for sure. She had to be muggleborn, then,
maybe halfblood. Weird. 'Who the hell are you?'

The woman didn't look at all impressed with that answer. 'If you want in, girl, you'll be giving a
better answer than that.'

Lily couldn't help it. She was quite suddenly very annoyed. She didn't bother responding, just drew
up a handful of power, flung it unformed against the surface of the door. Even without proper shape,
the force was enough to push the wood back hard, knocking into the woman's shoulder to send her
stumbling backward, the door swinging open wide. Gritting her teeth, trying again to reign in her
magic before it did something stupid, Lily walked into the room.
And focused immediately on the two wands pointed right for her face, one held by a man, another by a girl probably only slightly older than Lily. She instantly saw they looked similar enough to be father and daughter; the Black family resemblance was just as obvious. Before she could even open her mouth to say anything, charms were flying at her. Looked like a rather nasty bludgeoning curse from the girl, a dark incapacitation hex from the man. The bludgeoning curse was easy, Lily deflected it away with little more than a twitch of her fingers, but the incapacitation hex was harder. Couldn't just deflect dark magic like that. She drew her fire up again, but let it come harder, let it come darker. Let her frustration and her fury colour it, turn it sharp and stabbing.

She always coloured dark magic with anger. Sev mostly used hatred, she knew, but Lily just couldn't summon enough of that consistently enough. If an especially contemptible person happened to be annoying her at the time, sure, but not consistently. Which had made Sev joke more than once that she was just too nice, but considering she did have enough anger constantly simmering in the back of her head to do just fine...

She formed the black flames boiling under her skin not into a charm reaching past her to strike, but a bowl. A bowl made of unalterable steel on her side, but softly padded on the other, enticing the incoming hex to slow, to rest. She knew this was rather impressive to watch, Sev had stared at her wide-eyed for near on three minutes the first time she'd managed it. As the hex neared her shield the spellglow sharply decelerated, stretching blurred across the last couple feet. When the two charms properly met, there was a sustained glow of orange-green light, the occasional spark of yellowish lightning crawling up her arm, clawing at the air. For two seconds, three, the spells glowed, the lightning crackled. Then, finally, the momentum in the man's hex was used up, and Lily dropped her hand, the mixed energies of his hex and her shield, now harmless, falling to sink into the floor.

There was a pause of a couple seconds as the two stared at her, the girl blinking at her much as Sev had, the man instead looking almost terrified. Then, all four of them — four including the woman, who was standing to the side, scowling and rubbing her shoulder — jumped when a harsh, weak voice came from Lily's right. 'Give it a rest, you two. It's Lily.'

The voice might have been thin, and strained, and exhausted, but it was still obvious who it belonged to. She glanced that way to find Sirius, propped up by thin pillows in a starkly plain bed, looking far too pale, and small, and fragile. The anger still clenching her chest only tightened at seeing him, but Lily managed to control herself, her teeth grinding hard enough it hurt. But she was distracted a moment later. Lily being Lily, she saw more than just what he physically looked like. It was a cloud of black and purple and green, clinging around his heart, the texture about it drifting and thin enough she knew it wasn't her eyes that were seeing it. She didn't recognise it, but she knew well enough to know it was a curse of some kind. Why hadn't the Healers removed it yet?

But anyway, the man was saying, 'How do you know it isn't a disguise? Polyjuice or something?'

When Sirius spoke, the old joking tone was almost there. Weak and thin, but almost. 'Honestly, Uncle, how many people do you know can do wandless magic like that?'

The man answered instantly. 'Bellatrix.'

For a couple seconds, Sirius just stared at him, unsteady eyes slowly blinking. That...is a good point, actually. It's her, though. I can feel her. Trust—' Sirius broke off, and Lily saw the curse under his skin pulse, vile sparks clawing at his flesh, a thin, pained moan slipping past his lips.

Without thinking, Lily started moving toward him. The girl, scowling at her again, stepped in her way. Lily shot her an irritated glance, dipped into shadows with a quick thought, and surfaced an instant later at Sirius's side. She watched the curse slashing at his insides for a couple seconds,
narrowed eyes following the interaction of essence and substance. Once she thought she understood
the way the curse was reaching out like that, twisting his flesh like this, Lily put a hand on Sirius's
shuddering chest, and reached out with her own power. Carefully, slowly, she stitched a line of
magic between the curse and Sirius, a temporary barrier to directly counter that twisting, prevent the
curse from acting. It was still there, of course, but it was stopped from harming Sirius further, for the
moment.

Sirius let out a shaky breath of relief, feeling far too weak and unsteady under her hand. A smirk
crossed his face, but thinner, lesser, with not even a quarter of the usual energy and humour.
'Thanks, love. I think they're making up those potions they're giving me as they go, they barely help
at all.'

She just hummed at him, still half-distracted watching the curse. It was a transfiguring charm, she
could see that, energies ever so slowly shifting Sirius's own flesh to blades. Blades that would cut
him up from the inside if the curse had its way, even as it transfigured more. Not a pleasant curse. It
almost looked like blood magic but, no, that wasn't quite right. Dark magic that was simply
anchoring itself in his blood, maybe — that was something a lot of more complex curses did. 'Why is
this still here? The curse, I mean.'

'They said they—' Sirius broke off, shooting an annoyed look off to her side. 'You mind, Ailís?' Lily
glanced that way to see the girl still had her wand on Lily, her face a deeply red, furious glare. Her
eyes narrowed on Sirius, but, after a short moment and a disdainful sniff, she slipped her wand up
her sleeve, turned back to her parents. 'Honestly,' Sirius said, in a whisper so low she almost
couldn't hear it, 'even the not-evil side of my family can be so ridiculous sometimes.'

Lily almost had to smile at that. 'I guess I can add another name to the list of your cousins who don't
like me.'

'You did use magic on her muggle mother.'

She winced. That almost made her feel bad about it in retrospect. 'Didn't know she was a muggle.
Just knew she was in my way. And being annoying.'

'You're not helping your case here, love.'

She muttered, 'Shut up,' almost smiling despite herself. 'Anyway, Healers left this curse here. Why?'

The smile on Sirius's face instantly vanished. His eyes tracked away from hers, looking somehow
even more uncomfortable than he had before — which was significant, she thought, considering how
painful that curse had to be. He hesitated for a long moment, biting his lip. Finally, his voice small
and cautious, 'They didn't leave it on purpose.'

For long seconds, Lily could only stand and stare. They... That meant...

Before she could collect herself, the man who had to be one of Sirius's uncles spoke, standing a short
distance away at the foot of the bed. 'They tried. They've never seen the curse before. They said it
was probably invented by one of the—'

'Travers,' Sirius said, voice again a hardly-audible whisper. 'Cyrus Travers. He did it.' A few
seconds into the hard, brittle silence, Sirius winced, looking up only long enough to shoot her a
quick glance. It took a moment for Lily to realise what that glance was about, again tamp down her
flaring fury, enough to loosen involuntarily clenched fists — one of which had still been on Sirius's
chest. Whoops. It was just, she'd met Travers, she thought twice. More than one Travers, actually,
but one Cyrus Travers was a particularly disgusting Death Eater. She really, really, really didn't like
Lily resolutely moved Travers to the short "kill on sight" list she kept in her head.

A frustrated, empty, hopeless sort of feeling about him, Sirius's uncle finally managed, They couldn't get rid of it. They said... They said there's nothing they can do. They're giving him so many potions, just in case they come up with something, but...’ He gave a small, helpless shrug.

It was a peculiar moment Lily had over the next few seconds. First, that knowledge, that fact, that Sirius was going to die and there was nothing anybody could do about it, it rushed down on her in an inevitable wave, and Lily felt oddly, she didn't know, precarious, unbalanced, like a single wrong push could... Well, bad things might happen.

But, in the next instant, the fury still simmering in the back of her head pushed back at the thought. She refused to accept it. She absolutely, unequivocally, irrepresibly refused. It would not happen. Sirius was not allowed to die. There was no reason to get sad, or panicky. And it was certainly not the time to fall apart like a useless little girl.

Because Sirius was not going to die, it wouldn't happen. There were advantages to being herself. It wouldn't happen, it could not happen, because it simply wasn't allowed.

Lily pulled out her wand, quick conjured a chair for herself to sit in. Even as she conjured a knife — copying the style they usually used in Runes, a short, narrow blade with a proportionately long handle — she glanced over at Sirius's uncle. 'I'm sorry, sir, I never did catch your name.'

'Alphard.' Ah, yes, she recognised that name. It would be him, wouldn't it. He was watching Lily, staring at the knife she was still carefully shaping, his brow noticeably lowered. Having been born a Black, he was more familiar with some sorts of magic than the average mage, so he was probably guessing she was about to cast blood magic — not entirely incorrectly. 'What are you doing?'

'Healing Sirius. But I need you to—'

'You're what?' That was from the girl, the shout paired with a distrustful look tinged with lingering anger.

'It's not allowed.' Lily again felt her fists tightening, almost painful on her wand and the knife handle, and she had to take a couple long, slow breaths before she could hold them normally. When she opened her eyes again, all four Blacks — at least, she assumed those three still used the surname, she wasn't sure — were staring at her with a mix of confusion and disbelief. And a bit of pity, actually, but she was ignoring that. 'And before you ask, yes, I can do it. But it's very illegal, so if you could seal the door please, Alphard, until I'm done, I would appreciate it.'

'You can get rid of it?' That was from Sirius, voice almost painfully hopeful, like the thought were too good to be true and he reflexively distrusted it. She turned back to him, and her breath caught in her throat. He'd been trying to be his usual easy, joking self, as much as he could past weakness and what had to be a considerable degree of pain. This wasn't that. The way he looked at her, he seemed far too fragile, like a single word spoken too harshly would shatter him into a million pieces, relieved and desperate and terrified. He'd been hiding it, hiding it far too well, hiding it well enough she hadn't even noticed. She had been distracted with controlling herself, true, but she hadn't thought he could fool her like that anymore.

Lily slipped her wand back up her sleeve, her knife to her right hand, and reached forward with her left, trailing lightly along his cheek. She'd barely even touched his hair before she thought her fingers had been caught by the knots — honestly, his hair was so ridiculous sometimes. As a shaky breath
slipped through his teeth, his face turning into her hand just a few degrees, slightly enough even she barely noticed, she said in a light whisper, 'Yes, Sirius, I can get rid of it. It's going to be a little unpleasant, though.'

With a short, shocked laugh, he said, 'Shite, if I'm gonna live, you can do whatever you want to me.'

She let a smirk touch her lips. 'Now, now, Sirius.' Her left hand retreated, and with a sideways twitch with her wrist, a flick of her fingers, she slit down the front of his simple hospital robe, spread the gash wide over his bare chest. 'Is that really a smart thing to say to a dark sorceress?'

He just smiled.

While Alphard behind her laid charm after paling after charm over the door, Lily leaned forward and, carefully and delicately, cut a Melīx channelling rune into Sirius's forehead. He barely even winced, which wasn't so surprising, since that curse was probably far more painful than these few shallow cuts. Once that was done, she carved a second one, on his chest right over his heart. She then cut two more runes, one on the palm of each of her hands, this a Melīx rune of taking, of receiving. She vanished the knife, cast a quick silencing around her own head, placed her hands on Sirius — runes touching runes, their blood mixing — and closed her eyes.

See, she was going to cheat to get rid of the curse. She'd be surprised if the Healers here didn't know about this trick, but they likely couldn't do it themselves, for more than one reason. Not least of which being it required a Parselmouth — hence the silencing. She'd found this trick in a book Sev had gotten her. Actually, she still had no idea where he'd found the thing. He'd given her a book detailing all kinds of Parseltongue-related magics, but he never had said where he'd gotten it from. Not that it particularly mattered, she guessed. A lot of people in western Europe didn't seem to know Parseltongue had originally been invented, millennia ago, by Melīx Healers. There were healing magics out there, perfected over millennia of use, that could only be used by Parselmouths.

She could count the people who actually knew this on one hand, but she just so happened to be a Parselmouth. And she just so happened to know a couple of these spells.

Which she guessed made Sirius the luckiest son of a bitch in the world right now.

Gathering herself, her will, she drew in a slow breath through her nose, let it out as a low, musical hiss. «Death that lurks below, hear.» Even with her eyes closed, she could see it — obviously, her magesight didn't technically require her eyes. The curse, that malignant cloud of black and purple, twitched at her words, the red and white tendrils already reaching from her blood. Another long breath, easing herself placid, another singing hiss. «Livelier prey awaits, see.» Red and white meeting black and purple with tantalising hints, caressing and teasing, the curse twitched again, turned, claws sliding ever so slightly out of Sirius's flesh. «Upon a greater feast, come.» The red and the white was too tempting, too sweet, and the curse lifted from Sirius enough her magic could slip between them, isolating Travers's magic from its victim.

Trapping it with her. Which meant it was time for the fun part.

The curse came crashing down on her, stinging lashes of agony crawling across her body from head to toe, but she grit her teeth and ignored it. Her magic bucked under her leash, protesting at the assault, weary from holding too much too tightly, but she kept an unyielding grip, allowed not a twitch out of place. But it was not properly bound to her the way it had been to Sirius, unrooted. She could face it directly. And death stood before her, cold and empty and implacable, staring down on her with mindless, ravenous, terrifying eyes, demanding she yield, surrender, there was nothing else for mortal creatures to do. But she dug in her feet, lifted her chin, and glared right back, demanding the curse disperse, demanding death retreat, throwing all her considerable power behind her will,
furious and unyielding.

This was another reason some Healer wouldn't have been able to do this. To stare down death in the
place of another, one had to care enough for the victim. And magic could be very particular about
this sort of thing. It couldn't be professional. It had to be honest, it had to be personal.

Sirius was hers, now. He was not allowed to die. She hadn't given her permission. So when death's
eyes met hers, Lily did not yield, she refused.

And death blinked first.

As the blackness broke apart, her head was filled with white, soft and numb. And she was sluggish,
and weak, and tired, and the world felt so far away. She was done, she'd done it, she felt only
distantly her body slump forward against Sirius's bed, tingling with numbness and weak with
exhaustion. She was already half-asleep, she couldn't even open her eyes.

She heard, thin and quiet as if from a distance, Sirius break into laughter, high and loud and joyous.
Despite her exhaustion, she felt herself smile. He was fine, Sirius was going to be fine. She could
rest, now.

There was a faint sense of motion, of being pulled, she thought she was being lifted forward, out of
her chair. Warm, familiar arms were around her, a hand tickling in her hair, and she turned into the
warmth without thinking, feeling far too sleepy, far too comfortable. A voice whispered into her ear,
gentle and tender. 'Thank you, Lily.'

'Mm. You're mine. Can't die. Didn't give permission.'

His laugh was almost painfully loud in her ear, but it didn't do anything to keep her awake, still
slipping inexorably away from the world, down into warmth and darkness. 'I love you, you bloody
nutcase.'

Lily could only manage so much as a low hum before she fell asleep, smiling against the crook of his
neck.

October, 1995

Melantha sat in her bed, arms crossed, glaring at the potion bottle sitting on the sheets before her.
This was a crazy idea, she didn't know what she was thinking. Well, okay, she did know what she
was thinking, but...

On advice from her mother's journals, she'd been keeping a little bottle or two of the potions they
brewed in class. Some of the potions they were working on were dead useful, and it was just such a
waste to vanish all but the tiny sample Snape needed from them. It'd barely been a month and a half
yet, and she already had quite a stash going. Nothing compared to Hermione's, of course —
Hermione had been saving potions here and there since second year, and with careful use of
preservation charms most of them were even still usable — but still a good few.

The one she was staring at was the one that had gotten Snape all suspicious, the Draught to Improve
Active Recall, or simply Morgen's Draught. This potion was, in a sense, the poor man's pensieve. A
person could take a dose, look back to a past event in their head, and remember it with supernatural
clarity. Like a pensieve, it wasn't quite perfect — the potion would show the user how their brain had
recorded it, not necessarily what had actually happened. Though, usually, that was in far more detail
than people could remember without it. Brains were silly things, and often there would be
information hidden in there the person couldn't remember unprompted, but with the potion to help
came springing up. Whether it was entirely accurate or not wasn't certain, but still. The potion could
also be taken at a much lower dose to improve a person's recall of what was happening to them just
then at some later time — apparently, there was a little black market trade in the school involving this
potion, sought mostly by OWL and NEWT students — but Mel wouldn't be using it for that right
now.

She had an odd feeling. An unpleasant feeling. It'd been bothering her for a couple weeks now, ever
since that ridiculous trip to the Ministry. Seeing Dora act like... It had been very uncomfortable
seeing it. Partially just because, well, it had never been quite so clear to Mel just how pathetic she'd
been. But that hadn't been the only reason it'd bothered her. She couldn't help the thought that, well...
She didn't know, it was complicated.

She didn't think she was that much better. She had the feeling she was still...like that, most of the
time. And she really didn't like the thought. She didn't like the person she used to be. Kind of hated,actually. She'd thought she'd been doing better for a little while there, but she wasn't convinced
anymore. She suspected she hadn't improved nearly as much as she'd thought she had. Which was an
uncomfortable thought.

So, potion. It hadn't been obvious to her how timid and pathetic Harry Potter had been until she'd
seen it from the outside. When she was removed from herself, could watch and see. With this potion,
she'd be able to watch Melantha Black, and see.

Which was inexplicably terrified. She didn't know what she would do if...

She let out a long breath, rubbed at her forehead with both hands. She had to stop thinking about this
so much. Wasn't that the entire problem? That she was thinking too much, getting too wrapped up in
her pointless, idiotic neuroses that she couldn't act like a fucking normal person? She was taking this
way too seriously. Just take the potion, think back to the list of moments she'd already decided to

Gritting her teeth, she swiped the bottle off the bed, popped out the seal, and downed the thing in
two gulps. And shuddered as soon as she was done — god, that tasted awful, like a sickening
combination of broccoli and copper, blech.

Ooh, wow. This felt...weird. Her head felt oddly heavy, but also too light, and... It was hard to
explain. She could only assume that meant it was working. Okay. Okay. She was doing her list in
chronological order, starting only after that little explosion she'd had in the bathroom, which meant
the first one was—

Mel cringed at the nauseating twist, then blinked her dazzled eyes. She was outside, warm in the late
summer sunlight, wind playing at her hair. For a moment she just stared around. Hadn't expected it to
be this accurate, honestly. It wasn't quite perfect — there was a faint hint of unreality to it, the
movement of her hair not feeling quite right, the feel of her own body slightly off, the blue of the sky
shining against the sunlight almost glass-like. Surprisingly good, though.

And just a little bit away were hopefuls for the Gryffindor quidditch team, Mel standing at the edge.
It was slightly odd to watch herself from the outside, struggling with the instant assumption that that
girl couldn't possibly be herself, an impulse she thought she'd gotten rid of by now. Maybe seeing
herself in a mirror and seeing herself from outside like this were different somehow, she wasn't sure.
But anyway, in the memory she had just landed, and people turned to glance at her, then stare when
they realised she was holding a Firebolt. And Mel watched herself shift and squirm in place, visibly
trying to shrug off their eyes, to not care. And visibly failing. Until she'd been distracted by her
thoughts, at least.

A quick fast-forward to talking to the team, telling them who she was and that she wouldn't be trying out, didn't make her feel any better. There she was, small, folded inward enough she seemed even smaller than she actually was, noticeably cringing whenever anyone said anything too uncomfortable. She...

No, this was not a good omen.

Swallowing, she shook off the whatever it was itching at her throat, and reached for the next item on her list. She'd been—

She didn't have to watch very far into her meeting with Remus before she'd had all she needed. The way her shoulders had turned inward the moment his hand had come to her back, guiding her to the room she remembered they'd talked in, the way her head turned away, her breaths too low and thin—

After their first practice duel, the way she'd shrunk away from Dora's eyes, curling into herself, hugging the mug of hot chocolate to herself—

Her second conversation with Malfoy, how she was sunk into her chair, pulled away, barely even looking at him, only meeting his eyes a few seconds at a time here and there. And she hadn't noticed it at the time, but it'd clearly been obvious to Malfoy she was uncomfortable. Watching from the outside like this, she could see the slight hesitations, how he retreated, voice going somewhat softer, whenever she had a particularly bad moment. Which meant Malfoy had been consciously nice to her, which was weird enough it almost distracted her from her own patheticness—

That bloody trip to Hogsmeade, shrinking away from Hermione and Daphne's eyes with every few seconds, cringing and twitching with practically every word from Tracey's mouth. She'd thought she'd been less obvious, with how tongue-tied Tracey and Susan's incessant teasing and compliments had made her, far less obvious than this. Her face was too red, and she wouldn't even look at them, and it was clear with the way that Tracey smirked, how Susan would pull back a few inches every once in a while, how Daphne's eyes softened with what she thought, with an unpleasant twitch of her stomach, was probably pity—

Talking with Ellie about that same trip, shrunk into her armchair, arms hugged around herself, eyes on the ceiling, or her knees, or the walls, or the fire, anywhere but at the person she was talking to, shrinking away from Ellie's more direct looks—

No wonder Treasa had just taken charge the way she had! She could barely even meet a house-elf's eyes without cringing—

Watching herself shrink under Neville's gaze was especially bad. Neville! Really? And watching him collect himself, go all nice and gentle, even though, from the red all over his face, it clearly made him uncomfortable. God, this was so awful to watch, they were both so pathetically awkward, she couldn't, she had to go to the next one—

That conversation she'd had with Susan, when she'd randomly showed up in the enchanting lab. The way Mel shrunk away, avoiding her eyes, face going far too red practically every time Susan opened her mouth. At the time, she'd thought Susan's smirk had been mocking, teasing, but looking at it when she wasn't being made uncomfortable just by the fact she was looking at her, she saw, yes, the teasing slant did appear a few times, when she was actually saying something teasing, but otherwise, she... Well, it looked different, was all, she wasn't sure exactly how. Not the time to think about that, though—
She watched through the entirety of the trip to the Ministry, and was surprised by how...not pathetic she was being. Mostly. There were a couple points she twitched or cringed, like seemingly always, but most of the time she... Well, she seemed almost normal. And she got why Dora had made that time turner joke, she really had seemed like a completely different person dealing with Ethan, far too light and easy, not herself at all—

She was surprised again by her talk with Snape in the hospital wing. She did flinch here and there, a few shiftings that made her look far too guilty. But she gave glares nearly as good as she got, and talked back to him almost uncharacteristically level. After a moment of thought, she might get it. It didn't matter what she did with Snape, did it? It wasn't like he could possibly think any less of her...

There was something there, a bigger point peeking out, just barely visible. But she brushed the thought off for now, gathered herself to look at the last memory on her list, only a few days ago—

She hadn't noticed it at the time. It wasn't surprising she hadn't, she'd barely been looking at Susan at all, far too uncomfortable. All pulled into herself, so flushed Mel had to wonder if that was healthy. But she only noticed now how cautious Susan was being, hesitating between sentences here and there, carefully watching. Her face alternating between that confident smirk, and a smile far too gentle and warm, it was making her uncomfortable even in her head—

And Mel shoved the memories off, returning her with a snap to lying in her bed. She threw the bottle still in her hand against the curtains, and sunk back into her pillows, arms wrapping around her stomach, her breath inexplicably harsh in her throat.

She'd been worried she was no better. She'd had that suspicion. And it turned out she was entirely correct. She was no better. She'd hardly changed at all. Marginal improvements, here and there. She did talk to far more people on a regular basis than she did before — but even then, those were mostly the members of that study group Hermione had more or less forced her to join, or otherwise Blacks, and she was still as uncomfortable as all hell talking to most of them anyway. She was aware she was far better with magic now than she'd been a year ago, or even just a couple months ago. Even with things not directly related to duelling, in practical lessons these days she'd gone from being not far from the last in the class to figure something out — excluding DADA, at least, where she'd always done well — to being only a couple minutes behind the first to manage it. Duelling especially, though. It wasn't even funny how thoroughly she could pummel herself as she'd been at the end of last year, it wouldn't even take two seconds.

Of course, fighting with magic was like that. There were far too many spells that could take someone out in one shot, so all you needed was one good hit your opponent couldn't deal with, and it was over. Unless the two people fighting were extremely evenly matched, duels tended to be very, very short. Mel now knew what was basically a variation of the stunning charm that also happened to be dark magic, and thus practically unblockable, she could easily take out herself from a couple months ago with that, fight over in one spell.

And, well, another thing she'd give herself, she was dressing a lot better these days. So, while she did turn incredibly pathetic whenever someone so much as looked at her, her baseline pathetiveness was much lower than it used to be. If that made sense. Which wasn't saying a lot, granted. She didn't even want to consider what people must have thought about her walking around in Dudley's old clothes, no thanks. Of course, most people generally didn't notice, since she'd quickly developed a habit of almost always wearing her school robes, which she had gotten a few funny comments for, but still.

But other than that, other than those few small things, she hadn't changed at all. She was still the same stupid, pathetic, useless little boy she'd always been. She was still— She didn't...

Her hard breaths were catching, her chest and throat so tight it hurt, enough she could barely breathe.
She knew what was happening, and the instinctive fear immediately started lashing in her head, her magic, so uncontrollable of late, already shifting at the building panic. But she couldn't, she had to hold it down, she had to control herself, crying was dan—

And she was somewhere else again, she knew where this was, she was in the Dursley's living room. By the furniture and decorations — which, after so many times cleaning them, she had far too good a feel for — she knew this had to have been some years ago. Once she spotted who had to be herself, she knew she hadn't guessed wrong: she was absolutely tiny, not even old enough for primary school yet, probably three or four, looking almost comically silly in Dudley's ratty, oversized clothes. A bit less comical when Mel recognised that tight, controlled look on her much younger face, she knew that feeling.

She had an odd moment where she had to remind herself she would have been a boy back then. It could be hard to tell with young children, and apparently she was used to being a girl enough it hadn't occurred to her at first. A thought she was rather ambivalent about.

After a couple more seconds watching, picking up a couple details — the greater-than-usual sluggishness in Dudley's blinking as he gazed blankly at the television, the glass of brandy on the little table next to Vernon's chair — she realised this must be shortly after dinner. The Dursleys were in their usual routine, and Mel was in hers. By which she meant she was dusting that stupid cabinet in the corner. God, she'd always hated that thing. Shelves fronted with glass, thing filled with all kinds of stupid little baubles Petunia had picked up here or there over the years, cutesy disgusting little things all of them. And she swore Petunia had to have far better vision than she did, or perhaps just a persistent hallucination, because she always saw dust where Mel didn't, where she'd already gone over three times, there couldn't possibly still be any there — there had hardly ever been any dust in the first place, the shelves were sealed with glass! It was so stupid, she hated that fucking thing.

The few times she'd broken one trinket or another hadn't been nearly as accidental as she'd claimed. She hadn't done it very much, since she'd always been punished severely for it, but she hadn't been able to help herself.

Tiny her was already fiercely trying to hold something back, Mel could see it in how pinched and still she was, how sharply her hands moved. She figured out what it was just when Vernon said something about it, how they had taken her in out of the goodness of their hearts — right laugh, that — so if she wanted to eat, she would do her chores and she wouldn't complain about it. It was better than a freak like her deserved, really. Worthless as her parents, filthy layabouts never amounted to anything, nothing but a burden on society. Honestly, he had to wonder if she would have ended up here either way, he doubted her parents would have provided for her properly, or perhaps they would have just voluntarily left her with them, they were worthless freaks themselves, so their tolerance for worthless freaks like her would naturally be far lower than that of good, ordinary people. On, and on, and on.

Mel didn't know what it was. Maybe just because she'd been younger then, not yet used to these rants Vernon could go on. Or maybe she'd had an especially awful day. And missing a meal, as she obviously had, had always made it harder. Whatever it was, whatever the reason, the tiny her lost grip of the last shreds of her self-control. Standing there in the living room, in front of that stupid bloody cabinet, dusting rag held tight in one hand, she started crying. Quietly at first, holding her breath in a fierce effort to control herself, and by the fear flickering across her face Mel knew she'd already learned crying was dangerous. And her hand was clamped over her mouth, her tearing eyes squeezed shut, but she couldn't stop it, there was no stopping it.

And Vernon was yelling at her to quit that awful racket, but she couldn't, it was only getting worse,
and then... Oh, Mel didn't remember this at all. Of course, she hadn't remembered this particular incident in the first place, but she certainly didn't remember this. The colours around her were bending, shimmering, like the air over a fire, the image on the telly shifting, twisting, before finally exploding into multicoloured chaos, light bulbs all around noticeably flickering. Dudley was startled out of his stupor, Petunia let out a sharp yelp, when the bulbs above their heads popped, one immediately after the other, the shattered glass tinkling inside the fixture, and Vernon was on his feet, purple face twisted with rage, screaming at her words she couldn't quite hear over the roar of flame that seemed to be filling her ears. Vernon reached for her, violence thick in every inch of him, but when his hand came within a few inches of her, into the shimmering air around her, he retreated with a pained roar, his hand red, blisters blooming unnaturally fast across his palm and fingers. With a scowl that seemed half rage and half terror, he stormed off, disappearing into the hall.

He returned a few seconds later with a cricket bat. And, the memory turning dim and blurry in anticipation, hit her across the head with that instead.

The memory went dark and fuzzy for a few seconds, and by the time Mel could tell what was going on again, Vernon was already dragging tiny her into the hall, still screaming at the top of his lungs. She couldn't make out what he was saying, and the shapes around her were still oddly blurry, she assumed the hit to the head or the accidental magic or both had messed up her memory here. And tiny her was shoved into the cupboard under the stairs, the door slamming and clicking locked behind her, and everything was dark.

But not so dark Mel couldn't see tiny her curl into a ball on her bed, gingerly poking at the thin gash on her head, rubbing at the arm Vernon had probably wrenched dragging her here. Still fruitlessly trying to control herself, sobs thin, and weak, and choked—

Mel finally managed to tear herself away from the memory, sprawling back on her pillows in Hogwarts. Stupid fucking potion! She thought it'd worn off! She scrambled to the side of her bed, reaching for her wand with shaking fingers, barely even able to hold the thing, pointed it at her own head. She knew she couldn't concentrate well enough at the moment to get it out silently, but she kept stammering on the incantation, her throat too tight and unsteady to let the words out properly, it must have taken six tries before she finally got a dispel out. She wasn't sure if that would actually work, so she overpowered it as much as she dared, just in case. Then she dropped her wand and flopped back against her bed again, hugging her arms around herself, stubbornly, fiercely trying to control her breathing, to hold back the stinging in her eyes, but it wasn't working.

That fucking memory hadn't helped, Jesus Christ...

She had put up a silencing earlier, she thought, but luckily there was no one else in the dorm all the same, because she just couldn't stop it, there was too much of it, a tense, hot pressure in her chest she just couldn't repress. And her throat hurt far too much, like she'd gone far too long without drinking, and her head felt too heavy and too thick, and she couldn't control her breathing at all, it was pointless to try, so she just lay there, holding her head in her hands, waiting for it to stop, praying it would just fucking stop.

Honestly, she didn't even know what she was crying about anymore. Her head was such a shifting, confusing mess these days, she had no idea what was going on. But she couldn't stop it, and it honestly terrified her a bit that she couldn't stop it, which made twice in just the last few months, she didn't know what was happening to her.

God, she was so pathetic.

She jumped at the sound of the door opening, her knees hitching up a bit toward her elbows. But it was fine, she'd put a silencing, it was fine. She listened past those fucking noises her own stupid
body was making, quickly picked out Lavender and Parvati chattering. Oh, wow, fuck, good thing she'd put that silencing up, Jesus, did not want to deal with those two right now...

A couple seconds later, she jumped again, a voice coming from far too nearby, just on the other side of the curtains. 'Mel?' She wasn't entirely surprised Lavender was using Hermione's nickname for her. They'd hardly talked at all, Mel had honestly been avoiding her and Parvati a bit, but that was just a Lavender thing to do, she guessed, far too friendly that girl. 'Are you in there?'

'I think she is,' Parvati said in a lower whisper. 'There's a silencing over her bed.'

'Really? How'd you know?'

'That analysis charm Professor Weasley taught us.'

'Right, good thinking.'

Oh, of course these two pay attention in class when it's Bill bloody Weasley teaching, god dammit...

'I... Mel, are you okay in there? I don't even know if you can hear me. It's, just, your curtains are smoking.'

What? Mel peeled open her eyes, glanced upward. It was hard to tell with how blurry her vision was right now, stupid fucking tears, but she had a feeling Lavender was right. Stupid useless magic, being so bloody uncontrollable lately, she wasn't a fucking child, why did it have to keep—

'We're coming in, okay, Mel? Just...'

No! Bad! Fucking friendly bints! Mel started scrambling for her wand again, but she only got so far as sitting up before she froze, the curtains before her sliding aside. And Lavender and Parvati were standing right in front of her, and Mel couldn't look, she had to jerk away, she didn't even like these two, she didn't want them here right now, she couldn't.

Before she could pull very far away, she felt her bed sink on either side of her, and unfamiliar arms were wrapping around her. Lavender, she thought, it was hard to tell for sure with her eyes still closed. And then Lavender was pulling Mel into her, and for a few seconds Mel resisted, trying to push away — which wasn't at all easy to do, with Parvati hemming her in from her other side. But she only struggled for a moment. Lavender was too soft, too warm, too gentle, and that fragile thing that had been lingering for months now, that open wound constantly weeping in the back of her head she did her best to ignore, it shuddered and relaxed, melting inside of her, and she was shivering, and she was still crying like a pathetic child, and she couldn't hold it.

'Stop it,' she groaned past her painful throat, muffled a bit by Lavender's shirt where Mel's head had ended up.

'Stop what?' Lavender muttered, her voice vibrating against her.

'Being so n-nice.' She shivered a moment later, reflexively twitching away from Parvati's fingers slowly combing through her hair.

'Why?'

'You're m-making it w-w-worse.'

'We don't mind,' said Parvati from behind her, fingers still gently slipping through Mel's hair. Which she was trying to ignore, not going too well. 'It's okay. Let it out.'
No, she... She couldn't. Not... That...

Ah, fuck it. It was a losing battle by this point anyway.

She had absolutely no idea how long she sat there crying like a pathetic...well, a pathetic something, anyway. She couldn't even try to guess. It was so fucking embarrassing in retrospect, and, honestly, it was rather embarrassing at the time too. She just couldn't stop. Lavender's hand gently rubbing up and down her back, Parvati's fingers slowly working at her hair, those didn't help. It felt too, well, good, and a part of her she wasn't usually aware of was stridently protesting at that, that she shouldn't be feeling good right now, she was doing something bad, and it couldn't be allowed, she was a freak, and she had to stop it, right now. But she couldn't, she couldn't, and quite honestly she couldn't be bothered to try. She didn't want to listen to that part of her head, the part she knew Vernon and Petunia had put there. This might be a bit awkward and embarrassing, sure, but she felt good so rarely she didn't think it was the end of the world if she just sat back and allowed even a little bit when it actually came for once. Sure. That was fine.

Eventually she stopped, slowly fading out, her face still buried in Lavender's chest, hands clenching fistfuls of her...actually, didn't have a clue what Lavender was wearing right now. Her top, anyway. Parvati's fingers were still twitching in her hair — she had the odd feeling Parvati had switched to plaiting it at some point, but that was fine, whatever. And she took a long moment once she was still just sitting there, trying to gather herself, enough so she could lean away and actually look at them without feeling mortified.

Well, without feeling too mortified, anyway.

Before she'd even sat up, her hands just loosening from Lavender's clothes a bit, Lavender said, 'Milly?' There was a pop from the side of Mel's bed, sudden and sharp enough she jumped. After a quick exchange, the Hogwarts elf popped away again, returning a moment later with a mug of water.

Wait, no. Mel corrected herself when she'd sat up, the mug pressed into her hands. It smelled like some kind of tea, couldn't say what. While the two patiently waited, Mel shakily raised the warm mug to her lips, took a sip. It was a bit sweeter than she usually took, but it felt inexplicably amazing on her abused throat, spreading warmth and relief all along the painful tightness through her neck and chest, powerful enough she almost had to wonder if there was a potion of some kind in it. A couple sips later, and she could breathe without her throat convulsing on her, her chest didn't hurt anymore, and she could probably talk without stammering incomprehensibly. So, staring down at her mug instead of either of the girls, she muttered, 'Sorry.'

'What for?' Lavender actually sounded honestly confused. Jesus, these two were weird...

It took herself a second to shake herself, find her voice again. 'Crying all over you, I m-mean.' Dammit, stupid... 'Probably got your clothes all messy.'

'It's fine. That's what cleaning charms are for.'

These two, honestly... The thought slipped out before she could stop it. 'Why are you being so nice to me?'

'Huh?' And there Lavender goes sounding confused again! Seriously...

'I mean, you don't have to. It's not like we're friends, or anything. We've barely even talked at all.' Mel managed to stop herself from admitting she'd been avoiding them, but only barely.

'Well...' She was aware Lavender was staring at her, but she resolutely didn't even glance in her
direction, just gazing down at her too-sweet tea. 'Because we feel like it, I guess? I'm not sure how to answer that.'

From her other side, Parvati said, 'It's just what you do, I think. You know?'

'Mm-hmm. Parv's been playing with your hair the whole time, though. She likes hair, you know, but she can't do mine, because it's too gnarly and blech.' Now that she thought about it, Lavender's hair was almost as bad as Hermione's. Mel had just hardly ever taken occasion to notice because...well, honestly, she'd never paid that much attention to Lavender, ever.

'There's nothing wrong with your hair.'

'Yes, that's why you randomly plait flowers into it all the time never.'

'Well, no...'

Mel blinked at that. 'What did you do to my hair?'

'Oh, well, ah...' That was weird, Parvati sounded strangely embarrassed. Mel glanced that way quick to see there was a slight reddish tinge to her brownish face. Which was weird. 'I just, ah. Well, let's get a mirror, and I can—'

Mel rolled her eyes, set her mug down and leaned backward to snatch up her wand from the bed behind Lavender. A quick, silent swish, and a swath of the air in front of her abruptly turned reflective. And Mel stared at herself, blinking. Her face was all red and blotchy, and she had some dried stuff on her lip which, okay, ech. But her hair wasn't just solid black anymore. Turning her head a bit, she saw Parvati had made five narrow plaits all the way down, all about the width of her pinky, and threaded through them were flowers. Tiny little things, mostly violet and cherry, she thought, in whites and purples and yellows. That was...

'Sorry about that, I kind of, just, do that,' Parvati muttered, looking almost painfully sheepish in the reflection next to her.

Brightly smiling, Lavender said, 'She'll play with any hair that sits still long enough.'

'Yeah, ah, the flowers are just conjured, so they won't last very long, but...' Parvati gave a little, embarrassed-looking shrug, turned a little to meet Mel's eyes through the reflection. 'You like it?'

'I...' Mel still wasn't sure what was going on in her head still. It was a confusing mix of all sorts of things, she had no idea. But she felt weirdly... 'I think I do, actually.' Parvati just beamed at her, and after a second Mel had to look away, she wasn't sure why.

'So.' Lavender snatched Mel's arm with both of hers, suddenly enough Mel jumped, and gave her a look through Mel's lingering charm. Not sure what kind of look, but definitely a look. 'If you want to talk about it, we're here. You don't have to, of course, but if you wanna.'

'No, I—'

'It's not Malfoy being a prat, is it?' said Parvati, a sharp frown taking her forehead. 'I can tell my sister to curse him.'

'No, it's not...' Mel blinked, turned to glance at Parvati. 'Malfoy? Why was your first guess Malfoy?'

Parvati just gave another awkward shrug, but Lavender said, 'See, I told you there was nothing to that, people just making stuff up like normal.'
'Wait, nothing to what?'

'Just a rumour going around that you and Malfoy are, you know, a thing.'

Her charm failed, the reflective surface dissipating in little whiffs of steam. For long seconds, all she could do was stare at Lavender. Finally, she managed to get her mouth working again. 'What? Why?'

'He is weirdly nice to you. You have to be the only Gryffindor he doesn't sneer at.' Then Lavender shrugged, adding, 'Well, you and the other Black, but she doesn't go sneaking off to meet with him.'

'I— That only happened twice! And I was just carrying messages from Sirius! There was nothing—' She broke off, rubbing at her forehead with the hand that wasn't weighed down by a silly girl. It was true he was being unusually nice to her lately, but she was pretty sure that was just because he'd started thinking of her and the other Blacks as family, which demanded a lesser degree of arseholeishness. And, yes, that was weird, but she'd mostly been not thinking about it. How did people... 'I mean, he's Malfoy.'

'Yeah, I didn't think there was anything to it. There's also one floating around involving you and Hermione, but I think I would have noticed that.'

Again, all Mel could do was stare at her. Seriously? Did people have nothing better to talk about?

'She doesn't like girls, though.'

And Lavender smiled at her, a crooked, teasing sort of smile that did not belong on Lavender fucking Brown's face, it was the weirdest thing. 'Ran into that problem, did you.'

'I— no! It, just, it came up! I—'

'Relax, Mel, I'm just teasing.'

Mel let out a long huff, turning away to stare up at her curtains. 'I would think people would have better things to do with their time than speculate about who I may or may not be secretly dating.'

She felt Lavender shrug through the arm she was still holding, but it was Parvati who answered the not-question. 'A lot of people have been talking about the Blacks lately. It is a Noble and Most Ancient House, you know, there aren't very many of them left. And with Lord Black breaking out of Azkaban, and everyone going crazy over that, and then him turning out to have been innocent the whole time, and then adding a whole bunch of people to the House, some of which nobody had ever heard of before, and then him being, well, Sirius Black — he had a reputation when he was younger — yeah, a lot of people are talking about the Blacks lately.'

'It doesn't help,' Lavender said, 'that nobody has any idea where you came from. I've asked around, and no one knows.' This was said with a rather hopeful tone, half-begging Mel to spill her secrets. Only partially so she could go bragging about it to these nameless other people later, Mel guessed.

And Mel hesitated, biting her lip. This could be a problem. She'd known people would probably go digging, with Black being a Noble House and her just appearing and all it was inevitable. Sirius had said their explanation would hold up to all but intensive inspection, but that the truth would get out eventually, he couldn't prevent that forever. But...she wasn't ready yet. She didn't want people to know. Eventually, yes, it would have to get out eventually, but not yet.

But everyone was just so nosy. They'd probably keep looking no matter what she said.

Or, maybe she could...
Mel let out a long breath. This was going to be uncomfortable. 'I just don't like to talk about it, is all. I never really knew my parents, you see.' She realised just as she was finishing saying it that that didn't quite fit with the backstory Sirius and Andi had worked up. Erm, oops. Oh well. 'And the people I was with until Sirius took me in were... Er, not very nice.'

She was still staring up at her curtains, so she couldn't see how the girls were reacting to that. They did seem to go oddly still, Lavender's hands tightening a bit around her arm, but that was all she got. Her voice slow and cautious, Lavender said, 'Is that why you've been...you know.'

Mel wasn't entirely sure what Lavender was referring to. That little episode she'd just had, maybe, or how pathetically shy and awkward she was. Either way, the answer was the same. 'Yeah, sort of.'

There was silence for long seconds. 'Oh.'

Mel almost had to laugh at that. Yeah. Oh.

Whatever was going through the girls' heads now, she didn't know, but they didn't bloody leave her alone. They were still sitting there — talking about the most idiotic shite, she couldn't even remember — when Hermione appeared from wherever she'd been, freezing halfway to her bookshelf when she saw them, eyes flicking between the girls, to Mel, to the flowers plaited into her hair, to the girls, and back again. She didn't say anything, but by the smirk twitching at her lips she was definitely thinking teasing thoughts.

And Mel certainly wasn't blushing. Not at all. That was silly talk. What was there to possibly be blushing about? Honestly.

Chapter End Notes

[You did use magic on her muggle mother.] — *Just to clarify, these three are Sirius's uncle Alphard, aunt Theresa, and cousin Ailís (the triplets' mother). I do think I mentioned this before, but Theresa was a muggle. Ah, yes, I checked, and waaaay back in chapter seven, Sirius says, "[Alphard] was expelled from the House before I was even born, I think. Aunt Terri's a muggle, you see."

[He'd given her a book detailing all kinds of Parselmouth-related magics, but he never had said where he'd gotten it from.] — *In case you're wondering? Tom let him have it. Tom didn't know who it was for at the time, thought it was for Snape's own curiosity, but he put it together when he figured out Lily was a Parselmouth a couple years later.*

Ugh, sorry about how ick this chapter was. I didn't want to end it here, but I'm already late, and my brain was getting increasingly fuzzy, so I decided it would have to stop early. Which meant shuffling a couple scenes around, but I serendipitously stumbled on a sequence I really like, so...yay?

Anyone thinking on commenting on how Mel is being all terrible and blechy this chapter, I thought we were done with this pathetic bullshit, do note the "part one" in the chapter title. I have plans.

*Until next time,*
~Wings
Melantha was trying to ignore the looks Lavender and Parvati were giving her. It wasn't going very well.

In retrospect, crying all over them like that, and then telling them the whole Dursleys being “not nice” thing, had been a terrible idea. Of course, she hadn't really thought it was that great of an idea at the time anyway. Telling them even that tiny, vague bit, just barely implying at all that shite, she'd mostly only done that in hope it would stop people from going digging. Lavender and Parvati themselves, but then they would go gossiping about it to other people, who would then have less reasons to go digging. Sate their curiosity, like. It had been a comparatively small, easy thing to give up, but a big, juicy thing at the same time, so she'd thought that might work. The crying she hadn't had a lot of choice about, wouldn't have been able to stop if she'd tried. Well, she had tried, actually, so. And she'd been half-convinced at the time that was going to come back and bite her in the arse somehow. Perhaps for no good reason, but still.

Not that they were doing anything that bad. It was just...subtly annoying, she guessed. It was breakfast, now, and she was down in the Great Hall, surrounded by Weasleys as usual. And Lavender and Parvati were sitting much closer than usual. Only a few seats away. Watching her. Not in a distractingly obvious way or anything, but they were there, throwing her occasional looks.

She wasn't sure what kind of looks, exactly. But Mel couldn't help feeling like Lavender and Parvati had come away with the impression she was especially fragile or something, like she was in danger of collapsing at any moment. It was embarrassing.

She was trying to avoid returning their looks, even to warn them off with a glare. If she looked back, that increased the chances someone else would notice, which would make them wonder exactly why Lavender and Parvati kept staring at her, which would then lead to a whole thing. So she wasn't. And yes, she realised that was a bit neurotic, she couldn't help it.

At least people were being distracting.

'What do you mean, it's a terrible idea?' said...well, one of the twins anyway, his voice loud and over-dramatic.

'It's brilliant! Just slip the first half when no one's looking and—'

The first brought his open palm down on the table with a shout of, 'Bam!' dinnerware rattling noisily with the impact. 'And you've got the perfect excuse!'

'Down the second half when you're out of sight and you're golden!'

Hermione slowly chewed the bite she'd taken after her last comment, only responding after she'd
finally swallowed — and taken a sip of tea, the twins rolling their eyes. 'As long as you're careful, I suppose,' she said speaking in a low, calm voice, 'and are very thorough with your testing. Your Fainting Fancies and Fever Fudge,' these said with a noticeable hint of sarcasm, 'might not be too terrible. There is the chance you might accidentally put someone into circulatory shock or give them severe hyperthermia respectively — at least, I assume the Fancies work by inducing hypotension, I could be wrong on that — both of which are potentially life-threatening, so you'd have to be very careful. Personally, I think I'd scrap the Fancies and focus on the Fudge. If someone takes one of the Fancies, they'd almost certainly be sent off with an escort, just to ensure they make it to the Hospital Wing. Similar problems for customers outside of Hogwarts as well.'

'Do mine ears deceive me, Gred, or did that almost sound like approval?'

'Almost, Forge, almost. As close as Little Miss Prefect can come to it, anyway.'

Hermione raised an eyebrow at that, but didn't say anything.

'Don't worry about the testing, we aren't idiots—'

'—we have read a book or two, believe it or not—'

'—but you might be right about the Fancies. Hadn't thought of that.'

'You said those two might be okay. The other two?'

Hermione shrugged. 'Nosebleed Nougat is a terrible idea. I'm not sure how exactly you're creating the nosebleed, but any possibility is risky. Even a slight overdose could easily cause far more bleeding than you want, or a hypertensive crisis, or I don't know, lots of things. What if one of your customers happens to be anaemic? Then even the amount of bleeding you are looking for could still induce hypovolaemic shock. Or perhaps they have an infectious disease they just unknowingly sprayed all over the place. Or perhaps someone could have some sort of magic bound to their blood — that could cause all sorts of unfortunate interactions, there's no telling what could happen. It is a terrible idea, and if you continue developing it despite my warning, I will do something about it.'

'And you really think you could stop us?'

'Hmm, perhaps not directly. But there are other things I can do, things I'm sure you would find unpleasant.'

From this angle, Mel couldn't see the look Hermione gave them. But she did notice how both of the twins visibly paled. Mel turned back down to her breakfast to hide her smirk.

'Ah, no need to do anything dramatic here, Hermione.'

'Yeah, yeah, consider it scrapped.'

'All right, that's that, then. But you still haven't said—'

Hermione let out something between a sigh and a groan. 'Oh, come on, do I really have to explain why Puking Pastilles are a bad idea?'

'What's so bad about it?'

'I mean, I can't see any problems it could—'

'If you can't stop vomiting, how, exactly, are you supposed to swallow the antidote?'
There was silence for a few seconds. Mel glanced that way again to see the twins were slowly blinking, turned to stare at each other. 'How...'

'How...'

'How did we never notice that?'

'We are such bloody idiots.'

' Completely and utterly retarded.'

'I can't believe it. I just can't.'

'No reason for quite this much self-flagellation.' Hermione paused, taking another slow sip from her tea. 'Besides, if you just make the antidote topical instead, that solves the problem. Shouldn't be too difficult.'

For a couple seconds, the twins just gaped at her. Then the nearer one grabbed her by both shoulders, jerked her around in her seat, and planted a kiss on her forehead with a surprisingly noisy, disgustingly wet-sounding smack. While the Gryffindors within a few seats, and even a couple nearby Hufflepuffs, roared with jeers and laughter, Hermione shoved him away, hard enough her back bumped into Mel's shoulder, started wiping at her forehead with her sleeve. 'What the hell are you doing?' she hissed at him.

'Forgive us uncouth cretins, Miss Granger—'

'—but sometimes we simply cannot contain ourselves.'

'It came upon me so swiftly, so suddenly, I was powerless to stop it.'

'I know the feeling, brother, all too well.'

'The urge overcame me, and I simply had to kiss your brain.'

'It is—'

'—so very—'

'—beautiful,' they finished, this time in unison.

Hermione just grumbled to herself, turning back to sit forward in her seat. And it could be Mel's imagination, but she thought Hermione might be blushing. It was barely noticeable, just a hint of pink high on her cheeks. That could just be because of the bystanders laughing and all, but... Was Mel the only one who'd noticed these three had been acting weird lately? Wait, no, Ron had commented a couple times too; a glance across the table showed he was even now giving them a suspicious look. It was just... It was weird, that was all.

She was just wondering if she should maybe ask Hermione about that at some point when they weren't in public when she jumped nearly out of her seat. Goddamn owl, fucking thing appeared out of nowhere, and nearly flew right into her, Jesus. She glared at the little ball of ruffled feathers for a second, getting a flat, almost bored look in return, before reaching for the half-size parchment envelope tied to its leg. Once she had it free, she just blinked at it for a second. It had her name on it, of course, but it also had something where the sender's name went — mages don't often do that. But it said only, Guess. What was that supposed to—
Wait...

Even as the little owl lifted from the table, Mel looked up to scan the Hufflepuff table. It didn't take her long to spot Susan. Granted, she was helped along a bit when the same owl fluttered down to land on her shoulder. Feeding the owl a bit of bacon from her fingers, Susan just smiled at her. After barely an instant of meeting her eyes, Mel had to look away.

Great. So, this was happening now, apparently.

For a moment, she considered not even opening the envelope, and just setting it on fire. But, well...she had to admit, she was sort of curious what was in there. Not that it would really make a difference — she sincerely doubted there was anything Susan could say or do to change her mind. She was just curious. So. Why not? She broke the seal.

And then nearly jumped out of her seat again, letting out a startled yelp she'd probably be embarrassed about later, when a bundle of flowers appeared out of nowhere. Just, pop, there they were. Susan must have done some magic something on the envelope, because they'd appeared far too quickly, not to mention there was not enough room for these in there.

Taking a few calming breaths, silently cursing herself for her own jumpiness, she started picking through the flowers. The roses she recognised instantly, one each in red, white, and a pink that looked more like a pale purple, really. And, well, lilies she knew, she'd looked them up a long time ago for the obvious reason, a few of those — though these were a weird colour she didn't think she'd seen before, a blue-purple so dark it seemed almost black. A handful of violets, though they didn't look quite right. They were obviously violets, but there was an odd reddish tinge to the little purple petals that was new. The last one, she wasn't even sure what it was. The bunches of tiny pink flowers...sort of looked like oregano, maybe? She didn't know, something like that.

Once she was done sorting through the flowers, she couldn't help a sudden flare of embarrassment, sharp enough she could feel the heat on her cheeks. Anyone could guess pretty easily what was going on here, and she'd managed to entirely forget she was in public right now. Dammit. She looked up to shoot a glare over at the Hufflepuff table, but Susan wasn't there anymore — a few quick glances around, and she found her just walking out the door with Hannah. Dammit.

'Well,' Hermione said, bringing Mel back to her surroundings with a start, 'someone likes you.'

Mel hesitated for a second before deciding, eh, fuck it. But she still couldn't say Susan's name in anything higher than a grumble.

'Ah, well, it would be her, wouldn't it.' Hermione was silent a moment, her head tilted a bit to the side, eyes jumping over the flowers. 'Was there anything else in there?'

'Erm.' She hadn't checked, actually. The flowers had just randomly appeared before she'd even gotten the envelope open. Pulling it out from under them, she slipped a couple fingers inside to find only a single little rectangle of parchment. It was barely large enough to fit the words written on it, though they were pretty much nonsense to Mel anyway. More flowers I noted, yet I none could see, But sweet or colour it had stolne from þee. Yeah, no idea what that was supposed to mean. Tipping the parchment to Hermione, she asked, 'Mean anything to you?'

Hermione took a second to read it, then nodded. 'That's what I thought it'd say, actually. It's from— Hey!'

The shout was because one of the twins had reached around her to snatch the parchment out of Mel's fingers. Both Mel and Hermione tried to grab him, but he pulled away too quickly, jumping to his
feet out of their reach. 'Oh ho ho, what have we here!'

With a matching, painfully bright grin on his face, the other said, 'I do believe we have us some poetry!'

'Ah,' the first said in a breathy sigh, wrapping his arms about himself, 'music to my ears, it is.'

'The forward violet thus did I chide—'

Mel sprung to her feet right on Hermione's heels, her hand going for her wand, even as the twins both reached for theirs.

'—sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells—'

The twins' wrists turned in the familiar flourish, the pale blue of a pair of shield charms springing into existence. Yes, that was totally discreet, it wasn't like they had practically the whole school staring at them now. But Mel couldn't stop a smirk from touching her lips anyway. Silly boys apparently had no idea who they were dealing with.

'—if not from—'

That was as far as they got. Drawing her magic up in the now long-familiar way, but letting her anger touch and colour it in a way that was much newer, Mel shot off a deep purple stunning charm at the twin who happened to be talking at the moment. It slipped through his shield like it wasn't even there, catching him in mid-syllable, instantly dropping him to the ground. The other only had long enough to gape at her before she fired off a second one an instant later, and he collapsed to the floor next to his brother, both unconscious.

While seemingly the entire Hall burst into laughter — Mel could imagine nearly everyone in the room had probably fantasised about hexing the twins at some point — she bent down to snatch the slip of parchment from where it'd fallen, set it on fire before anyone else could do anything annoying.

'Well,' Hermione said, sounding somewhere between confused and amused. 'I feel like I should be angry at them for teasing you, but mostly I'm just impressed they have that memorised.'

Mel rolled her eyes. Yep. Hermione.

When the familiar sharp, stern voice suddenly appeared from right behind her, Mel couldn't help jumping again. 'Is there a problem here, Miss Granger, Miss Black?'

Mel reluctantly turned to face McGonagall, trying her very best not to look guilty, wondering how she could possibly get out of stunning two students in the Great Hall without getting detention. But, as usual in this sort of conversation, Hermione took point. Her voice all smooth and casual, she said, 'Oh, nothing big, Professor. These two were just getting a bit out of hand — you know how they can be — so Mel put them in a time-out.'

The snickers shooting back and forth along the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables was no surprise at all, the perfectly deadpan delivery from Hermione somewhat unusual, but not too shocking. The way McGonagall's thin lips twitched slightly sideways, as though ruthlessly suppressing a smirk, that was really fucking weird. Had the whole world gone completely insane when she hadn't been watching or something? Seriously... 'Well, don't let them sleep in too long. We wouldn't want them to miss their first class, would we?'

'Of course, Professor.' Hermione's wand flicked into her hand, and she shot two quick charms at the twins, invisible to the eye but detectable by the slight sense of static in the air. Nothing happened, the
twins still unconscious. Hermione frowned to herself, and Mel was just opening her mouth to explain she had to cast a dispel first — most of the more advanced stunners temporarily charmed the target against basic revival spells, the one Mel had used simple enough the usual dispel would do — when Hermione did exactly that with a wide, casual swish, a repeat of the revival charms this time waking the twins up immediately.

Before they could even get back on their feet, Mel was already moving for the door. She'd barely gotten any breakfast, true, but she'd rather wait until lunch than deal with the twins right now. So, of course, Susan just had to be waiting in the Entrance Hall. At the base of the stairs, leaning against the end of the balustrade, talking to Hannah. Dammit. Mel crossed her arms, and plodded steadily across the Hall, intending to walk right past Susan, continue on up without a word. She did not want to deal with any of this right now.

She was nearing the stairs when heavy pounding of feet reached her over the low noise of the Hall, followed by Hermione's voice. 'Mel! Hold up, you forgot your— Oh.' Mel didn't slow, but she did glance over her shoulder, finding Hermione already surprisingly close behind. Carrying a bundle in her hands that was obviously the flowers Susan had sent her. Hermione blinked at Susan for a couple seconds before, coming in behind Mel, she said, 'The twins made a scene, ruined it the way they do. Nice try, though. Very sweet.'

Well, you know me.’ That was as much as Susan got out before Mel passed her, starting up the steps without slowing. 'Strike one, I guess. Meeting tonight?

'Yep, see you then.' And Hermione followed her wordlessly up one flight of stairs, then a second. 'All right, Mel, could you stop for a second.'

Mel reluctantly came to a halt, turned to face Hermione. And instantly grimaced when Hermione made to hand the flowers over to her. 'No, I— I don't want those.'

A sad sort of smirk at her lips, Hermione said, 'And here I thought you liked flowers. You girl.'

She had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. Rolling her eyes seemed good, she went with that. But she knew resisting was pointless, Hermione never bloody gave up, so she reluctantly took the things, fingers carefully encircling each stem as Hermione released them, smooth and soft and slightly damp against her fingers. She'd always liked flowers, yes — though she'd very quickly learned not to comment on it, Petunia always gave her funny looks when she said so. And they were nice, yes, soft and delicate and the colours sharp and vibrant, but she was trying not to notice that. Only partially because the thought was making her uncomfortable. And of course there had to be bloody violets. She'd always liked violets. They smelled nice. A lot of flowers didn't smell like much of anything, but violets were nice. Petunia didn't like them for some reason, so there'd never been any in the garden or in the house. Not nearly as bad as her hatred for lilies, though — one time Vernon had gotten her a ridiculous huge bouquet that happened to have a few lilies in it and he'd spent a week in the guest bedroom for the slip, which Mel thought was a silly overreaction, but okay. But some of the neighbours had grown them, violets, and they're one of those things that have a habit of spreading around whether you like it or not, so she'd seen plenty. They'd always been one of her favourites.

Those and lilies, mostly for the same association Petunia was stupid over — so of course there had to be a couple of those too.

Her fingers tightened on the stems slightly. It was taking a frustrating amount of effort to stop herself from leaning in and sniffing the goddamn flowers. She couldn't. She couldn't encourage this even a little bit, not even in her own head. It needed to stop. 'Yeah,' she said, muttering under her breath, 'that's the problem.'
Hermione gave her a narrowed, curious look, but thankfully let it drop.

By now, Mel had changed her mind. Asking Dora to give her duelling lessons was the single best decision she had ever made in her entire life.

And she wasn't only saying that because of how much less useless she would be in a fight now — though that was rather absurd. She didn't really notice it most of the time because, well, all of her lessons were with Dora, and Dora had seven years of experience on her. Three or four of those years, she couldn't remember exactly, in intensive training with some of the best fighters in the whole goddamn country. It would probably be some years yet until she got good enough Dora couldn't wipe her out blindfolded and with her hands tied behind her back. It also didn't help that she was still reading her mother's journals, so at some level she was always comparing herself to her, and... Well, this was a woman who in at least one duel Mel knew about had been quite nearly evenly matched with the most feared Dark Lord in centuries. And she hadn't even reached her twentieth birthday yet. So, not a fair comparison.

Well, not quite evenly matched — thinking back on it, it seemed obvious that Voldemort hadn't really been trying to kill Lily. For...some reason? She had been constantly shooting to kill, though, so he would have been at something of a disadvantage. So.

And Mel was ridiculously better than she had been. She wouldn't be surprised if, in only the month or so Dora had been teaching her, she'd learned more spells than every class in the entirety of fourth year — including her extracurricular studies with Hermione. While knowing more spells wasn't everything in a fight, it did give you more options. And she could get spells out far faster as well. She was far quicker at calling and bending her magic than she had once been, she was adding spells she could do silently by the dozen, and could even cast more than one charm at once. Just copies of the same charm, that was the point of spell duplication. She could only get a few out at a time, nothing like someone like Dora — just to prove a point, Dora had destroyed an entire army of conjured clay man-sized figures, rendering Mel and Katie temporarily blind and deaf in the process, by casting *fifty incendiary curses at once* — and it often didn't even occur to her to duplicate charms when it would be useful, but she *could* do it. And, sure, she still wasn't as fast as Dora even when she was being easy and casual about it, but her cousin was a bloody Auror. Judging by what she'd seen of her classmates' abilities, Mel was pretty sure she and Katie would both be able to flatten all but a couple people out of the entire Hogwarts student population.

Which seemed to her insanely rapid progress, especially on her part — she had the feeling Katie wasn't improving quite as quickly as she was, though she had started and was still better than Mel. Dora had reassured her, if that was the right word, that she was just catching up and would plateau eventually, so it was possible Mel had no clue what she was talking about.

No, while that was all *definitely* nice, it wasn't what made doing this the best decision she'd ever made. Even if some of the reasons made her feel a bit silly for even noticing. She hadn't noticed it at first, it had only really struck her a few days ago. She'd been in the bathroom, changing in seclusion as she still always did — by some of the things Lavender and Parvati said, she assumed they were coming up with wild theories to explain exactly why. But anyway, she'd just randomly caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and had gotten...quite distracted, honestly.

Just...it was **weird**. It was still **weird**, on some level, to see herself in the mirror, and like how she looked. She actually looked sort of nice these days. She assumed it was a combination of the much more consistent and less shitty diet and all the exercising Dora had been making her do. She'd never been at all an active person, which hadn't exactly been her fault — it's quite hard to do much of anything when you're so close to the brink of starvation even jogging for a minute makes you
breathless and dizzy. She'd mostly gotten through everything, be it running away from Dudley's gang or various magical creatures or dark wizards or whatever, on pure adrenaline. It hadn't occurred to her to wonder at the time, but according to Ellie those crashes she would always get after nearly anything strenuous were not normal. She'd gotten through quidditch games fine, for the most part, but it's not the most intensive game, is it? Whole thing is on bloody brooms.

It was weird how she could carry her book bag from the Great Hall to her room in Gryffindor tower and not be in agony from her shoulders all down through her back. It was weird how long she could run without feeling like she was going to pass out. It was weird how she could stand up for longer than ten minutes at a time and not feel like she was about to collapse. It was weird how she'd never noticed how weak and pathetic she'd been until she suddenly wasn't anymore.

And it was really fucking weird seeing herself in the mirror. She still wasn't getting that, erm, curvy, she guessed was a word. More than right after her unintentional sex change, sure, but compared to honestly the majority of the girls in her year, she was still rather tiny and... She didn't want to use the word "androgyrous", but she wasn't sure what else to say. Flat? Whatever. She didn't really expect that to change — from pictures she'd seen of her mother, and just a couple of the women on her father's side, she was pretty sure she had genetics to blame for that. But it was enough that...

And she had muscles, enough she could actually see, which was the weirdest thing. Not a lot, sure, but thin lines visible here and there, obvious what they were hinting at. Which, yes, she was aware that was a thing a lot of people didn't like so much, but... Well, she had ended up staring at herself for an embarrassingly long period of time, so take that as an indication of her opinion.

Now, if only she could translate this into actual self-confidence in public, she'd be golden. Not holding her breath.

The other big thing she'd noticed she was also somewhat embarrassed about, she probably couldn't admit it out loud. Not for the same kinds of reasons but, she guessed, because of what it might say about what kind of person she was. Not only was she getting a lot better at this duelling thing, but...

It was rather fun. She enjoyed it.

This was something she and Katie did a lot these days, more often than they had proper lessons, even. Dora couldn't make it to the castle all the time, but they'd sometimes go to the Room without her anyway, not quite daily but close, just to get a few practice duels in. Dora was actually observing this time, but still. And standing a few feet away from Katie on the uneven, rocky and weeded ground Dora always requested for some reason, her wand held loose and ready at her side, she and Katie both waiting for Dora to call the start to the duel, Mel was hopeless to prevent the eager thrill filling her chest, twitching insistently at her lips, making her head blissfully light and fluttering, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet with impatience. Which she thought was a bit strange of her, considering they hadn't even started yet. She couldn't help it. She was excited, she was excited every time, she couldn't even say exactly why.

Duelling was just fun. She couldn't help it.

The very instant Dora called to start, with barely even a twitch from her wand, Katie sent a charm off at her. Mel noticed with some amusement it was the same stunning charm she'd knocked both the twins out with a couple days ago. Katie always did that, snapped off a disabling hex right as the duel started, hoping Mel would get hit by it, an instant victory — that had happened a few times, so it wasn't unreasonable. But Mel wasn't as much of an idiot anymore, stepped out of the way of the familiar deep purple spellglow, moving her own wand in a wide swirl to fire back even as the hex passed her. Just a simple severing charm, the first thing that had occurred to her. It didn't really matter what she did, since she expected Katie to block it anyway.
While she couldn't throw the ridiculous amount of power into this thing Dora could, the arc of the
curse racing across the air so dim it was invisible, she was slightly impressed with herself when she
noticed the subtle wavering, her magic thick enough the air around it shimmered.

She waited only long enough to see how Katie was going to deal with that: conjuring. Okay. With a
long breath she willed her power to rise, almost giddy with the flickering lightness filling her, but she
didn't have time to be distracted by that. Katie was already transfiguring her conjured shield —
bronze again, she liked bronze for some reason — into curved blades, glimmering brilliantly as they
flew upon her. Voice a low hiss, she incanted, 'violenter aufer,' the charm rocketing from her wand
as an eye-piercing dagger of white light. It struck the lead edge of the nearest conjured blade,
exploding in a flash of orange-yellow flame, what was essentially a very dramatic fire elemental
dispel consuming the magic holding together the conjuration, the blades vanishing with a bang and a
roar and a flood of smoke.

Mel was pelted by a few tiny bits of heat-blackened bronze, but she'd gotten most of it, anyway.

And then three spellglows were racing through the cloud of smoke, and she wasn't sure what they
were but they didn't feel dark, the first one was missing her, but she made a little sideways skip out of
the path of the second, then deflected the third into the ground behind her with a little twitch of her
wand. Getting better at that. She brought her wand back up out of the flourish, with the now-familiar
twist and jab, a muttered, 'cumigne lacerā,' but then she had a thought at the last moment, scrambled
to catch the charm before it could be released. This always felt weird, the fluttering, raging heat of
her own magic trapped under her skin, but she was used to it by now. She imagined the spellglow
slicing through the air, a hard dagger of yellow-orange light, and then she imagined that spellglow
splitting, like passing through a prism, dividing into five. The charm drew harder on her magic,
energy dense enough in her hand her skin burned and her joints stung, but the eager dancing of life
and power through her head and chest had her smiling anyway.

Mel ducked out of the way of a flurry of little sliverish darts heading straight for her chest, because of
course Katie hadn't just been waiting for Mel to finish, and Mel used the movement to spin on her
heel, her wand passing sideways in a long, sharp swishing. She wasn't great at aiming duplicated
charms, honestly, but good enough for this. The five incendiary curses sprung away from her, the
sudden absence of giggling magic in her head making her stumble, five piercing yellow lights arcing
in toward Katie. The smoke had dissipated enough Katie was visible again, so Mel could see her
bring her wand up to deflect, sinking a bit in preparation to dodge, only to hitch with surprise clear
from here when she noticed the charms weren't coming in toward her, but the ground at her feet, in
front of her and to the sides. A grimace twisting her lips, Katie brought up a pale orangish shield
charm, disappearing behind a wall of fire and dirt and smoke and rock when Mel's incendiary curses
hit an instant later.

Taking a deep breath, willing magic to fill her again, Mel took just an instant to smile at the sensation
of it running through her, wild and hot and powerful and alive. Then she pointed her wand to the
ground, started muttering, 'Flammae immortālēs, quia intrā omn—'

Oh, what the fuck was that? There was...something charging through the smoke and debris, a pillar
of rock and metal and glass and dirt, twisting in the air like a sideways dust devil. Except, parts of it
seemed to be glowing. Some of it was charmed, she guessed. That was rather impressive, Katie just —
You know what, think about that later. 'Ūlen cuśējit.' The spell came as a shockwave of wind, so
thick it was visible, racing out from the tip of her wand until it met that whatever that was Katie had
made, disturbing the vortex's motion enough it simply collapsed, rock and metal raining down to the
ground well in front of her.

Funnily enough, she wasn't even certain she'd pronounced the incantation properly. She was used to
Latin and Greek and shite by now, but Belēs was impossible.

And Katie was too goddamn fast. Mel was catching up, but she was still quicker. Before the debris had even fully settled Katie's wand was already moving in a flash, and a flurry of spellglows were racing across the air. Bludgeoning hexes, she was pretty sure, two, three, five...well, a lot. Mel hesitated for an instant, her breath hot in her throat, before dropping to one knee, touching the tip of her wand to the ground. 'Èrişh ŏā,' and glimmering blue-green crystal was flaring up from the ground in front of her, arcing up and over her back. A bare second later, there were a few hard thudding noises, waves of sparkling light carried through her half-conjured barrier, but the thing held under the barrage with hardly a shudder. Very useful spell, learned it from her mother's journals. Couldn't quite do it without actually touching her wand to the ground, so she didn't have near the versatility with it her mother had in that memory of her duel with Voldemort she'd seen, but still useful.

But, funnily enough, she wasn't even certain she'd pronounced the incantation properly. She was used to Latin and Greek and shite by now, but Melīx was impossible.

A smirk touching her face, she twisted her wrist, released a banishing charm into the crystal right in front of her, as overpowered as she could possibly make it on such short notice. Overpowered enough it kicked her back somewhat, she had to brace herself to not fall over, but her barrier was shattered, dozens of shards of glittering turquoise winging through the air at high speed, long and hard and deadly sharp. Before the blades had even reached Katie, she snapped up to her feet, her wand rising in a twisting motion before slamming down with a call of, 'Steðinn detti!' the magic pouring out of her as a gust of wind that roared in her ears. Not even waiting a second, she started her next hex, wand moving in a jabbing twirl, grinning again at the crackling of magic in her veins. Katie deflected the crystal shards well enough, hesitated at the hammerblow of concentrated wind falling upon her, managed to disperse it with a growl Mel actually heard from all the way over here, the force still enough to send her reeling back a couple steps. And the next spell left Mel's wand as a tight lance of dark green, Katie instinctively snapping up that same soft orange shield charm. Mel saw Katie tense as she realised exactly which hex was about to hit her, but it was too close, already too late to do anything about it.

Mel smirked.

Green hit orange with a low, reverberating crash, Katie's defenses instantly shattering into a million pieces under the force of Mel's shield-breaker. As Katie staggered again — she knew from experience having a shield shattered like that was really uncomfortable — Mel started walking forward, setting the ground to Katie's left and right on fire with two easy sweeps of her wand. She sent hex after hex after Katie, mostly stunning and bludgeoning, but also a couple stinging just because, forcing her to deflect even as she tried to collect herself again.

For some inexplicable reason, the way Katie was scrambling away from her between walls of crackling flame, desperately trying to block the rain of hexes, falling too thick, still too disoriented from Mel's shield-breaker to fire back, was amusing Mel far too much. She held back the urge to laugh, she knew Katie wouldn't take it well.

But, this had gone on long enough. She was basically toying with Katie by this point. She considered drawing it out just because, but decidedly that would be a bit excessive. So she slipped a disarming charm in the middle of the stream of bludgeoners and stunners. The invisible hex hit Katie before she could react, knocking her off her feet, her wand flipping into the air to land on the opposite side of the fire to her right.

She'd actually won. She didn't think she'd ever done that before. At least, not in a practice duel.
where Katie hadn't made a stupid, fatal mistake while trying to be too fancy, those didn't count. She'd actually won.

Mel just couldn't stop smirking. It was actually almost making her face hurt a little. But she wasn't really trying that hard.

They only went on for a few more minutes, Dora going over things to keep working on, blah blah. Mel was fighting a smug grin the whole time, and Katie kept sending her glares, but that was fine. It looked like she was maybe starting to catch up now. That could only be a good thing. She had good moods so inconsistently she wasn't going to let Katie ruin hers.

And it had been far too much fun. The memory of Katie being knocked over by her disarming hex, letting out a yelp of surprise, she was still having trouble stopping herself from giggling minutes later. She had to bite her lip and force herself to listen to Dora to hold it in.

'Mel, stay a minute.'

She blinked at Dora, glanced over her shoulder at Katie. Didn't seem to have any more idea what this was about than Mel did. She shrugged — probably some family thing or something, who knows. As soon as Katie left, the Room reformed around them, which was always somewhat weird to watch. Some animal part of her brain, evolved before people had developed magic, screaming at her that something was wrong, her surroundings shouldn't contort and bubble like that, the sensation making her a bit nauseous. But soon it was over, the big open area Dora usually made for practice shrunk to a tiny wood-paneled room, holding nothing but a single sofa before a cheerily-crackling hearth.

When she thought about it, it was sort of weird the things the Room could pull off. Hogwarts in general, really — though it wasn't taken advantage of often, the castle technically had no constant form, could shape itself to fit the needs of the present situation. She guessed there was a reason the Founders had been so famous in their time.

Dora moved to sat on one side of the couch so, internally shrugging, Mel followed her. And was further confused by how Dora just sat there for long moments, not saying anything. It was obvious she was hesitating. Which was weird. Her aggravating new cousin had never really seemed the type to hesitate. And it must be about something rather serious, too, by the way her hair had gone solid black, her skin unnaturally pale. As the silence stretched on, a persistent little niggling of anxiety started itching at her throat. Had something happened? She would think if anything so terrible had been going on, Sirius would have informed her by now...

Finally, staring into the fire instead of looking at her, Dora opened her mouth to speak, her voice low and cautious. 'I don't really know how to say this. I've never been on this end of the conversation before, you see. I've gotten it on your end — from both my mother and Alastor, actually — but...'

She trailed off, shrugged a little.

'Erm...' Nope. Had no clue what Dora was talking about. But then, that wasn't exactly a rare occurrence anyway. 'What conversation?'

Dora bit her lip a moment, then let a short sigh. 'That fight with Katie just now, you could have ended it sooner than you did.'

'Oh.' Well, she guessed she could have. She could have sent off that disarming hex immediately. Or slipped it in far earlier in that rain of random little hexes she'd been casting at the end. 'I just...' No, didn't know how to finish that sentence. Honestly, she didn't know what she just. At least, she had no idea how to explain without making herself seem...well, you know.
'You don't have to explain, Mel. I saw the look on your face.' Dora turned to look at her, something of a crooked, sad smile on her face. 'You were enjoying yourself a bit too much, I think.'

Mel cringed at the black sinking in her stomach, had to break eye contact, staring down at a corner of the room. Well, yes, she guessed she had been. She just... She didn't know. She couldn't even explain why exactly. It'd just been inexplicably fun, she couldn't help it. 'Are you saying I should, ah...'

'No,' Dora said, voice suddenly a little louder, a little flatly insistent. 'If I know what you're thinking, that doesn't help. Just—' She let out another sigh, and Mel resisted the urge to look, see what expression was on her face, the squirming heat in her chest holding her back. 'Okay. Let me borrow a little wisdom from my mum. I'm assuming you know who Bellatrix Lestrange is, that she's my mum's sister.'

Mel blinked, quick glanced at Dora. She was looking away from Mel again, staring at the fire, a distant sort of look on her face Mel couldn't read. 'Ah, yeah, I know.'

'See, I've heard so many times that some people are born bad, that that's just the way they are. That there's no helping it, no changing it. Personally, I'm not convinced anyone is born evil. Some may be more susceptible to falling into, shall we say, bad habits. For some people, it's all too easy to become evil. But they didn't start that way. They had to be pushed by something to get there.'

In the short pause, Mel remembered a trip in a pensieve, black and white tiles improbably clean, hints of a victim become victimiser, a young boy hiding fear behind cold eyes.

'My mum told me stories, about her childhood. Her father wasn't around very much, busy with House business, and her mother...wasn't very nice. And she often had friends over who were even worse. Bellatrix... She did everything she could, at every opportunity, to protect her younger sisters from them. Even now, Mum really doesn't like to think of the punishment Bellatrix took in her place. So, she wasn't born evil.

'But see...' Dora let out a long sigh, her head tilting back to rest against the sofa. 'Bellatrix eventually went away to Hogwarts. And in second year, she joined the duelling club — which was a thing Hogwarts had back then, Dumbledore convinced Flitwick to close it during the war. And she was good at it, as many women of our House seem to naturally be. And she enjoyed it, being on the other side of a wand for once, enjoyed it perhaps too much. And we all know how that turned out. It can be so easy, for people like you and me, people whose talents lie where ours do, people who have that fire inside to push and fight and win like we do, it can be so easy to give into it. To do as we will with other people, because we don't particularly care about them, and because we can, and because it's fun. Now, what you did with Katie a few minutes ago wasn't that bad, just a little playing around in a duel. But I could tell just watching... Well, it would be very easy for you to become something you might hate, and not even realise it.'

'You think I...' Mel had to stop to swallow; her throat didn't seem to be working properly, her voice all thin and shaking. Which was weird because, again, she didn't really seem to be feeling all that much. Or at least not feeling much she was aware of. Her chest was a bit hot, though she couldn't say exactly what that was, but her mind was oddly empty. But she just did this sometimes, she was used to it by now. 'I don't...' No, wasn't even sure what she was trying to say there.

'I'll just say it plain.' Dora turned to her again, giving her another sad smile. 'I could be a Dark Lady, if I wanted to. Or something very similar. I'm powerful enough, I'm skilled enough. Sometimes, the idea is even tempting. Arresting someone who has done something terrible, but I know will likely buy their way off, or has some relative in a convenient place to make the problem disappear. Well, I
could the problem disappear. Or, when people don't come quietly, but insist on fighting me — well, I'm sure how know by now how it feels to have so much magic running through you that's begging to be used, and sometimes I just get so annoyed with these idiots, trying to fight me even though they have to know they don't stand a chance, some foolish sense of honour. I sometimes have to stop myself from casting spells I really shouldn't. Sometimes, watching all the incompetent, selfish arseholes running our government, watch them blunder and scheme... Sometimes I'm convinced this country will be a better place if I murder them all and do it myself.'

Mel's disbelief must be showing on her face, because Dora's smile twitched wider, her eyebrows raising and a pale blue touching the tips of her hair. 'I mean it, Mel. I know it's not obvious with the way I usually act. But see, that's part of why I act that way in the first place. There are many people who would not be happy if they knew what I actually thought of them. And if I act like a silly, ditzy little slag all the time, people are less likely to be afraid of me. I mean, I am the only known metamorphmaga in Britain right now, which by default makes me quite nearly the most magically powerful person in the country, and ordinarily people would be worried what I might do with it, but because I act so harmless most of the time they tend to completely forget.

'Of course, part of the reason is simply that teasing people is fun. And, well, teasing people is a much more prosocial way of amusing myself than cursing them, don't you think?'

Despite the seriousness of the topic, Mel for some reason found herself letting out a short snort of laughter. 'I guess. I just rather wish it weren't me you were teasing so much.'

Dora grinned at her, just for a second before turning more sober again. 'My point is, it may be new, something you hadn't opportunity to notice about yourself before, but I'm starting to think you're a bit too much like me. I'm not saying you should...I don't know, repress these impulses entirely, or ignore them. They'll always be there. Just be aware of them, be aware of what you're thinking and why you're thinking it. And if you realise you're about to do something questionable for irrational reasons, stop yourself. And if you slip — I mean, with a big thing, not a little thing like today — and you need help, or just someone to talk to about it, call me. Or Sirius, I guess, I suspect he's had to deal with the same thing a few times. Just the way we Blacks are, I think.'

This might sound a little weird, considering what they were talking about, but Mel felt a little smile twitching at her lips. Probably because of that last comment — actually having a family was still a new experience for her, and she was increasingly coming to like it, even tiny little comments like that. 'Actually, I...' She paused a moment, biting her lip, thinking how to word what she was thinking. 'I was going to draw it out longer. But I decided it was, ah, pointlessly cruel, so I stopped myself.'

Dora smiled at her again, but with a slight quirk at the edges. 'And here I thought you'd just gotten bored.' Mel rolled her eyes. 'But really, that's good. Just, keep doing that. You don't need to obsess over it or anything, just be aware of it. And if you're ever having trouble, I'll always be here.'

In the privacy of her own head, Mel had to wonder if that thought were reassuring or annoying. She must be getting used to her most embarrassing cousin, because she was leaning toward the former.

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Mel was really, really, really starting to hate crying.

She'd managed to walk Ellie through most of it. That incident with that memory potion, she meant, and what she'd seen and figured out. She'd been talking for a while, but now her throat was going all tight and hard, and her vision was blurring a little, and she had to stop to keep control over herself. Her head was being a bit weird again, another of those not really feeling her own emotions things. She was crying, so there had to be something going on in here, but mostly she was just embarrassed.
about the crying. What was this, the second time in a week? Third time in the last few months, she thought. She hadn't cried for years, and now it just seemed to keep happening.

Oh, god, she hoped she wasn't turning into some weepy, pathetic little bitch. Blech.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, trying to get back in control of herself. At some point, she'd brought her feet up onto her chair, her arms wrapped around her ankles, forehead pressed against her legs just below her knees. Or above, whatever. Which she realised was sort of...she didn't know, childish, she guessed, but she just wasn't comfortable with Ellie looking at her right now, and that was the best thing she could come up with. And her chest and throat hurt, and she was feeling annoyingly hot, and inexplicably hungry for some reason, and she hated crying, she just wished it would bloody stop.

After a long while she jumped, nearly falling over against an arm of the chair, when something hit the floor with a sharp slap. She tipped her legs a bit to the side, looked around. Ellie had dropped that clipboard and stack of papers she always had when meeting with Mel, and leaned forward in her chair, her elbows on her knees and her fingers lightly interlaced. Giving her a very strange, intense sort of look, which was kind of making Mel want to hide behind her legs again. 'Er...'

A smile pulling a little bit at her lips, Ellie said, 'I'm going to say a couple things here, that I think you need to hear. And they might sound a bit mean at first, so bear with me.'

Mel didn't really want to say anything to that, how annoying and tight and unsteady her throat was being at the moment. Not that she really knew what she could possibly say anyway. So she just frowned at her.

Calm and flat, 'You're being an idiot.' Mel felt her frown turn into a glare, and she was opening her mouth to say...something, not sure what, when Ellie cut her off, saying, 'No, no, just listen. I bet you a galleon you'll agree with me in a minute.'

Honestly, Mel didn't think that said very much. She thought she was an idiot kind of a lot. Other people saying it was different, though...for some reason. Whatever.

'So, on the one hand,' Ellie said, splitting her fingers so she could hold a hand out a bit to the side, fingers curled, 'you just want to be a normal person. To do normal people things like have an ordinary conversation or just go out in public without spontaneously transforming into a nervous wreck. But then, on the other hand,' moving her opposite hand to mirror the first, 'you don't let yourself do ordinary things. Because stupid, unthinking people around you have given you this insane idea that you have to defeat the Dark Lord. You can't do ordinary teenager things because, now that you actually have access to people who will teach you, you have to be studying and training every free moment — you simply don't have time to do ordinary teenager things. And it's better not to make new friends, it's better not to get close to anyone, because the Dark Lord has already proven that he will kill people you love simply to get to you.'

Mel cringed. She hadn't thought of it that way before. That was really—

'The problem comes in because, Melantha, you can't do both. Either you have this duty to defeat the Dark Lord hanging over you every waking moment, and all of your energies have to be directed against that, and you would be perfectly justified in hating yourself a little for letting yourself be distracted, for feeling anxious and uncomfortable being pulled away from whatever you're doing to prepare for almost any reason. Or you don't, and investing your energy in doing normal people things, and maybe actually start properly healing, is something you can afford. It's one or the other. You can't do both.'
'But, I...’ She couldn’t get further than that, her throat failed her. Not that she really wanted to say what she thought of that out loud. If that was how it was, if she could only do one, then, well, she was sort of doomed, wasn’t she? She didn’t think she’d told Ellie about the prophecy, but... Sure, Dumbledore had said he didn’t believe it meant Mel had to face Voldemort directly anymore, but she still had to do something. And Voldemort was going to come after her anyway, so it likely didn’t matter, she had to be ready either way. If she could only do one, it was pretty obvious which one she was stuck with.

Even though she hadn’t said anything, by the somewhat exasperated look on her face it was very clear Ellie had a rough idea what she was thinking. 'I don’t even really know how to get across how absurd this is. Melantha, the idea that you would even be capable of defeating him any time soon is absolutely preposterous. I don’t expect you to do it. Honestly, I think anyone who does is a total bloody moron.'

Okay. This was making her weirdly uncomfortable. She couldn’t even say how exactly. 'Erm, well, you actually know me, and—’

‘No, Melantha, it has nothing to do with that. I thought the idea was preposterous before I ever met you. I never believed the story that you had anything to do with him disappearing the first time. I always assumed your mother was responsible. I mean—’ Ellie shrugged a little. ‘—I don’t know if anyone’s ever tried to explain this to you, but people talked about your mother all the time, everyone knew of her. She was absurdly powerful for her age, and was one of the few people in the High Enchanter’s little group of vigilantes who wouldn’t hold back, would fight fire with fire. Many influential people were terrified of her, and I can’t even count how many nasty articles turned up in the Prophet over the years, but ordinary people adored her for it. They would say, yes, Dumbledore is the only one he fears, but if anyone is going to kill him, to stop him for good, it’ll be Lily Potter. Dumbledore cripples himself by refusing to go for the kill, but your mother didn’t have the same problem. So, I always assumed she’d come up with some ritual or something, that took him out but sacrificed her life in the process. I never believed the Boy-Who-Lived story, assumed from the start it was propaganda.’

For long seconds, all Mel could do was sit and stare at her. She’d just realised how entirely stupid this was. What Ellie was saying was actually true. From what she could tell, her mother had come up with some ritual to protect her, and had given her life willingly to power it. Dumbledore always talked like the whole thing was unintentional, but that was retarded — if all it took for this sort of thing to happen was for someone to give their life up for another willingly, it would happen all the fucking time. It had to be something Lily had done on purpose. But, it was stupid because, while it was true, Ellie was the first person who wasn’t in the loop to ever think of it. Just...that was ridiculous. For some inexplicable reason, she had the weirdest urge to giggle, it was so dumb.

Ellie gave her a thin smile, as though reading her mind, and completely agreeing. 'And, something else important I think you need to understand that you don’t seem to, the Dark Lord is not an existential threat. What I mean is, well, the same thing will happen to him that happens to all Dark Lords. The entire country has been taken over by one Dark Lord or another, you know, more than once over British history. Most recently by Feynman in the Nineteenth Century, it wasn’t even that long ago. This Dark Lord isn’t even the worst one we’ve had — historians think the period of the Dark Lady Cromwell’s rise and reign in the Seventeenth Century led to the deaths of quite nearly a third of the magical population of Britain, a disaster this Dark Lord hasn’t even come close to. But every Dark Lord, no matter how powerful, no matter how vicious, they’ve always fallen eventually. Dark Lords create enemies just by their nature, and no one can defend from all sides at once. Inevitably, they slip. So, if the Dark Lord wins, it is not the end of the world. It’ll be terrible, yes, but it’ll be temporary. But even so, it is not your job to stop him. To be frank, anyone who tries to tell you it is is a terrible person. Someone else will take care of it.
'Now, I'm not saying you should stop your lessons with your cousin — much of what you're learning there is useful in other fields anyway, and with the stories that have always been floating around about you you'll likely be a target the rest of your life. And you needn't abandon your extracurricular studies entirely, much of that is useful as well. But it's not...’ Ellie trailed off for a moment, frowning to herself a little. 'It's not the life or death thing you make it out to be. If you want to do it, that's fine, but you don't need to do it. I really, honestly, don't think you're doomed to be, as you put it, a "neurotic mess" for the rest of your life. But healing takes effort, Melantha. You'll never get better if you don't prioritise getting better.'

Mel had absolutely no idea how she felt about this. She just... She didn't. She wasn't sure she believed it. Sure, the stuff about Voldemort not being an "existential threat" was probably true. There had been other Dark Lords before, there was no reason to think he'd be any more successful than they had been. Actually, come to think of it, he'd been less successful so far than many of them. Far as she knew, none have ever come back to life before, but if he could be killed once he could be killed again. So, Ellie was probably right about all of that.

But the rest...

It was kind of surprising her how hard it was hitting her, like one of Dora's annoyingly precise bludgeoning charms to the back of the head, and it was sort of weird feeling dizzy while sitting down, but she was used to feeling weird. God, she wanted it to be true. She hadn't let herself really think it before, she didn't entirely know why. Because she was convinced it was her responsibility, because she'd been conditioned not to question her lot in life, she didn't know. She didn't want killing Voldemort to be her responsibility. She really, really didn't. And not because it meant she would have to take at least one life, and probably several — honestly, that didn't bother her that much, which especially after a couple days ago kind of had her wondering if she was a horrible person a little bit. And not because it would be a fucking lot of work, which it definitely would be, or that it was entirely unlikely she could pull it off, which meant it was entirely likely she'd die in the attempt. None of that had much to do with it. She just...

She just didn't want to have to deal with it. She didn't. She felt a little guilty just thinking it to herself, this was the kind of thing she hardly ever let herself admit even in her own head, but at a certain level she didn't care. Honestly, she had a bit of trouble maintaining the hatred and rage for Voldemort she kind of thought she should have. The evil arsehole had killed her parents, had killed so many other people, but when he wasn't directly present, or some other arsehole wasn't saying something very Voldemort-related, she found it strangely hard to care. If there wasn't some specific thing happening to motivate her, she just couldn't keep it up. Which she kind of felt like shite about, but she couldn't help it.

If she were being perfectly honest with herself, in the privacy of her own head, beyond making sure the fuck didn't kill her, or any of the few people she cared about, she really didn't care about Voldemort that much. She didn't. More than anything, she just... She just wanted to be safe, to not have to deal with this shite anymore. She just wanted to be happy. God fucking dammit, she just...

It really didn't help that she could hardly ever remember feeling legitimately safe, sure it couldn't all be swept away from her in an instant if she wasn't careful, and she honestly wasn't even sure what happiness felt like.

She wanted to believe it, she wanted so badly, but she wasn't sure she could. And not just because she wasn't sure it could be true, Ellie didn't know about the prophecy—

'Whatever the exact details of how it will come to pass, I no longer believe it will be something you do yourself.'
Mel shook her head to herself, ignoring the memory of Dumbledore's words, ignoring the tightness increasing again in her throat and chest, no. It didn't matter what the prophecy actually said, or what Dumbledore thought it said, what mattered was what Voldemort thought it said, he would come after her either way, even without the prophecy, to undo the embarrassment of being beaten by a child, it didn't matter what—

'Melantha.' She jumped at Ellie's voice, coming from surprisingly close. She opened her eyes to find the older woman, kneeling in front of her chair, giving her an intense sort of look she couldn't quite read. 'Say it, Melantha.' While she just stared in confusion, slowly and gently, Ellie wrapped one hand around her ankle, just above her foot propped against the edge of the chair, the other coming to rest on her hand gripping her leg. A very dim part of Mel considered yanking herself away, but she was a bit too dazed at the moment to focus on it.

'Stopping the Dark Lord is not my responsibility. Say it,' she whispered, shaking Mel very slightly where she held her.

If she were to try, Mel wouldn't be able to say what was going on in her head at that moment. There was just too much. Memories snapping back and forth before she could really tell what she was remembering, her head a confusing mess of sound and colour she couldn't keep straight, and she felt her magic twitching at the edges of her control, which was really not helping. Her eyes were stinging, so she closed them, and she bit her lip, and her throat was so hot and tight she wasn't sure she'd be able to get the words out even if she tried. Ellie just whispered again, 'Say it.'

And she didn't know what it was, some of that nonsense going on in her head, the sharp heat of furious magic she was only half-aware of, Ellie's hands and voice all soft and smooth and gentle, but she wanted to believe it, god she wanted to believe it so bad, and she knew instinctively saying it would help, she had to say it, that was the whole point of what Ellie was doing here. 'Stopping the... That was as much as Mel could get out before she had to cut off, pause for a moment to get control of her breath again, cursing at her stupid pathetic uselessness in her head. 'Stopping the Dark Lord isn't my responsibility.' Ugh, stupid—

'I deserve to be happy. Say it.'

Mel had to bite her lip, ruthlessly clench down on her throat, or she suspected she would have made an embarrassing noise there. She didn't know why Ellie had to keep doing that. She just had to go and say exactly the wrong things, and she hated being like this in front of someone else, or alone even, but it was impossible to stay in control of herself when Ellie just kept saying things like that.

Or...maybe that meant those were exactly the right things to say. Nobody had ever said this was going to be comfortable.

She took a few long, shaky breaths, curled up with her head pressed against her legs again. Which didn't give her a whole lot of space to breath, really, but she just felt like doing it anyway. God, she was so pathetic sometimes, she was ridiculous. 'I d-deserve to b-b— Fuck.'

'It's okay, Melantha.' She was pretty sure she heard a bit of carefully repressed amusement on Ellie's voice, but Mel guessed she couldn't fault her for that. She was being very silly. 'It doesn't have to be perfect. This is just us.'

Mel took another slow breath, feeling like her whole body was twitching with each spasm of her stupid fucking lungs. And a couple more just be sure. And slowly, faltering, barely coherently, she got the bloody sentence out.

But Ellie just had her say both of them again.
And again.

And again.

And eventually, she didn't know how many repetitions later, feeling oddly exhausted considering she hadn't been doing anything strenuous, but at the same time oddly light, as though someone had cast a featherlight charm on her without her noticing, and maybe just a little bit, and maybe just for a little while, but...

She thought she actually believed it. Just a little bit.

A little bit, she thought, was more than good enough for now.

Laying in bed, all too warm and sleepy and comfortable to really be thinking properly, it took Mel long moments to realise something was wrong.

It was the smell that tipped her off. She'd gotten rather used to the normal smells of the girls' dorm, it never really changed that much day to day. There was that familiar tingling sweetness she was pretty sure was a scent charm of some kind Lavender used practically every day — the smell seemed to follow her around, so. A dry sharpness from those plants Parvati always had hanging around her bed, still no idea why those were there. The sugary cinnamon of those boiled sweets Fay had in her mouth more often than not. The normal musty dustiness that lingered most everywhere in the castle. All of that was familiar.

But there was something new. A lot of something new. It was that smooth, soft, oily sweetness of fresh flowers. Thicker than she thought she'd ever smelled it before, almost overwhelming, as though she were surrounded by it, swimming in it. It was the weirdest thing.

Frowning to herself a little, she opened her eyes, blinking a bit at a shaft of low sunlight, only partially diluted by the curtains around her bed. It took a couple seconds for her eyes to focus. To see what she was looking at, right in front of her nose.

What...?

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Mel turned over onto her back, gradually slid up so she was sitting against the headboard. And stared around her, dazed by a combination of amazement and disbelief.

They were everywhere. Someone had, somehow, worked flowers into her curtains. Lilies and lilac and roses and violets and peonies and lavender, some she didn't even recognise. Even her sheets were covered, coated with a dusting of loose petals. Purples and pinks and reds and blues and yellows, so thick the curtains behind them were covered entirely, could only see little slivers of her sheets here and there. Dozens of them, hundreds of them. For long moments she just sat there, staring, taking it all in.

She did not know what to think about this.

Eventually, she woke up enough, broke out of her surprise and wonder enough to realise what this was. Susan. It had to be Susan. Who else would have done it?

Though... how? How had she pulled this off, exactly? She'd guess the flowers had been stitched into the curtains somehow — that wouldn't take too much effort with a bit of magic. And she guessed getting into Gryffindor Tower wouldn't be too difficult. But how long it would it take to get them all embroidered into her curtains? Could Susan have done it without getting caught?
Mel had a sudden thought, and really wished Susan hadn't taken the opportunity to watch her sleep or something. Creepy.

She...

Mel had no idea what to do with this. Why did Susan have to keep doing this shite? Why couldn't she just give up? But no, she was always there, all bloody smiling at her, and being too fucking nice, and doing shite like *this*. Mel wished she would just stop, it would be *so much easier* if she just stopped.

She picked up a handful of petals, silky smooth and soft and vibrantly colourful, loosened her hand to let them fall back to the surface of her bed. *God*, this was too fucking beautiful, why was Susan doing this to her, dammit.

She didn't notice anything was wrong until she felt the hot stinging in her eyes and she jumped, immediately wiping at her face. *Fuck*, what the fuck was *wrong* with her, there was nothing here to be being like that about, god, she was so fucking pathetic, what was wrong with her...

She really wished Susan would stop. This had to stop. She couldn't deal with it. It was too much.

Because Susan was too damn nice, and if Mel were anyone else, if she weren't such a *fucking mess*, she'd be considering it. She would. But she couldn't, this had to stop. Susan was too bloody persistent, and it would be *so easy*, to just surrender and...and...honestly, she didn't know, and just the fact that she didn't know, no, she couldn't do it, she couldn't, she *shouldn't*—

*Stopping the Dark Lord is not my responsibility.*

*I deserve to be happy.*

Mel winced as the words practically slapped her in the face, and her lungs were being fucking stupid again, she found herself covering her face with both of her hands even though she knew that was fucking pointless. Just, god *dammit*, she'd almost think Ellie and Susan had been coordinating, fuck...

This had to stop. She didn't want this, she didn't. She didn't even...

'*You can pretend to yourself, maybe even so well you'll almost believe it. But, deep down, you know.*'  

Mel glared at the Ellie in her head, annoyed with herself for remembering that stupid line again. Fine. Fine, Ellie, yes, she knew. She thought Susan was perfectly fanciable. She usually didn't let herself think it, but she did. *Fuck*, as long as she was being honest with herself here, she didn't even mind the teasing half the time. Sometimes she went too far, especially when Tracey also happened to be in the room, and it was rather embarrassing, but she didn't mind too much. Fine. If she were a normal person, she wouldn't have hesitated nearly this long. She probably would have said yes the first time.

But that was the problem. She wasn't a normal person. She was a useless, pathetic, neurotic mess, and it would take more than a few metaphorical smacks over the head from Ellie to get her to stop it.

And, fine, yes, she knew what she was feeling. A part of her did want to say fuck it, and just do it. But the thought was *bloody terrifying*. The little she did understand about what people did in...well, relationships, she guessed, the little she did know was terrifying all by itself. But, honestly, she had virtually no idea how that sort of thing worked, and that was even worse. Stick her in the Chamber with the basilisk again, please, that sounded easier. Certainly less complicated. Close eyes, put sword in snake. So much simpler.
She guessed a lot of things seemed simpler when she was fighting for her life.

And, well, she didn't think she'd be able to bring herself to do it for another reason anyway. Susan didn't know who she really was. She'd probably feel like she was lying to her the whole time, she wouldn't...

Oh. Now that she thought about it, she had another problem. If she understood the plan correctly, now that she was sure she didn't want to go back to being Harry, they'd probably be changing her name and stuff over winter break. And that sort of thing was a matter of public record. Which meant everyone would know who she really was, she didn't expect it to take very long for the Prophet to find it and spread it all over the place. Even if she could swallow the lying to her part, it would come out eventually, and that would be awkward.

Maybe...

Okay. This was a strange idea. The whole thought of all this was completely terrifying, yes. She didn't think she'd be able to decide what to do, yes. But, maybe she didn't have to. Maybe...maybe she should just tell Susan. Then it would be her move, so to speak. It was very possible Susan wouldn't like the idea anymore, and Mel wouldn't have to decide. And everything would take care of itself. If Susan did still, well, she'd deal with that if it happened. But...this was something Susan would have to know anyway, and if it also made Susan stop...

For some inexplicable reason, she came out of the thought feeling relieved. Not sure where that came from.

Gingerly, trying not to disturb the flowers too much — god, this was pretty, she wondered how long she'd be able to keep them with preserving charms — Mel slipped out of bed, got to her feet. And realised Lavender and Fay were already up, both blinking at the garden that had been made out of her bed. Ignoring the blush on her face, Mel grabbed her clothes for the day, and fled to the bathroom, getting ready in peace.

Mel managed fine until she was all the way down into the Entrance Hall, just before the big doors barring her from breakfast. Where Susan probably already was. It wasn't until she'd almost been walking into the Great Hall that she realised her heart was pounding painfully in her throat, feeling so out of breath she was almost dizzy. She stopped a bit to the side, took a few long breaths, mentally kicking herself. She was being so ridiculous. Honestly, this wasn't that big of a deal. They were just going to talk, they'd done that dozens of times. New subject matter, of course, but still, nothing too scary. Stop being so silly, stupid.

With a last, quick sigh, she turned and stepped into the Great Hall. She ignored everything else, she just wanted to get this over with, scanned the Hufflepuff table. It wasn't that hard to spot Susan, really — her hair was quite distinctive. It helped she was sitting right next to Hannah, hard to miss her, with how ridiculously tall she was. Trying to ignore her chest being stupid, Mel just kept walking, until she was standing right behind her. 'Susan.'

Susan turned to look at her over her shoulder, a crooked sort of smile already on her face. 'Oh, Mel. Pleasant morning?' She hadn't said it outright, but with that slight lilt at the edge of her voice, it was clear Susan knew about the flowers. But of course she did, who else would have done it? Obviously.

And Mel glared at her for a second. Susan seemed far too pleased with herself. Sighing internally, she said, 'I need to talk to you. Not here.' Hey, her voice had come out level. She was slightly proud of herself for that. Which was a silly thing to be proud of, but still.

For an instant, Susan just blinked at her, but her smirk promptly stretched into a grin. 'Sure, lead the
way.' And Susan was on her feet, and they were both walking out of the hall, Mel trying not to think too much.

Before turning away, though, she did notice the look of shocked disbelief on Hannah's face.

Without even really noticing what she was doing, Mel lead her into the room she'd met Malfoy in those couple times. But, whatever, it hadn't been that far away, and it was empty. It would do. Mel walked inside, waited for Susan to trail in after her, then closed the door. Her wand was out, and she was casting locking and sealing charms on the door, then every privacy and anti-eavesdropping charm she could think of, all in a steady, unbroken stream. Finally she ran out of charms to cast, replaced her wand in her sleeve holster.

Which meant she actually had to have this conversation now. Great.

'That seems like overkill.'

Mel turned to find Susan, standing a little bit away, staring at her with her arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. She shrugged, feeling oddly sheepish. 'I just, ah, there's something you need to know, and I didn't want anyone to overhear.' Another of her crooked smiles touching her lips, Susan was about to say something, but Mel had to know something before the actual conversation. 'How did you do it?'

With a little shrug, Susan said, 'Wasn't difficult. The flowers I mostly got through owl order. I asked Talis, she's one of the Hogwarts elves, to find me a spare set of Gryffindor bed curtains. Just took a couple charms and a bit of thread to get the flowers stitched in. The flowers that didn't fit, a couple more charms stripped the petals off. I asked Talis to go to your room in the middle of the night, swap the curtains, and spread the loose petals over your bed, as quietly as possible. I haven't heard back from her yet, but I take it she pulled it off. I guess I owe Talis some strawberries.'

Mel blinked at that. 'Strawberries?'

'Well, going on little errands like this for students isn't exactly something the elves are supposed to be doing. Whenever Talis does something for me, I pay her in chocolate-covered strawberries. She loves the things.'

Huh. Well. Okay, then. Mel thought she felt a bit relieved with that explanation, that Susan hadn't been spying on her in her sleep or anything. Good. But now her distraction was done, and she had to get to the actual thing she had to talk about. And she knew she was fidgeting, but she couldn't stop it, and she knew she was hardly even looking at Susan right now, but she just... 'I have to tell you something. Something you need to know before... And I'd rather you keep it to yourself, at least for a little while.'

She thought Susan was giving her an odd look, but she was hardly looking in her direction, so she couldn't tell for sure. 'All right, then. What is it?'

Mel took a long breath, wrapped her arms around her stomach to stop from picking at her shirt, frowned down at the ground, God, she was silly. At least she didn't have to look at Susan, she didn't know if she'd be able to get it out. 'I'm— Well, I mean, I used to be Harry Potter.'

An instant, no more than a second or two, of silence. 'Huh? You—' Susan broke off, and Mel bit her lip, resisting the urge to look over there, but she really didn't think that was a great idea. She wouldn't know how to react to pretty much anything that could be on Susan's face right now. 'I... This isn't a joke, is it? Her voice was slightly shaky, which Mel didn't want to think about. 'If it is, tell me right now, because I've already half-convinced myself it's true, so...'
She— 'Wait, what?'

'I don't know, I mean...' In the pause, Mel took the risk, glanced up in Susan's direction. She was just standing there, hands planted loosely on her hips, staring at her with her head tilted and eyes somewhat narrowed. 'It makes a weird amount of sense. What with you already knowing Maïa, and the Weasleys, and even Bell, apparently, and everyone knows Sirius Black is Harry Potter's godfather, and how you're... It's actually kind of obvious, looking back on it.' Susan shrugged a little. 'Guess I just didn't know you well enough before to notice. Yeah, I'm pretty convinced now. So if it's a joke, I guess it's a good one.'

Well. Okay. She guessed for someone who was paying attention, and knew enough to look, it really would be rather obvious. Just, most people don't expect someone to just magically switch sexes over the summer, so it wasn't something that even occurred to them, that was probably the only reason she was getting away with it. 'It's not a joke. I guess it'd be pretty hard for me to prove it, but...'

'No, no, I believe you. Sort of explains a lot. Like why no one has ever heard of your parents before — they don't exist. Or why you needed to buy so many clothes that day — you'd simply never had any girl clothes before, so obviously.' Susan hesitated a bit, shooting her a look she didn't know how to read. 'You really are a girl now, right? Did the whole blood alchemy thing, I mean.'

She fought the urge to shift in place, turned to look away again. It took more effort to stop biting her lip than she thought was entirely sane. 'Ah, yes to the first, no to the second. It was accidental magic, wasn't planned.'

'Oh. Yeah, I've read that can happen. Must have—' Susan suddenly cut off with a loud, harsh snort of repressed laughter.

Mel frowned, turned to look at her again to find she'd clapped one hand over her mouth. By the look of her furrowed brow, how her face was pinking a bit, she was still trying not to laugh. 'What's so damn funny about that?'

'No, I mean, it's not—' Susan bit her lip, pulled a long breath through her nose, a helpless grin tugging at her face. 'It's not that, I was just thinking, and, I realised, a couple weeks ago, I—' She broke off again as giggling broke across her voice, much higher and thinner than her usual speaking voice. 'I— I helped Harry Potter pick out knickers!' And she burst into giggles, constant and breathless, one arm hugged about her stomach and the other hand covering her face, laughing so uncontrollably she had to sit down after a moment, plopping down on the arm of one of the sofas, still giggling to herself like a maniac.

Mel was sure her face was very, very red. Partially just because she was remembering it — fucking hell, that had been mortifying. She really didn't like thinking about that. And Susan just wouldn't quit giggling. It was annoying. 'It's not really that funny.'

'I'm sorry, it's not, I'm sorry, I just—' It took Susan a couple minutes to get control of herself again, and by the end her face was red, and there were lines from tears down her cheeks, and her voice was uncharacteristically thin and rough, and Mel was mostly just glad she was finally done, Jesus Christ. 'I'm sorry, I have no idea why I found that so funny.'

With a long sigh, Mel said, 'Because you're fucking weird, mostly.'

And Susan smirked. Which Mel thought sort of proved her point. 'Well, I guess I am, at that. So anyway. Next Saturday, meet in the Entrance Hall at, say, ten?'

For a couple seconds, Mel could only stare at her. Honestly, she'd been almost entirely sure Susan
would change her mind. She hadn't really prepared herself for this. 'I...' She sighed, took a second to rub at her face. 'Are you sure? I mean, I'm sort of...'

Susan smiled at her, easy as anything. 'Well, I guess it's only fair, since I really don't think you know what you're getting into either.'

Yeah. She really, really didn't.

Chapter End Notes

The poetry quotes are Shakespeare, by the way, Sonnet 99. The spelling "stolne", which is usually modernised "stol'n", is taken from the original printing.

violenter aufer — Latin, but I'm having trouble finding a nice smooth translation. The first half is just the adverb violently (ultimately from "vīōs", meaning force, power, or violence). The second half is a second-person imperative (basically, ordering her wand to do the thing) of "auferō", with meanings everywhere from carry away, to separate, to abduct, to deceive, to banish, to kill... You get the idea. The basic idea intended is "forcefully cast away"

cumigne lacerā — I know this has shown up in TLG, but I can't remember if I've used it here yet. Whatever, Latin, basically means "tear apart with fire"

Flammae immortālēs, quia intrā omn... — More Latin, "undying flame(s), that in ever —"

Ũlen cuśējit (IPA: /'ʊ̃.l ̥ɜ.ɕ ̞̃.jɪt/) — Bleh, Belēs grammar. The "-len" is third-person, the ũ- is an object marker...sort of (morphosyntactic alignment in Belēs is confusing, won't get into it), the "c-" marks perfective aspect (followed by an epenthetic vowel), the "-jē-" is an intensifier, the "-t" is a modal partical (calling it optative wouldn't be incorrect), and "śēse" is a verb meaning to sweep or brush, that kind of thing. So, I guess I'd interpret it as, "I wish that they be blown far away"...sort of. Belēs is weird. And yes, I really did think of all that for one incantation, I'm a crazy person.

Èriṣh ųā (IPA: /ˈɛ.ɾɪʃ liŋ/, roughly "eh-dish ngah") — Melīx, means "grow", as a command. Unlike Belēs, Melīx grammar is actually very simple, it didn't take me nearly as long to figure this one out, ha ha...

steðinn detti — Old Norse, something like "steh-thin deht-ih", meaning "anvil, fall". Pretty sure that's right. If it seems familiar, Neville used the same spell in chapter 27 of The Long Game.

Bluh. Insomnia again. I feel like finding Mel's voice — or anyone's, really — was fucking impossible. Sorry if this chapter feels weird.

Until next time,
~Wings
Mel tromped down the hall, trying not to scowl too much. She was starting to get extremely frustrated.

She'd admitted to herself she couldn't teach herself *everything*, sure. At least, not without possibly hurting herself. Er, again. Dora had sent her a list of licensed masters of various sorts of restricted magics, yes. Most of the names were people she'd never heard of before, though many of the surnames were familiar from Hogwarts. Comparatively small society and all that. Unfortunately, very few of them were in the sorts of magic she wanted to learn — the vast majority of them seemed to be licensed in blood magic or a certain kind of warding that was restricted for some reason, whatever. There were a few who were licensed in runic casting, but only a couple in shadow magic. Only a single person in the entire goddamn country was officially licensed in both runic casting and shadow magic (as well as blood magic and a few others, actually).

Severus Snape.

Was there anyone it could have been who would have been less convenient? Well, he wasn't inconvenient, exactly. When she thought about it, a professor at Hogwarts would have been ideal — that way she didn't have to go anywhere for her extracurricular lessons, whole thing was easier to arrange. But it just had to be him specifically. He hadn't been... *quite* as awful to her this term as he'd used to be. He still made comments about her father, but now only when nobody else was in earshot, and she was pretty sure a lot of things he said in class were supposed to be a reference to the girl now thing. Subtle enough her classmates hadn't picked up on it, thankfully, and subtle enough she wasn't even sure that's what was going on, but she thought so. And he just seemed less... she didn't know, it was hard to put words to. He was still *bad*, but he wasn't *as* bad.

And it *fucking sucked*, because she didn't really have anyone else to go to. He was literally the only viable option in the entire country. But he was an enormous arse.

She'd tried again, just now. She didn't know why she'd bothered. It hadn't seemed quite... she didn't know, proper? Anyway, it hadn't seemed right to just linger after class and ask, so she'd gone down to his office instead, after classes had ended for the day. She'd asked him to teach her again — which had been mortifying, she'd only managed it by trying to think of him as the Severus in her mum's journals and definitely not her awful Potions professor — and she'd tried to be all nice and polite about it, not that she'd entirely expected it to do any good. And it hadn't. Snape had just given her another flat look, and said something along the lines of not seeing why he should put up with the bother.

Come to think of it, she was pretty sure he'd said something similar the first time. It was possible there was something she was missing here. Of course, it was also possible he was just an enormous arse, could go either way.
So she was now walking back up to Gryffindor Tower, trying not to be too annoyed. Or, at least, not too externally annoyed. The way her magic kept lashing around at the back of her head was really not helping. Maybe she should head off to the Room quick, explode a few things just to calm down a bit. Far as she could tell that did generally—

She jumped at the sound of a door opening ahead of her. When she saw which one it was, she instantly ducked behind a nearby statue of some wizard, who knew which. That was one of the larger closets on this floor, and she was well aware what a lot of students used them for — she couldn't count the number of times she'd seen two figures on the Map huddled together in a tiny room, it was almost funny. She was entirely uninterested in whatever awkwardness would ensue from catching a couple walking out of one. She'd just wait here until they...

They...

For long moments, Mel could only stare, shocked into thoughtlessness. It was the Weasley twins. As in, both of them. Hair messier than usual, clothes slightly rumpled. They...what? From the way they were looking back into the closet, all smiling and saying something, Mel was too far away to catch what, they hadn't been alone, so it wasn't like they'd been... Well, it was still weird. After a moment the two wandered off, grins on their faces and bounces in their steps, looking inordinately pleased with themselves. It wasn't until they'd been out of sight for a few seconds that—

... What the fuck.

Okay, it actually sort of did explain a lot. But, just because it made other things make sense, didn't mean it at all made sense just by itself. She never would have thought in a million years... Seriously, what the fuck was happening...

She happened to be walking in Mel's direction — a pleasantly dazed sort of look on her face, which was making Mel feel rather weird — so she just stood there, waiting. Somehow, she missed Mel entirely, didn't even notice her until she'd fallen into step right next to her, announced her presence by saying, 'Both of them at once, really?'

With a quickly-repressed eep, Hermione jumped, so hard Mel almost thought she might fall over. She stopped in the middle of the hallway, a hand at the base of her throat and breath heavy, glaring at Mel. 'Don't do that!'

It took everything Mel had not to smirk. For some reason, she had no bloody clue why, she was finding this far too amusing for her own good. Confusing, yes, but also funny. 'Hermione, you were so out of it a troll could have snuck up on you.'

Whoops, bad choice of language. Hermione twitched, a flare of terror crossing her face for just an instant before she repressed it again. It was a lot better than it'd used to be, so it could be pretty easy to forget, but Hermione had a thing about trolls. When the school had had the brilliant idea of guarding Gryffindor Tower with "security trolls" back in third year, Hermione had taken to brewing herself a steady supply of calming draughts just to get herself in and out of the common room. Mel really couldn't blame her, considering what had almost happened. After a second, Hermione let out a long sigh, eyes tipping to the ceiling for a moment. Then she grabbed Mel's wrist, started dragging her off. 'Come on.'

Mel stumbled at first, but caught up easily enough. 'Er, what...?'

'I'd rather we hold the inquisition somewhere someone won't overhear, if you don't mind, thank you.'
Within a few seconds, Hermione had dragged her into a dilapidated, dusty classroom — judging by the shite laying around, an old potions lab that hadn't been used in at least a century. When Hermione released her vice from Mel's wrist, she turned right back to the door, whipped out her wand, and let loose with a litany of privacy charms, one after another in smooth succession. Mel recognised the ones she actually said the incantations for, but most of them she could only vaguely guess by the feel of them. Hermione then shot a cleaning charm at a nearby counter, popped herself up to sit on it. 'All right, then. Go ahead.'

Okay, this was weird. Mel couldn't help feeling...vaguely guilty. Sitting on the counter, feet absently kicking in the air, very pointedly not looking in her direction, Hermione looked to be a very un-Hermione-lish degree of uncomfortable. It was weird. It took a few seconds for Mel to fight off her unease enough to say anything. 'That was sort of a lot of privacy charms.' She realised she was a hypocrite. Shut up.

Still staring at the ceiling, Hermione shrugged. 'I don't really...' She broke off, biting her lip a little, letting out a hard sigh through her nose. 'We're not ready for people to know.'

Mel almost had to laugh at that. Good thing she held it in, she'd probably have felt even worse if she hadn't. 'Do they know that? They're sort of obvious, when I think about it.' She was remembering a couple days ago specifically, when one of them had just up and grabbed Hermione and kissed her in full view of the entire school. On the forehead, yes, but still.

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'The preference for secrecy, at least for the time being, is mutual. But, well, remember who we're talking about. They're finding it difficult to restrain their natural impulses. They have little practice at it, you see.'

It was clear Hermione was trying to pretend she was comfortable with talking about this. A forced casual tone on her voice, joking around like that. But, well. Out of all people, she was trying to trick Mel. Especially after seeing her memories of her own shifting awkwardness, it was far too easy to see it in someone else. Hermione very clearly did not want to have this conversation.

Which, yeah, was making Mel feel rather terrible. She knew how much she hated being forced into talking about things she would really rather not, and here she was doing it to one of the very few people who had always been nice to her, always done their very best to be what she needed. Hell, she was pretty sure that list was only Hermione and a couple Blacks by this point. Being a nosey arsehole now really seemed like shitty repayment for everything Hermione had done for her.

And Mel was just curious. Humouring her curiosity was not worth making Hermione this uncomfortable.

Shrugging to herself, Mel walked over, popped up to sitting on the counter next to Hermione. They wouldn't have to even pretend to look at each other this way, if she were in Hermione's place it would make her feel less, she didn't know, pressured, whatever. 'It's okay. We don't have to talk about this if you don't want to.'

Hermione let out a long sigh, leaning forward to rub her face with both hands. After a few seconds, she said, 'Yeah, I just— I have no idea what I'm doing. So, yeah, let's not. You're not gonna, you know...'

'No, I won't tell anyone.' Mel was slightly offended Hermione even thought to ask, but she quickly suffocated the feeling — roles switched, she probably would have said the same thing. 'And I'll try not to give it away on accident. Knowing me, I'll probably be watching you three out of... Well,
curiosity, I guess. I'll try not to be obvious.'

'That's fine.' Hermione sat up again, arms going around her stomach, cleared her throat for a second. 'Thanks. I'll tell you about it later, just, I need a couple weeks to sort it out first.'

'Believe me, I get it.' Hermione shot her a quick look at that, and Mel hesitated for a short moment before deciding fuck it. It still took her a moment to push through her own awkwardness, but she managed. 'I have a date with Susan in two days, and I'm sure you heard about it from someone else by now, but this is the first time I'm mentioning it.'

Hermione's lips twitched, forming a weak but noticeable smirk. 'Well, yeah, I do know about that. Susan asked me for advice, you see.'

Mel let out a groan, forcibly holding herself back from palming her face. Of course she did. That was the danger of most everyone she knew being friends with each other, she guessed. 'What did you tell her?'

'Nothing you would be uncomfortable with her knowing. Honestly, most of it was just telling her to, well, tone it down, so to speak.' At Mel's glance, Hermione shrugged. 'Susan can be... Well, she can be a bit much. I heard about some of the things she did for Hannah after the fact, and I think most of it would just... I really don't think you'd react well. So I told her to play it more casual, not get...overly romantic, I guess. Should I not have?'

'No, you're probably right, I just...' Mel let out a sigh, shaking her head to herself. 'You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I still hate it when people talk about me behind my back.'

Smirking again, Hermione said, 'I told her that too, actually.'

Okay, that almost made Mel laugh. They sat there in easy silence for a few moments, uncomfortable thoughts of what exactly was going to happen in two days bouncing around Mel's head. Eventually she ran the topic out, and she fell back to why exactly they'd ended up in this room in the first place. She glanced at Hermione, wondering if this was something she should bring up at all, before just shrugged to herself. 'You know, my parents and Sirius were, erm... Well, they lived together and everything.'

'Triad.'

Mel blinked. 'Huh?'

'That's the word for when there's three people in a relationship instead of only two. It's called a triad. And yeah, I know they had one.'

'Oh.' For a second, she could only stare at Hermione — who looked slightly uncomfortable again, but she was sufficiently distracted she didn't have the energy to feel guilty about that at the moment. 'Wait, you knew? You never said anything.'

Hermione gave an awkward shrug. 'Well, I found out shortly after Sirius escaped from Azkaban, back before we knew he was innocent. I was going through back issues of the Prophet, looking for stuff on him, and, well, you know how the Prophet can be. Imagine some of the worst comments people have made about us and Ron, but hidden behind a sickening veneer of self-important civility, and you've about got the idea. I didn't want to say anything at the time because just thinking it was your parents' friend who had betrayed them was bad enough, but... And later I assumed Sirius must have told you, but you didn't mention it, so I thought you maybe just didn't want to talk about it. So I didn't say anything.'
It was amazing, Mel thought, the things that occurred to her these days. She didn't think this was something she would have thought of before. But as soon as Hermione said that, her brain immediately skipped to what she would have assumed herself had it been her, and the thought made her uncomfortable enough she actually winced. 'Ah, you know I don't care, right.'

Hermione turned to blink at her. 'Huh?'

'About, erm, triads, I guess. I didn't figure out about my parents and Sirius until very recently, and...' God, this was awkward... 'It doesn't bother me.'

'Oh, well.' For a couple seconds, Hermione just stared at her, her teeth worrying at her lip a little. 'Let me skip the socially expected platitudes and all that, and go right to saying I know why you thought to tell me that. And, sure, maybe I did worry what you would think a little, but... What I mean is, that's not what's going on. I mean, it's not technically a triad, in our case.'

'Erm, what?'

Hermione sighed, eyes turning up to the ceiling for a moment. 'Thinking of Fred and George as two separate individuals isn't precisely correct. They don't have separate thoughts, or feelings, or memories. They aren't two people, but one person who happens to have two bodies, because magic does things like that sometimes. They do tend to think of themselves in the plural, but I think that's just conditioned, from being referred to in the plural from childhood. The Black triplets are the same way, actually.'

'Erm...' Mel frowned, staring at her. 'No, they aren't? I mean, they are pretty similar, but there are differences.'

'Any differences are intentional.' When Mel gave her a look at that, Hermione sighed again. 'They do it on purpose. You know how something might happen, and you have to think for a moment about how you're going to respond to it, because there's more than one thing you could do and you can't decide which. The twins and the triplets, and people like them, they have a tendency to condense those different motivations into what seem like distinct personalities, but it's really only for social convenience. It's something they do intentionally to better communicate with other people. There are slight behavioural differences between the one calling himself Fred and the one calling himself George, but if you pay attention you'll realise which one is which switches. They told me themselves those slight differences are on purpose, mostly to make other people less uncomfortable. From observation, I'm positive the triplets do the same thing.'

'But... But they're even in different houses!' Hermione shrugged. Sometimes, Mel really thought she was getting annoyed at how often people did that when she said things. 'So their single personality is divided between the attributes stereotypical of those three houses. I thought that was sort of obvious by how the first one took so long to be Sorted, but the other two were Sorted instantly. At least in their case, they could be divided appropriately. I mean, I'm sure if you had two bodies that could be split up, one of you would have gone to a different house, with how long you took.'

All this did make a weird amount of sense. In fact, she had noticed the triplets and the twins had some sort of...thought-sharing thing, she guessed, where they were aware of what each other were thinking and feeling. But she'd thought it was a constant mind-reading thing going on, not that they were all the same person. That was just... That was extremely confusing. But anyway, 'Yeah, sure, I... Well, I almost went to Slytherin. I had to argue with it to get Gryffindor. Twice now, actually.'

'Yeah, it wanted to send me to Slytherin too. Said it was a bad idea, being muggleborn and all.' For a
couple seconds, Mel could only stare at Hermione. She had not expected that. She was staring so long, in fact, that Hermione turned her a slightly annoyed look, sighing a little. 'Honestly, Mel, is that really that much of a surprise?'

'I...' Well, come to think of it, it wasn't that much, actually. Only really obvious in retrospect, though, she hadn't noticed some of the weirder shite Hermione had gotten up to over the last couple years until after the fact. 'Well, no, I guess. I just would have figured Ravenclaw.'

Hermione sent her something of a crooked smile. 'Mm, slight difference there. See, Ravenclaws are stereotypically so interested in learning things merely for the sake of learning them. They have no external motivation for their self-improvement, it's merely something they enjoy for its own sake. And I will admit I have what a lot of people consider an unhealthy obsession with my studies. But why do you think that is?' The smile tilted slightly further, now looking more like a smirk than anything. 'I'm not gathering all this knowledge and all these skills for no reason, Mel. I want to do things with them. There would be little point, otherwise. That's a stereotypically Slytherin mindset, not Ravenclaw.'

Oh, well. For a long moment, Mel just stared, while Hermione just kept smirking at her. Now that she thought about it...when she put a few things she'd noticed over the years about Hermione together... Well, she had the feeling Ron was more right than he'd probably even realised.

Hermione sort of was just a little bit scary.

And, yes, she did realise she was being a hypocrite, thank you.

Once she was done changing, Mel stood in front of the mirror for long moments. Not really seeing herself, just staring blankly, her head a hundred miles from here.

She had absolutely no fucking clue what she was doing.

After an incredibly awkward breakfast, trying to avoid looking in Susan's direction and ignore the knowing looks from some of the study group the whole time, Mel had gone back up to Gryffindor to get ready. Which had taken an embarrassingly long time. She'd just grabbed a simple black and silver dress and ran with it, but that ended up more complicated than she'd expected. For one thing, she still wasn't used to dresses yet. Skirts she was fine with by now, she'd been wearing those often enough for a few weeks, but she didn't think she'd ever worn a dress that Andi hadn't forced her into. For some reason it had taken her far too long to figure out how to get the cursed thing to sit right, feeling far too awkward. It hadn't helped that she had noticed hints of certain things were visible through the cloth that really shouldn't be, it had taken her far too long to think of the obvious solution to that problem, stupid fucking...

So yes, sure, fine, that was taken care of. And she would have to be going down to the Entrance Hall before too long here. And she was strangely..."terrified" wasn't quite the right word. She just had no idea what was going to happen. What did people even do on dates, anyway? She didn't know how to handle herself in this situation, it wasn't anything she'd done before, and she just knew it was going to be awkward and unpleasant and she really had to wonder why she was doing this to herself.

Her brain helpfully provided her with a memory of Susan smiling all nice, but she thought that was quite beside the point.

She didn't know how long she'd been staring at herself in the mirror, but eventually she jumped at the sound of the door clicking open. She whirled that way to see Parvati walking in, giving Mel something of a weird look — probably at how she'd reacted to her appearance, she guessed that had
been a bit much. Clearly shrugging it off, Parvati just gave her a bright, 'Hey, Mel,' before walking up to the long mirror a bit away and pulling from seemingly nowhere what Mel recognised as her make-up box thing. And Parvati promptly ignored her, starting in on that nonsense Mel still didn't really get.

But she was having a thought now. For a few seconds she stood there, glancing between her own image in the mirror and Parvati just a couple steps away, biting her lip. It was an idea, right? She didn't think Parvati would be too annoyed by her asking. To hell with it. 'Hey, Parvati?'

Parvati froze with a pencil halfway to her eye. 'Yeah?'

'You in a rush to get anywhere?'

She shrugged. 'Not really. Why?'

Swallowing back her own awkwardness, Mel muttered, 'You, er, mind doing my hair like you did that one time?'

Parvati just blinked at her for a moment, looking faintly surprised. Then a thin smile touched her lips, she flipped her make-up box back closed, and grabbed Mel by the wrist. 'Sure, come on.' And she yanked Mel back toward their room quickly enough Mel stumbled for the first few steps.

Girls kept doing that to her lately.

Before too long, Parvati was ducking under those dried plants always hanging around her bed, sitting in the middle cross-legged, patting the edge just in front of her. Mel took a short breath, trying to shove off the completely *stupid* prickling of anxiety crawling across her skin, and softly sat herself down. She'd barely been sitting for two seconds before she felt Parvati's fingers running through her hair. Her own fingers clenching about her knees, she just barely managed to stop herself from ducking away. She was being stupid, there was no reason to be silly over this, honestly...

She was still tense enough she nearly jumped when Parvati spoke. 'You going out or something?'

'Ah, yeah.' She was temporarily distracted by the feeling of what were definitely charms breaking against her head, running smooth along her hair down her back. Was Parvati really casting those silently? Huh. 'Yeah, er... I, I have a date, actually.'

Parvati let out a long, 'Oooohhh,' in that high, giggly sort of voice she got sometimes — Mel was wondering if it had really been a good idea to tell her that. To Mel's surprise, she didn't ask who with. Instead, quite suddenly, Parvati let out a very indelicate snort, obviously holding in laughter.

Mel frowned, barely stopping herself from turning to glare at her. 'What?'

'No, it's nothing. Just, wearing a dress and duelling boots on a date.'

She straightened her left leg, looking down at the matte black leather boot that enclosed the thing nearly up to her knee — her dress cut off just an inch or two above her knees, so the whole length was visible. Well, she guessed they were technically duelling boots. Most all that weren't intended to be had heels, and while Andi *had* forced her to learn how to walk in those, after a humiliating amount of stumbling, she really didn't want to deal with it if she didn't have to. She'd gotten these back during the summer, and had taken to wearing them sort of a lot. They were useful in her lessons with Dora, since one of the various enchantments on them increased traction, but she wore them most other days too. She guessed other people might find it kinda weird, but she just liked them, she didn't know why. 'Why, is that bad?'
'Not bad. It just struck me as, you know, very House Black of you, if you get what I mean.'

Well. She guessed she sort of did — the family did have something of a reputation. Still didn't think it was really that funny, though.

Honestly, it took an impressively short period of time for Parvati to do her thing. Mel guessed that could partially be from practice, but considering the number of little flowers she'd conjured along the way, smooth and easily with hardly breaking her rhythm, she was still a bit surprised. Since Parvati somehow managed to keep up near-constant chatter through the whole thing it was especially impressive. She'd admit she'd gotten into a habit of dismissing Parvati and Lavender. They just always seemed so...well. It really didn't help how they idolised that melodramatic lush of a Divination professor. But it turned out Parvati, at least, wasn't exactly a magical slouch. Mel still had trouble conjuring at all, never mind that quickly and with the kind of detail she could get in the little things.

So it was hardly very much time at all before Mel was whipping out her wand to turn a portion of the air before her reflective, looking herself over. Parvati'd worked multiple thin plaits into her hair, each about the width of Mel's pinky, two framing her face and a few others spaced at random. Stuck in every inch or so were tiny, delicate flowers in perfect whites and soft purples. She didn't think they were any particular kind of flower — since Parvati had just conjured things for the purpose, she hadn't truly expected them to be recognisable — but they were still pretty.

She realised putting flowers in her hair was such a stereotype, and she felt like such a silly girl at the moment, but she was a silly girl, so that was fine. Vernon's voice in the back of her head calling her a freak, quieter than before but still present, would just have to fucking deal with it.

Dispelling her mirror charm, Mel stood up again, turning to give Parvati a smile she hoped wasn't too uncomfortable-looking. 'Thanks.'

'Hey, no problem,' Parvati said, grinning brightly back at her. 'You have really nice hair.'

Mel felt oddly twitchy at the compliment, but did her best to ignore it. 'It's kind of bloody annoying, really. Before my aunt taught me a charm to deal with it it was impossible, messy and tangly as all hell.'

Parvati cocked her head a little. 'Which charm?'

It wasn't until Parvati was leaving for the bathroom again — after teaching Mel what she said was a better spell than the one Andi had taught her, and a couple more for other little things — that Mel realised she had just spent a couple minutes talking beauty charms with Parvati fucking Patil. The second the thought occurred to her, she thought she might almost die of embarrassment. Hermione must never know.

Actually, no, no one could ever know ever. She would not survive the humiliation. She would take this secret with her to the grave.

She realised she was being a bit silly right now. She was trying to distract herself from what she was about to do.

Mel had noticed recently that, now that she wasn't unhealthily scrawny, she hardly ever felt cold indoors. Even though it was hardly hot in the castle at this time of year, she could go around in knee-length skirts and sleeveless shirts with barely noticing. She assumed it was a fire magic thing — the book Dora had given her to read on elemental magic said people leaning strongly enough toward one
element or another sometimes showed traits like that, the magic in them doing shite without their
conscious input. But it was late October now, and she doubted the natural resistance to cold she
apparently had would hold up to autumn in the Highlands. So she grabbed a cloak, slipping a few
things into the pockets she may or may not need before leaving the room.

She might have ended up bringing a cloak even if she didn't think she'd need it for warmth, just
because at least this bloody thing had pockets — magically-expanded pockets at that. For some
stupid reason, a lot of her clothes didn't, despite how easy it would be to slip them in with magic
available. Girl clothes sometimes, honestly...

Somehow, distracted as she was with thoughts of inconvenient clothing and reviewing the list of
things in her head she must never tell Hermione if she didn't want to see that knowing smirk again,
she was already descending the marble staircase into the Entrance Hall before she barely noticed any
time pass. Granted, it did take her a bit less time to get places than most people, with judicious use of
shortcuts she'd memorised from the Map, but still. She could only be retroactively thankful for that,
though: as distracted as she'd been, she hadn't had time to be nervous.

So of course it came in now. She was on the last few steps when she caught sight of Susan a short
distance away, chatting with a boy with curly brown hair Mel vaguely recalled was a Ravenclaw in
their year. She twitched at the sudden flare of hot prickles racing across her skin, nearly choked on
the sudden clenching in her throat and chest, but shoved it all off as best she could with a furious
grimace. No, stop it. That was stupid. There was no reason to react like that. Jesus Christ, couldn’t
she just pretend to be a normal human being for two fucking seconds...

By the time she got close, Susan finally catching sight of her, she was mostly back to normal. Not
that the crooked smile Susan shot her helped at all. 'Well,' Susan said, glancing back at the boy,
'that's interesting and all, Tony, but I'm leaving now.'

The boy — Tony, apparently — brought a melodramatic hand to his chest, letting out an obviously
fake offended gasp. 'I am appalled, Susan. I will not stand silent at this treatment. Your aunt shall be
hearing from my mother, I can assure you of that.' Mel was only mostly certain he was being
sarcastic.

'Whine as you will. I have better things to do than listen to your blathering.'

Tony cut a glance at Mel quick, then let out a short snort, rolling his eyes. 'I'll bet.' And then he
walked off toward the doors to the grounds, without another word.

That... Okay, that was weird.

'Right, then,' Susan said, turning back to her. 'Ready to go?'

'Erm...' Mel stared after the Ravenclaw for a second, before consciously dismissing her curiosity.
Didn't really matter right now. 'Yeah, okay.'

There was this weird moment where Susan started moving, but then hitched an instant later, an odd
uncertainty crossing her face. Then she smiled again, tilted her head toward the door, and started
walking off. Frowning to herself a little, Mel followed.

It wasn't until they were stepping out of the doors, Mel reflexively pulling her cloak about her, that
she realised what that was. Susan had probably been about to, she didn't know, take her arm or
something, before thinking better of it. Mel wasn't entirely sure how she should feel about that. True,
she didn't think she'd be comfortable with Susan just grabbing her like that, but if Susan was actually
aware of that...she had to wonder why she was doing any of this in the first place.
Too confusing. She'd just not think about that right now.

Within a few moments, they were climbing into one of the carriages, the thing lurching into motion the moment they were both seated. Mel wondered how the thestrals knew to do that. While they started trundling off, Mel just stared out the window at the slowly passing scenery, trying not to fidget. She knew Susan was probably watching her, but she was trying not to think about that too much.

Susan let the silence hang for a moment before asking, 'Did you start on that essay for McGonagall?'

Mel blinked, turned to look at her. Somehow, on the list of topics she'd expected Susan to try to talk to her about, schoolwork hadn't featured. When a couple seconds passed without Mel saying anything, Susan's head tilted a bit, one eyebrow slowly tracking up her forehead. Right, okay, just...act normal. Okay. She could do that. 'Ah, well, I did, actually. Hermione sort of dragged me off to the library to work on it the day it was assigned.'

'That's Maïa for you,' Susan said, a warm sort of smirk pulling at her lips.

It abruptly occurred to Mel that virtually all of Hermione's other friends used that nickname — if Mel remembered correctly, Hermione had explained at some point it was what her cousins called her. Should... Should she be using it too? She'd never thought to ask what Hermione preferred. What with Hermione using one for her and all, it was a thought, at least.

But anyway, Susan was still talking. 'I was looking over it, and, is it just me, or does it look like McGonagall is building up to us starting conjuration already?'

Mel shrugged. 'Didn't she say we should be competent with basic inanimate conjuration by the end of the year? We did start vanishing almost right away.'

'I guess they are just inverse functions arithmantically, but the visualisation with conjuration is a lot more complicated. I mean, obviously.'

'Well, with how long we've been transfiguring all kinds of shite, I think we should mostly be used to that by now. It's not really that different.'

Before too long, Mel entirely lost track of her surroundings, distracted by technical discussion of transfiguration theory. This she blamed Hermione for: before becoming friends with her, Mel hadn't had much interest in academics at all, but she'd been quite nearly forced into learning far beyond the bare minimum she'd once limited herself to just to understand what Hermione was talking about half the time. Not that she minded so much. After a few years of contact, she guessed she'd sort of absorbed Hermione's opinion on the matter. She knew she used to end up grumbling with Ron when they'd been dragged along more often than not, but these days, honestly, it was getting harder and harder to find it in herself to agree with him. Or, whenever he said something about her extracurricular studies she'd taken upon herself recently, to hold in the urge to hex him.

In a world where academic study directly led to a greater ability to alter reality at a whim, who the hell wouldn't learn as much as they could?

Though, in the back of her head, she did have to wonder why Susan had decided to talk about transfiguration theory, of all things. It just seemed sort of random, and not what she'd expect most people would do in...this kind of thing. Unless they were Hermione, anyway. Come to think of it, what exactly did Hermione and the twins talk about when they were alone together? At least, Mel assumed they talked some, they couldn't snog all the time.
Er. Could they?

Nope, rather not think about that.

These last couple days, Mel had found herself wondering a few times why exactly Hermione put up with the twins as much as she apparently did. She just hadn't really thought they were her type. At all. She guessed they were pretty clever — they would have to be, to come up with some of the shite they regularly invented just for the fun of it. But she would have thought they'd be too... She didn't know. Granted, these last couple months she had overheard the three of them discussing things that went far over her head more times than she could count, so she guessed the twins could maybe keep up with Hermione intellectually, at least enough she wouldn't be bored. Just, she'd have thought their complete inability to take anything seriously would get on Hermione's nerves very quickly.

Maybe they were just snogging all the time. She guessed she didn't know. Not surprised Hermione hadn't wanted to talk about it, really.

It was almost strangely easy, sitting in the carriage bouncing along, to talk to Susan about academic shite, honestly. Hell, Susan was rather close to the top of their class, which meant she had enough of an edge on Mel she may as well be talking to Hermione right now. Susan had even recited from memory part of the generalised formulae for the vanishing of conjured materials at one point. Being so casually outclassed by a girl in school stuff was so familiar Mel entirely forgot she was supposed to be nervous.

The carriage jolted to a halt, sooner than Mel thought it should have. Must have gotten distracted. Susan popped the door open and hopped out first, her cloak snapping over the lip behind her. Mel followed a second later, and nearly closed the door on her own trailing cloak before remembering to yank it after her. Stupid bloody thing. She gave the nearest thestral a quick glance before turning to Susan a couple steps away. 'Okay. Where are we going?' Huh, her voice was surprisingly normal-sounding. Almost impressed with herself.

Smiling at her like usual, Susan said, 'We're gonna go through the floo at the Three Broomsticks, actually.' Then she turned on her heel, started leading the way off.

Frowning to herself a little, Mel obediently trailed after her anyway. 'Are we allowed to do that? I always thought we were supposed to stay in Hogsmeade.' They were leaving Hogsmeade, right? going somewhere else? That was the only way she could figure using the floo would be worth it.

'I think maybe technically? I'd have to check to be sure. But people leave all the time, so if it is a rule it's not one the staff enforce.' Susan gave an easy shrug. 'I kind of guessed you'd never been to na Caomhe.' When Susan turned a questioning look on her, Mel shook her head; she knew from History class that was the largest magical settlement in Ireland, but she'd never been there. 'Right. It was an idea I had. Besides, I figured you wouldn't appreciate being watched the whole time.'

'Watched?'

'Bodyguard.'

'Huh?' Since she'd pulled up next to Susan by now, she caught the glance off to her right. Mel followed her gaze, after a moment picked out who she was looking at through the foot traffic. To the side and somewhat behind them, a rather severe-looking woman in dark robes was shadowing them. The way she carried herself, confident and almost preternaturally graceful, reminded Mel immediately of those Aurors that had been following her everywhere early this summer. It was hard to tell through her robes, but Mel thought she caught the lines of what was probably dragonhide armour. Interesting, Mel hadn't noticed her show up at all. 'You have an Auror following you
'Íde is a Hit Witch, actually, I don't normally rate an Auror. But there's always someone following me, almost every time I've ever left the manor or Hogwarts for as long as I can remember.'

She turned to give Susan another frown. 'Why?'

Susan sighed, a slightly annoyed cast falling over her face. 'Well, mostly 'cause my mum is bloody paranoid, really.'

'Er...' Mel was a bit confused, but she wasn't sure if pointing out Susan's mother was dead was exactly tactful.

But she didn't have to ask, Susan obviously picking up on it. 'Oh, sorry. I call my aunt Amelia Mum in private. Always have, since I was little. But anyway, since she's been Director of the D.L.E. for as long as I can remember, and I'm the closest thing she has to a child, she's always been worried someone will hurt me to get at her. So, bodyguard.' She shrugged again.

Oh, well, she guessed that did make sense. The directors of the various Ministry departments were some of the most powerful people in the country — the same idea as the cabinet ministers in the muggle government, she thought — and the Director of Law Enforcement in particular probably made some unpleasant enemies just doing their job. If she were in the elder Bones's place she'd probably do the same thing.

Mel couldn't help a short flash of hot jealousy, though. She'd gathered it was commonplace, in both magical and muggle worlds, for people to use "mum" and "dad" for whoever raised them, whether they were biologically their parents or not. A random reminder out of nowhere the Dursleys were awful, thanks for that, universe. She did her best to suffocate the feeling, force herself to ignore the thought.

Luckily, she did manage to pull herself back before only a couple seconds had passed. 'Is it really a great idea to duck her, then?'

'Oh, it'll be fine,' Susan said, flipping a hand dismissively in the air. 'I do it all the time. If something actually does happen, I have so many emergency tracking charms and portkeys and shite on me it's honestly a bit silly. Don't worry about it, they're used to me running off by now.'

Mel really wasn't sure that made it better.

Before too long, they were walking into the familiar discordant racket of the Three Broomsticks on a Hogsmeade weekend. Mel winced, immediately set to trying to block out the noise as much as she could. Susan talked to Rosmerta for a second before throwing a few knuts on the counter and walking off. For use of the floo, Mel assumed — she wouldn't be surprised if there were some kind of expected etiquette for doing this, but it would be on the gradually shrinking list of things that hadn't been explained to her yet.

Standing a bit to the side of the hearth, picking up the little bag of powder waiting there, Susan turned back to her. 'You wouldn't happen to speak Gaelic, would you?'

'Erm, no?'

'Yeah, didn't think so. Can you say "an chearnóg"?'

'Er...' Mel thought about it, then fell back on that Brīþwn she'd had to study but now hardly ever used. That was related to Irish, right? 'Yn xiarnog?' That sounded kind of like "the square" in
Brîwn, she guessed, she wondered if it meant the same thing in Irish.

Susan just stared at her for a second, a hesitant sort of look on her face, before finally shrugging. 'Close enough.'

While Susan flooed away, Mel whipped off her cloak, folded it over her arm. She honestly had no idea if it were possible for it to get caught on anything, but better safe than sorry. Mel grabbed a pinch of powder, made her absolute best attempt at pronouncing the foreign word, then followed Susan through the fire.

As she swirled through dark shadows and green flame, there was an odd sense of hesitation, as though the Floo Network weren't quite sure what to do with her. But it only lasted an instant, and she was falling through the familiar panoply of grates, reflexively moving her free hand to the skirt of her dress as it fluttered up her thighs in the stupid breeze. She felt her magic moving under her skin, itching to strain against the foreign magic pushing back her own, but she held it in as best she could, grit her teeth as she concentrated on—

The world abruptly popped back into existence around her, Mel's boots hitting the wood floor with a slightly harder than usual thump, her first step with an extra little hop to keep her balance. That went well, she hadn't almost fallen even a little bit. She'd hardly gotten her bearings — she was in a wide, low-ceilinged room made of dark woods, the thin light from candles showing only a couple tables with spindly chairs, a row of fireplaces all along one wall, a few people standing around here and there — when Susan was grabbing her arm, yanking her further in. 'Come on, get out of the way.'

'Out of the way of—' Mel was cut off by a flash of green fire from behind her, quickly followed by a high, childish squeal. Something crashed into her legs below her knees, hard enough she nearly fell over backward. After getting her balance back, she twisted around, glancing toward the groaning on the floor at her feet.

Apparently, she'd nearly been ploughed over by a little boy rocketing out of the floo. He looked maybe six at the oldest, wearing baggy, brightly-coloured trousers and tunic of obviously magical make, blotched here and there with soot. The kid was just sitting on the floor, a pained grimace on his little face, rubbing at his shoulder. Mel couldn't help a flare of pity for the kid — looked like he had about as much trouble with the floo as she'd had until recently.

'Hé, buachaill.' The boy started turning to stare up at Susan, looking a bit sheepish. 'Tá cabhair ag teastail uait, nach bhfuil?'

Whatever Susan had just said, the boy's face split into a bright, cheerful grin. In a high, overly-loud voice, he rambled something off back at Susan. No fucking clue what he said, though, he was probably speaking Irish or something.

Because, of course Susan just had to bring her to a foreign country on a...

Wait a second. She wasn't entirely sure where this was relative to the border, but she was almost certain they were in Ireland now. As in, the Republic of Ireland, not Northern Ireland. She had just left the United Kingdom for the first time in her entire life.

Huh.

Eventually a woman was running over to engulf the boy in a smothering hug — it was hard to tell with mages sometimes, but Mel didn't think she was old enough to be his mother, maybe a sister or cousin or something. Then she was rattling off apologies to the two of them, which Mel only understood half off, the bit after Susan had told her Mel didn't speak Gaelic. Within a few seconds,
the relieved-looking woman was leading the bouncing child off, Susan and Mel trailing a bit behind them toward the door out.

They were almost there when Susan jumped, stopping in mid-step, an apologetic look slipping over her face as she turned to Mel. 'Gimme a second here,' she said, reaching into a pocket, 'I think Íde wants to yell at me.'

And that was exactly what happened. Susan pulled a little golden pendant out of her pocket, muttered a word Mel didn't catch, and the slightly tinny voice of an older woman started screaming out of the thing, asking Susan what she thought she was doing, where the hell she had run off to, and she would come back right this second so help her. Through a strained smile, Susan eventually managed to talk Íde down from charging off after them, but Mel fully expected Susan would be getting a tongue-lasing in person later.

Once she was done being yelled at, Susan slipped the thing back into her pocket, muttering under her breath, 'Coimhéd fearg bhean na foighne, is ceart...' She shook her head a little, turned a warmer smile back on Mel. 'Sorry about that.'

Mel shrugged. 'It's fine. If Sirius knew I'd just popped off to a foreign country without telling him I doubt he'd be happy either.'

Already walking off toward the door, Susan frowned, her pace hitching slightly. 'Fore– Oh, right, muggle countries make no sense, I forgot. Isn't Ireland split in half for no reason at all?'

Oh. Mel had somehow forgotten herself that Britain and Ireland were the same country on the magical side — things like Ireland having their own national quidditch team tended to throw her off. And apparently Susan barely even knew Northern Ireland was a thing. That was almost funny. 'Well, yes.'

'Why the hell would they do that?'

'I think it's one of those Catholic–Protestant things.'

'Oh,' Susan said, nodding her head to herself. 'No good reason, then.' She pushed the door open, walking out into warm sunlight and surprisingly mild autumn wind.

'I really doubt they'd agree.'

'Well, you know. Christians.'

Mel might have had something to say to that, but she was promptly distracted. She didn't think she'd ever seen anything like this place.

After a moment of looking around, she decided it was an open-air market. A vaguely square-shaped valley nestled between the buildings of the town, she thought roughly the size of a standard quidditch pitch, the ground mostly dirt, broken with grasses and weeds browned from approaching winter here and there, the rare walk path of glimmering white stone stitching across in a few places. Filling the entire space, pressed close enough together there was barely room to walk between them, were dozens, perhaps hundreds of little booths. Some shaded under half-tents, framed by curtains billowing gently in the breeze, some looking more permanent with solid walls of wood or stone, some no more than a simple table, items haphazardly strewn across the surface. The place was noisy as hell, people chattering in a thick murmur, laughter and yelling, the occasional high squeal of excited children, it was almost a physical force slamming down on her.

Giving her a crooked smirk, Susan looped her arm around Mel's, and started dragging her forward...
— Mel was too distracted to be uncomfortable with that. Some of the venders and tiny little stores seemed to be closed, nobody perusing or standing vigil, the shimmering of anti-theft wards over the unattended tables visible from a dozen metres away. Others, there might be a couple people standing around, looking over the things on display, talking quietly with the owners. Other places were entirely packed, so thick with people it was impossible to pick their way through without getting jostled at least a little, the constant noise pounding ever harder in Mel's ears, occasionally getting a suspicious glare, as though the person were thinking she was trying to cut in line. After a bit of observation, she noticed the most crowded stations were ones selling food, the air around them alternating heady and spicy and sweet — must be lunch time here, she guessed.

Not that there were only food stalls, not even close. There were plenty of those, yes, and a slew of others looked to be tiny little groceries, a butcher here, a counter bearing fruits and vegetables there, she even saw a tent selling what looked very much like liquor, but that was a guess. It was hard to tell exactly what some places were selling because, while every booth seemed to have some identifying signage in Irish, maybe only half of them included an English translation. But not only food, there were also what was obviously a potion supply shop, a table not far away covered in an array of pre-brewed potions for people who couldn't do it themselves — she noticed several of these, actually, coming in various degrees of professional and shady — dozens of tables selling enchanted objects of all kinds, from the useful to the dangerous to the frivolous.

Some tables weren't selling goods at all, but advertising services. One tent that actually had English signage was a construction outfit, which apparently did everything from little storage sheds to houses or stores to huge bloody mansions. Mel saw a young couple talking with an employee of some kind inside, pouring over a tiny little model of a house cracked open to show the inside, the worker prodding at the thing with a stylus as they talked, stretching and shrinking walls, conjuring rooms and furniture and decoration, drawing little runes Mel guessed represented enchantments and wards in the air.

This was absolutely insane. Mel hadn't expected to stumble on anything like this. It just all seemed so...

Well, in a word, big. She'd always gotten the impression that magical Britain was sort of tiny. There were a lot of bloody people here, and just the fact that a place like this could sustain itself meant they would have to get a fair amount of business, which implied there being a lot of bloody people here was a consistent thing that always happened. It was sort of a lot to take in.

'That can't be right, though.'

Susan turned to give her a look at the question, the first thing Mel had said, aside from requesting a couple translations, ever since they'd gotten here, however long ago that was. 'What can't be right?'

'I mean...' She frowned to herself a moment, trying to figure out how to say what she was thinking. 'There can't be this many people in magical Britain. If there were, there would be way more kids at Hogwarts.'

Susan gave her an even weirder look at that, as though Mel had just said something extremely stupid. 'Here, I'll just show you.'

They walked for a couple minutes, out of the open market entirely, down a street paved in shining white stone, quartz trapped in the granite here and there glimmering in the spotty autumn sunlight. This looked like a comparatively well-off residential district, she would guess, wooden houses two or three stories, painted in garish colours, curtains draped here and there littered with brightly-contrasting beads. After walking for only about a block, the houses on one side fell away into unseasonal greenery, trees heavy with vibrant leaves and bushes thick with flowers despite it being...
late October, what looked like a few larger buildings of wood and metal visible through the screen of plants. Just to the side of a stone path through the garden that had to be being maintained by magic, there was no other way, was a large slab of granite, intricately carved into flowers and quills and runes around the edges, lines of shining silver worked into the face forming words.

OLLSCOIL COITEANN CAOIÔME NÍ BLÁIÎÍN
MORYSCOL CYHÉÐWS CIVW MERC VLAÎCYN
KEEVA OF BLAHEEN ACADEMY OF MAGIC

Mel blinked at the sign for a second, then back at the buildings barely visible through the greenery. For a moment she just stood there, half-remembered shite from books, or things people had said over the years, flicking through her head one after the other. 'Oh. Okay, I feel like an idiot.'

At least Susan had the decency not to laugh at her. 'An Ollscoil is actually the largest school of magic in the country. Not by physical size, of course, number of students. Not just OWL and NEWT courses like Hogwarts either, they have a whole thing for younger kids and even Mastery programs, neither of which Hogwarts does at all.'

Okay. She hadn't thought she was that stupid. She turned to look at Susan, to check if she was messing with her, but she was just smiling. Looked slightly amused with her, but not like she was lying. 'What's so special about Hogwarts, then?'

'Well, Hogwarts is a lot more selective, isn't it? Only certain people are allowed to go to Hogwarts at all — people from Noble Houses, a few other families if they have the right connections, muggleborns who don't have close magical relatives. Hogwarts is more prestigious, and our NEWT program is considered the best in the country by far. But an Ollscoil will take almost anyone who applies. Their NEWT and Mastery programs require an evaluation, but if you're good enough it doesn't matter who you are, you can get in.'

'Hmm.' And here she'd been under the impression people could only get a Mastery through an apprenticeship. She guessed it was possible some people did one and some did the other, she'd just never thought to ask about the details. Then she thought of something else, and almost felt like slapping herself. 'You know, I always did wonder where people learned to read and shite if mages didn't have school before Hogwarts.'

Susan smirked a little at that. 'Yeah, well, parents who have the time will do it themselves, or pay a tutor to do it if they have the money, but most people go to one school or another. I actually went here,' Susan said, giving a quick nod in the half-hidden academy's direction, 'from when I was six or so up to the summer before Hogwarts. That's how I learned Gaelic — I was in the English-language track, but Gaelic classes were a requirement, and almost everyone over here speaks Gaelic, so I never forgot it.'

'About that, I thought nobody really spoke Irish anymore.'

Susan shrugged. 'Maybe muggles don't, but mages still do. Besides, Gaelic is pretty.' And Susan did it again, sending her own of those warm, brilliant smiles that always made her uncomfortable. 'Nuair a bhíonn an gaoth ag imirt le do fholt, tá tú rá-álaínn.'

'Er...' Mel took a moment to figure out what the hell to say to that, Susan smiling all pretty at her the whole time. Which was really not helping. Okay, here we go. 'I have this sneaking suspicion I'd be blushing right now if I had any clue what that meant.'

And Susan smirked, which probably just meant she was right. Mel rolled her eyes — silly girl.
They went back to walking around, Susan leading her seemingly at random. Mel was mostly surprised there was so much to wander around in. She'd heard of na Caoimhe before, of course, but she'd had no idea the town was nearly this big. Almost seemed more like a small city, really. Which... When she thought about it, she really shouldn't be that surprised. With how big the government was, by the impression she'd gotten by how many people were in the Wizengamot and how many worked at the Ministry, there would have to be a proportionately large number of mages, and they would have to live somewhere. It was just sort of a lot to take in. Just... She didn't know, it was weird.

After a little while, she had the vague feeling Susan had somewhere in particular in mind, since they seemed to be wandering in a certain direction now, not just in circles. It didn't seem like a very nice direction. The road they were on was somewhat narrower, and not quite as clean nor flawless, the houses and shops around them shabbier and, well, a little shady-looking. The people here and there were a bit rougher around the edges as well. Not as bad as some places along Knockturn Alley, but it was obvious this wasn't quite as nice of a part of town as where they'd arrived. Since she had no fucking clue what they were doing, didn't know the first thing about this place, she wasn't sure if that was something she should be worried about or not. Should be fine. She didn't think Susan would bring her somewhere they were likely to get mugged or anything.

But if she were holding on to Susan's arm a little tighter, paying somewhat more attention to the people around them, well, she felt she couldn't be blamed for that.

She still didn't notice it first.

They had just turned into another street, this one the dingiest and most depressing one yet, when Susan let out a low hiss, her hand tightening on Mel's arm. 'Don't look now, but we're being followed.'

It wasn't so much her words, but the way Susan had said them, the sharp tension on her voice, the sudden sense of contained motion in the way she held herself, that sent a flood of lightning instantly running through Mel's veins. The subtle awkwardness she'd been trying to ignore the whole last hour or two or however long they'd been here instantly boiling away, sinking into her Dora-is-going-to-curse-me-if-I'm-not-careful mentality without even really meaning to. 'How many?'

Susan stared down at her for a moment — god, why did she have to be so short — probably giving her a weird look of some kind. But Mel wasn't watching, eyes flicking around, looking for anything suspicious in head of them. 'Ah, I think three. I recognised Yaxley, and another I think might have been in my mum's book of Death Eaters. I think I saw a third, not sure.'

For some reason, the thought of Amelia Bones just having a book full of photos of Death Eaters sitting around struck her as strangely appropriate. But, anyway, focus. Three was sort of a lot, especially to take by themselves. That Susan didn't recognise the other two probably meant they weren't any of the more dangerous ones, but Yaxley was another story, Mel remembered his name as one of the ones who escaped from Azkaban. He wasn't quite as widely feared as the Lestranges or Travers, but he was not someone you wanted to bump into in a back alley. But, if she could get the drop on them... 'Do you have something on you you can call for help with?'

'Yeah, already did. Will be a couple minutes though.'

Mel took a second to glance at Susan. She seemed...surprisingly calm, actually. She meant, Mel had gotten into all kinds of insane life-or-death situations, so she was mostly used to it by now, but Susan didn't seem to be doing that bad. Almost seemed more frustrated than anything, glaring around them, maybe slightly shaky, but not bad. Huh. 'I'm sorry.' She blinked a second at that — she hadn't been planning on saying that. 'I mean, my stupid shite always—'
'Mel?' Susan turned a slightly strained smile at her, shaking her head. 'How likely do you think it is
the Death Eaters know who you are?'

'Oh.' When she put it like that... 'Not very likely, I don't think.' At least if Snape hadn't told them, and
she was confident enough he was on their side to be comfortable assuming he hadn't.

'Exactly. They're after me, not you. Wouldn't be the first time.'

Right. Susan had said that bit about why she had bodyguards and shite in the first place. Probably
kicking herself for ducking that Hit Witch now. 'Okay, well. It's possible they're going to make their
move before whoever gets here.'

'Possibly, yeah.'

'Wanna make our move first?'

And now Susan was staring at her again. She didn't say anything for long moments, just blinking at
Mel with an odd combination of exasperation, surprise, fear, and amusement. Finally, 'Did you have
something in mind?'

Mel shot her a quick smile, trying to be as reassuring as possible. Which, with how tense and eager
she felt, probably wasn't a lot. 'Is there a place nearby we won't accidentally curse anyone? With a
jerk, Susan changed direction slightly, heading more toward an alley to the right. 'In there?'

'There should be a little square a few metres in there. This area of town, it'll probably be empty.'

'Right.' Mel took a long breath, and consciously relaxed, opening that something she could never
find words for deep inside, letting magic flood into her. She was immediately filled with bright,cackling power, making her feel lighter, both calmer and more energetic than she'd been a second
ago; she heard Susan let out an odd, choked gasp at the same time, but ignored it. Hmm, maybe she
should have just been channelling magic like this the whole time, she would have been far less
nervous. She reached over her stomach, loosened her wand holster a little where their pursuers
wouldn't be able to see it. 'When we get there, I'm gonna cast a strong as hell notice-me-not on
myself, wait for them to pass me, and try to stun them in the back. So try to act natural when I
disappear.'

Susan let out a little snort. 'I think I can do that.' They passed into the little alley, and Mel could see
how it opened up a bit ahead, the ground mostly covered in grass browned with neglect, strewn with
fallen leaves, bits of discarded trash here and there. 'You know there are three of them, at least.'

'Yeah, I was gonna try to stun them all at once.'

Susan jumped, turned to stare at her again. 'Er. Okay, then.'

Flicking her wand out into her hand, wearing a smirk that was impossible to suppress with eager
power filling her head, she said, 'I've been spending a ridiculous amount of time lately training with
an Auror, you know.' She didn't think she was good enough to take someone like Yaxley in a
straight fight, of course, but hopefully she wouldn't have to.

'Right.' Even as she started the charm, Susan gave her arm a quick squeeze. 'Good luck.'

Mel just smirked at her. With a twist of her wrist and a muttered incantation, Mel cast the strongest
notice-me-not she'd ever attempted, forcing as much energy into it as she could without making
herself dizzy. And bit her lip to stop herself from laughing — the way Susan blinked, letting go of
Mel only to stare at her hands with very obvious confusion, was far too funny. Another couple steps
and they were out of the alley, the tiny little square opening up around them. Susan was right, there was no one here, the dilapidated rears of shops and homes looking almost abandoned. Mel ducked to the side, back against the wall, started the lengthy incantation for her group stunning charm of choice.

It was rather powerful elemental magic, really, any mage worth a damn would be able to feel it long before she was done casting it. She was pretty sure the notice-me-not would cover her until she actually cast it, though. Pretty sure.

She watched as Susan kept walking into the square, still looking faintly confused. That should have worn off by now, but she guessed since Susan knew she was there, was probably watching for Mel to do something, the notice-me-not was constantly affecting her. Oh well. After a moment, Mel hissing all the way to the end of her incantation, contained magic turning her entire wand arm hot and shuddering, so thick it hurt, three people walked out of the same alley they'd come in through. Two of them looked a bit dingy, cheap robes and apparently too lazy to cast a single easy charm to deal with their scraggly facial hair, but the woman in the middle, she thought maybe around Sirius's age, looked far more together. Mel immediately assumed she was the only real threat of the three.

Weird. She didn't see Yaxley. Hmm.

When they were a few steps in, Mel slunk around until she was behind them, but still somewhat to the side, so her spell wouldn't accidentally hit Susan. She less forced the spell out, and more just stopped holding it in. Magic rushed out of her in an ecstatic wave, bringing a smile twitching to her lips, green and orange flames licking up her arm all the way to her elbow, a wave of heat and fire pouncing on the three in an instant, the air filled with crackling, leaves and junk on the ground hissing and popping. Mel felt the spell burn away her notice-me-not as it went, but that didn't particularly matter anymore — she'd wager the Death Eaters knew she was here now.

For a moment she could see nothing but brilliantly dancing flames, but they quickly dissipated, thinning away to nothing but a lingering heat on the air. When she could see again, she noticed the two scruffy men were unconscious on the ground, their robes smoking a bit, but the cleaner woman was turned back to her, her wand already half-lowered from her dropped shield charm. Must have been a pretty good shield charm too, that spell would have gotten through all the basic ones.

Mel tried not to scowl. Shite. Now they had to have a proper fight. This was going to be interesting.

But the woman didn't move right away. While Mel glared back, wand at the ready, the woman slowly scanned her head to toe, an odd frown on her face. 'Who the hell are you?' she said.

Somewhat to Mel's surprise, she had the same delicate, slightly Celtic-sounding accent most of the Noble Houses seemed to.

Mel did not intend at all to say what came out of her mouth next. She blamed the magic giggling inside her, she always did weird things these days when she wasn't holding it back. 'What, you don't see the family resemblance?'

The woman's head tilted a little, nodding to herself. 'You're one of those new Blacks, then. You know, I'm only here for the Bones girl, and only because your cousin is paying me. We don't have to make an issue of this.'

Despite herself, Mel was distracted by a moment of surprise. By "cousin" she obviously meant Lestrange, but...why would she have to pay Death Eaters to do shite for Voldemort? That didn't make any sense. Before she could think to say anything, Susan said, 'Would you two like to talk about abducting me without me standing right here listening? That's fine, I can leave.' Mel almost giggled at the hot sarcasm on Susan's voice — actually, it was almost impressive she could talk that
way at all, considering how worried she looked all of a sudden. Probably that Mel hadn't taken out this one, must be dangerous. She didn't recognise her, but...

The woman spoke, but without moving her eyes from Mel. If she had to guess, the woman had evaluated her as the only threat around the same way Mel had dismissed the other two. Could probably feel the magic crackling through her right now, Dora had said most people would notice. 'Ah, Miss Bones, you won't be going anywhere, I'm afraid. At least,' she said, thin lips twitching into a smirk, 'not conscious.'

'Ooh, go to hell, Yaxley.'

Mel blinked. This was Yaxley? But...Yaxley was a man! Must be a different Yaxley? She knew Yaxley was a Noble House, so there would be others, she'd just sort of assumed Susan had meant the convicted Death Eater Yaxley.

The woman who was apparently Yaxley, and a scary enough Yaxley the Director of Law Enforcement's niece had recognised her on sight at that, turned to give Susan an exasperated look. Which meant she was partially turned away from Mel.

Well, she wasn't going to just let that opportunity slide, was she?

Sadly, Yaxley spun back around, catching Mel's shimmery cutting charm with an unfamiliar purplish shield. Damn. Yaxley dropped the shield, a tight twist of her wrist shooting a spellglow off straight for Mel's chest — a stunning charm, surprisingly. But Mel dipped and twisted out of the way, letting the charm pass her left shoulder, brought her wand up, magic crackling along her arm so thick she could almost taste it, then crashing back down with a call of, 'Steðinn detti.'

God damn, Yaxley was fast. Before the hammer of compressed wind could fall on her — Mel was only a few steps away, that had only taken two seconds — she'd already cast a spherical orange shield around herself, then pointed her wand at the ground, casting some kind of charm, Mel wasn't sure what. The wind struck the shield with a sound like a gong, low and thick and hanging too long in the air, wisps of air clawing at Mel's cloak and skirt and hair as her attack was dispersed. And, somehow, Yaxley didn't go flying. Mel wasn't sure how she'd managed that.

The instant she dropped the shield charm, there was already a bright blasting curse from Susan darting in for Yaxley's shoulder. A snarl twisting her lips, she pivoted around, deflecting the thing downward a bit to Mel's right. The charm dug into the ground, bursting with a flash of yellow light, flinging up dirt and bits of charred grass. Mel caught the flying debris with a quick levitation charm, with a second of thought transfigured the little bits and clumps into dozens of sharp metal darts, sent them flying back for Yaxley.

But that was worse than pointless. With a disdainful flick, Yaxley transfigured them all into water, two flickering rivers curving through the air around her, before condensing again into long silvery spears, arcing through the air straight for Susan. Mel hesitated only long enough to pick up the panicked look on Susan's face before reaching out, drawing the ground right in front of Susan into a thin wall shielding her. Even as she dodged another stunning charm from Yaxley — and what was up with that, both Mel and Susan had tried to hit her with potentially lethal shite already, and Yaxley was still trying to stun Mel — she grit her teeth, forcing her magic into compliance with iron will, the dirt piled in front of Susan taking on the gleam of bronze. Yaxley's spears clanged against the transfigured metal, tumbling uselessly to the ground.

Mel took just a second to gasp, steady herself. She'd seen Katie do transfigurations with bronze enough she'd picked up the trick, but transfiguration was still her weak point. Transfiguring that much metal from this far away had been hard as fuck. Note to self: just levitate Susan out of the way.
or something next time. The light of her magic in her flickered a little, dimming, but it only took a moment of focus before it was flaring to life again.

And not a moment too soon. Some weird yellow-green charm was shooting for her chest — the familiar bite meant it was dark magic, but she didn’t recognise it — so she bent her knees, ducked down, let the thing pass over her head. She stood back up with a flourish, an arc of flamma impulsāns cutting in for Yaxley, but she dispersed it with an annoyingly easy twitch of her wand. And Yaxley was casually stepping out of the way of a severing curse from Susan, even as she sent a bludgeoning hex for Mel, and she scrambled to deflect it away.

Why did Yaxley have to be so damn fast...

Yaxley caught Mel's slicing curse, one of those dark curses Dumbledore would not be happy if he knew she'd learned lately, on a weird red shield charm she didn't recognise, retaliated with a snap—

—Mel barely saw the piercing curse coming in time, twisted out of the way—

—with only a glance and a flick, Yaxley caught Susan's stunning charm, shot a dark variant back at her—

—Yaxley deflected Mel's blasting curse with contemptuous ease, twisted her deflection into another stunning charm—

—it dispersed on Mel's shield, and she cocked her wrist back into a piercing curse—

—as the curse slipped past Yaxley's ducking shoulder, she fired off an unfamiliar charm—

—Mel twisted out of the way of the crackling dark magic, her aim on her cutting curse a bit off as she stumbled—

—so Yaxley completely ignored the shimmering of the curse as it passed her, instead deflecting the piercing curse from Susan, the yellow spellglow disappearing up into the sky, an odd transfiguration spell Mel didn't recognise making the dirt around Susan's feet churn—

—but that gave Mel enough time to get off an incendiary curse, even a moment to duplicate it into four, though one missed entirely—

—the three curses exploded against another brilliant orange shield, Yaxley vanishing behind a torrent of fire and smoke—

—acting on instinct, Mel dove for the ground, a dark stunning charm coming within inches of her back as she dropped, tingles racing against her skin at the charge carried through her cloak from the near miss. She rolled to the side, a bludgeoning hex throwing up dirt just next to her, scrambling to face Yaxley where she'd appeared behind her—

—Yaxley was distracted for an instant by another cutting curse from Susan, and since Mel was still so close to the ground anyway, she touched her wand to the dirt, hissed, 'Tì gi kêu!' She twitched at the draw on her magic, but ignored it, pushing herself to her feet as the flames rose around her—

—eyes widening, Yaxley retreated before the tall red-white flames crawling across the ground toward her, but she still had time to fire a trio of stunning charms off at Mel—

—she leaned away from the first, and caught the other two on a shield, the thing shattering from the combined pressure of the charms, and Mel staggered back from the whiplash, angry magic clawing at her skin—
—and Yaxley was suddenly behind her again, Mel felt her move this time, skipped out of the way of the blood-vanishing curse headed for her back—

—even as she spun around, retaliating with a slicing curse, she added the fact that she could apparently recognise a fucking blood-vanishing curse without even needing to see it to her list of things other people didn’t need to know—

—the curse splashed against another of Yaxley's reddish shields, she twisted to catch a blasting curse from Susan, deflected it—

—sending it straight for Mel, who stared at it in shock for a moment before remembering herself, barely managing to deflect into the ground. Had Yaxley really just deflected Susan's curse right at her? That was cheating! How the fuck had she even managed to aim that?

—conjured or transfigured dogs were suddenly barrelling down on her, Mel dodged the first one to make a leap at her throat, blasted the second one right in the face, set the next on fire with a panicky fire charm, barely got it off in time, hit the next with another of those slicing charms, nailed the first one as it came around again with an overpowered dispel and a snarl—

—and she jumped as Yaxley appeared right in front of her, barely a step away. Her left arm was inches above Mel's shoulder, wreathed in runes glowing yellow-green in the air. Runic casting? The dogs had just been a bloody distraction! Mel tried to jerk out of the way, but Yaxley's hand came down on her shoulder, the runes disappearing with a crackle of energy releasing into the air. For an instant nothing happened at all, but Mel felt the magic around her contorting with a nauseating swirl, then pouring down on her shoulders, driving her knees hard into the dirt, then slamming her into the ground chest-first.

A puff of dirt rose from the ground in front of her mouth as the air was forced out of her lungs. Mel gasped, trying to breathe against the crushing weight pushing on her back, some of that dirt sucked back into her throat, making her break into a coughing fit. God dammit. She grit her teeth, strained against the magic holding her down, couldn't lift a bloody finger. She couldn't even try to dispel the fucking thing, she'd dropped her wand at some point.

'Ah, ah, ah,' Yaxley said, her voice light and teasing, 'none of that now.'

'Let go of me, you—'

Mel couldn't see from here, but she recognised the hem of Susan's skirt. Straining against the spell, she managed to turn her head a little, enough she could mostly see. Susan was struggling against hands grabbing at her, with a twist jerked around, trying to get her wand pointed at Yaxley. But Yaxley grabbed her wand hand by the wrist before she could get anything out, brought her own wand to Susan's forearm, dragging it down from wrist to elbow. Susan let out a gasping groan, blood welling up shockingly quickly, little red streamers running across her pale skin, dripping to the ground. Susan's hand spasmed, her wand falling from limp fingers.

'There we are. This will be a whole lot easier if you just—'

Yaxley was cut off about there. Susan had cocked her shoulder back, brought her left fist flying into Yaxley's cheek. As Yaxley reeled from the blow, her grip loosened, Susan broke away and darted off toward Mel. The completely dumbfounded look on Yaxley's face was giving Mel the silliest urge to giggle.

It was a bit less funny a moment later, when the look shifted to one of hard, incandescent rage. With
a flick of her wand, Susan's feet were yanked out from under her, sending her face-first to the ground. Mel winced — that had not looked fun. Yaxley stalked over toward them, wand unwavering on Susan, her face twisted into a hideous snarl of fury. 'Cru—'

For an instant, an instant that seemed to hang in the air for far longer than it should, Mel could only watch, horrified.

No. No, that would not be happening, if she could do anything about it, thank you.

And she could do something about it. It wasn't like she necessarily needed her wand to do magic, after all. It was just a stick of wood. The magic came from her. She'd even done wandless magic before. She remembered that time she'd been talking to Remus, and she'd been angry and frustrated and hurt and she'd filled the air with fire just to burn some of it off. She hadn't needed her wand then, and she didn't need it now.

Instead of trying to hold her magic in, yanking it back, she pushed it out into the air, hot, angry whips of power clawing at the world around her. She glared up at Yaxley, gritting her teeth. She couldn't use an incantation to guide the spell, that would take too long, she didn't even take the time to consider what spell she wanted, she just focused, pushed the magic through her and out, putting all of her fury into it, that Yaxley would try to hurt Susan like this, especially right in front of her, it would not happen, Susan was not going to be hit with that curse of all curses, Mel refused to let it happen, it would not, it would not, it would not—

With an odd, crackling pop, Yaxley's wand, her hand, her forearm nearly up to her elbow, all were suddenly consumed in blue-white flame.

While Yaxley fell to her knees, the air suddenly rent with her high, piercing screams, Susan scrambled back over to her wand, took it up in an awkward left-handed grip. Awkward, but she still managed to knock Yaxley out with a stunning charm. She was still burning, of course — Mel could feel the tendril of magic flowing up out of her, a tickling draw like blood trickling from a wound, feeding power to the spell — but at least the screaming stopped.

And Susan was kneeling next to her, her bleeding arm wrapped around her stomach, wand shaking in her off hand. Mel felt a dispel wash over her, but it didn't do anything. Susan glared impotently at the magic holding Mel down, tried again, this time saying the incantation out loud. The fluttering of her charm washed over her, several times more powerful than the first try, but it still didn't work. 'That's not gonna work.' Mel blinked for a moment, surprised at the weakness on her own voice. Huh. She didn't feel that bad... 'Try a different one.'

'I can't...' Susan bit her lip for a moment, shaking her head. 'I don't think I can do any others with my off hand.'

'Can you fix your arm?'

'I'm pants with healing.'

Mel closed her eyes for a moment, ran through her options. They could just wait for their rescuers to finally show up, but Mel would rather not. That cut in Susan's arm had looked rather deep, she was probably losing more blood than was entirely safe; Mel wasn't great at healing, but good enough to deal with that at least temporarily. Every charm that might work to free herself she would need to—No, wait, not every charm. 'Can you find my wand, put it in my hand?'

'Erm, sure.' Susan looked around for a second, then crawled away, down out of the bottom of her vision. After a couple seconds, her skin tingled as a familiar length of wood was slipped onto her
palm, Susan wrapping her fingers around her wand. All right, okay. Mel took a long breath, focused on what she wanted the spell to do. She'd never tried this without pointing at the thing she was casting it on, but it should work. 'Ablue.'

She knew the spell had worked before it did. Magic crawled over her, gentle and warm, tingles just on the edge of tickling. She heard Susan somewhere nearby let out a worried-sounding gasp — Mel couldn't see it herself, at the moment, but she knew this particular dispel looked like low yellow flames crawling over the target, so not surprising. She felt Yaxley's runic spell resist, pushing back against Mel's fire, but after a couple seconds of straining it broke apart, the energy sustaining it consumed by the flames, and Mel was free.

She pushed herself to her knees, turned to Susan. Pulling her arm away from her stomach, she winced at the blood all over Susan, staining her shirt and her skin. Yeah, no way that was good. A couple quick charms sealed the cut itself, but Mel couldn't replace the blood she'd lost. Oh well, the Aurors or whoever were coming should have potions to take care of that.

While Susan ran her fingers over her forearm, Mel turned to look back at Yaxley. Shimmering blue fire was still running all along her arm. Should probably do something about that. Mel closed her eyes, tried to feel out her magic, find the spot it was running out to keep the fire going. It didn't take too long before she found it, pinched the tendril off, yanked all of them back into her. She didn't really needed it anymore, so she buried her magic back where she usually kept it, tucked away somewhere deep inside.

Exhaustion hit her in a sudden wave, muscles twitching and head filled with swirling fog. Okay. Apparently her magic had been keeping her going, because she was really fucking tired all of a sudden. She opened her eyes only long enough to make sure Yaxley wasn't on fire anymore — her wand arm from fingertips to elbow was all withered and blackened, really gross — before flopping over on her back, letting out a weary sigh. 'So. That went well.'

Susan gave a shaky, disbelieving laugh at that. Mel's eyes were still closed, but she was pretty sure she heard Susan lay down next to her. 'You call that going well, do you?'

'Hey, we could be dead.'

'That is true.' By the odd sound of her voice, she figured Susan couldn't decide whether she should be terrified — there had been a number of very lethal curses thrown around there — or just amused. 'I had no idea you were that good, honestly. Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but...'

It wasn't hard to guess what she was thinking with that. Mel shook her head to herself, trying not to be annoyed and finding it strangely easy. She was tired, that could be it. 'Don't listen to that Boy-Who-Lived shite. I was worse than useless before Dora started teaching me. Yaxley would have stunned me in a second a month ago.'

'Mm.'

There was silence for a few seconds, filled with nothing but the two of them breathing. Mel was strangely tired, it would be too easy to just fall asleep right here. Suddenly, Susan let out a snort of laughter, followed by a flurry of muffled giggles, as though she were trying to hold them in and completely failing. When they went on for some seconds, Mel said, 'What?

'It's just– No, it's nothing, forget about it.'

'What?'
'No, it's stupid, forget it.'

Mel felt a smile twitching at her lips. 'You know, saying that is just making me more curious.'

'Oh, well, fine, it's just, it just hit me, is all. I don't know why I think it's so funny, I just...' Susan let out a moaning sigh, but it didn't sound right, her voice suddenly high, oddly breathless and nasally. In the same voice, all exaggerated and over-dramatic, she said, 'Oh, Harry Potter, you're my hero!'

Mel bit her lip to stop herself from laughing, reached over to her best guess of where Susan was, smacked some part of her, not sure where, with the back of her hand. 'Shut up.'

Back to her normal voice, but tinged with giggles she was barely holding in, Susan said, 'Yeah, see, I told you it was stupid.'

'I'm used to it by now. You say stupid shite kind of a lot, actually.'

'Aw, well, I am so flattered right now. Gosh, Mel, you sure know how to sweet-talk a girl.'

Mel just smiled and said nothing, laying there and doing her absolute best to stop herself from passing out. Hopefully whoever was coming would have a potion to wake her the fuck up. Turns out setting Death Eaters on fire is really exhausting.

Mel had absolutely no idea how to feel about this.

In a lot of ways, the day had been strangely...normal. Outside of the fight with Yaxley, at least, but with how much duelling practice Mel got in these days even that wasn't that weird. Though, when the authorities had shown up, they had reacted a bit more strongly than had really made sense. She'd gotten the impression Yaxley was infamous for some reason or another, more than just a run-of-the-mill Death Eater, but she didn't know why. Nor did she really care. Yaxley had wanted to do something bad to Susan, they'd fought, Mel and Susan had won. That was enough for her.

Honestly, Mel had won — looking back on it, Susan really hadn't helped that much, most of Yaxley's attention had been on Mel the whole time. Susan had actually apologised for that, when they'd been sitting down for lunch. Which was silly. She guessed Susan had been getting self-defence lessons here and there over her life, so she was probably far more capable of handling herself than most in their year, but she'd never gotten anything like the training Mel was getting with Dora now, nor did she have near the experience Mel had with nearly getting killed. She wouldn't have expected Susan to keep up, it was fine. If anything, she was pretty sure Susan had been more useful than anyone she'd had with her in previous scrapes she'd gotten into. So, not complaining.

That, and... Mel was simply more powerful than her. She felt kind of bad thinking it, the idea seeming a bit too...Death Eater -ish. But it was true.

But it was weird. She'd expected to be all awkward and nervous and, she didn't know, terrified the whole time. And while she had had moments here and there, it'd been surprisingly easy. Actually, that wasn't surprising, she guessed — she should expect she would get along with people who had been friends with Hermione for years. When Susan wasn't teasing her, or sending her flowers or shite, she actually wasn't that hard to talk to. It was easy.

It would be too easy.

They were going back to the castle already. She was sure Susan had had a longer day planned. She'd said something about an underground duelling club, why they'd been in a sketchy part of the city in the first place, but after that fight with Yaxley she really wasn't in the mood for more violence.
Which was fine with Mel. The people who'd shown up had had a blood replenishing potion for Susan, and something to wake Mel up after magically straining herself like that — apparently, using wandless magic on purpose was way harder than doing it on accident — but she was already getting tired again. It was only...three in the afternoon or so, she thought, and she'd probably be going to bed almost right away.

She honestly wasn't sure how far away they were from the castle. They'd been in this carriage for a little bit, but conversation had petered out pretty quickly. And she'd lost track of time. She was tired, enough it was kind of hard to focus, that was probably part of it. And it didn't help that Susan was...

It wasn't anything bad, exactly. It'd probably be better if it were bad. They were sitting in the carriage, and Susan was just kind of...holding her hand, and... Her fingers were running along the back of Mel's forearm, so light she could barely even feel it, back and forth in seemingly unconscious circles. Mel kept twitching, fighting back half-formed urges, struggling to remain just sitting here like a not-completely-crazy person.

It would be easy, far, far too easy.

This was stupid. She realised she was being stupid. She knew she shouldn't feel like this. She didn't... There was nothing about those fingers on her arm that should make her feel like she wanted to jump out of the moving carriage and apparate away. There was nothing about Susan sitting next to her, quiet and comfortable, nice and warm and... There was nothing about this that should be making her so scared! This was stupid!

But she couldn't stop thinking it. It would be too easy.

It would be too easy to just...let go. She was far too comfortable, and she wasn't used to feeling comfortable, and this felt far too good, and she wasn't used to feeling good, it would be far too easy to just let herself... She didn't even know exactly. She wasn't entirely sure what she was afraid of. If she were, it'd probably be a lot easier to figure out what the fuck she was going to do about this. But she could feel this whatever it was, she wasn't entirely sure what was going on in her own head right now, it was new and different and confusing, and it was too big, and she couldn't...

It would be far too easy to lose control. But she didn't know why she had convinced herself that was such a bad thing. Well, okay, she sort of did. Sometimes the Dursleys could be pushed, prodded, sometimes she could say or do something they didn't like and she wouldn't get punished too horribly for it. And she'd learned to find those moments she could rebel, even in tiny ways, just to do something. Just to feel like she had something. But if she wanted those moments, she had to be perfectly behaved whenever possible. And sometimes they couldn't be pushed, and reacting on impulse, even so much as an inappropriate facial expression, could be very bad. They'd never hurt her that bad physically, true, or at least not very often, but being locked up in her cupboard for days on end was almost worse, in its own way. If she didn't want to be punished, she had to be in control whenever possible.

By the time she'd turned eleven, looking back, she'd been strangely good at it, keeping herself mastered, feeling out when she could enact her small rebellions, when she had to be absolutely perfect. Spending months at a time at Hogwarts, where she hadn't needed to be nearly so careful, had worn down her ability to do it properly when she went back for the summers, but she had been very good at it at one point.

In retrospect, it wasn't surprising at all she'd nearly gone to Slytherin. If Malfoy hadn't made such an arse of himself, if Ron hadn't filled her head with nasty stories about them, she almost certainly would have.
But she didn't know why she had to hold on to this so hard. She didn't know why the idea scared her so badly. She didn't even know what would happen if she just gave up! This whole thing was so vague, she had no idea what the consequences would be. It didn't make sense, it didn't make sense at all, why was she being so stupid...

It would be far too easy, and she didn't know what would happen, and maybe that was what scared her, that she would let go and not realise what was happening and find herself...she didn't know, somewhere else, someone else.

Of course, she was already a different person than she'd been before, and she realised that, but that didn't mean she didn't still...

Why did this have to be happening? It would be so much easier if she didn't have to deal with this right now. It just made everything more complicated, she didn't know how to deal with feeling like this, she didn't know what she was doing.

Why did Susan have to do this to her? Couldn't she have picked someone else?

This would be so much easier...

Shite, when had she started crying? She hadn't noticed. Stupid fucking eyes. She turned to stare out the window on her side of the carriage, did her absolute best to keep her breathing as even as possible despite her lungs apparently deciding to take a goddamn holiday for no reason, tried to ignore Susan's fingers still softly running along her skin. Hopefully she could pull herself together before Susan noticed anything, bloody fucking hell that would be embarrassing.

'Mel?' Susan's fingers stopped moving, instead gently wrapped around her forearm a bit above her wrist. Her voice all soft and concerned, which was not helping. 'What's wrong?'

Oh, of course something couldn't go her way just fucking once, that would be too much to ask. Mel couldn't say anything, with how her throat was all tight and hot right now it would probably come out all strangled and stupid, and that was assuming she even had the first clue what she could say. Her head was way too confusing, she had no idea. So she just brought her hand to her face, rubbing at her stupid bloody leaking eyes, shook her head.

For maybe just a couple seconds, the carriage trundled along, Mel trying to stop being such a bloody mess, Susan staying blessedly quiet. God, this was embarrassing. But, no, of course they couldn't just...not talk right now. That would be impossible. Her voice all quiet and cautious, Susan said, 'I'm sorry.'

Mel considered just giving her a questioning look, but with how wet her fingers were getting, no, that would be bad. 'Why?' Oh, hey, that actually came out sounding mostly normal, good.

'I...' Susan hesitated for a moment, sighing, her grip on Mel's hand and arm tightening slightly. 'Someone hurt you very badly, didn't they.'

'Someone hurt you very badly, didn't they.'

She... She had absolutely no idea how to respond to that.

'I didn't... I didn't know it was this bad. I thought you were just, you know.' Susan shrugged, her shoulder brushing against Mel's. 'Shy. I might have... I just didn't know.'

How the fuck was she supposed to deal with that? She had no clue, no clue at all, this just... She was not prepared for this. She just shook her head, still trying to get herself back under control, at this rate they'd be getting to the castle—
Even as she thought it, the carriage jerked to a halt. Great, and now she had to get out and walk around with it very obvious she’d been crying, just perfect. But before she could even move, she felt Susan shift around, by the feel of it going for the holster on her wrist. Susan half-stood, there were a couple quick taps of wood on wood, and with a sudden lurch the carriage was moving again.

Huh. Okay, then. She wasn't sure if she should be glad she had more time to compose herself, or concerned she was going to be stuck in here with Susan for even longer. Susan did seem to make her feel things, and she wasn't very good at dealing with that.

Susan didn't go back to sitting next to her. Instead, she heard a bit of shuffling around, her arm being pulled along in front of her. Then she started at pressure against her knees, pulled her hand away from her face and glanced down on reflex. Susan was kneeling on the floor of the carriage in front of her, Mel's trapped hand in both of hers, arms against Mel's legs. Staring up at her, and it was hard to tell, since her vision was still a bit blurry, but Mel thought she looked strangely uncomfortable. Seeing Susan bloody Bones at all uncomfortable was a bit strange, honestly. After a second of meeting her eyes, Susan said, 'Tell me to go away.'

For a second, Mel could only blink at her. 'Huh?'

A sad sort of smile twitching at her lips, Susan said, 'I'll do it. Tell me to leave you alone, and I will. I won't be happy about it, but—' Susan shrugged. 'I'm not here to make your life difficult on purpose, Mel. If it's what you want, just tell me to go away.'

She...

She didn't...

Well, it would be just fucking perfect if that was actually what she wanted, wouldn't it? But she couldn't get Ellie's voice out of her head these days, telling her to at least acknowledge to herself what she actually wanted, and she could try to lie to herself, but she would know it was a lie.

It took a long moment for Mel to find her voice again. 'If I wanted you to go away, this wouldn't be so...' She didn't know. She didn't know what she was saying.

And there Susan went just smiling at her again. Sometimes, Mel really wished she would do that less. Or that she were just less good at it. Mel didn't know why, but she was just so goddamn pretty when she smiled at her like that, and it made her uncomfortable. 'I guess I'm sticking around then.' Susan got up a little, reorienting herself so she was sitting on the bench on the opposite side of the carriage. Didn't let go of Mel's hand, leaning forward sort of awkwardly, but fine.

Since Susan didn't seem to be inclined to say anything more, Mel ended up just kind of...staring at her. Which was slightly awkward, but she'd mostly gotten control of herself again by now, and it wasn't like she had much else to do, so fine.

Did magic do weird things to people's hair? She was pretty sure it did. She didn't mean misbehaving, as her hair did, she was pretty sure that was also magic. But when she'd first seen pictures of her mother, she'd been positive Lily had dyed her hair or something, because there was no way that deep, vibrant red was a colour hair would naturally be, but it turned out it was just like that. She didn't think Susan's was a colour hair should be either. Or colours, technically. She still thought it was kind of weird, like it couldn't decide if it was going to be a deep red a lot like Lily's, or a much paler pinkish blonde, graduating one to the other seemingly at random. It was less obvious when it was in the long plait she normally had it in, but when it was mostly free like it was now you couldn't miss it. Not that it wasn't pretty, Mel actually rather liked it, it was just...different. She could imagine the comments the Dursleys would have about hooligans and unnaturalness if they ever had occasion
to see it.

Why was she sitting here thinking about Susan's hair? She was so weird sometimes...

She stared at Susan smiling back at her for another moment, her jaw working silently, trying to think of how to say what she was thinking. Ah, hell, there was no use dancing around. Just say it, you idiot. 'You want me to be your girlfriend, don't you.'

Susan's smile tilted a bit, shifting into a smirk. 'Well,' she said, sounding slightly amused, 'I can't honestly say I would be opposed.'

Despite herself, Mel was strongly tempted to roll her eyes at her. This girl sometimes, seriously. 'You know I have absolutely no bloody clue what I'm doing.'

'That's okay.' Susan shrugged a little. 'I do. And I don't mind if you mess up a little. No one really knows what they're doing the first time.'

'And, you know, if we're still...' Mel trailed off, no clue what words to use here. She'd overheard the sort of things other people said, but she wasn't sure what was appropriate. 'By the end of December, everyone's gonna know. Who I am, I mean.'

A look of surprise crossed Susan's face, only for a moment, before she went back to smiling at her. 'No need to be thinking that far ahead, Mel. That's, what, two months away yet. Besides, I don't care. My mum's Amelia bloody Bones, people already talk about me.' Susan's smile tilted into a smirk again. 'If you think my name hasn't been said in scandalised whispers a million times already...'

Mel just sighed at that. She guessed that was true. She barely ever payed attention, and even she'd heard rumours about Susan over the years. She mostly ignored them, since it wasn't like any of the rumours about herself were accurate, and most were about boring social shite she didn't entirely get but would probably make Andi sputter, but still. 'You're ridiculous, you know that.'

'Believe it or not, I have been informed. Repeatedly, thoroughly, and in multiple languages.' If anything, Susan seemed almost proud of that.

Mel just sighed at that. She guessed that was true. She barely ever payed attention, and even she'd heard rumours about Susan over the years. She mostly ignored them, since it wasn't like any of the rumours about herself were accurate, and most were about boring social shite she didn't entirely get but would probably make Andi sputter, but still. 'You're ridiculous, you know that.'

'Believe it or not, I have been informed. Repeatedly, thoroughly, and in multiple languages.' If anything, Susan seemed almost proud of that.

Mel shook her head at the silly girl, trying and completely failing not to smile.

Chapter End Notes

Íde — Pronunciation varies somewhat depending on dialect, something like "ee-dyuh" (IPA: /iː.də/) or "ee-juh" (IPA: /iː.ðə/)  
an chearnóg (/əŋ kə.ɾˠə.ɾˠəːɡ/, roughly "un hahr-nohg") — Irish, literally "the square"  
yn xiarnog (/ən ɾˠə.ɾˠəːɡ/, roughly "un hyarr-nohg") — Mel attempting to say the above, spelled as though it were Bríðwyn  

[Hé, buachaill. Tá cabhair ag teastail uait, nach bhfuil?] — Irish. I was going for, basically, "hey, kid, don't need help, do you?" but, you know, not my language, might have fucked it up.  

[Coimhéad fearg bhean na foighne, is ceart...] — Irish some more. I intended something
like "beware the wrath of a patient woman, no doubt..." In case anyone who actually speaks Irish is thinking of commenting, I'm aware the use of "is ceart" here isn't correct, that was on purpose.

[OLLSCOIL ĆOITEANN CAOIâ{}ME NÍ ĊBLÃITÎN] — Uses an old thing for lenited consonants, in standard orthography would be Ollscoil Choiteann Caoimhe Ní Bhláithín. I almost changed other things too, actually, but meh. The "an Ollscoil" Susan refers to it as is pronounced something like "un ole-skell" (/ən ələskɛl/). I know the use of "ollscoil coiteann" here is slightly strange, it's not a mistake.

[MORYSCOL CYHÉDWS CIVW MERČ VLAÎČYN] — A translation of the above into Brîþwn, with partially Gaelicised orthography.

[Nuair a bhíonn an gaoth ag imirt le do fholt, tá tú rí-álainn] — Irishing it up some more. I might have fucked this up, but I was going for something along the lines of "you're very beautiful when the wind is playing with your hair." Should be close-ish?

flamânia impulsâns — As a reminder, this is a type of elemental fire magic that transfers its energy into physical force on contact.

ti gi kége (τη γη καίγε) — Modern Greek, "burn the earth"

ablue — Latin, second-person imperative of "to wash off, purify"

Yeah, this is late, I know, sorry. My brain is being an enormous bitch. And then the chapter went way longer than I anticipated, which seems to happen to me a lot. Literally my longest fanfic chapter yet. Yay?

It didn't help that Mel surprised me again. The plan actually was for her to interrogate Hermione about the twins, but the Mel in my head was just like, "No, we won't be doing that." But I— "I won't be mean to Hermione. No." And I'm like .-

Thanks to MurderRose for some corrections to my spotty Irish. Should be slightly better now?

Anyway, sorry for the wait. Until next time,
~Wings
October 1995 — An Incomplete Puzzle

Chapter Summary

Mel doesn't understand a bloody thing anymore.

Chapter Notes

Some paraphrasing and a couple directly quotes from Half-Blood Prince. And a couple others, actually, but mostly HBP.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tom gave the issue of the *Prophet* in his hands a harsh glare. Like the shameless, voyeuristic, disgraceful bundle of shite the periodical was, it didn't even have the grace to apologise for displeasing him.

Apparently, Arianna Yaxley had attempted to abduct the young Lady Bones. That, in itself, was not a surprise. Well, that Dilwyn and Elisabeth's underage daughter had inherited the title, and Amelia hadn't taken it up herself, *that* was a little bit of a surprise. Tom hadn't checked, but he was rather certain Amelia had been next in the order of succession — was there some quirk in inheritance law that had passed her over, or was it just some personal reason? Oh well, that wasn't really the point.

Arianna Yaxley, a granddaughter of a Yaxley he vaguely remembered from Hogwarts, had been a new player at the time of his incapacitation — while he had considered recruiting her more than once, he'd never gotten around to it. She had made a bit of a reputation for herself over the years he'd been absent, from what Severus had told him. She was something of a procurer. Many potions or rituals involved certain live ingredients that could be a bit of a hassle to get one's hands on. Rare creatures, some of which were illegal to breed or even own, magical beings of various sorts, most of which had some sort of legal protection. Even humans, sometimes. Yaxley was well-known as someone who could get almost anything, prompt and untraceable, no questions asked. For an especially hefty fee, she could even be convinced to acquire *particular* specimens — she essentially had a side business in professional kidnapping. And she was very good at it, good enough she'd been on the Aurors' kill-or-detain board for some time.

That someone would hire Yaxley to secure the Bones girl, probably as some leverage over Amelia, was not unusual. That Yaxley had failed, defeated by the young Bones and one of the newly-adopted Blacks, that was unexpected, though not unbelievable. The identity of who the *Prophet* claimed Yaxley had told the Aurors had hired her, on the other hand, *that* was a problem.

Tom folded the newspaper, slipped it inside his robes. Before moving to stand, he let out a long sigh, rubbing at his face with both hands. He'd been worried something like this would happen. He really didn't want to deal with this.

There were very few things in this world that frightened him.

He got to his feet, started on his way through the ridiculous opulence of Malfoy Manor. Honestly, he
didn't know how people lived like this. All the gleaming granite and glass, the silky and spotless carpets and tapestries, vases and abstract-looking bits of sculpture here and there. It was absurd. He felt like he was standing in a bloody museum most of the time. At least the personal apartments were generally less ostentatious, but it was still annoying. He could mostly ignore it, and often found the display amusing, sort of the architectural equivalent of a strutting peacock. But he had to wonder sometimes what it was like growing up in a place like this. He would be the first to admit he hadn't had a typical childhood, and had been far from the typical child, but he didn't think this could be healthy.

Not surprised Draco had run away, really. It was more strange it had taken so long.

He'd only made it halfway to the hall he knew Bella was in when he felt the wards in the back of his head twitching. It only took him a second to identify who was approaching him. He closed his eyes, took a moment to let out an exasperated sigh before the man could see it — speaking of Draco running away...

Soon he was joined in the hallway by Lucius, as always done up in his characteristic silky perfection, his affectations perfectly analogous to those ridiculous peacocks he bred. Tom always found that comparison amusing. The pathetic excuse for a Lord of the Wizengamot was soon kneeling at his feet, so Tom reluctantly came to a halt, trying not to look too impatient. It was perfectly appropriate for a Dark Lord to be impatient with his idiot servants, of course, but he'd been finding it unusually hard these days to stop himself from just killing the arrogant little ponce, and he sort of needed him alive for the moment. It'd be better if Lucius wasn't aware just how close Tom was to getting rid of him, just so he didn't have to hear his incessant whining anymore. 'Is there a reason you've decided to annoy me today, Lucius?' he said, unconsciously dropping into the low, cold, melodramatic hiss he thought of as his Voldemort voice.

'Forgive me if I am imposing, my Lord.' At the servile, slightly terrified edge on the pureblood lord's voice, Tom couldn't help a short flash of smug pleasure — he never tired of powerful pureblood supremacists humbling themselves to him, it was hilarious. 'But I was wondering if you had made any progress in plans to recover my son for your service.'

Tom barely managed to hold in a snort of derision, too far out of character. 'Recover him for your service, you mean.'

'My Lord, I—'

'Silence.' Tom hissed the word overly slowly, letting the weight of his power settle over Lucius as he did. The younger man took in a sharp, terrified breath, quite near shaking in his exquisite tailored robes. Eventually he spoke, his voice a harsh whisper, but not before letting the idiot quivering at his feet marinate in his fear for a few moments. 'No, Lucius, I am not making progress in any such plans. Because I do not have any such plans. Maintaining your authority over your family is not my responsibility. If you did not want your wife to seek refuge with the House of her birth, you should not have given her reason to. If you did not want your son to flee in her wake, you should have taken the opportunity to instill loyalty properly while he was still under your influence. These are your mistakes, Lucius. I fail to see how it is my responsibility to fix them for you.' He was tempted to make a comment about Lucius being a grown man, and Tom not being his mother, but that wasn't quite in character either.

Sometimes, he really missed Candidus. The first Malfoy he'd ever met had been a bit of a prat sometimes, but he'd at least been consistently entertaining. His son, at least, had been consistently competent. His grandson was just consistently disappointing.

Tom glared down at the kneeling man, head bowed low enough he couldn't see his face. 'I know you
may not be the most rational right now, but I would advise you to not do anything stupid. Narcissa has been reclaimed by the House of Black. Draco is under their protection. Provoking the Blacks more than necessary would be unwise.'

Lucius looked up, only enough to give Tom's stomach a surly glare. "The erstwhile Noble and Most Ancient House of Black has fallen far. They are not the threat they once were, my Lord.'

Perhaps not the same threat, no. Honestly, Tom hadn't expected much direct opposition from within the Dark Noble Houses when he'd started his Voldemort gambit. He'd thought most would do their best to avoid him, avoid drawing his attention, while subtly aiding or obstructing as their personal politics dictated. Orion Black reforming the British Circle of Agastya specifically to defeat him had been a complete surprise. And not necessarily an unpleasant one either. Albus Dumbledore had never quite made a satisfactory rival. He was just too... Tom couldn't explain it exactly. The tactics and strategies Albus always used were sometimes effective, yes, but they left a bad taste in Tom's mouth just witnessing them. Not to mention the man's rhetoric. He was always so...fatefulistic, absolutist. It bothered him.

Orion, on the other hand, he had been a worthy opponent, an entertaining rival he hadn't even seen coming until it had almost been too late to react. So unapologetically powerful, so articulate, so clever, so deliciously devious. Tom had quite enjoyed their game.

Until it had gone too far. Tom was starting to wonder if making his horcruxes had been ill-advised to begin with, but at least he should have reconsidered where to place them, and certainly who he let know about them. The elf had survived, he was certain of it, and by the time he had arrived at the cave, instantly notified by tripped alarm wards, young Regulus had already drowned, and his mother's necklace was gone. He hadn't known Regulus had been placed as a spy by his father, but it was rather obvious in retrospect. Tom had assumed the locket had been ferried off to the Circle, and before they could move on his other horcruxes, he had done his absolute best to wipe the entire organisation off the face of the planet. Some had escaped, but Orion, at least, Tom had managed to kill himself.

The deft old snake had even tagged him a couple times in their duel. As he'd said, a worthy opponent.

It was true, the new Lord of the House was no Orion Black. That was a legacy Tom doubted all but a few could ever live up to. But he was no slouch himself when it came to magical talent and intelligence and unbridled nerve, and he had multiple households' worth of powerful witches and wizards behind him, a nearly unmatched fortune in gold and knowledge and enchanted artifacts accumulated over centuries. And they were Blacks. The House was never to be underestimated. As everyone should now have been reminded, with a fifteen-year-old daughter of the House somehow bringing down Arianna Yaxley, of all people.

'Perhaps,' Tom whispered, with an easy shrug Lucius probably couldn't see from that angle. 'But I would suggest you not dismiss young Sirius so quickly. He is more dangerous than your lack of proper consideration suggests.'

'With that mudblood whore gone, he is nothing.'

Ah, yes, the "mudblood whore". The "mudblood whore" who had been teaching herself to cast dark curses wandlessly before even starting at Hogwarts. The "mudblood whore" who'd secretly mastered restricted magics Lucius had hardly ever heard of as a child, right under Dumbledore's nose. The "mudblood whore" who had very quickly established herself as the most powerful mage of her generation on the one hand, but on the other hand projecting an image of such unthreatening innocence few knew enough to be frightened of her. The "mudblood whore" who had rejected an
invitation to join him at sixteen, only to turn right around and join the Circle of Agastya instead — Tom was almost certain Albus still didn't know about any of that. The "mudblood whore" who, while suffering the animosity of the pureblood elitist Noble Houses, had many of the others wrapped around her finger, and the vast majority of the Common Houses eating out of her hand. The "mudblood whore" who had not only escaped him twice, but legitimately won in a duel. Against him, when she hadn't even been twenty years old yet. True, he probably could have killed her if he'd really wanted to, but by the time he'd realised what she'd been doing it'd been too late, and he'd barely escaped with his life.

Lily Evans. That "mudblood whore".

Purebloods, honestly. So blinded by their own preconceptions they can't see what's staring them right in the face.

But she wasn't really the point right now. 'I believe, Lucius, you are so blinded by the reckless teenager you remember that you do not see the powerful man for what he is now. But I won't stop you. If you wish to ignore my advice, to deny the threat the new Lord Black poses, I suppose that is your prerogative. He is not a threat to me, after all. If you want to draw the young Lord's ire so badly, by all means, be my guest. I'll be sure to have a good laugh with Narcissa at your funeral.' And he turned and walked away, shaking his head to himself at the continuous aggravation that was Lucius Malfoy.

When he walked into the open hall, centre of the wing of the Manor he'd taken over, Tom was not at all surprised to find Rodolphus laid out on the floor, eyes glazed over, little twitches running through his body every few seconds — cruciātus, obviously, maybe about a minute's worth — Bella seated on a couch a short distance away, book splayed open on her lap and a cup of tea in one hand. A smirk twitched at his lips at the familiar sight.

Unlike the rest he'd rescued from Azkaban, Bella was more or less recovered physically. It had taken a rather involved ritual and the sacrifice of three muggle women, yes, but she was whole and healthy again, if anything looking some years younger than she'd been when he'd fallen. But she hadn't been doing any better psychologically. It did come and go a bit. Sometimes, she would be the coldly intelligent, beautifully devious woman he remembered. Sometimes, the irrational, raging, half-insane monster that failed ritual nearly two decades ago now had made her. Sometimes, the paranoid, hallucinating wreck of a human being over a decade of dementor exposure had reduced her to. She did have lucid periods, yes, but they didn't seem to be getting any more frequent.

But this was very familiar. Smiling to himself, he walked over, not even trying to hold back his amusement. 'Your work I assume.'

Bella glanced up at him through her lashes, and gave him an evil little smirk. It was so like her old self some of that tense worry he wasn't even aware of most of the time loosened, his smile stretching wider. 'I'm not apologising. Bastard touched me.' Bella lifted the hand not holding her tea, flicked her wrist in Rodolphus's direction, the flash of a wandless stinging charm snapping at his back; Rodolphus was so out of it he barely twitched.

Ah, yes. Even before he'd had the long-term dementor exposure messing with his head, Rodolphus had slipped a few times. When the marriage had been arranged, Rodolphus hadn't been aware it was just for show, a small detail threaded into Tom's Voldemort gambit. Bella had had absolutely no intention of letting him touch her. Ever. After, oh, maybe a year or so, Rodolphus had been getting quite annoyed. Tom wasn't sure exactly how they'd gone about it — some combination of love potions and compulsion charms, he suspected — but Rodolphus and Rabastan had tried to force the issue, so to speak. After breaking whatever magics they'd tried to use to rape her, Bella had vented
her fury on the two of them for a while, and then come to fume at him about it. He'd quite nearly run off to murder the both of them, but she'd darkly insisted she would handle it, so he'd let her.

A couple weeks later, she'd performed a sort of enforced obedience ritual to permanently enslave both Lestrange brothers to her will. They'd been little but dumb muscle since, but Tom had still been rather impressed she'd pulled it off at all. For some reason, Rodolphus still had grabby moments he guessed were too instinctive for the ritual to have removed entirely, but Bella always promptly punished him for them.

Yes, this scene was very familiar. Tom was having a bit of a nostalgia moment here.

'Sounds like he deserved it, then.' Actually, he was somewhat disappointed he'd missed it. He always had enjoyed watching Bella curse the piss out of the pathetic excuse of a man that was supposedly her husband. 'I was wondering about something, hoped you could clear it up.'

'Oh?'

Tom reached into his robes, dropped the issue of the Prophet onto the gleaming granite coffee table in front of Bella, the article about Yaxley's arrest face-up. 'You wouldn't happen to have heard from Miss Yaxley lately?'

'I...'. Bella frowned at the paper. She set down her tea and her book, read the article, brow furrowed but face blank. After long moments, she slumped back in the couch, her eyes unfocused. 'That was me, wasn't it?'

'Do you even remember?' It took more effort than he would like to keep his frustration off his voice, but he did it anyway. He wasn't frustrated with her, not exactly. She wasn't getting better, and he hadn't found a cure. But he knew letting her hear how annoyed and increasingly desperate he was wouldn't be exactly helpful.

'No, I don't.' She let out a long sigh, rubbing at her face with both hands, suddenly looking quite exhausted. Then she started reaching into her robes, placed first her wand, then a couple vault keys and chequebooks on the table in front of her. 'You should keep these. I'm not sure I should be trusted with them.'

Tom held back a wince. Well. She wasn't entirely incorrect, was she? He walked around, sinking into the seat next to her, reached to pick up the keys and chequebooks, but left the wand. 'You keep that. I wouldn't want you to find yourself unable to punish our dear friend Rodolphus, would I.'

Bella shook her head to herself with something between a laugh and a sob. 'I hardly need my wand to do that.' But she picked it up anyway, again vanishing up her sleeve. 'I'm not getting better.'

It wasn't a question, so Tom didn't bother answering.

Rubbing at her face again, Bella let out a long sigh, leaning forward in her seat a bit. 'I don't—' Her voice came out a little choked, and she broke off with a snarl, probably annoyed with herself. After a moment of forced calm, she said, 'What are we going to do?'

'I'm looking into it. Ritual backlash is not that exceedingly rare of a condition. I'm sure someone, somewhere has had some useful ideas in how to deal with it.'

'And how's that going?'

He considered lying, but only for a second. Bella had always asked him not to lie to her. 'Not well.'
Bella quietly nodded.

Then, hardly two seconds later, she burst into tears.

Oh... Oh, Myrðin. He hated it when she did this. He could count the number of times he'd ever seen her cry on his fingers, but that didn't mean he hated it any less. He was not equipped to handle this sort of thing. Their relationship had been a huge confusing mess to him from the beginning, he'd stumbled his way along every step of the way, and while he thought he'd figured out some of it by now, these situations were still beyond him. He couldn't remember ever crying himself, even when he'd been a child, and it'd never particularly bothered him when anyone else did. But, for some reason, seeing Bella cry had always made him...uncomfortable.

Eventually, he wasn't even sure how, his arm had ended up around her shoulders, and she was tucked into his side, making fists in her robes. And he sat there, trying to think about something, anything else.

There were very few things in this world that frightened him.

'Now,' Bill stopped his usual pacing, coming to rest leaning against the front edge of his desk, arms idly crossing over his chest. 'I've been getting quite a few people who have been complaining about a lack of likely practical applications of what I've been teaching. I've been getting owls from parents, even.'

Out of curiosity, Mel took a quick glance around the room. It was kind of a conspicuous move, with where she was sitting, but Hermione always wanted to sit at the front, she couldn't really help that. If the Gryffindors had had any part in any complaints — which, Bill himself being a former Gryffindor and a rather successful one at that, she thought unlikely — they weren't showing the least bit of a remorse. A few of the Hufflepuffs looked sheepish, though.

'I guess I can see the point, though I'm a little curious why it's me you would be complaining about. Can't honestly tell me Quirrel or Lockhart taught you anything useful and, as competent of an instructor as Master Lupin is, kappas are not endemic to Europe, and your chances of ever running into a grindylow, vampire, red cap, or transformed werewolf are minuscule.

'But, granted,' he said with a shrug, 'I can see the argument for needing more practice with what we've been talking about. So, starting next week, some of the chairs and desks will either be charmed or enchanted with something you will not find enjoyable to sit on. Nothing permanently harmful, but not nice.' Bill ignored the muttering sweeping the classroom, kept smoothly talking as though there'd been no response at all. 'Some will be harder to break than others, but you shouldn't have any trouble with most of them. Make sure to check with those detection and analysis charms you've been learning. For the rest of class today, well, consider this an object lesson.'

Bill reached behind him, picked one of the projection crystals off his desk. He placed it on the ground, activated it with a jab of his wand, the air in front of him now filled with glowing shapes, a few branching strings of colourful runes. 'Let's say, it's over the summer, you're passing a week with one of your mates. You're staying in the night at the home of one of their cousins — not someone you personally know, but closely related to your friend, they've known them their whole life. Out of curiosity, you decide to play around a bit with those analysis spells, and you find this,' he said, gesturing at the ephemeral runes with a sweeping wave of his open hand. 'My question is: are you safe?

'Let's hear from someone who isn't in Runes. Is this a charm, enchantment, or a ward? Mister Thomas.'
Dean lowered his raised hand and, the answer sounding like a half-question, as though he weren't entirely sure, he said, 'Ward, sir.'

'It is a ward. Can you tell me if it's passive or active?'

'Ah, passive?'

A smirk touched Bill's lips. 'Was that a question or an answer?'

'Answer?' A few muffled giggles crossed the room.

Shaking his head in obvious amusement, Bill said, 'Yes, it is a passive ward.' Bill pointed his wand at the cluster of runes for a moment, three of the symbols somewhere in the middle, which Mel recognised as a standard trigger switch, were highlighted in a steady blue.

Mel still thought that terminology was flawed. The basic idea was an active ward constantly enacted some magic in its bounds, whether over the entire area or just along the wardline, depending on the desired effect. Anti-transportation wards, as an example, were active wards — they continually twisted space just so to prevent the magic of apparation or portkeys or whatever from properly functioning. Passive wards, on the other hand, did absolutely nothing most of the time until a certain circumstance was detected, and the effect of the ward was then triggered.

Why Mel thought the terminology was sort of stupid is because passive wards were also active wards: there was a detection spell of some sort as part of every passive ward. Otherwise it wouldn't know when to do anything. So, it was kind of stupid, she thought, the distinction wasn't as clear as it sounded.

But anyway, Bill was talking. 'Could anyone label the functional strings in this ward?' This one took quite a bit longer for anyone to volunteer — except for Hermione next to her, anyway, who'd had her hand in the air before Bill had even finished the sentence. After a moment, he turned a slightly crooked smile on her. 'I know you can do it, Miss Granger, but sometimes we should let other people try, don't you think?'

Hermione lowered her hand again, grumbling to herself under her breath. Mel tried very, very hard not to smirk too much.

'Ah, Miss Bones, come on up.'

A couple seconds later, Susan was standing next to Bill, wand in hand. She took a second to send a quick crooked smile off to Mel before turning back to the ward. She touched her wand to the blue part Bill had already highlighted, her lips twitching with a whispered incantation, the tip flicking up, drawing a little arrow and the word "trigger" into the air with soft blue light. Another couple quick twitches had the longer, branching string stretching to the left highlighted a deep red, labeled "active component — charm". A few more had the simpler string to the right highlighted yellow, labeled "passive component — detection", a short few runes branching off instead highlighted blue, "determiner".

As soon as Susan was done, Bill nodded, saying, 'Yes, there it is. The determiner in this case is technically a referent, but good enough. Go ahead and sit back down.' Once Susan was gone, with that same, smooth smile he always seemed to have, Bill pointed his wand at the passive half. Which was more confusing terminology — the "passive component" was technically an active ward. So stupid. 'Can anyone tell me what this does?'

'It's a detection ward.'
'Yes, Mister Hopkins, it is a detection ward. But what is it detecting?'

'Ah, aren't those two runes right there for apparation?'

'That is part of the answer, Miss Rivers. Can you be more specific?'

'Erm...'

It was Hermione who answered, with the same smooth self-assurance just short of condescending she always had when she was entirely confident she was correct about something. 'It does detect apparation, but the trigger condition is limited to outgoing apparation only. Further, the referent excludes certain targets from triggering the active component — I would assume somewhere else in the scheme would be some way to key people into the wards, which would also mark them as an exception to this clause.'

'Very good, Miss Granger,' Bill said, again flicking his wand up to the floating runes. Soon there was more English text on the passive side, "target outgoing apparation." 'So, your friend's cousin has a ward that triggers only when someone tries to apparate out. Very curious. That's not something people normally do — usually keeping people from apparating in is a greater concern. But ignore that for now. The question I'm curious about right now is—' His wand flicked over to the active side. '—if you do try to apparate out, what does it do to you?'

Silence, for a few seconds, as people thought about it. Or perhaps simply trying to process why someone would put a ward like that up — Mel couldn't think of a single reason someone would target outgoing apparation like that that reflected well on the owners of the house.

'It's, ah, a curse?'

'Yes, Miss Patil, it is a curse.' Bill highlighted in purple a branch off the left side, which Mel recognised as one of the common modulations all spells needed to overcome the innate magic of any living person. 'What kind of curse? Anyone?'

Mel ignored the chattering whispers around her, a few more incorrect guesses, quills scratching at parchment, and stared at the runic representation of the curse. It targeted a person, obviously, with that modulation, it couldn't do anything but. Though, there was a second modulation that was a bit odd. She could be reading it wrong — she was hardly an expert on the topic — but those runes looked oddly similar to the modulation on a compulsion charm she'd looked up for an assignment once. Which would mean it could be acting on a person's mind...but the compulsion charm didn't need the first modulation at all. And the modulation was similar, but not identical — Mel noticed particularly a place where the compulsion charm she knew had two runes meaning "enter into", but this one instead said "pass through". That was a very important difference.

The actual meat of the curse was a bit odd, too. If only because it was very familiar — it looked almost identical to the basic charm to boil water she was sure everyone in the room knew. But the determiners branching off of it were completely wrong. It was targeting water, yes, but the water it was targeting was...

Was...

Huh. Mel blinked at the floating runes, not sure if she were more confused or surprised. Bill hadn't shown them anything quite that deadly before. Interesting.

She'd only had her hand in the air for a couple seconds before Bill called on her. 'It's a lethal boiling curse, sir.'
Before Bill could say anything, Hermione was already blurting out, 'But there aren't any runes for blood anywhere in there.'

'You're not wrong, Miss Granger,' Bill said, voice easy and light, a hard contrast with the cold sharpness of his smirk. 'You'll notice Miss Black did not say it was a blood boiling curse. If you could, Miss Black, what does this curse target?'

Mel tried to shrug off the feeling of eyes on her, was only partially successful. 'The, er, all the water inside someone's skull, sir. Anyone hit with it wouldn't even have time to try to counter it. It would kill almost instantly.'

'Correct, Miss Black.' Voice slow, harshly even, he said, 'This ward strikes anyone trying to apparate out of its bounds with a curse that boils the water inside their brain. It doesn't stop them from disapparating, but it kills them so quickly they're dead before they reach their destination.'

Into the shocked silence of the classroom, Seamus almost yelled, 'Who would actually put up a ward like that, though?'

'That is the question, isn't it?' said Bill, shrugging to himself a little. 'I can only think of a few reasons why someone would want to kill anyone who attempts to leave their property, and none of them are good. But, see, what I didn't tell you going into this is that this is not a scenario I just made up. Between my sixth and seventh years here at Hogwarts, I was spending a week with one of my friends, and we went to one of his cousins' for one night. They seemed perfectly ordinary people to me, nothing that screamed "dangerous criminal". I couldn't sleep, and I was bored, so I started analysing their ward scheme to pass the time. I found this,' he finished, nodding at the representation of a lethal ward still glowing innocently in the air. 'I was surprised because, so far as I know, his cousin would have no particular reason to have anything quite like this just floating around. But there it was. I still don't know why. But you can believe I was much more cautious around his family from there on out.

'Returning to the question we started with, now that we know what this ward does: was I safe?'

There was an uneasy silence in the room for long moments.

'Of course, I was not. You are not safe anywhere the owners felt it necessary to take these kinds of precautions. This,' he said, pointing at the glowing runes, 'is why you should never apparate in or out of any private home, for any reason, before checking the wards first. It has nothing to do with proper courtesy in someone else's home, as you've probably heard so many times. No, it's much simpler than that. You could be dead before you even realise you'd made a mistake.

'And the question you should really be asking yourselves is, what if I hadn't thought to randomly check the wards? I wasn't told there was anything lethal on them, you know. What if I had to leave abruptly, for any reason? What if we were leaving the next morning and, unthinkingly, I didn't quite pass over the wardline?

'What if one of your friends, or one of your cousins, or even your own home, has a ward much like this one? I'm sure some of them do, especially the older family manors. Wouldn't you want to know?'

Apparently Mel wasn't the only one in the room who couldn't think of anything to say to that.

Within a few moments, the period was over, and Bill was waving them off until next time. They'd barely been dismissed before Mel and Hermione were being swarmed by Susan, Hannah, and Lily, confirming they had a study group meeting in the library in a half hour — Mel noticed Ron hovering a short distance away, looking decidedly uncomfortable and annoyed at the fringes of the clump of
girls. She considered him for a moment, then just shrugged it off. Yes, she had friends other than him now. Yes, most of them were girls. Ron was either going to get over it or he wasn't, there was no point in her worrying about it.

They walked out into the hall, a bit behind most of the rest of the class, and Mel quickly found herself trying to ignore how close Susan was walking next to her, close enough she could smell citrus, was half-convinced she could feel the heat drifting around her. For a couple seconds, Mel entirely lost track of the conversation. Damn, that girl was just going to keep doing this kind of shite to her, wasn't she? Very distracting...

Right, Hannah was saying, 'We were going to meet after dinner for spell practice, right? If we found a good room for it, I mean.'

'Mm, I think Mel and I found a good place for that. Right?' Hermione turned to give her a look — they had talked about letting the rest of the group know about the Room of Requirement, but neither of them had been able to decide if it was a good idea or not.

She didn't think it would do too much harm to let them know. She'd like the room available for when she needed it, but... Well, they'd see. 'Yeah, maybe, but I can't do tonight.' She shrugged at the curious looks from the other girls. 'I'm supposed to meet with—' Mel broke off at the last second, just before saying Dumbledore's name. What possible reason could "Melantha Black" have for meeting with the Headmaster like this? 'Ah, I'm busy.' She internally winced at the clumsy, obvious deflection. Very smooth, Mel.

'Oh!' Hermione said, her eyes going wide, clearly putting together what Mel was talking about. 'Right, right, forgot. Okay, we'll reschedule that, then. Tomorrow?'

With an uncertain frown, Susan said, 'I think Tracey and Daphne have a club meeting tomorrow, but I don't know when. Ask when we see them.'

'And it's actually a club meeting this time.'

Susan's lips twitched into a smirk. 'Pretty sure, Maïa. It's been a while since they've felt they needed to lie to get alone time. You might have noticed Daphne is far less shy about it these days.'

Lily snorted, shaking her head to herself. 'I really don't think you can stay a prude for very long when your girlfriend is Tracey bloody Davis.'

With what happened next, Mel was absolutely positive she was still missing something. After that comment, Hermione, Susan, and Hannah all quickly glanced at each other, the first looking slightly exasperated, the second smirking, and the last amused. Then Hannah made a little fake cough into her hand. With shocking abruptness, Lily's face went completely red, and she turned to look up at the ceiling, temporarily ignoring the other girls.

Huh.

When they got to the stairs, the entire group turned left, to head down, while Mel turned right. Susan had snaked her arm around Mel's at some point — somehow, she'd hardly even noticed — so they both got jerked to a stop. Tugging her arm free, Mel said, 'I gotta head up to the Tower quick. I was gonna work on that essay for McGonagall, don't have my Transfiguration stuff on me.'

'I should get that too,' Susan muttered, nodding to herself. 'Right, see you in a minute.' Before Mel could react, Susan leaned in quick and—

She entirely didn't see it coming. It happened too quickly. She didn't have time to be her usual
neurotic mess about it. By the time she realised what was happening, it was already over.

Susan leaned down the couple inches difference in their heights, her lips meeting Mel's, only for an instant before she was turning away again, walking off down the stairs.

Mel just stared at the back of Susan's head, thoughts blanked with shock.

She'd just...

She...

The girls were about halfway down the stairs already, Hermione lagging behind somewhat, shooting her looks somewhere between amused and concerned. Hannah and Lily had just looked momentarily surprised, but Hermione Mel figured was more in the loop, knew they hadn't— That she— That— That was new.

But anyway, Susan had gotten about halfway down the first flight of stairs when she suddenly jerked to a halt. After a couple seconds, she spun on her heel, her hair in its usual thick plait whipping through the air quick enough it flipped over the front of her shoulder. Hand clapped over her mouth, wide eyes staring up at Mel. Her hand gradually loosened, the surprise fading from her face to be replaced with an increasing sense of guilt, of...fear? Something like that, anyway. Through the net of her fingers, Mel saw Susan bite her lip for a moment, shifting a little in place. 'I, er...'

Through the blank silence in Mel's head, a single coherent thought slowly trickled through.

Susan hadn't meant to do it. It'd been entirely on instinct. She'd just...kissed her. Hadn't even thought about it, just...

Which was kind of...

Mel had already started worrying about this kind of thing, the last couple days. She knew Susan was going to want to do it eventually — was probably already thinking about it, really, with what Mel knew about how this sort of thing went. And Mel would be lying if she said the thought had never occurred to her even a little bit ever. But it'd still been... It'd been scary to think about it. Mel had absolutely no fucking clue what she was doing. She wouldn't know how to... She had no idea. She doubted she'd be able to...

And then, Susan had just done it. Without even meaning to.

Which was kind of...

Mel tried to hold it in. She clenched down on the bubbling in her throat and chest, bit her lip, did her best to control herself for long seconds. But she couldn't stop it.

Under the confused stares of Hermione, Lily, Hannah, and Ron — who had apparently still been following them, she hadn't noticed — Mel burst into laughter.

It was just so ridiculous! She didn't even know why she found the whole thing so funny, she just... Something Mel had honestly been freaking out over, worrying about the last few days far more than she knew was entirely reasonable, and Susan just... Just like that, like it was no big thing. She hadn't even realised she was doing it! Didn't even notice until a few seconds later, then clearly all worried Mel would be angry with her...

Helpless to stop the chuckling pulling at her lungs, Mel shook her head, turned to start up the stairs.
toward Gryffindor Tower, her cheeks almost painful with how widely she was smiling.

Her life was just so ridiculous sometimes, honestly.

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Mel flinched as she recognised where the pensieve had dropped her, but relaxed an instant later when she saw Marvolo Gaunt was nowhere around. She really hadn't enjoyed the Vernon-related thoughts he'd given her last time.

Not that it was very easy to tell. The place was even more of a dingy mess than it'd been before, layered in filth, the air thick with cobwebs. There was a shaggy, haggard man in a tattered chair before a fitful fire, but Mel was pretty sure that was...what was his name, Morfin? She thought that was it. They hadn't looked that different to her the first time, but the man had a chipped knife in his left hand, gleaming dull in the thin light, twisting slowly between his fingers — that suggested Morfin, to her.

Even as she settled herself, the door cracked open, bright sunlight slicing into the dusty air. Morfin jumped to his feet, a glass bottle of some kind clanking to the ground, started yelling something entirely incoherent. Then, before Mel could even pick out what was happening, a low, smooth voice cut across the air, with a familiar sense of seductive power about it, magic carried through the sound. «Calm yourself.» The noise and motion stopped immediately, Morfin staring dumbly at the figure in the doorway.

Mel felt her breath catch as she recognised the young man. He looked exactly like the Tom Mel remembered from the diary — only slightly older than Mel was now, tall and thin, the same pale, sharply handsome face, darkly glittering eyes, straight black hair. She thought his hair was even close to the same length, just barely brushing his shoulders, this could only be a few months afterward. He was even wearing his Hogwarts robes, though without the prefect badge Mel knew he should technically have at this point.

Shaking off the memories the familiar sight was bringing up, Mel was temporarily distracted by the fact that the young Dark Lord was wearing his Hogwarts robes away from school. Did... Did he not have anything else? Remembering how meagre the sum total of his belongings had been back in that memory at the orphanage, Mel wouldn't be surprised. That was really...

Mel couldn't help noticing that the people in the magical world she most empathised with were the bloody house-elves and Lord fucking Voldemort. She really had to wonder what that said about her. Or Voldemort, for that matter.

While Tom looked around the dismal little home, his eyes narrowing and lips tightening in clear disappointment, Morfin stared blankly at him, only regaining the power of speech after a few moments. «You... You speak it?»

Tom rolled his eyes, and Mel had to bite down on her lip to stop herself from giggling — Lord Voldemort, rolling his eyes, so silly. «Yes, of course I do.» He stepped into the room, reaching behind him to—

'Do let me know if they say anything particularly interesting.' Mel jumped at the voice coming from right next to her — she'd entirely forgotten Dumbledore would be in here with her, she hadn't noticed him standing just behind her shoulder. 'I'm afraid my Parseltongue isn't quite perfect. I can understand the general idea, but...'

'That was Parseltongue?' Mel watched as Tom closed the door behind him, giving the grime left behind on his fingers a disgusted sneer so thin it was barely noticeable. A flick of his wrist, and his
fingers were spotless again. Wandless magic. Well, she guessed that was one way to get around the prohibition on magic over the summers... 'I hadn't even noticed.'

'Yes, this whole conversation is in Parseltongue. Excepting the occasional name, of course.'

With a wave of his hand, a smear of orange-yellow light sprung away from Tom, drifted up to hang just under the low ceiling. The place did not look any better under improved lighting. While Morfin just stared some more, probably shocked into silence again at the casual wandless magic use, Tom looked around the filthy little hovel, shaking his head to himself. «I simply do not understand how you can possibly live like this. You call yourself a wizard?»

Morfin straightened, his face under his tangled beard twisting into a scowl, wand lifted to point straight for Tom's chest. «Take care what you say to me, boy.»

«I mean no offense, of course,» Tom said, his voice light and casual through the hissing lilt Mel now recognised as Parseltongue. «But honestly, look at this place! Do you prefer to sleep in filth, is that it? Or is that wand just for show?»

Letting out a snarl, Morfin's wrist jerked, a bright bluish curse Mel didn't recognise leaping from his wand. Tom lifted one hand, casually caught the spellglow in his palm, and the curse instantly vanished. He didn't even deflect it, it just disappeared. Morfin stared at Tom, looking an almost comical mixture of confused and surprised.

As though nothing had happened at all, Tom just kept talking. «Perhaps you simply never learned any vanishing charms, is that it? Look, it's not that difficult.» A twitch in one eye the only sign of effort, Tom waved a hand downward and around him. A semicircle a couple metres out from the door was suddenly cleared of grime, revealing the chipped and cracked wood of the floor. He clicked his tongue at the sight. «Might want to replace the floorboards, but you do live in a forest. Should only take a few cutting and burnishing charms, and you're done! What excuse do you have for this embarrassment?»

Voice in a low, breathy growl, Morfin started, «I don't know who you think you are, but I am Morfin, last of the Noble and—»

«—Most Ancient House of Gaunt, yes, yes, I know that.» 'Pureblood pride firmly intact, I see.' Tom shook his head in exasperation, hands planted on his hips. The sight was so ridiculous Mel had to hold back the urge to giggle again. «Only, it's not much of a House, is it?» It was obvious from his tone and the tilt of his head he meant the little shack they were standing in, but the second implication was still there.

Morfin bristled, hands tight around the knife and wand that might as well be scrap for all he could do to Tom, teeth clenched in fury.

«Besides, you're not technically correct. I checked the law, you see. It doesn't matter if the name I was given at birth doesn't match, no other House has any claim on me. You are not the last of House Gaunt. We are.»

The boiling anger about Morfin immediately vanished, leaving him to stare wide-eyed at Tom, dumbfounded.

«Which was rather a surprise to me,» Tom said, voice still smooth and casual, as though he had no idea what effect that simple statement was having on his uncle. «It wasn't until my third year that I put together who my mother must have been, and when I mentioned it to Andi — oh, that's Candidus Malfoy, by the way — he informed me that the Gaunts are a Noble and Most Ancient
House, and have a seat on the Wizengamot that has been unclaimed for generations. I went to Wizengamot Administration Services just a few days ago, and they confirmed that, yes, I am a member of the House of Gaunt, but I could not claim the Lordship. I am not the only Gaunt left. The House is not mine to claim. You see the dilemma, I'm sure."

It looked like most of that rant had gone right over Morfin's head. He was still just staring at Tom, his face oddly blank. «Your mother...» Then his eyes went wide again, a look of horror and disgust taking over. «That filthy trollop, going and—!»

That was all Morfin got out before, letting out an exasperated sigh, Tom silenced the high screaming with a flick of his fingers. «Is that really necessary?» Morfin started charging toward Tom, but another wave of a hand had Morfin held a couple inches off the filthy floor, feet kicking and knife swiping wildly through the air. «That's quite alright, get it all out. It's not like I had anything else I wanted to get done today, or anything.»

While Morfin kept flailing in the air, Tom waiting out his rage with an air of distracted impatience, Mel shifted in place a little, consciously not looking in Dumbledore's direction. This whole thing was making her increasingly uncomfortable. She _was pretty sure_ she wasn't supposed to find Tom Riddle entertaining.

As Morfin gradually stilled again, a narrowed, calculating look took over Tom's face, his eyes flicking between Morfin, some point in the distance, back again. For just an instant, a cold, vicious smirk touched his face, before abruptly vanishing again, leaving an expression that looked almost...pitying. Mel knew it was just acting, but it was still weird to see Lord Voldemort showing pity. «I think you've gotten the wrong idea here, Morfin. What do you think happened with your sister?»

Mel could feel it on the air again, that slight touch of a seductive whisper, suggestive magic slipping into Morfin's head. Far as she could tell, though, Morfin didn't. «No sister of mine, that squib bitch running off with muggle filth—»

«Running off,» Tom repeated, shaking his head. «You keep saying that, but that is not what happened. Both you and—» Tom hesitated for the barest instant. «—Grandfather were sent off to Azkaban, leaving my mother here alone. Unprotected. A squib, as you say. How do you know what happened?»

«She was always watching that muggle, I could tell she...» He said it confidently enough, but Mel could see the doubt already touching his eyes.

A smile touched Tom's lips, barely there, just for an instant. «What do you think happened? What, they eloped?» He shrugged. «There's no wedding certificate. No one ever even saw them together, so far as I can tell. And you don't really think a pretty wealthy thing like that would court someone like your sister, do you? They don't know what we are.»

The implication settling in to Morfin's head, probably helped along by that compulsion in the air, Morfin's face twisted with rising disbelief and horror, his head shaking. Tom lifted the spell on him, his feet again touching the ground, only to stumble a moment. «No, she... She...»

Voice low and soft, Tom whispered, «What do you think happened, Uncle?»

And, as Morfin reached the exact conclusion Tom wanted him to, he basically exploded.

Morfin screamed an incomprehensible deluge of curses and oaths, slipping randomly between English and Parseltongue, raging back and forth, kicking over his chair, curses flying out of his wand
to blast flaming holes in the ceiling, the floor, the walls. After only a few seconds, the chair was a charred, unrecognisable mess, the cabinets in the kitchen area were broken apart and smoking. One stray spell hitting the wall shattered the grimy window, glass daggers flying right for Tom, but he stilled them in midair with another casual wave of his hand, the flickering fires all around illuminating a satisfied smirk.

After what felt like minutes, Morfin stopped again, standing in the middle of the hovel, fists clenched at his sides, chest rising and falling with harsh, furious breaths. Tom watched him for a moment, then his head tilted a few degrees to the side, and Mel felt the touch of suggestive magic on the air again. «I know, Uncle. What that filthy muggle did is...» He paused for an instant, a smile twitching at his lips. '...unforgivable.'

Morfin nodded at that, a cruel, evil cast falling over his face, fingers clenching tighter over his wand. «Yes,» voice a thin, harsh hiss. «Yes, I should...» He glanced at Tom. For a moment, a reluctant, half-disgusted feeling came about him, but then he shook his head, looking nothing but determined. And also fucking nuts, but that wasn't new. «You can't come. You have to... The line of Salazar Slytherin cannot die.»

«It won't.» Lips twisted in a cold, self-satisfied smirk, Tom said, «I promise you, Uncle, the House of Gaunt will not die with you. When I am done, the mages of Britain will know to respect our name again. Or face the consequences.» A vicious smirk fell over Morfin's face, but Tom continued before he could move. «But for me to do that, they can't know I was here. I need to erase your memory of my visit. You'll still know what was done to your sister, but not that I was here.»

«You expect me to just let you play with my head, boy?»

Tom let out a short, amused snort. «You've seen the wandless magic I've been throwing around since I got here. You really think you could stop me? I think I'm being quite considerate, asking for permission.»

For a long second, Morfin just glared at Tom. But then he let out a long sigh, his shoulders sinking a little. «All right, fine, get it over with, then.»

A smile on his face that seemed almost soft, gentle, Tom walked within a few inches of Morfin, placed a hand on the older man's forehead. Even as Mel felt magic start gathering on the air, Tom leaned in toward Morfin, hissed into his ear. «Happy hunting, Morfin Gaunt.»

And everything went black.

And Mel was rising through the soft silver shadows of the pensieve, the world twisting around her with that familiar shuddering thud, and she was thrown back into her chair in Dumbledore's office. She took a long breath, fighting down the nausea that always hit her after a trip into the pensieve. It was getting better, the more of these memories Dumbledore made her see, but she still wasn't entirely used to it.

Dumbledore was already talking though. Unsurprisingly, the Riddles — the entire family, Voldemort's unwitting muggle grandparents, their son, his wife, their two young children — had been found dead the next morning. Dumbledore didn't give details, but there had certainly been torture involved, traces of all three unforgivable curses later detected. Mel wondered for a moment what use exactly Morfin could have had for the imperitāns, but decided she probably didn't want to know. Considering Morfin had been doing it in the first place because he'd been convinced his sister had been raped...

Yeah, she preferred not to know the details.
—no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort stunned his uncle, took his wand—'

'Wait, what?'

Dumbledore broke off, gazing across the desk at her. He was giving her that open, calculating look again, clearly trying to figure her out. He was silent for a long moment before finally speaking. 'I believe young Tom Riddle stole Morfin's ring, tortured and murdered his muggle family, arranged carefully to lay blame at his uncle's feet. Do you disagree?'

'Yes.' Dumbledore just stared at her, one bushy white eyebrow raising a bit, so Mel shrugged, tried to wipe away the traces of annoyance off her own voice. 'I guess if you don't speak Parseltongue, it might not be obvious, but it really looked like Morfin did it. Tom did lie a bit to make him as angry as possible, and he probably used a compulsion or two to egg him on, but at that point he didn't need to do it himself, Morfin was all set to kill the Riddles for him. Which sounds very Voldemort-like to me, from what I've heard. Why kill someone himself if he can convince someone else to do it? That's kind of how he gets his jollies, isn't it?' Mel shrugged again. 'He probably did steal the ring, though, I'll give you that one.'

It didn't _look_ like Dumbledore was too powerfully disbelieving her. By the thoughtful look on his face, he was at least considering it. After a moment, he asked, 'What could motivate Morfin so powerfully to do as Tom wished, though? And so brutally, at that. They'd been living within a few miles of each other for decades, and he'd never done anything near so extreme. '

Mel frowned at him. Er, obviously? 'Tom convinced Morfin that he exists because his father raped his mother while he and Marvolo were in Azkaban. The "poor helpless squib" and all that.' She glanced away for a moment, blinking to herself. 'Which is actually kinda funny, when you think about it, considering it was Merope who raped Tom, not the other way around. But whatever.' She shook the thought off, turning back to Dumbledore. 'That was all the motivation Morfin needed. I think he actually did it.'

'But how would he have...' Dumbledore trailed off, no longer looking at Mel, but somewhere off in the distance, his eyes narrowed as he arranged things in that massive smart-person head of his. Mel was well used to Hermione going off on similar unexplained silences, so she just leaned back in her chair, waited for Dumbledore to come back. 'I wonder...'. Dumbledore muttered, staring off at a nearby shelf, the one filled with bottle after bottle of glistening blue-silver memories, eyes somewhat unfocused.

Mel tried to remain patient. She was really starting to get annoyed with these pensieve excursions Dumbledore kept bringing her on. What was the point of this stuff? She couldn't see how anything he was showing her was relevant. There were far more useful things she could be working on right now. Hell, she could be doing her bloody homework, that would be a better use of her time than this nonsense...

Dumbledore lifted a hand from his desk, and Mel barely felt the fluttery trace of magic, one of the bottles on the shelf whipping into his hand a moment later. Pouring the stuff that seemingly couldn't decide whether it was a liquid or a gas into the bowl of the pensieve, Dumbledore said, 'I wasn't originally intending to show you this memory, Melantha, but I am curious. You have had multiple insights I have not, and I find myself wondering what you would make of this.' He tapped at a few of the runes on the lip of the bowl, then gestured for Mel to precede him.

Keeping the exasperation off her face as well as she could, Mel touched her fingers to the swirling memories. After another nauseating tumble into nothingness, Mel was again standing on solid ground. Somewhat to her surprise, she noticed she had arrived in the same room she'd started in.
Dumbledore was even sitting at the desk, looking only somewhat younger, a handful fewer lines on
his craggy face and long hair only slightly darker and thicker, sitting a little taller in his chair, but
otherwise identical. The room was more different than its owner was. Mel noticed there were
significantly fewer of those little twittering devices he kept — in Mel's time, there was a whole long
table full of them sitting in front of the bookshelves just there, but in this time there were a couple
poofy armchairs instead.

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the slight whoosh-thud of the real Dumbledore
arriving next to her, Fawkes snuffling sleepily in a corner, wintery wind flinging snow against the
dark windows. In time, there was a knock on the door. The Dumbledore behind the desk looked
only slightly surprised, as though he hadn't expected the knock.

Mel noticed the room around her slow a bit oddly, as though time were being stretched out, the real
Dumbledore next to her speaking. 'I have wards on the stairs up to my office that inform me the
number and, if they are registered in the greater Hogwarts wards, identities of any guests I have. I
was expecting company, but my wards gave me no warning.' Mel nodded, and time returned to
normal again.

At a word from memory Dumbledore, the door was pushed open, a man walking into the room. It
took Mel a moment to realise who it had to be. The man looked to be maybe in his thirties — Mel
still wasn't used to how much slower mages aged, so she could be underestimating — with gleaming
black hair and a pale, sharply aristocratic face, the natural severity of his features lessened somewhat
by an absent smile, wearing long robes in blacks and greens Mel recognised as rather to the
expensive side. He looked different enough, older and calmer, he had glided halfway to the
Headmaster's desk before Mel recognised him as Tom Riddle.

The adult Riddle cut a quick bow — it seemed somewhat overly florid to Mel, but when she thought
about it Dumbledore was basically the leader of the whole damn country, it was possible doing that
was entirely appropriate. Voice smooth and pleasant, he said, 'High Enchanter, thank you for
meeting with me.'

It was hard to tell, since the memory Dumbledore had the same easy, slightly absent look on his face,
but Mel got the vague impression he wasn't happy to see him. Unsurprised, but not happy. 'Tom,' he
said, nodding; it was barely noticeable, but Mel happened to be looking, so she caught the flinch
from Riddle at the name. 'Have a seat.'

For some reason, Riddle looked faintly annoyed, the slight smile he'd been wearing before vanished,
leaving his face looking cold and impassive. But, after the slightest of hesitations, he gracefully
moved to sit on the opposite side of the desk — Mel noticed it was the same chair she was
technically sitting in right now.

Seeming not to notice his guest's displeasure, voice light and pleasant, Dumbledore said, 'Would you
like a drink?' At a mutter and nod from Riddle, another flutter of magic in the air raised by a
wandless wave of Dumbledore's hand, and a bottle of wine and two glasses came whipping in to
settle before him on the desk.

While Dumbledore was pouring, Riddle watched the older man, an odd look of exasperated
amusement crossing his face.

A few seconds passed in silence, both wizards — and, if Mel had guessed at the timeline properly,
imminent mortal enemies — calmly sipped at the wine. Mel caught the barest annoyed glance Riddle
shot at his glass afterward, but it was quickly gone. In a gentle, slightly absent tone Mel found all too
familiar, Dumbledore said, 'Well, Tom, my dear boy, I can't say I expected you to apply for the
position.'
Riddle's fingers tightened momentarily around his glass of wine before loosening again. He gave a little shrug, voice easy and light. 'Are you truly surprised, High Enchanter? As I recall, I had applied for the position the last time it was open as well. I'm sure Headmaster Dippet mentioned it. I had been not even two years out of school myself at the time — I am not surprised I was passed over for the job — but I am a much more thoroughly qualified candidate this time. Why would I not apply?'

'Thoroughly qualified?' Dumbledore took another sip, his expression distant and thoughtful. He pulled at a parchment folder on his desk, flipping it open before him. 'I suppose under a certain definition, that is true.'

Riddle blinked at him for a second. 'A certain definition?'

'I mean no offense, of course, Tom.'

'No, you never do, do you,' Riddle muttered, a slightly narrow-eyed, suspicious look about him. Sounding only slightly annoyed, he said, 'You know, you really shouldn't call me that, High Enchanter. I am a Lord of the Wizengamot these days, and I wasn't aware we were on intimate terms.'

A pleasant, almost dotty smile on his face, Dumbledore said, 'Oh, I am well aware, my boy, but my tongue gets away from me sometimes. I'm afraid you'll always be Tom Riddle to me. It's one of those irritating things about an old teacher such as I, we can never quite forget our former students' youthful beginnings.'

Riddle's hands clenched on glass and chair, face hard and tense, eyes suddenly filled to the brim with cold fire. Only for an instant, and then it was gone, leaving only the slightest chill sharpness on his voice. 'And you realise, of course, that under our law as it currently stands I would be perfectly within my rights — rights I have no plans to exercise, I assure you — to demand satisfaction for the repeated offence you are perpetrating upon House Gaunt.'

Mel started at that, glancing between the two men. It somehow hadn't occurred to her that this wasn't Tom Riddle, apparently muggleborn orphan; this was Thomas Gaunt, Lord of a Noble and Most Ancient House. Andi had forced lessons down her throat about this shite, and it was very true that Dumbledore talking to him like this was insulting. Massively insulting. That thing about always being Tom Riddle he'd just said almost came off as deliberately provocative, from a certain point of view.

Of course, Mel didn't actually give a fuck about this stupid society shite, but she did understand Dumbledore was definitely not being appropriate here. And Dumbledore was certainly informed enough to be fully aware he was being insulting, which meant it was deliberate.

The slight condescending smile on the memory Dumbledore's face as...Gaunt, his name wasn't Riddle anymore, silently stared at him really wasn't helping.

Finally, Gaunt let out a slight sigh, shaking his head to himself. 'I don't know what more you would want from a Professor of Defence. I managed a perfect score on both the OWL and the NEWT. I have several Masteries and licenses in various related fields. I have taught a number of apprentices to mastery, all of whom have gone on to be productive, law-abiding members of society — and I think we both know, that is not always a guarantee when it comes to the Dark Arts. I'm not sure under which certain definition I am not qualified.'

Dumbledore hummed a bit, his head tilting to the side. 'I wasn't referring to your academic qualifications. There you are well set, no doubt. No, I'm concerned about your temperament.'

Gaunt raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching, looking somewhere between baffled and amused. 'My
'And your other responsibilities as well, perhaps.' Dumbledore set aside his half-finished glass of wine, settled back into his chair, gazed at Gaunt for a moment over folded fingers. 'You have been rather active in the Wizengamot, for one thing, and I am curious if you plan to continue to be so, how you would balance those responsibilities with your responsibilities to your students.'

'With how infrequent Wizengamot meetings are, I don't see as I would have any trouble with that.' Gaunt's head tilted a bit, a faint smile coming to his lips. 'Besides, that would still leave me with fewer responsibilities than your own. Headmaster, High Enchanter, Supreme Consul — why, where do you find the time?'

'I manage,' Dumbledore said, slightly dismissively, as though that weren't even an entirely legitimate question. Which was making Mel more annoyed than she'd been already at these silly pensieve trips — she'd noticed herself Dumbledore had been letting things slip through the cracks for a while now, wondering if he wasn't spread too thin was perfectly reasonable. 'Of course, the Wizengamot, what few apprentices you might still be in contact with, your duties here, they would not be your only diversions, now, would they?'

Gaunt gave Dumbledore a politely confused look, calmly sipping at his wine.

'Tell me,' Dumbledore said, voice easy and casual, 'does the name "Lord Voldemort" mean anything to you?'

Somewhat to Mel's surprise, Gaunt barely reacted, just blinked at Dumbledore in perfectly simulated confusion for a few seconds. Perfectly simulated because Mel knew he was acting, but even though she knew it she couldn't tell. 'The name is familiar, yes. I've heard whispers, unpleasant things, among some of the more self-obsessed Dark Houses. I don't see what that has to do with me, though.'

'Don't you? Curious thing, the name...'

Gaunt snorted. 'Laughable, more like. It sounds dramatic, I suppose, but I'm not sure what's supposed to be so intimidating about an alleged Dark Lord who advertises with his very name fear of his own demise. And his little minions running around calling themselves Death Eaters, honestly, I have such trouble just taking any of them seriously.'

He...

No, Mel had absolutely no idea what to think about that.

The passive gentleness in Dumbledore's face abruptly vanished, his light blue eyes hard on Gaunt with a calculating, considering stare. 'Why must you play at ignorance, Tom? It doesn't suit you.'

With an amused smirk, Gaunt said, 'Why must you play at subtlety, Albus? It doesn't suit you.'

Dumbledore twitched at that, a look of annoyance momentarily deepening the wrinkles on his face. 'You are not being as careful as you think you are. I know it is you.'

For long seconds, Gaunt just stared back at Dumbledore. He sat saying nothing, his face impassive, almost unnaturally still in his chair. Then he let out a sigh, leaning forward to set the glass of wine lightly on the desk. 'I see you had no intention of hiring me at all. This isn't really a proper interview, is it? Just another circumstance engineered by the great Albus Dumbledore to further convince himself of his own omniscience, to further entrench his self-important delusions.'
'Delusions?' Dumbledore's voice was hard, harder than Mel had ever heard it — except perhaps once, indirectly threatening Malfoy that one time — his eyes glittering with contained motion. 'Am I incorrect, then?'

Gaunt shrugged, looking nothing more than exasperated, maybe a little tired. 'There would be little point in arguing with you. I doubt there is anything I could do to change your mind once it is made.' A trace of amusement again on his voice, he said, 'Though, I do have to wonder, if you are so convinced this Lord Voldemort and I are the same person, why haven't you told anyone? You haven't, have you? Why am I not even now defending myself in an open session of the Wizengamot, or perhaps suffering the Aurors' gentle entreaties? I confess, Dumbledore, I do not understand why, if you are so certain as to the truth of your accusations, you are limiting this confrontation to a farce of a job interview in the privacy of your office, not in some public or official setting where it would have any sort of impact.

'But, no.' Gaunt let out a long, weary sigh, shaking his head to himself. 'Albus Dumbledore must do things in his own way, in his own time, as he always does, for he is certainly the only one who can, the only one whose judgements and opinions truly matter. I wouldn't expect any differently from you by this point, honestly. Disappointing, perhaps, but not surprising.'

Dumbledore seemed to ignore the whole rant, though Mel did notice his eyes narrow ever so slightly. 'Why are you here, Tom? I don't think for a second you truly expected me to hire you, or even seriously—'

His voice thick with shocked disbelief, Gaunt said, 'You don't? You're joking, right? I find it hard to believe you are really that blind. Or is it willful ignorance, I suppose? So convinced of your ex nihilo assumption I am this Lord Voldemort person you forget the life-long inclination to teach I have not taken the slightest effort to hide? So convinced you ignore the long affection I have had for Hogwarts itself — do you remember how, as a student, I begged to be allowed to stay here over the summers? No? This isn't even the first time I've applied for this position, Dumbledore, and you claim to believe I don't actually want it?' Gaunt let out a harsh scoff, shaking his head. 'If I didn't want it, why would I be here? I have better things I could be doing with my time than sit here and suffer another of your self-righteous lectures. And on that note...' Gaunt pushed himself to his feet and started back for the door, still lightly shaking his head.

'You are simply going to walk out that door, then? Come what may?'

Gaunt paused, glanced back at Dumbledore. Before he covered it up, Mel thought she caught the barest instant of confusion. 'I'm not entirely sure what you think is coming. But we don't have anything else to say to each other, do we?'

'No, I suppose we don't.' A sense of weariness, of sadness fell over Dumbledore, a regretful weight falling into his voice. 'I wish things didn't have to be this way, Tom. I truly do. You can pretend ignorance as much as you like, but we both know what is happening. And how I wish we weren't walking this path. But, alas—' Dumbledore let out a long sigh, slumping back in his chair. '—I fear there is nothing I can do to dissuade you from the destructive course you have plotted. The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom, I wish I could...'

The air was suddenly thick with an oppressive sense of frigid fury, stealing the breath from Mel's lungs with a painful gasp. Gaunt's face twisted into a grimace of rage, his hand twitching, as though he were restraining himself from going for his wand. For a long moment Gaunt simply stood there, silent, obviously struggling with himself.

And, honestly? Mel couldn't blame him. She was a bit shocked Dumbledore had actually said that
herself. Yes, she understood this was Voldemort, sure. But Dumbledore had just said he wished he could force Gaunt to do what he wanted by threatening to destroy everything he had. No matter what Gaunt was doing, no matter what the context, that was still a really shitty thing to say, especially from someone who was claiming the moral high ground. Gaunt's anger was perfectly understandable, she felt.

But, eventually, the ice in the air retreated, Gaunt gave Dumbledore a jerky nod, and he left.

And a moment later, after another nauseating trip through silver clouds, Mel was in the same office in the present. Dumbledore giving her an expectant look, clearly waiting for her thoughts. But she didn't say anything, avoiding his eyes, letting the silence stretch.

Because she had no idea what to say. She didn't know what to think about any of that.

It had become clear to her, when she'd learned from her mother's journals that Thomas Gaunt was actually a thing, she'd gone and looked him up, it'd quickly become apparent that there were things about that time that she simply did not understand. At all. There were pieces of the Lord Voldemort puzzle that she was missing. It just... It didn't fit together. It didn't make sense.

Voldemort the crazy Dark Lord, that idea she was familiar with. Inured so thoroughly to black magics better left alone he'd gone a bit mad, sadistic and cruel, self-selected champion of pureblood supremacy, openly calling for genocide against muggleborns. She understood that. A bit...cartoonishly evil, maybe, but not that hard to understand.

Lord Thomas Gaunt, he wasn't that hard to figure out either. From what she'd read, pensieve memories from Dumbledore, she'd put a coherent picture together. Growing up an orphan, poor and unwanted, himself bullied until he'd learned to harness his magic, turn the tables on his former tormentors. A muggleborn Sorted into Slytherin — Mel thought everyone had to be able to imagine just how fun that would be — before eventually figuring out he wasn't a muggleborn at all, but a halfblood, and from a Noble and Most Ancient House at that. After a long, frustrating battle against generations of ingrained prejudice, finally managing to claw his way to a respected position in the Wizengamot, where his voting record she'd found suggested he could be a bit cold, yes, could be a bit heartless, but he'd also been reasonable. And, interestingly, tended to vote against blood purist legislation. He hadn't been the nicest person around, sure, but there were far, far worse. According to old issues of the Prophet Hermione had found, he'd even publicly and viciously argued against the Death Eaters in the Wizengamot. And who could blame him? With his history, Mel wouldn't expect anything else.

But they were the same bloody person. It didn't make any sense! How could one person do both, at the same time? They had to both contribute to one purpose, there had to be a reason, with how composed and intelligent and reasonable Gaunt had obviously been there wasn't any other possibility. But Mel couldn't imagine what that could possibly be. Voldemort and Gaunt's goals weren't just different, they were mutually exclusive, both couldn't be achieved at the same time. She didn't...

She was missing something. She knew she was missing something.

She had no fucking clue what it was. She couldn't even start to guess.

And it didn't help that... Okay, she'd known, that Gaunt was Voldemort. Crazy Dark Lord person, that was him. So, the stuff Dumbledore was saying in that memory about Gaunt being Voldemort was obviously correct. She knew Gaunt had been lying out of his arse, putting on an act of ignorance. She knew that.
The problem was, if she hadn't known that ahead of time, if she'd known nothing going in, at least in the context of that conversation, Dumbledore came off as the bad guy. Disrespectful and self-righteous and paranoid...

Mel knew he was right, but the image of the reasonable and dignified Lord Gaunt had been so perfect that she could easily see how someone else would...

And that just...bothered her. And not just for the fact itself. Voldemort and Gaunt's goals were mutually exclusive, yes, she'd thought that to herself a second ago. But Voldemort and Gaunt's personalities were also mutually exclusive. At least one of them had to be an act, a character put on for some purpose. That was obvious. It was obvious Dumbledore thought Gaunt was the act. Mel wasn't sure what Voldemort could have been trying to achieve with his legitimate society face, especially since everything she'd found said that legitimate society face had been actively working against him, but that wasn't the point. But, okay, wolf in sheep's clothing, blah blah, she could see it.

But the problem was, with how wrathful and unbalanced and...just fucking nuts Voldemort had always seemed to her, she wasn't sure, if Voldemort was the real person, he'd be capable of pretending to be someone as sharp and composed as Gaunt. Voldemort had always seemed to Mel to be dangerously unbalanced, to have only the most tenuous of grips on self-control. Voldemort wouldn't be able to meet those taunts and insults from Dumbledore without whipping out his wand and firing off lethal curses at him while screaming in rage, but Gaunt had just sighed and shrugged, alternating between polite annoyance, exasperation, weariness, and...disappointment. As though he expected better from such a great man, and was sad to see him stoop so low.

That suggested Voldemort was the character, the Dark Lord was the act. Which, in some ways, made a whole lot of sense — it was honestly hard for her to believe someone could be that melodramatically, ridiculously evil without doing it on purpose. But Gaunt would have had to have a reason to put on that act. But what did he have to gain from it? She couldn't...

It didn't make any bloody sense.

She had absolutely no idea what to think anymore. Which, granted, wasn't an unfamiliar feeling these days, but she still didn't know what to say to Dumbledore about it.

'What is the point of this, sir?' Dumbledore opened his mouth to say something and, even while noting in her head she was being rude, she talked over him. 'I mean, what are we doing here? These memories and all. I don't see what we're trying to accomplish, Professor.'

Dumbledore didn't say anything. For long moments, he just stared at her, those same light blue eyes glittering at Mel much the way they had a few decades ago at Gaunt, sitting in this very chair. Eventually, he let out a short sigh, held out a hand, a bottle again wandlessly summoned. 'I was going to call an end to our meeting for tonight, but...' Dumbledore shrugged, pouring the memory into the basin, prodding at the runes, the whole now-familiar process. 'I suppose, there is little use in delaying it, if it is making you so frustrated. Go ahead.'

Getting nothing but exhaustion back for her semi-apologetic look, Mel touched the pensieve with her fingers, again vanishing into its silver-blue, stomach-churning depths.

She glanced around when her feet again hit the ground. She was somewhere in the dungeons of the castle, she was pretty sure, though the room wasn't as dank and unpleasant as it could be. It was scrupulously clean, walls covered in paintings and portraits and framed photos and certificates, tapestries in Slytherin colours and what Mel recognised as the heraldry of a Noble House, though she didn't know which one off hand. There was a wide desk littered with parchment, flanked with bookshelves packed to bursting, a few picture frames, what looked like a bit of potions and
enchanting paraphernalia, nothing too surprising.

More unusual, though, was the other half of the room. Before a crackling fire was a low table, placed around it a collection of chairs and sofas. Sitting arrayed around it were people — by the looks of it, a single professor and a handful of students — with glasses of wine or brandy in hand, picking at the sweets arrayed before them. As Mel arrived, chuckles were running through the room, someone obviously having just made a joke.

'Sir, I was wondering.' Mel started at the familiar voice, followed it to a familiar face. Tom Riddle was there, casually reclining on one of the sofas, slowly swirling a glass of white wine in hand. The motion drew Mel's eye, and she caught the glint of Morfin's ring on his finger — probably Thomas Gaunt already then, technically. Mel immediately noticed the boy in the two-person couch next to him had unnatural silver-white hair, which she knew was a Malfoy family tradition, for some reason. She wouldn't have bothered noting him, but the hair was very distracting. As Tom started talking, she moved around the circle, finding herself a better angle on the group. 'I've been hearing rumours that Professor Merrythought is thinking of retiring in a year or two. There any truth to that?'

The older man at the head of the group let out a short bark of sharp laughter. The man was rather overweight, with short blond hair and robes of a very minimalist, practical cut despite what Mel could tell was high-quality cloth and tailoring. Something about that just screamed Potions Master to her, must be Snape's predecessor. Or Snape's predecessor's predecessor, whatever. He shifted in his chair a little, lifting a finger from his snifter of brandy to point chidingly in Tom's direction. 'Now, now, young Master Gaunt— ' Called it. '—I'm not sure you should be asking me such questions, on such matters unconfirmed.' Mel noticed there was admonishment on his voice, but gleeful sarcasm in his eyes.

Tom smirked back at him, an eyebrow rising a little. 'I do apologise, Professor Slughorn. I was only curious.'

The man, apparently named Slughorn, let out a harsh snort, his nearly comical moustache fluttering a bit. 'Who do you take me for, boy, I don't believe that for a second.' Tom just smiled at that, shrugged lightly. His disapproval vanishing instantly to be replaced with a crooked grin, Slughorn said, 'I don't know where you hear these things, Tom. More clever than half the staff, you are.'

'He certainly likes to think so,' muttered the Malfoy with a smirk.

Mel blinked in bafflement when Tom gave the other boy a teasing glare. The glare wasn't so surprising, it was the obvious humour on it that was weird. With how Malfoy met his stare with playful indifference, and he just sighed, it was obvious what was going on there. Which Mel couldn't help feeling surprised by. She honestly hadn't expected Lord Voldemort to ever have had friends. Felt wrong somehow.

'And perhaps I encourage him a little much, but it's the simple truth!' Then Slughorn gave a full-body wince — overdone, obviously exaggerated. 'You wouldn't happen to keep my truthful opinion from Albus, would you? Nosey Gryffindor seems to think he's my father, not my colleague...' Another wave of chuckles crossed the room.

While waiting for silence to take over again, Mel wondered if this was Slughorn's memory, and he had given Dumbledore it knowing full well that line was in it. It was very possible it was one of the students', but still, it was an amusing thought.

'I'm not certain it's so much cleverness,' Tom was saying. 'Simply knowing how to get people to warm up to me. It's a gift, I'll admit.' His eyes flicked to the box of sweets balanced on Slughorn's knee.
Slughorn chuckled at that, shaking his head. 'I have no idea how you knew these were my favourite, but honestly I've stopped wondering by this point. You'll make quite the politician one day, my boy, you'll go far, I'm sure of it.'

A slightly rueful smile, Tom said, 'I'll engage in tiresome Wizengamot drudgery as much as I feel is necessary, I suppose, but honestly it's not truly where my passions lie.'

'Oh?'

Before Tom could answer, a girl on the other side of their circle spoke. 'Tom fancies himself a great educator one day,' she said, her voice smooth and low. Even as ignorant as Mel admitted she could be about this kind of thing, even she could see what the girl was thinking as she smiled over at Tom.

Apparently Tom did too. Mel had to bite her lip to stop herself from bursting into giggles as Tom very obviously avoided her eyes, shifting slightly in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. By the smirks twitching at the other faces in the room, she wasn't the only one who saw it.

Well, okay, the having friends was unexpected, but at least teenage Tom wasn't throwing her off too much. She didn't know how she'd react if she found out Lord Voldemort had ever had a girlfriend, the thought was too weird.

'Oh ho!' Slughorn's eyes sparkled almost unnaturally bright as he smiled at Tom. 'That wouldn't be why you were asking after Merry's retirement now, would it? Am I even now looking at our next Professor of Defence?'

Tom blinked back at Slughorn, free hand at his chest, face the image of perfect innocence.

'Oh, you cheeky little...'

The conversation with the students and Slughorn went on for some minutes, Mel growing increasingly annoyed the whole while. She asked Dumbledore exactly what the point of all this was, and he sends her off to eavesdrop on a past conversation that was...seemingly pointless. Great answer. Of course, he couldn't just come out and say whatever Mel was supposed to get from this, that would be too easy...

Eventually the group was dismissed, all walking off for the door. Mel glanced around, wondering if she should stay in the room, or follow the students — or perhaps try to find some way out of the pensieve, since Dumbledore hadn't followed her in, and she didn't see much point to sticking around. But after a second she noticed not all the students had left. Just at the door were Tom, the Malfoy, and another boy their age, muttering about something. Or at least she assumed they were muttering about something. For some reason, she couldn't hear a sound, despite not being that far away, must have put up a silencing of some kind. And then the two boys were leaving, the door closing behind them, leaving Tom in the room alone with Slughorn.

'What are you still doing in here, Master Gaunt?' Slughorn had walked partway to his desk, a couple boxes folded under his arm, brandy still in hand. 'You should be getting back to the dorm. Even the greatest wizard needs his sleep.'

'I was wondering if I might ask you something, Horace.'

Slughorn blinked at the use of his first name, then seemed to relax, ever so slightly, his voice when he spoke marginally softer. 'More of your questions, Tom?' Slughorn shook his head to himself, walking over toward his desk. 'Someday I think you may run out of questions. I'm not holding my breath, of course.'
'Of course,' Tom said with a somewhat rueful smile.

The boxes he was carrying dropped to his desk, Slughorn turned around, leaned against the corner. 'Well, go on then! What do you have for me this time?'

'You wouldn't happen to know anything about horcruxes.'

An expression of shock momentarily flitted across Slughorn's face, before vanishing behind one of almost fatherly disapproval. 'Now, now, Tom. What are you doing reading about things like that? You might give people the wrong idea.' There was something about his tone, some question on it, but Mel didn't know what he was looking for.

Tom gave an easy shrug, casually leaning against the wall next to the door. 'Simple academic curiosity. You know how I am.'

'Oh, yes, I certainly know that.' Slughorn paused a moment, his fingers folding over the considerable bulge of his stomach. 'As I'm sure you've figured out by now, a horcrux is, in brief, an enchanted object containing a shard of a person's soul.'

Mel frowned at that. Er...

'The basic idea is that, if at least a part of the soul is kept separate, safe, than the person is, from a certain point of view, invulnerable. Even should their body be destroyed entirely, their spirit would be anchored, would not pass on.'

Mel was temporarily distracted by a wave of unpleasant squirming run across her skin head to toe. That... That couldn't be...

'—would want to live in such a form, and the process of splitting the soul itself is—'

'Please, Horace.' Tom was still smiling, giving his Professor an affectionately exasperated look. 'As I believe you said just a few minutes ago, Who do you take me for? A soul is not a discrete object that can be split into pieces and hidden away. Do give me some credit.'

Slughorn sighed, shaking his head, but Mel could see he seemed almost pleased despite himself. 'Never could slip a single thing past you, could I? You're right, of course. That is the layman's understanding of the art, not an entirely accurate one. The truth, as I suspect you know, is a bit more... Slughorn trailed off, frowning to himself in silence for a second. 'Well, many would find it even more unpleasant.

'It's a form of sympathetic magic, basically. The wizard seeking to make a horcrux kills a person — not necessarily a human, even, any being would do — and captures their essence before it can dissipate. Then, essentially, the wizard wipes all traces of the original personality from mind and soul, and alchemises it into a copy of their own. It doesn't have to be absolutely perfect, just close enough the end product, which should properly be self-aware, believes itself to be a perfect representation of the original person. A vessel is then enchanted to hold this copy, and bind the copy to the wizard. And from there, you have the basic principle of sympathetic magic — what is done with one, so is done with the other. So long as the copy is anchored to this world by the enchantment holding it, the wizard it is bound to is anchored also.

'It is not a pleasant magic by any means. Effective, I suppose, but even the most unscrupulous of mages are leery of making self-aware but potentially unstable copies of themselves. Courting disaster far too directly for all but the most desperate. And extremely illegal, of course.'

Tom gave a thoughtful nod, gazing up at the ceiling. A few seconds passed in silence. 'I was
wondering,' Tom said, his voice slow and careful. 'I was reading up on runic arithmancy, you see, and some of the memetic symbolism that works into it, and I was curious. Would a specific number of horcruxes make any difference? Say, six, thus seven parts total, symbolising completion, or permanence?'

For a second, Slughorn just stared at him, dumbfounded. Then, sounding rather sarcastic, he said, 'And what exactly is that supposed to do, Tom? Make you *more* immortal?'

*Immortal, Jesus Christ...*

'I can't see how it would make any difference. Herpo the Foul is the only mage in history who made more than one, as I recall, but he only did it as a precaution, so to speak, in case one was destroyed. Granted, I don't know this for sure, and there has never been any detailed analysis on the arithmancy of the things to my knowledge, but I can't see what that's supposed to accomplish.'

Before Mel realised what was happening, having lost track of the conversation at some point, she was being yanked upward through light and cloud, then thrown back into her body in Dumbledore's office.

Dumbledore was talking. Mel wasn't really paying attention, but she could tell he was talking at her. The diary, the messy hole seemingly burned through it, pulled from somewhere and sitting on his desk, along with the Gaunt ring, which Dumbledore had apparently recovered. Mel couldn't really pick out the words, but knew Dumbledore was talking about how these two had been horcruxes, that Dumbledore had already destroyed them, there should yet be more, but Mel wasn't listening.

She was in a bit of a daze, she could tell that, staring down at Dumbledore's desk. Head filled with big, indistinct thoughts, blundering around, she could barely even think straight, she didn't know what...

'...even if their body should be destroyed entirely...'

'...few would *want* to live in such a form...'

'...I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost...'

'...the only mage in history...'

'...further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality...'

Mel leaned forward in her chair, rubbing at her forehead with both hands. She could feel it happening, like objects turning around in her hand. She could feel the pieces sinking into place, the puzzle completing...

'...you and he are connected...that is no ordinary scar...'

'...bind the copy to the wizard...'

'...he transferred some of his own powers to you...'

Her brows gradually falling into a frown, Mel glared down at the desk. Her scar had finally healed, this summer, for no apparent reason. Dumbledore had said it, she remembered...

'...your room...'

'...found magics I did not expect...'
'...free of any undue influence from Voldemort...'

Mel said it without deciding to, her voice flat and empty. 'I was a horcrux, wasn't I?'

Dumbledore was talking again, his voice pitched soft and warm, reassuring, but she still wasn't listening. The pieces were still moving in her head. She remembered Hermione wondering out loud what Dumbledore was supposed to accomplish with a few risky decisions he'd made. She remembered Dumbledore saying he didn't think anymore Mel had to face Voldemort directly. A reevaluation she knew he'd made recently. She remembered Sirius saying Dumbledore was a great man, but not necessarily a good one. Ellie saying it was idiotic to think Mel could defeat Voldemort.

'...this insane idea that you have to defeat the Dark Lord...

*Stopping the Dark Lord is not my responsibility.*

*I deserve to be happy.*

'I wasn't supposed to kill Voldemort or die trying.' She glanced up at Dumbledore, who was giving her an odd, reluctant look, his eyes uncharacteristically unsteady on hers. 'I was supposed to kill Voldemort and die trying. Wasn't I?'

Dumbledore hesitated.

Without thinking, without deciding to, she popped up to her feet, turned around. She got halfway to the door before Dumbledore spoke, just her name. Mel stuttered to a halt. She frowned down at the floor, folding her arms around her stomach. 'I'm not angry.'

And she wasn't, really. Which was a bit odd, because she would have expected herself to be. She would expect to feel betrayed, to once again find herself so filled with fury and fire she had to find some way to vent her magic without breaking something, as had happened several times now. But she didn't. She just felt... She didn't know. Tired?

'I understand why you would have done it.' Why he would have led her off to slaughter, to unwittingly martyr herself. Maybe he would have explained why, but knowing his information-hoarding ways she honestly doubted it. And she really did understand. The faster Voldemort was gone, the fewer people died. If she'd had to die to get rid of him, well, she understood the logic. It made sense. But that didn't mean she didn't... 'I just can't look at you right now. I need to...to think, and I can't do that here. Okay?'

After a second, before she'd even started moving again, the double doors leading out of Dumbledore's office swung open. 'I'm sorry, Melantha.' And he did sound it. She wasn't going to look around to check, but his voice was heavy, and... Like, at some level, he was disgusted with himself, but he'd had to do it, so instead he was just empty and sad, but also almost painfully relieved, because now she didn't have to...

'I know, Professor. I'm just not certain it makes any difference.' And she walked out.

She only made it maybe halfway to Gryffindor Tower before she stopped. She didn't really feel like dealing with anyone else right now. Hermione would at least know not to pry, but she wouldn't put it past Ron to poke at her, since she was rather sure it was obvious something was wrong. She wasn't crying, but she was sure she looked off. Parvati, Parvati and Lavender definitely wouldn't know to leave well enough alone. So, she couldn't go back just yet. Instead, she found a spot along the corridor she was in, slid down to sit with her back propped against the wall. And stared up at the ceiling unseeing.
Everything was so entirely fucked up. She didn't understand. Voldemort made no bloody sense, she
had no idea what he'd been trying to accomplish, what he was trying to do now. Dumbledore had
been...had been setting her up to die. It made sense in retrospect, things she hadn't been taught that
she should have known, situations she'd been put in that should have been avoided, they made sense
if Dumbledore was...leaving her open, so to speak.

And she didn't even really blame him for that, it just... It wasn't what she'd thought was happening. It
was all too...

She'd been a naïve little idiot. That was obvious now. Too much black and white thinking, assuming
she knew what was going on from too little evidence. Sometimes outright lied to, she knew, which
wasn't her fault, but still. Now she knew she'd been a naïve idiot, but that didn't mean... She still
didn't...

She let out a long, weary sigh, eyes dropping closed, letting her head thud back against the stone
behind her.

She didn't understand a bloody thing anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Note to self: writing 7k words in a single sitting is a bad idea.

I am interested in finding a...well, "beta" isn't quite the right word. I could use
someone's help in both planning and presenting the more emotion...related...stuff.
Mostly just someone to bounce character development -type ideas off of, to read bits of
my shit and tell me whether or not the emotional appeal I'm aiming for works. I have
very serious trouble understanding that kind of thing, and I've been concerned things
I've been doing and things I have planned don't/won't work for a while now, and it
would be helpful. Someone reading both my fics would be ideal, as I could use the same
thing for both. To anyone who volunteers, I apologise ahead of time for being as cold
and empty inside as the void of space.

Until next time,
~Wings
The familiar weight and scent of his old leather jacket hanging about him, Sirius couldn't help a rather distant smile coming to his face.

He could remember when he'd first gotten this. The memory was somewhat foggy, eaten away at by those fucking demons, but not so distorted he couldn't piece together what had happened. It'd been the summer after sixth year, and on little more than a whim he'd gone out and bought a few things, that bike Hagrid had recently returned and this jacket among them. He'd just gotten away from his horrible mother, okay, it was possible he'd gone a little mad with newfound freedom. Anyway, a couple days later, he'd managed to plan a route along muggle roads to get to Lily's. He'd sort of had to piece together the rules of the road that apparently existed by trial and error, but it'd worked out.

And the instant he'd pulled up, Lily had yanked him off the bike and started laying into him with hexes. And, as usual, she hadn't even needed to draw her wand to do it. Scary girl, Lily.

After finally getting her to stop hurting him, she'd insisted that if he was going to ride that thing around like a bloody idiot, he was at least going to have some protection for when he inevitably tried to get himself killed. So Lily had enchanted his jacket. Took a good couple hours, and he still had no idea how she'd done it, or even what exactly the enchantment included. Thing had saved his life, though, at least twice. Only a few months later, he had, ah, tried to get himself killed, crushing the thing into some concrete wall somewhere, the bike had been smashed enough it'd taken a few weeks to fix the bloody thing, even using magic to cheat. He'd barely been scratched. The way he'd been caught by some weird combination of levitation and shielding and suspension charms, he thought she might have copied the safety features from those little toy brooms for kids — he'd tried not to feel insulted by the thought, since it had just saved his life. Another time, he happened to have been wearing the thing when he'd ended up in a fight with a few Death Eaters, and he'd been hit across the back with some kind of dark slicing curse. He'd thought he was dead, and had been just as surprised as whichever Death Eater that'd been when he'd been entirely unharmed. He'd checked the back of the jacket afterward, and it hadn't even been scratched.

Yeah, Lily was scary. Of course, he did like scary in a woman, but he thought that might just be a Black thing.

Speaking of, he had been slowly recovering his memory, both with these annoying meditations and mind magic exercises his mind healer had him doing and just by asking people to fill him in when he couldn't figure it out, but he still couldn't remember breaking up. With Lily, he meant. He knew she'd married James sometime in '79, and he thought he remembered something about them in May or June the year before, but... He didn't know, he couldn't remember. Of course, it was possible they hadn't broken up at all. He did have some memories that definitely suggested they hadn't. He'd heard by now there had been rumours about the three of them, which they'd apparently done absolutely nothing to counter. Actually, in some old newspaper articles he'd looked up, they'd explicitly
He could see that going either way. The way he saw it, there were two possibilities. What with Sirius's complicated legal situation at the time, marrying him hadn't been an option, so... It was possible they'd actually had a thing going on, the three of them. Which, honestly? He didn't think he'd have been opposed to that. Hey, James was a pretty man, and, well, he'd promised not to speak of what had happened July Seventeenth, 1975. So, that was a possibility. However, knowing the personalities of all involved, it was also possible the whole thing had been a cover — what with the muggleborn thing and all, Lily had married James for legal reasons, but she'd really only been with Sirius, and the triad stuff was just to keep some veneer of legitimacy over the whole thing. It would be the Marauders' magnum opus, so to speak, great fun. He couldn't remember which it was, but he could see it going either way.

And, well, he guessed that really would explain—

'Lord Black?' A sharp poke at his side harshly jerked him out of his thoughts. 'You're doing it again.'

Sirius glanced over toward Danielle, definitely not pouting down at her. 'I thought I asked you not to call me that.'

The younger woman let out a long sigh, her eyes rolling up toward the ceiling. 'Yes, generally. But what is the one place we go to on occasion where we really shouldn't try to get away with it?'

'Er, the Wizengamot Chamber, but—'

Danielle cleared her throat, nodding around them. Sirius glanced up. Oh. When had they gotten here? After a moment of disorientation that always seemed to follow those damn pseudo-blackouts the dementors had left him with, he shook his head, and made for his seat.

The large, slightly-elliptical hall, muddy sunlight filtering through thick clouds unmolested by an open ceiling above, was only yet partially-filled, people still scurrying about, walking along the curved tiers of the House seats, a few aides darting across the open space at the centre, the air thick with last-minute notes and messages, charmed parchment fluttering over to their targets on silent wings, all throwing unpredictable shadows against the eye-wateringly pure white marble. Sirius smirked a bit when he noticed he was already drawing attention. Well, this entire day was about making a statement, he had meant to.

There wasn't exactly a dress code in the Wizengamot. While there weren't explicit rules about this sort of thing, there were countless silly traditions that, honestly, Sirius had trouble keeping straight. To put it briefly: dress robes. If someone wanted to make a particular statement, seeing someone in a duelling kit or even bloody armour wouldn't be unusual, but that was comparatively rare. Usually, dress robes were the order of the day, fancy dress robes, sort of advertising wealth, he guessed.

So, while it technically wasn't against the rules for a Lord of the Wizengamot to walk in wearing muggle jeans and a leather jacket, it was very strange, and people noticed.

Good.

Before long he was sinking into his seat, the solid black obsidian of the desk, the familiar coat of arms of his House stitched into a heavy banner hanging from the front, the dark stone and cloth a sharp contrast against the pure white of the floor around it. His desk wasn't empty, of course. One of the aides had set the usual schedule down on a corner — with the mess he and Bella were planning on making, that was probably going entirely out the window anyway. There were a few messages from other members too. Sirius flipped through them quick, but ended up setting most of them on
fire, a couple without even reading them, just on seeing the name of the sender. For fuck’s sake, one of them had been from Diggory, probably trying once again to talk him out of opposing those bloody creature–being law reforms of his. It didn't seem to quite click for Diggory he wasn't doing this because he was acting out like the petulant man child most everyone seemed to assume he was, no, he had legitimate disagreements with, honestly, most of Dumbledore's people. That most of Dumbledore's people seemed to think he was also one of Dumbledore's people was simply not his problem.

He didn't need to look up to know he was drawing attention again. It was quite rude to just incinerate messages from people right here on the floor. Of course, the fact that he was doing it wandlessly was a bit of a statement as well — while the skill wasn't quite as uncommon as many British people believed it was, even simple wandless magic still wasn't something seen every day. He'd been able to do this for a long time, though. Hey, he had been paying at least a little attention when Lily had been talking about this shite — how much he'd actually heard varied greatly depending on where his hands happened to have been at the time — and Moody insisted anyone who was going to fight anywhere near him be able to summon their wands back to themselves at the very least. If that wasn't an indication of that man's insanely high standards, he considered casting an OWL-standard charm wandlessly to be a fundamental skill. Hell, even Dora was helping him pick up a little now. It was more than slightly humiliating, being taught magic by someone he could remember minding when she'd been a bloody toddler, but his pride really wasn't worth it.

He'd learned that lesson by now.

He was mildly surprised to find a message from Amelia Bones in the stack. By the time he'd gotten maybe halfway through reading the little thing, he was already grinning. It was common knowledge that Bones wasn't exactly a fan of Boot and Diggory's proposal, though she hadn't really spoken against it much in session. While Bones was technically acting as regent for her niece, she tended to prefer taking the more minimal role of the Director of Law Enforcement, so she only very rarely commented on anything that wasn't directly related to her responsibilities there. She did still vote her conscience, of course, but she was very quiet, and kept out of the politicking as much as possible.

But Mel had given Sirius the perfect opening. Bones had come by one day this week to give the expected proper thanks for one of his House defending one of hers, blah blah blah, boring society stuff, whatever. Once the ritual nonsense was over with, Sirius had managed to suck her into a conversation about how idiocy and corruption in their government had seriously crippled Bones's ability to do her job properly, something he knew she complained about constantly in private. And wow, she did not like Dumbledore or Malfoy's faction at all — she had different reasons for each, of course, but she despised them both. Eventually, Sirius had steered them around to Boot and Diggory's proposal, and been not at all surprised Bones thought it was terrible. The thing she was most angry about was the article on werewolves. While she wasn't nearly as personally invested in the subject as Sirius was, she was rational enough to realise alienating and impoverishing the law-abiding werewolves in their country was counterproductive. It would only make them desperate, and desperate people did stupid things. Getting by in this country as a werewolf was already far harder than it had to be, and these reforms would only make it worse.

The short of it was Sirius had managed to recruit Bones, at least temporarily, for this opposition alliance he and Bella had been putting together, and were about to officially announce, well, today. This notice from Bones was confirmation she would be openly siding with them during this session, which was a decision she hadn't quite made last they'd talked. They hadn't managed to recruit very many people yet, nor did he really expect to, but securing one of the Ancient Houses and the Director of Law Enforcement at the same time was fucking huge.

He wondered how Mel would react if he jokingly thanked her for choosing to snog little Susan, of all
people. It had turned out very politically convenient for him. Not to mention a member of House Black taking down as infamous a career criminal as Arianna Yaxley being plastered all over the papers, that looked extremely good, he couldn't have gotten better press even if he'd paid for it. She'd probably react badly, though, not worth it.

See, Andi, he was learning!

He looked around toward the Ministry seats. The directors of each department, plus the Minister, had a vote in the Wizengamot, and were clumped together in little booths much like anyone else, though with the colours and symbols of their department instead of their House. They were on the bottom tier, actually, in the ring reserved for the Ancient Houses — since only a couple were left, most of those seats were vacant, but their seats were still kept there, for some silly reason he couldn't fathom — so it wasn't hard to spot, just across the floor at the centre, a bit to his left. He wasn't surprised Bones wasn't here yet, she usually came in with Dumbledore and Fudge.

After a second of looking, he noticed Bella was already there, staring back at him from the Director of Education's seat. The woman was distractingly beautiful, with sparkling burgundy eyes in a soft, rounded face, shimmering black hair with just a hint of red where the light touched it, the kind of figure Sirius had to consciously remind himself to meet her eyes to keep himself from staring at. But, then, she was a lilin. He could count all the lilin he'd met on his fingers, but he was pretty sure the entire race were all ridiculously attractive. Lilin and veela were just like that.

When he met her eyes, she broke to give a pointed glance at his jacket, eyebrow slightly raised. Then she slumped back in her seat, eyes turning to the ceiling, forcing out a breath exaggerated enough he could see it, hand delicately fanning at her face. Sirius laughed out loud, didn't even bother trying to keep it in.

Lilin sometimes, honestly.

Speaking of Bones, looking around, he was slightly surprised to notice the Bones seat, a few spaces to his left past Augusta, was actually occupied. Which was strange, because it was always empty — Amelia was acting as regent for the House, but she invariably took the seat for the Director of Law Enforcement instead. Sitting unaccompanied behind the desk, idly spinning a sickle on the grey-white surface, was an unfamiliar teenager with bright red hair Sirius could only assume was little Susan, who, he knew, was technically Lady Bones. He didn't think she'd ever been here for a session of the Wizengamot before, though. He had to wonder why today, of all days.

He only had a few more minutes to wait before most of the seats were filled, and Bones, Dumbledore, and Fudge were walking in, flanked by a small honour guard of Hit Wizards in Wizengamot purples, slipping into their seats. Dumbledore didn't sit right away of course, standing at the High Enchanter's podium, calling the room to silence just with his presence. And he was babbling off with the familiar script, calling the session to order, blah blah, the same ritual platitudes in a quick series, blah blah, an acknowledgement of how they'd closed out the previous session, blah blah, then asking if anyone had announcements to be aired before the Wizengamot.

Sometimes, there was nothing to be said here. Technically, whenever one of the members had been replaced for whatever reason, whenever a new heir to their title had been selected, whenever any formal alliances between members were to be formed or dissolved, that sort of thing was supposed to be announced before the whole Wizengamot. Sometimes people chose not to bother, though they did more often than not. However, those sorts of things didn't happen very often, so it wasn't uncommon at all for the High Enchanter to open the floor for that sort of business, only to move on after a few seconds.

Well, today wasn't a normal day.
Sirius smoothly popped up to his feet. 'If I could, High Enchanter?' Ignoring the grumbling from the people around him — mostly, he was pretty sure, at the way he was currently dressed, a thought which put a smirk on his face — Sirius noticed Dumbledore looked an odd mix of hopeful and concerned. He was pretty sure he knew what Dumbledore wished he was about to do. And, well, he was half right. Once he was given the floor, Dumbledore sinking down to his chair, Sirius turned to the little booth right next to his, to the familiar woman behind the desk. 'Lady Longbottom.'

For just a moment, a wave of whispers skittering around the chamber, Augusta blinked up at him with clear confusion in her eyes. But she gathered herself quickly enough, the tall, powerful woman, still intimidating as ever, meeting him on her feet. 'Lord Black.'

'It pains me to say it, Augusta, but...' He leaned a bit against his desk, letting off a careless shrug. '...I'm not certain our priorities mesh with one another's anymore. I'm afraid I'll have to dissolve our alliance.'

'And you couldn't have decided this sooner? You only even joined us a month ago, Sirius.'

A crooked smirk pulling at his lips, he said, 'Hey, what can I say? I'm new at this.' He completely ignored the derisive muttering, even the few louder jeers filling the hall. Let them think he didn't know what he was doing. Didn't bother him. It would just make them more surprised in a couple minutes here. Surprise he could work with.

It didn't seem he fooled Augusta at all, though. Not that he'd expected to fool her, the wily old sorceress had known him since he was a child, knew him far too well sometimes. She was giving him a narrowed, calculating look, clearly trying to figure out what angle he was working here. In the end, she apparently decided to shrug it off. 'If you must, Sirius. Go in friendship.'

'In friendship, my Lady,' he acknowledged, dipping into a little bow. He was well aware Augusta was making a conscious statement there — while they weren't strictly political allies anymore, she was still making the point before the entire collected nobility of Britain that they were still personal friends. Sort of a very subtle warning, like. And, since she was one of the leaders of an alliance representing a significant portion of the Wizengamot, not an insignificant warning. Honestly, he hadn't expected that, but it wasn't a sentiment he opposed, so he just went with it.

As Augusta sank into her seat again, Sirius turned back to the High Enchanter. That hopeful look was far more intense in Dumbledore's eyes all of a sudden. He'd known, when Sirius had repudiated his House's old alliances as one of his very first acts as Lord Black, Dumbledore had expected him to ally with his people. He'd been rather disappointed when he'd joined the more neutral Bones–Longbottom alliance instead, disappointed enough he'd brought up the subject after an Order meeting. Sirius had been rather annoyed with his meddling, had fled the conversation as quickly as possible. But anyway, he knew Dumbledore thought he was about to proclaim allegiance to the Light, that he would return to the fold, as it were.

Instead, his smirk still wide on his face, he sat.

Before Dumbledore could hardly move, Bella was already on her feet, just a couple seats to his left. 'High Enchanter, if I could?' Sirius wasn't sure if anyone who knew her any less than he did would recognise the barest hints of simmering hatred on her smooth, cultured voice. She really didn't like Dumbledore, but she did hide it pretty well.

While her enmity for Dumbledore could be a bit irrational at times, he'd found over their talks the last few weeks, it wasn't like she didn't have good reasons or anything. Dumbledore's dislike of lilin in general and Bella specifically was just as irrational, and he'd been making things harder than necessary for her since even before she'd started at Hogwarts. This had been before his time, of
course, but Sirius had heard Dumbledore had tried to prevent her from being admitted, and if the Department of Education hadn't overruled his objections, he suspected due to bribes from her family on the Continent, she wouldn't have been allowed to go. According to Andi, who'd been in her year, if Slughorn hadn't constantly defended her — she had been one of his favourites, which Sirius thought should be a surprise to no one — it was entirely possible Bella would have been expelled long before she could graduate. And Dumbledore hadn't let up on her since, though, with her on the Hogwarts Board of Governors now, which technically meant she was his boss, there wasn't a whole lot he could do.

Sirius still couldn't understand Dumbledore sometimes. He couldn't fathom why he had gone out of his way to give Remus, along with a few other werewolf children he knew about, every opportunity at his disposal, but on the other hand had done everything in his power to sabotage a young lilin. Apparently, werewolves were people, deserved respect and sympathy, but lilin were inherently evil, and should be outcast.

So, yeah, he entirely understood why Bella might not like him.

With barely noticeable reluctance, Dumbledore let one of his more outspoken opponents have the floor. Summoning a severe, somewhat sad sense about her, Bella turned to the seats just across from Sirius, facing a middle-aged woman almost exactly at the opposite side of the floor from him. 'Lady Monroe.' The woman frowned in surprise, but got up to her feet anyway. 'I hope you don't think poorly of me, my friend,' Bella said, characteristically silky voice dripping with regret, 'but I'm afraid we can no longer be allies. I do not disagree with your principles, no, it is your methods. You, all those with you, you insult when you should prevaricate, you strike when you should sneak. You cede ground when you should dig in your heels and fight for what you believe in. No, no we cannot work together anymore. I wish it weren't so, but it is.'

It wasn't until Bella had finished her little speech that Sirius snapped out of it, shaking his head. Without even realising it, Sirius had been drawn into her words, filled with a boiling sense of injured pride, of intelligent, articulate rage. Their enemies would be destroyed, yes, of course, but they would be *civilised* about it. No messy murders or distasteful violence, but clever words and meticulous maneuvering. Those who stood against them would see all their power, all their accomplishments, vanish, to be left in the faded remains of their former glory, powerless to do anything but watch as she and her friends undid all they had wrought. She had done one of those lilin things, he knew, slipping her magic into her voice, worming thoughts and feelings not his own into his head, and probably a good portion of everyone who had heard her speak. That was a thing lilin and veela could both do, he knew, but he'd hardly ever noticed her do it.

Okay, sometimes he could understand how Dumbledore felt about lilin, but he still thought the man was too extreme about it.

Monroe blinked for a moment, probably shaking off Bella's influence much as he just had. There was a bit of angry muttering, so they clearly hadn't been the only two affected, but nobody reacted too badly. Which meant Bella hadn't touched everyone — Sirius could think of a few people in the room right now who would probably react violently. 'I understand, Bella. And I'm not as offended as you might fear. I had always known you would one day fly free from us and ours.' Sirius was certain she'd worded it that way on purpose. 'Go in friendship, Mirabella Zabini.'

'In friendship,' Bella said with a smile and a nod. When Monroe had taken her seat again, Bella immediately turned to him. 'Sirius.'

He was slightly surprised she'd just used his first name — that was rather out of protocol. But, oh well, it wasn't like he cared. While he got to his feet, he noticed the mutters, the looks people were
giving the two of them. Clearly, most in the chamber were putting together why he hadn't announced a new allegiance immediately. The look of shock and disappointment on Dumbledore's face was almost comical. Pitching his voice casual and playful, leaning his hip against his desk, he said, 'Bella?'

And she sounded just as amused and irreverent as him. 'You know, I noticed something interesting. It seems that my enemies are yours.'

Sirius glanced around the hall, being sure to meet the eyes of a few of the worst blood purists in both the Dark and the Light, lingering slightly longer on Diggory among the Ministry seats and Boot a bit behind him. 'I had noticed that. Funny how that worked out, isn't it?'

Bella smirked back at him, and then slowly crossed her arms. In a way that, visible even from this far away, was doing...interesting things to her chest. Cursing in his head, he forced the distraction off as well as he could, tried to keep his eyes steady on hers. By the way her smirk twitched with obvious amusement, she was messing with him on purpose. This woman, honestly... 'Well, perhaps we should do something about that.'

'Perhaps we should.' He was pleased to note his voice was perfectly normal, no trace of his annoyance with himself audible on it. Good, that would have been embarrassing.

Holding her crooked smile for just another moment, Bella loosened again, dipped into an inhumanly graceful curtsey. 'My word, my wand, and my wings, Lord Black.'

He stumbled at the abbreviated oath slightly. He wasn't surprised she'd used a shortened casual version, of course — they'd decided on an irreverent, mocking tone for their entire little strategy here, he'd expected that. He just hadn't thought she would include the wings part. He knew the lilin had a similar idea to the traditional Wizengamot allegiance oath, that the members of their Imperial Parliament (pun intended, he was sure) used for a similar purpose, and that theirs did not include a reference to a wand, since lilin hadn't used them until comparatively recently, but did have something wing-related. So, he got where it came from, he was just surprised she'd included it. She didn't usually draw attention to the whole not being human thing that directly. She didn't go out of her way to avoid mentioning it either, of course, but...

Whatever, not the point. He gave the ritual response back, ignoring the muttering from around them. Not surprising — the Wizengamot could go decades without seeing the formation of an independent alliance like this. And they weren't even done yet. Voice light and casual, as though he were wondering how she took her tea or something, Sirius asked, 'Should we get started right away?'

Bella let out a long hum, the charms worked into all the little booths to project the voice of the occupant sending it to vibrate softly in his ears. 'I don't see why not.' And she smoothly sank into her seat again.

'Right. Danielle?' A thin smirk on her face, the younger woman quickly becoming his favourite muggle cousin reached into one of her pockets, pulled out a little enchanted box, set it on the table. A tap of her finger at one of the runes on the surface, and it expanded to several times its size, the wooden box now roughly the scale of a large book.

He heard the displeased murmuring from several quarters, most noticeably around Malfoy and his cronies. It wasn't technically against the law to let muggles aware of the existence of magic use enchanted objects — and, since Danielle was legally a member of House Black, such a law wouldn't apply to her even if one existed. But while it wasn't technically against the law, it was still seen as... Oh, he wasn't sure of the proper word. "Sacrilegious" didn't seem quite right, perhaps too strong, but that was the sort of impression he was going for. Something like that, anyway. He hadn't needed to
have Danielle carry that for him, of course, most of the reason he'd done it in the first place was to tweak those idiots' noses.

With a wave of Sirius's wand, dozens and dozens of little stacks of parchment came lifting out of the enchanted box, floating up into the air. Once he had them all out, the standard count to get one to each member of the Wizengamot, he gave his wand an awkward little twist, with a thought handing over the levitation charm to one of the enchantments worked into the chamber. The bundles of parchment were then winging off, each coming to a gentle stop on every occupied desk in the room. Ruffling sounds filled the air as the various members started flipping through the document, murmurings of surprise and confusion following swiftly after.

Dumbledore was the first to speak — at least, the first to speak with the intention of being heard by the whole hall, anyway. 'And what exactly is this, Sirius?'

'Why, Albus, I thought that would be obvious.' Sirius saw Dumbledore twitch at the use of his first name. Technically, Dumbledore shouldn't have used his either — it was far from the first time he'd slipped during a session of the Wizengamot, and Sirius had told him very plainly that if he kept doing it he would return the favour. 'As our first joint action in the Wizengamot, Lady Zabini and I have prepared a counter-proposal to the creature–being law reforms we have been discussing these last months. You can see the official title there but, personally, I prefer to call this the G.Y.H.O.Y.C.A.Y.S.F.P. Act.' Yes, he had practised saying that.

One of the Lords behind him, he wasn't sure which, said, 'And what is G.Y.H... Well, what does that stand for?'

He glanced over his shoulder, a wide smirk on his face. 'Get Your Heads Out of Your Collective Arseholes, You Stupid Fucking Prats.'

Over the cacophony of half of the Wizengamot springing to their feet to scream at him, Dumbledore already up and shouting for calm, he heard Augusta next to him choke back a laugh. 'Colourful.'

He turned to shoot her a wink before raising his voice to address the Wizengamot again. They weren't quite done yelling at him, but he didn't particularly care. 'I am aware this is not the time to debate this directly. We just thought we would submit it now for consideration. Go ahead, read the thing. I'm sure you'll find it interesting.' Or infuriating, as the case may be.

'What?!' Oh, wow, Sirius hadn't expected that so soon. Diggory was quicker than he'd thought. The man had sprung to his feet, Sirius and Bella's proposal splayed open across the desk marked with the symbols and colours of the Department for the Regulation of Magical Creatures. 'You entirely abolish the— You can't do this!'

Sirius didn't have to hear a complete sentence to know what Diggory was blabbing about. Part of the idea they'd come up with involved abolishing the legal category solely for humans entirely. Instead, the same rights and privileges were accorded to all races considered beings, which included humans. Exactly what was meant by "beings" was also somewhat redefined — essentially, any person who was rational enough to understand the potential consequences of their own actions counted, no matter their race. Which meant a number of peoples living with restricted privileges or special oversight under the law as it currently stood — goblins, lilin, veela, werewolves, centaurs, merpeople, vampires, hags, and so forth — would suddenly be considered no different than mages. Legally speaking. With some considerations for people like centaurs and goblins, who had their own nations with their own laws, but magical governments were well used to handling complications brought about by dual citizenship by now.

The law semi-accidentally abolished any official designation of blood status for humans as well.
"Semi-accidentally" because that hadn't been Sirius's intent writing it, but when he'd noticed he'd entirely failed to care.

Of course, using any potentially harmful magical abilities nonhuman beings might have to compel, injure, or kill a person was still illegal. But doing those things was illegal no matter how it was done. Sirius wasn't entirely sure why the punishment should be different just because they weren't human, because it was something humans couldn't do. If someone was compelled to their own detriment, did it particularly matter how they were compelled? He didn't know, Sirius personally didn't see why anything but the results should be considered. The exact method didn't seem important.

He was well aware he was skirting the same rationale people used to oppose the regulation of dark magics. He didn't think it was quite the same thing. A werewolf couldn't help being a werewolf. A lilin was simply born the way they were. It was different.

That he happened to be wavering in his principles there anyway, especially after certain conversations the last few months, was entirely beside the point.

But anyway, there was more shouting in the chamber as exactly what Diggory was whining about got around. Eventually, Dumbledore finally got everyone to shut up, ceding the question on whether doing such a thing was legal or not to the expert on the matter currently on hand. 'So far as I am aware,' Bones said, sounding somewhat exasperated, 'such definitions are policy determined by this body. There is no reason they cannot be altered or entirely removed at our whim. In fact, Director, from the perspective of legal theory, what your and Lord Boot's proposal does with the same definitions is no different. It's the same process.' Diggory was standing to protest that, so Bones raised her voice a little, her tone sharp and severe. 'What it seems you are forgetting, Director, is that your entire Department exists by the grace of the Wizengamot. There is no legal reason we could not decide to dissolve it entirely — so long as we maintain our treaty obligations to keep the Statute, that is. There is nothing in any department in the Ministry, excluding the Obliviators, that is set in stone. You are entitled to none of the specific details of the policies affecting your Department. So sit down and shut up.'

Sirius failed to stop himself from chuckling. He wasn't exactly trying very hard, but still. Not so much because of what Bones was saying, though that was plenty amusing by itself. No, most of the funny was the look on Diggory's face. Apparently, Diggory hadn't been aware that Bones was, to put it lightly, not exactly pleased with him of late. In their talks recently, Bones had gone on enraged rants about how some of the current policies made her Department's work excessively more complicated than it had to be — the DRMC criminalising things that really needn't be criminalised just made it worse. Some of these policies Diggory was directly responsible for. And this latest proposal was only going to make things more complicated.

So, no, she was not pleased with him. And Diggory was such a self-righteous, stupid sod he didn't realise his proposed policy would effectively force Bones's people to closely monitor entire segments of the population simply because they existed, overworking her Department and potentially ruining the lives of hundreds of innocent people for no good reason — he thought he was doing the right thing!

Some of the people among the Light were just so ridiculous sometimes.

Before too long, the uproar in response to Bones's rudeness had settled down again, and they were moving on. Though, if anyone had expected them to go right on to their scheduled business for the day, they got a nasty surprise. The next...well, it went on for quite a while, he wasn't sure how long, but it was very tedious. A Lord or Lady would stand up, renounce their allegiance to the alliance they'd been in, then join Sirius and Bella — most allied themselves with House Black, but a few
Bella had brought with her from the Ingham–Monroe alliance treated with her instead, it made little difference — the same formulaic expressions, over and over and over.

There was a small amount of excitement when Andi stood to do the same thing on behalf of House Potter. While it was a bit annoying, the accusation that Sirius was getting his cousin to do whatever he wanted with the Potter seat, without the absent "Lord"'s approval or knowledge, was not an unexpected one. Andi produced a letter signed by "Lord Potter" ordering her to change "his" House's allegiance in this very way, floated it over to Bones for the Department of Law Enforcement to confirm it appeared genuine. While the Wizengamot processed that, Sirius couldn't help smiling to himself. Mel had said in a mirror call that she'd actually had to write that letter three times — she'd managed to fuck up and write her name as *Melantha Black* twice in a row.

Sirius had pretended to find it funny. He thought it'd probably just make her uncomfortable if he'd gotten too soppy.

See, Andi, he was learning!

There was really only one minor surprise the rest of the process — only a minor one, because he had expected something similar.

Toward the end of the whole shuffling of alliances, the young Lady Bones got to her feet. She didn't even put her sickle down, she'd been playing with the thing the whole time, still flicking the coin into the air and catching it, over and over, even as she stood. 'Lady Longbottom.'

Sirius blinked, glancing quick at the elder Bones, who looked entirely unsurprised. When Bones had said she would publicly support their proposal, he'd thought she'd meant she would argue in favour of its legal merits. This hadn't been quite what he'd expected. It wasn't unwelcome, of course, and it *did* explain why little Susan was here in the first place — Amelia never did directly take part in this kind of thing if she could avoid it. It was just sort of...big. Getting another Ancient House to join what was originally expected to be Sirius and Bella fruitlessly raging at the thickheaded pureblood twats in power would make it all seem a bit more legitimate in society circles than he'd planned on. This changed things, he'd have to rethink their plans a little...

Only looking very faintly surprised, Augusta got to her feet once again — they'd both been doing that quite a bit as people left her alliance to join his. 'Lady Bones.'

'It seems our priorities no longer align.' And the little Bones flicked her coin into the air, catching it again without even breaking eye contact with Augusta. Kid was reminding Sirius far too much of James playing with that damn snitch, and in the middle of the Wizengamot no less... 'I'm afraid we must part ways.'

Augusta paused only long enough to send Sirius an annoyed glance. The formal alliance between Houses Longbottom and Bones had stood for literally centuries, after all. He did his best to look innocent — it helped that he actually was this time, he hadn't planned this. 'If you truly must. Go in friendship, child.'

Once the pleasantries were over — little Susan managed to curtsey while her coin was in the air and still smoothly catch the thing, tricky kid — she turned straight to Sirius. 'Lord Black.'

He pushed himself to his feet yet again; he was rather glad Andi and Dora had been working him so hard to get back into duelling fitness, he would have been aching from all this standing and sitting just a couple months ago. 'Lady Bones. Same script, I'm assuming?'

The girl's lips twitched into a smirk. 'Same script.'
Faking a pout, he said just above a whine, 'My name still gets to go first.' Usually, if a formal political alliance has any Ancient Houses among their numbers, the alliance is referred to by those Houses. By seniority within the alliance by default, but otherwise alphabetically. Both of which would put Black first, but he was mostly teasing.

Susan lightly shrugged. 'Fine with me. I doubt I'm going to be much involved any time soon. I am supposed to be in Transfiguration right now,' she said, her voice all sweet and innocent, raising a few light chuckles from the surrounding Lord and Ladies.

'I'm sure Minnie's ecstatic at the thought that you're here playing with me instead of stuck in her class.'

She just smirked. 'My word and my wand, Lord Black.'

'And mine for yours, until we part ways.' He tilted his head a bit, matching her smirk. 'Do give Mel a kiss from me.'

Susan blinked, hitching for a second — if Sirius had to guess, she hadn't been sure Mel had told him about them. Then she snorted, rolling her eyes. 'I'd rather stick with my own, thanks.' And she carelessly flopped back into her seat, returned to spinning her sickle on her desk.

Yeah. Only a few moments interacting with her, and Sirius could already see how Mel could get a little stupid over the girl.

There were only a few more Houses called after that. Some names Sirius hadn't expected, but mostly not news. As the opening of the meeting was finally called to a close, far later than most of the room had expected, Sirius tuned out the proceedings for a moment, going over the list Danielle had been compiling as the whole dance had gone on, tallying the changes in the strengths of the various alliances. They'd picked up a few unaligned Houses, mostly newer, more radical families seemingly realising he and Bella were in this to fuck with the established power base as much as possible. The Dark seemed mostly unchanged — though, interestingly, a couple had abandoned ship for Ingham–Monroe, he wondered if Bella leaving had anything to do with that — and only a few had joined them from the Light. They'd taken a surprisingly large chunk out of the Longbottom and Ingham–Monroe alliances, though, far more than he'd expected. Looking over the way the numbers worked out, how the balance of power in the Wizengamot had shifted ever so slightly, noting some very particular names they'd managed to pull...

Sirius felt the positively evil smirk on his lips, didn't even bother trying to hide it. Oh, yes. Yes, this would do quite nicely.

The heavy thud of a bookbag falling onto her little table squirrelled into a corner of the Gryffindor common room nearly sent Mel jumping out of her chair. When she looked up from her book she immediately felt a bit silly. It was just Hermione.

Though something seemed a bit off about her. Mel couldn't say exactly what. Her face seemed oddly tight, as though she were forcing herself to not have an expression, her movements as she slid into a chair jerky and unsteady. A thing she'd noticed, when Hermione got especially worked up about something, her hair would kind of poof up a bit — sometimes she wondered if the bird's nest Hermione had had haloing her head the first few years here was just because she'd been constantly on the edge of an anxiety attack or something. Right now, it wasn't as bad as it could get, but it did seem a bit frizzier than usual, like someone had hit her with an underpowered electricity-producing charm of some kind.
As Hermione dug into her bag, pulled out a book, and then slumped back into her seat, face resolutely buried behind an extremely dry-looking Arithmancy text, Mel just sat there watching her, biting her lip. It was obvious something was really bothering her. Should she...?

Mel really wasn't good at this shite. She'd learned by now not talking about problems didn't make them go away. But she really didn't know what she was doing. Okay, Parvati and Lavender were annoying much of the time, yes, and she really didn't envy them in most anything. She couldn't imagine caring about a lot of the stupid nonsense they got worked up over, honestly. But sometimes she really wished she understood...people...shite? Just, they would know what to do here. And they'd probably know how to do it without sounding like an awkward idiot. She had no fucking clue.

And she couldn't just point Hermione at them and stand aside because, well, they really didn't like each other very much.

After what had to be a couple minutes, she'd mostly decided she was just going to let it drop. Probably not the best thing to do, but it was really the only thing she could do. Just as she was turning back to her book, she got temporarily distracted by noise at the portrait hole. She glanced that way to see Fred and George walking in. And they looked a bit... Well, someone had obviously cursed the both of them. And not with something nice, either. They were both moving cautiously and tenderly, as though in rather a bit of pain. Their clothes and hair were both ruffled, their robes charred slightly along the edges in a couple places. One of them was even missing eyebrows. People were laughing at them, as they usually did whenever the twins got the short end of something, asking what the hell had happened to them. They just laughed it off, claimed they fucked up with one of their potions experiments, blah blah.

Which was a lie. Mel couldn't read the twins well enough to tell when they were lying, but by now she knew curses and hexes. She couldn't identify which hex or curse exactly, but that was definitely spell damage.

A glance at Hermione showed she was sinking further in her chair, thick covers rising to more completely hide her face.

Well.

Mel let out a long sigh, rubbing at her face with one hand. Fuck, she was really doing this...

Her book slipped back into her own bag, and she was up walking around the table. Before Hermione could react, she yanked the thick Arithmancy text out of her hands, put it back in her bag, then lifted it to sling it over her other shoulder. She almost dropped the bloody thing — Jesus, how many books does Hermione carry everywhere? Thing was fucking heavy. Once she was sure she wasn't going to drop anything, or just fall over from the weight of Hermione's mobile library, she grabbed Hermione by the wrist, ignoring the hot glare she was getting, and started dragging her up the girls' stairs.

Thankfully, she found their room was empty. Which was somewhat weird, she hadn't thought it was — weren't Parvati and Lavender up here at the moment? Eh, whatever. She led Hermione over toward her bed, paused a moment to shrug off both their things, then pulled her on after her. A few flicks of her wand had the curtains pulled closed and then sealed around them, a silencing and a few privacy charms following in quick succession. Then she slipped her wand away, flopped down against her bed on her back, and stared up at the ceiling.

'Er. What are we doing here?' Mel wasn't looking, but judging by the odd wiggle on her voice, Hermione was a big annoyed by being dragged around, but almost amused despite herself.

Mel shrugged. Which was slightly awkward to do while lying down. 'If I've learned one thing over
the last few months, it's that keeping shite bottled up really doesn't help in the end. Something's bothering you. I'm listening.'

There was silence, for just a second. 'Are you saying I'm going to have to get used to actually talking to you about things now? Because, I'll admit, sometimes I kinda liked how you would just let everything go. Personal stuff, anyway.'

Her eyes flicked to the side for just a second. Hermione was sitting against the headboard, arms crossed over her chest, an annoyed glare focused on the curtains around them. 'Hey, you're the one who said back in July having a girl best friend for once would be "fun". Isn't this the kind of shite girl friends do?'

Hermione snorted. 'Like I have any bloody clue. I quite intentionally try to avoid talking about anything but academics with most everyone. It's simpler.'

'Why, I am genuinely shocked.'

There was only the barest warning, Hermione's eyes narrowing slightly, before her foot came lashing out, slapping Mel across the shoulder.

It didn't actually hurt — after some of her lessons with Dora, Hermione would have to try a lot harder for Mel to really even notice — but she flinched anyway. Mostly out of guilt, she guessed. 'Sorry,' she muttered, shrugging against the bed again. 'That was Hazel.'

'That... What?'

Mel blinked, turned to look up at her. The annoyance from a moment ago had vanished entirely, leaving a Hermione who apparently couldn't decide if she should be more confused or concerned. Come to think of it, that was a rather crazy-sounding thing to say, wasn't it? 'Ah, it's this whole thing I'm doing with Ellie now. Sorry.'

'What thing?'

'Well...' Oh, this was incredibly awkward. They were supposed to be talking about the obvious trouble Hermione was having with the twins here, not Mel's persistent brain issues. All right, fine. Get it over with, they could move on then. 'Ah, well. I don't know if I told you, but if I were born a girl normal like, my name would have been Hazel.' Hermione just blinked at that, so apparently she hadn't known. Or perhaps didn't see the point, also possible. 'And, you know, the Dursleys were kinda...fucking awful. I learned to just...not do or even think certain things, because then they would be somewhat less awful. But sometimes lately, I've noticed sometimes there's this...' Mel let out a sigh, rubbing at her face. She had absolutely no idea how to explain this. It was this whole...thing. If she wasn't paying attention, if she was too sleepy. If she were angry enough, or amused enough. Sometimes when Susan prodded her just right. There was this... It was like a curtain being pulled back, some wall in her own mind she wasn't really aware of, and for a moment she was someone else entirely. Someone who hadn't been beaten into a less freakish shape both verbally and physically. The person she should have been, without her honestly horrible excuse for a childhood, all the nonsense that had happened at Hogwarts the last few years, none of that fucking her up. Hazel Potter, somewhere inside her, still alive. Only for a couple seconds, and the door closed, and she was just Mel again.

The last couple weeks, it was something Ellie had brought up more than once. Sort of a lot, actually, once Mel had mentioned it was a thing that happened sometimes — mostly in the form of kneejerk sarcasm, but here and there elsewhen. Ellie was trying to get her to focus on it, to figure out,
basically, who she really was. Harry, she said, had never been real, just what the Dursleys had made of her, a face she'd created to survive. Mel wasn't really any different. But Hazel was in here, somewhere, and she had to find her. Half the time Mel thought it was nonsense, but she was still trying, still trying to piece together the remains of who she was supposed to be. She didn't know this Hazel Potter person very well at all yet but, well, she was working on it.

But that was complicated, and she wasn't sure how to explain it to Hermione briefly without making absolutely no sense at all. 'Well, I'm trying to figure out what I would be like if the Dursleys hadn't fucked me up, basically. Ellie has me calling the things I'm figuring out — you know, things I think or feel or say or whatever without even meaning to, on reflex, but calm reflex, not bad reflex — calling them "Hazel", talking about them like they're a person. And, yeah, I know it sounds kinda crazy, but it's this whole thing.

'So, there, I shared something awkward and uncomfortable. Your turn.'

Hermione laughed, sounding harsh and choked, as though failing to stop herself. 'Just, it's nothing, it's stupid.'

'I'm sure if it were stupid nothing, it wouldn't be bothering you nearly as much as it obviously is.'

'God dammit, Mel. When did you get so...persistent?' She was pretty sure Hermione actually meant to say "pushy", something like that, but that would sound mean.

Mel turned to smirk at her a little. 'Learned from the best.'

With a roll of her eyes, Hermione let out a huff, slumping further against the headboard. She was silent a long moment, glaring with narrowed eyes at the sheets around her knee. 'It's just... I have no bloody clue what I'm doing.'

Well. That was not a feeling Mel was unfamiliar with. 'Did something happen earlier?'

'Nothing, it was stupid.'

'I'm sure you had some reason when you cursed them.'

Hermione winced. 'Yeah, I kinda did curse them, didn't I.'

'A little bit.'

For a few seconds, Hermione just sat there some more, staring unseeing at the sheets. Then she shifted, knees lifting from the bed, hands crossing over her ankles, hugging her legs to her chest, chin planted on her knees. 'It wasn't anything that different,' she started, her voice low and slow. 'Some Slytherins were just...being Slytherins. Some sixth-years, I don't even remember who. I was in the library and they...' Hermione trailed off, finishing with a shrug, but she didn't really have to explain. Mel was well aware people were horrible to Hermione sometimes. 'I wasn't even there with them. I was doing Arithmancy work, I didn't even know they were there. And suddenly they were...

'Well,' she said with a snort, 'between them they lost forty points and have a few nights' worth of detention, fill in the blanks as you like. Once Irma and Professor Burbage were done yelling at them, I dragged them off. You know, to get my own yelling in. I don't even know how it happened, the conversation got turned around somehow, and...'

Mel waited a few seconds, didn't speak until it was obvious Hermione wasn't saying anything. 'Turned around how? What happened?'
'They...' Hermione let out a hard sigh, Mel noticed her hands tightening noticeably around her ankles. 'They want me to make up my mind.'

'About what?'

Hermione bit her lip for a second, shooting Mel an almost nervous look. 'If, if I want this, any of this, to mean anything. Or if it's just...secretly snogging sometimes.'

Oh. Well. That was sort of an important thing to figure out, right? She was far from an expert in relationship shite, but she was pretty sure that was something that should probably be agreed on. Hell, even she and Susan had agreed on that. Sort of. Mel making it clear she had no fucking clue what she was doing, and was certainly going to make an idiot of herself and might end up bailing with little to no warning, and Susan saying she was okay with that, that counted, right? Whatever. 'Ah... And do you want it to mean anything?'

'I don't—!' Hermione cut off in mid-shout, her hands jumping up to her bushier-than-usual hair. For long moments she didn't say anything, but Mel just waited — she had enough experience trying to calm herself down by just focusing on her breathing for a little while to recognise it when someone else was doing it. 'I don't know, I don't know what I'm doing. I just...'

'I didn't try to...' She trailed off again, rubbing at her face, shaking her head a little. 'It wasn't something I meant to happen, really. It wasn't planned.' After a second of hesitation, another awkward look at Mel, Hermione muttered, 'It was back in...May, I think it was May. That bloody Tournament. And I was so...angry and scared, all the time.'

Mel tried not to wince. 'Er, sorry.'

Hermione's discomfort was broken long enough to give Mel a little glare. 'Not your fault, Mel. I was just angry that you had to be in the stupid thing at all, and I was terrified that you were going to die, and I was so frustrated that I couldn't help—'

'You helped a lot, though! If you hadn't taught me all those—'

'Sure, I could help you learn a few spells, but I couldn't be in there with you! You'd be going into the maze alone either way! And I was so terrified that—' She broke off, rubbing her face with both hands, taking a few long, shaky breaths. Mel felt a little retroactively guilty — she hadn't noticed it'd been bothering Hermione nearly this much at the time. She had been occupied with her own shite, true, but still... 'And nobody else was taking it seriously! It was all some big joke to them! I was so bloody furious at them all the time, I couldn't...'

'I walked in one of their stupid pranks one day. Couple third-year Ravenclaws, don't remember who.' They'd probably been teasing Luna — Mel knew the twins' infamous overprotectiveness for Ginny sometimes extended to Luna a little bit, since she'd been around so much growing up. Not that that stopped people from treating Luna like shite, but there were consequences sometimes. 'And I don't know why. I guess I was probably just in a bad mood already, but I kinda...exploded on them. I just remember I was screaming at them, and they were just laughing and joking back like always, and I had my wand out, and the Ravenclaws were running away, and I was just so...'

'I don't even remember it happening, really,' she said, the trace of a hollow laugh on her voice. 'Just, I remember I was yelling at them, and then...' Hermione was silent a moment, her eyes closed, rubbing at a cheek with a hand. 'And we just... I'm convinced it's the only reason I made it through that term without having a nervous breakdown or something. Whenever I was just...too terrified and angry that I couldn't even think anymore, I would just find them and... Well, I was better.
'But now I'm not angry and scared all the time anymore, and I'm still doing it. I guess they just...'
Hermione trailed off for a moment, staring blankly up at the curtains. 'I think they, you know.
Legitimately like me. Romantically. And they're getting tired of me not taking them seriously.' A
slight smirk touching her lips, Hermione muttered, 'I guess even Fred and George Weasley have a
limit.'

'Well.' That was a lot of weirdness Mel had had absolutely no idea was happening. And didn't really
make a lot of sense. Not to mention exactly how that all led to cursing them. But then, it didn't make
sense to Hermione herself, so she guessed expecting it to make sense to her would be silly. But,
honestly? Maybe she just wasn't thinking about this hard enough, maybe she was missing
something...but it seemed pretty obvious to her. 'Do you like them? Romantically.'

'I... Well, if I had a simple answer to that question, this wouldn't be so hard, would it?'

Mel entirely failed to choke back a laugh. She glanced quick to see, yes, Hermione was giving her a
look, so she quickly explained herself. 'Sorry, it's just, reminded me of something with Susan, it's
nothing.'

'What nothing?'

Oh, turning back around to stuff about her, was she? Fine, whatever, if Hermione would rather be
distracted for a moment. 'It was just, that day, she said if I wanted her to go away, just tell her, and
she would. I said if I actually wanted her to go away, this wouldn't be so complicated.'

'So you do like her, then.' There was a faint note of satisfaction on Hermione's voice, as though
internally congratulating herself for solving a problem correctly.

Mel had to roll her eyes at that. 'Yes. That was never the problem. It was other things. I just...' No,
she really had no idea how to briefly explain this. Her brain was a complicated, confusing place. And
a rather depressing place a lot of the time, and she was well aware Hermione cared, so she tried not
to make her too depressed on her behalf. It didn't exactly help that Mel honestly wasn't entirely sure
what her own problem had been. It all seemed a bit silly in retrospect. Keep it simple, then. 'You
know, I'm really fucked up, Hermione.'

For once, Hermione didn't seem inclined to call her on her language. 'I had noticed that.'

There was silence for long seconds, but Mel didn't really know what to say here. A glance to the side
showed Hermione was seemingly thinking to herself. Face calmer, posture less tense than before,
absently picking at Mel's sheets. So Mel decided to just leave her to her thoughts for a while. Didn't
seem like a terrible idea.

Her eyes were closed, picking over her occlumency to fill the time, when she was started out of her
quiet by the feel of a dispel tearing apart her privacy charms. She sprung up to sitting, glanced
around, after a second found Hermione had her wand out, was sliding to the edge of the bed again. 'I
should go.'

Mel blinked. 'Go where?'

Pausing just at the curtains, Hermione let out a long, weary sigh. 'I'm gonna go apologise.' Then she
continued, in a much lower mutter, 'I get the feeling I'm going to be doing a lot of that.'

'Hey, it is the twins. Pretty sure they're going to be doing a lot of it too.'

Hermione snorted, shaking her head. 'See you later, Mel.' And with a last, slightly shaky smile,
Hermione was gone.
More confused than anything, Mel lay in bed for some moments. She really couldn't imagine she'd been at all helpful...

Oh well. She didn't understand her own brain. She wouldn't expect herself to follow Hermione's.

'I still think there's something off about that bird.'

While Hedwig shifted a little on her leg, giving an impression of very faint annoyance, Mel took a long breath, gathering herself. She'd known Susan would be coming, of course — they'd arranged to meet here, after all. Just, she'd gotten here early, and her thoughts had wandered off. She'd noticed the abandoned little sitting room, filled with dusty couches and chairs, was only a few doors away from the stairs up to the Owlery. So she'd gone up to collect Hedwig quick, before coming back down to the room, book splayed open in her lap. Well, the half of her lap that wasn't taken up with a calmly snoozing bundle of feathers, anyway. Sometimes she forgot how bloody huge Hedwig was, it could be a bit difficult to work around her. Not that she minded, of course, just saying.

So, she'd been distracted, and not entirely prepared for Susan showing up. And she did have to be prepared to be around Susan, especially alone like this. If she weren't careful, she would fall back into being her old neurotic, painfully nervous self, and she really wanted to avoid that as much as possible. Which she was getting better at doing. The trick was to not think about certain things, and focus instead on other stuff, something, anything that could keep her thoughts from going down loops that were just unhelpful.

She wasn't perfect at it yet, but she was getting better.

When she thought she was centred enough, she summoned a little frown, glanced up to Susan slinking across the room toward her. 'Is this how you plan to get on my good side? Insulting my friends?'

A look of confusion crossed Susan's face — at a guess, surprised by the use of the word "friend" — but it quickly vanished, replaced with a familiar smirk. 'And here I thought I was already on your good side. Silly me.' Letting her book bag slump to the floor, Susan paused for a second, frowning thoughtfully. 'Or do you mean a better side? Am I going to get to go there too?'

If she were asked, Mel would categorically deny she was blushing even a little bit. She'd be lying, of course. Something about the smirk Susan was giving her made it very clear exactly what she was referring to with "better side" and "go there".

Her smirk now looking somehow smugly victorious, Susan flopped down into the spot next to her. That jostled the couch a bit, making Hedwig on Mel's leg bounce up and down, sending a steady glare over at Susan in response. 'I don't mean to insult this beautiful creature, though.' Mel had the very clear impression Hedwig had understood that perfectly — while it wasn't by very much, she did seem somewhat mollified just with that. 'I just mean she doesn't behave like other owls. I've only even seen her a couple times, and it's already obvious to me.'

'What do you mean?' Honestly, Mel had never really thought about it before. She had noticed that other people didn't spend nearly as much time with their owls as she did. Ever since she'd started here, she would just go off for a couple hours to sit with Hedwig, at least once a week. More often the first couple years, actually. But, then, most people had more friends than she did. Hedwig was sort of the first friend she'd ever had. Which, yes, she realised was a bit of a strange thing to think, considering Hedwig was a bloody bird, it wasn't like they'd ever even had a single conversation. Though she was positive Hedwig could understand English just fine more often than not. Maybe she was wrong, but she had the vague impression Hedwig was just smarter than other owls, for some
inexplicable reason. She'd never noticed anyone else going to check on their owls nearly as much as she did Hedwig, and she'd never seen anyone else doing, well, what she was doing right now, just sitting here with her. She'd been aware of all that but, she guessed, she'd never really considered if that were relevant. It was just how things were.

Susan was silent a long moment, meeting Hedwig's steady stare, clearly trying to put what she was thinking into coherent words. This was a problem Mel was very familiar with, so she just waited. 'I don't know, she just doesn't act like other owls. She just seems far more...' Susan trailed off, blinking to herself. 'You two don't have a familiar bond, do you?'

'Oh, er. I don't think so? I'm not sure.' Mel had no idea what a familiar bond would feel like. She didn't know much of anything about the concept.

'If you're not sure, you don't.' Susan gave a little shrug. 'She acts more like a familiar than a normal post owl, though, that's why I thought of it. Too intelligent, too much personality, too...protective of you. It's familiar behaviour. You are a very powerful witch, it's possible there's some...bleed-over, that's changed her a little. That sounds like something that should be possible, I'd have to look it up.'

'Ah.' Mel added researching familiars to her own admittedly rather long to-do list. She'd never thought to inform herself about that sort of thing before, seemed like an idea. Especially if it turned out Hedwig had been her familiar the whole time and she hadn't even noticed, that definitely sounded like something she should know about.

Maybe? It was possible it was something she should know about, she didn't know enough about familiars to say for sure either way. That was the problem.

But, anyway, stop being so serious. Susan was still staring at the owl in her lap, and Mel was suddenly having a Hazel moment. She suffocated the automatic impulse to censor herself, to be quiet, inoffensive — she was slowly getting better at doing that. 'Are you jealous, Susan?'

Susan blinked, eyes flicking up to her. 'Huh?'

'Are you jealous? of a bird? Well, too bad, Hedwig was here first.' Feeling a bit silly, and ruthlessly strangling the thought that she should care she was being silly, she leaned into the warm, soft feathers of Hedwig's chest, fingers burying themselves in her sides. She had to force herself into a slightly awkward posture to pull that off, her back curled a bit weird, but it was fine for a few moments. Hedwig let out a short snuffle Mel had long ago identified as a sound of amusement, then started tugging idly at her hair, fluttering twitters of affection vibrating through her feathers.

'Ah, yes, woe is me.' More than anything, Susan just sounded amused, the playful smirk clear on her voice. 'My girlfriend would rather cuddle up with her owl than with me.' Her tone turning deeper, melodramatic, 'That 'twere I engifted solace within generous arms! That 'twere I enlivened beneath gentle fingers! Pray that envy be shewn a dream, and fated be her brow on my bosom rest.'

Erm. Mel turned her head a little, so she could peek through a haze of white feathers over at Susan, just a short distance away. She was obviously trying to be all serious, but she was obviously failing, traces of a grin pulling at her lips. It took a second for Mel to find her voice. 'Are you quoting poetry at me again?'

Susan shrugged, the semi-severe set to her face collapsing into a smirk again. 'Paraphrasing. Also translating — the original is in Brīþwn. There's probably an English translation out there somewhere, but I don't know it.'

'Okay, then.' She was self-aware enough to know she'd normally be a bit embarrassed by Susan
saying shite like that, but she was being so weird about it Mel was more distracted by the weirdness. For a second, she wondered if Susan was doing that on purpose. 'Anyway...' Mel straightened in her seat again, Hedwig immediately hopping over to the arm of the couch, abandoning her lap. Huh. 'Was there something you particularly wanted to, I don't know, work on or whatever.' Honestly, she wasn't sure what people like... Well, couples, she guessed, she still wasn't entirely sure what they did when they were alone together. This thing with Susan was still new enough she didn't know what she expected.

Er, that is, she didn't know what couples did when they were alone together if she excluded snogging and...other stuff. She really didn't think she was ready for any of that, though. The thought was honestly a little terrifying.

More than a little, really. She tried not to think about it.

'Mm.' Susan just shrugged, looking entirely comfortable and unconcerned. Which honestly annoyed her a little. Mel was a lot less...she didn't know, even a couple weeks ago she'd probably be far more anxious than she was now, but she still was a little bit, and it honestly bothered her that Susan wasn't. Just, no fucking clue what she was doing. 'Nothing in particular, really. What are you reading?' she asked, her head tilted a bit, as though trying to look around to the cover of her book.

Mel almost answered immediately, then remembered she was technically talking to the not-daughter of the Director of Law Enforcement right now. Er. Awkward. 'It's some book I found on shadow magic.' She folded the book closed, sliding it into her bag at her feet. 'Not that it's a particularly helpful one.' A completely useless one, in fact — it more seemed to be describing things people had done with shadow magic, the history of the discipline, without any actual helpful details.

For a second, Susan just frowned at her. Not too severe a frown, just a slight one, barely there. 'You're aware shadow magic is a restricted dark art, right?'

'Yeah, I know. That's probably why the book isn't very helpful.' She glanced over at Hedwig — in the privacy of her own head, she could admit it was because watching Hedwig was easier. Hedwig seemed to be settling in to nap, head turned away from them, still and relaxed. That was quick.

'And you know you could be fined or maybe even sent to Azkaban if anyone finds out you're teaching yourself, especially with scheduled materials.'

Also true. The only reason her mother hadn't ended up with a ridiculously lengthy Azkaban sentence was because Dumbledore (or possibly Sirius's father, come to think of it) had covered for her. 'I know. You going to report me or something?'

'No!' The word came out a bit harder, a bit louder. Mel glanced toward her to see she almost looked offended by the idea. 'I just— I'm just saying be careful with it, is all. If you really think you have to learn it, you should really find someone registered in it to take you as an apprentice. Even if it's only on paper, with someone in the family, to cover yourself.'

Mel couldn't hold back an annoyed groan. She'd tried that! She'd suggested to Dora they should just have it official, with her, so she could study by herself as well as she could and not worry about getting in trouble later. Not that she was having any luck teaching herself anyway. But, no, Dora had refused. Said it would be irresponsible, if Mel were her Dark Arts apprentice she'd feel obligated to do it properly, and she really just didn't have the time to do that. Even just their duelling lessons were already stressing her schedule quite a bit. And she'd asked Snape to teach her properly twice but he'd said no both times. There wasn't really anyone else who was both qualified and easily accessible she could ask. It was too complicated.
Susan gave her a half-curious half-concerned look, so Mel explained all that. She left Snape's name out, of course, but she did mention she'd asked a Master of the Dark Arts twice, and been rejected both times. 'How?'

'Er.' Mel was startled out of her rant, blinking at Susan for a moment in confusion. 'How what?'

'How did you ask him?'

'I dunno. I just...asked.'

Now Susan was giving her a disbelieving look, intense enough Mel suddenly had to wonder if she'd said something extremely stupid without realising it. 'You mean, you just walked up to him and said, _Hey, I want to learn shadow magic, could you teach me?_'

'Something like that.' And Susan was still staring wide-eyed at her, like she were completely insane. 'What, should I not have?'

'No, you... You really, really shouldn't have.' Susan slumped into her spot on the couch a little, rubbing at her face with both hands. _Muirgen, you were really raised by muggles, weren't you._

Okay. She'd put together by now she was saying something that must show quite a bit of ignorance when it came to magical culture, but Susan wasn't exactly being helpful. Making her a bit annoyed. Trying to keep any anger out of her voice, she said, 'Okay, what _should_ I have done, then?'

'Mel...' Susan let out another sigh, her hands dropping as she stared up at the ceiling. 'Sorry, just thought someone would have explained this to you by now.' With a last shrug, she turned in her seat a little and—

Mel jumped, her heart leaping into her throat with almost painful force as Susan laid down, her legs across the empty spot next to her, feet planted against the opposite armrest, her head coming to softly land in Mel's lap. Er...

'Apprenticeships are a very big deal, Mel.' Susan shifted a little, her arms crossing under her chest, the way her head moving a couple inches pulled at Mel's skirt making her twitch. 'It's not something people take lightly. If it's someone in your House, people tend to be far more casual about it. But... It's a very involved agreement. It has a lot in common with how people go about betrothal arrangements, actually.'

'Ah...' Mel took a long moment, breathing slowly to stop her blood from pounding in her veins, swallowing a few times to loosen her throat. After a few seconds she was a little more comfortable. It helped that Susan wasn't actually looking at her, eyes pointed up at the ceiling instead. Not _completely_ comfortable, of course — she had no fucking clue what to do with her hands. 'How do people go about it, then?'

'Sometimes, gifts.' Susan tilted her head a little, the tap against Mel's middle almost making her jump again. 'Used to be very common in the past, these days not so much. A House, usually acting on behalf of one of their young members, would ply a master or mistress with whatever they felt appropriate. Rarely money, but mostly wealth of other kinds. Enchanted crafts of some kind or another. This wasn't a direct trade, of course — in receiving these gifts, the master or mistress was under no obligation to do anything. It was just to get them to _consider_ it. Some of the more famous sorcerers in history quite literally lived off of the gifts hopefuls sent them, only ever taking a bare handful of them as apprentices, if any at all. Eventually, this way of doing things fell out of favour, but you'll still see it happening. Mostly when the potential apprentice is around our age, or a little younger.
'These days, the usual way of doing it...' Susan's eyes flicked to Mel's just for a second, before turning to the ceiling again. 'When this Master rejected you, what did he say? I mean, did he say anything more than just "no, go away"?'

Mel didn't even have to think about that, she remembered it quite clearly. "'Why should I?' His exact words.'

'Right,' Susan said with a nod, 'thought it might be something like that. See, training an apprentice is an enormous sacrifice in time and effort from the master. It takes a lot of work, hours and hours every week invested in the development of a single other person, often over the course of years. It's not an insignificant commitment. And, beyond that, apprentices are seen sort of as...’ Susan frowned in thought for a moment, biting her lip. 'Well, they reflect on the master. Not just while they are in the apprenticeship, how they behave in public seen as a reflection of the master's own discipline and values, but to a degree even afterward, what they get up to even decades after the end of the apprenticeship. They're seen as a continuation of their master's legacy, what they do with their knowledge and abilities, says something about the person who taught them to them. So, because it's such a large investment of their time and such a risk to their own reputation, masters tend to be very picky about who they will take as an apprentice. It's not something done casually, it is a major decision. Especially for Masters of the Dark Arts, whose apprentices have a greater than average chance of running afoul of the law somewhere down the line. They're careful about who they pick.

'So, if the potential apprentice wants to be seriously considered by the master, they have to prove they take it seriously. If sending gifts isn't seen as appropriate, which was never truly common with dark arts specifically, then by some gesture. Some sacrifice of something they value, something important to them. Or, sometimes, something other people would think they should value, to make a point about their priorities. Often this is done publicly, in full view of the master's peers, whoever they are. Not always some physical thing — in fact, often, someone aiming for an apprenticeship well publicly humiliate themselves somehow, to press the idea that their name, their reputation, whatever is less important to them. To prove that this apprenticeship is meaningful for them, they'll take it seriously, and they will be a dedicated, loyal student. Worthy of the master's attention, will honour their investment and the risk they are taking.

'The point is, Mel—' Susan's eyes turned back to Mel's, a smile stretching her lips. ‘—this Master of yours wasn't saying no. When he said "Why should I?" he wasn't telling you he had no interest in teaching you at all. If he thought he couldn't be convinced you would be a worthy apprentice, he would have said so. To oversimplify things a little, you came to him and said, Hey, I value your knowledge and skills, and would be willing to sacrifice quite a lot to have them. And he thought about it for a second, and said, Okay. Prove it. And then you didn't prove it. If you don't, he'll never say yes. But he didn't say no. He's waiting, for you to prove you're worth the investment and the risk. That it means something to you.'

That...

Okay, most of that was news.

Though, in a way, it did make a whole lot of sense. Some of the shite she'd read in history books, a few things people had said here and there. If they were such a big deal, it did explain why so many people would go to the mastery programs at various schools instead, despite how even she knew doing it that way was considered much less..."prestigious" seemed like not quite the right word, but something like that. Apprenticeships were highly valued, she'd known that, but a lot of people didn't even bother trying for them. If people were so selective about who they took, if there was a whole complicated thing behind it, that would explain a lot.
And, well. Snape had been...not quite as much of an arse lately. There'd been a noticeable decrease in his dickishness directed toward her just with the start of the year, but especially after that conversation in the Hospital Wing... Well, okay, assuming she could take what Snape said to her at face value, he'd seemingly been working on the assumption she was a lazy, spoiled brat. She had no fucking clue how he could possibly come to that conclusion, but that was really beside the point.

Though...she guessed how much she'd been taking her school work not as seriously as she probably should have... Yeah, she had to admit his opinion of her hadn't been entirely unfounded. There were just bad conclusions in there. He'd seen she hadn't been really trying half the time, and assumed it was because she was an arrogant little twat. That it'd simply been habit by that point, after five years of being punished by her shitty relatives whenever she did better in school than her idiot cousin, wasn't a consideration. How could it be? She seriously doubted Snape knew about that. Without the full picture, his disdain for her wasn't entirely unreasonable.

That he probably couldn't help constantly comparing her to both of her parents, one of whom had been an honestly ridiculous prodigy and the other, to be entirely fair for a second here and if only for a few years at Hogwarts, a self-involved arsehole, yeah, Mel wouldn't expect that comparison to reflect well on her.

And that day, in the Hospital Wing, she'd said... Well, it was a bit embarrassing in retrospect, but she'd admitted to Snape, she was useless, she knew she was useless, and she was tired of being useless, so she was doing whatever she could to fix it. To not be useless anymore, even if that meant studying illegal magics in secret. And Snape had just stared at her, for long seconds, felt like minutes, even.

Looking back on it...he'd been surprised. In just a couple sentences, she'd completely upended his understanding of her character, and he'd needed those couple seconds to figure out how to process it. And once he'd snapped out of it, the first thing he'd said... She couldn't remember the exact words, something about approving of what she was trying to do, if not the way she was going about it.

Snape. Expressing any sort of approval of her. Snape.

And he'd been consistently less of an arse since then, even compared to the new normal of the weeks previously. Because, she somehow hadn't put this together until just now, it'd finally clicked for him his assumption she was a lazy, spoiled brat wasn't accurate. He probably hadn't figured out just how wrong he'd been — from what she knew about him from her mother's journals, she thought she'd know if he'd found out what her childhood had really been like — but at the very least he knew he'd been wrong. That she didn't deserve quite so much of his hatred.

And he hadn't said no. He was just waiting.

Mel had absolutely no idea what to think about all this. It was just... As if the world hadn't gone insane on her enough already.

'What sort of thing should I do, then? To prove I mean it, I mean.' Did she mean it? This was sort of more serious than she'd thought it was...

Susan shrugged, her shoulder bumping Mel's hip. 'I don't know enough about either of you to say. And, well, it would definitely depend on if he knows. Who you were.'

Being a little circumspect about that. Mel was reluctantly amused, for some reason. 'He does.'

'Right. Just, well. Don't necessarily think of what's important to you, but what you think he thinks is important to you. That should make a bigger impression, you know. Being who you are, something
about your reputation is actually a good possibility, I know you don't care about that nearly as much as people think. But anyway, just, find some way to show what he can offer you is more important. Well, I mean, if you decide it actually is. Find something to make your point, and do it.' She shrugged again.

Yeah. Find something, and do it. Simple! Right. Even sitting there, a couple possible ideas flipped through her head, but she would have to think about it. She hadn't realised apprenticeships were nearly this involved of a thing, she'd have to reconsider if this was really something she wanted. Especially with Snape, of all people. 'Right. Okay. I'll have to think about it. Thanks.'

Susan's grin turned toward that familiar teasing tilt, her eyes sparkling enough Mel had to wonder if that was magic of some kind. 'Aren't I so sweet and helpful?'

Fighting the rebellious twitching of a smile at her own lips, Mel rolled her eyes. 'Oh, yes, sure, why not.'

'Well, since I was so very helpful, I think I deserve a reward.'

Er. Mel glanced back down at Susan. She was aware she was being a bit neurotic, but she couldn't help a sudden flash of completely ridiculous paranoia. 'What kind of reward?'

Susan let out a long, high hum, one finger tapping at her lips. 'I wouldn't say no to a kiss.'

The thought brought an immediate boiling of nerves rising in her stomach, but Mel ruthlessly ignored it, focused on something, anything else. 'Ah, well, it'd be kinda awkward to reach you, lying down there like that.'

'Good point.' Before Mel could move, Susan was pushing up again, head lifting off of Mel's skirt, and she was sitting upright again, sliding over until their arms touched. Grinning brightly at her, she chirped, 'There! Much easier.'

Mel focused on her amusement — entirely so she wouldn't focus on being nervous for stupid, silly reasons — trying to force out the fluttering awkward twitchiness filling her with a sharp scoff. 'You're ridiculous, you know that.'

'Mm, we have been over this.'

'I know. But you keep doing it.'

'I am persistent.'

Mel couldn't help laughing a little at that.

For a few seconds, Susan didn't move, Mel not entirely facing her, shaking her head to herself. She heard it before she felt or saw it, the slight sound of cloth rustling, before she started at a couple of Susan's fingers softly landing on the side of her jaw. Slowly and softly, Susan turned her face back toward hers. Giving her time to change her mind, she knew, gentle and loose enough Mel could easily break away if she wanted to. And while she did appreciate that, it was useful for another reason: it gave Mel time to beat back the nervous tingling washing along her skin, the distracting bubbling in her chest, the frantic fear trying to build in her head, which was stupid and ridiculous, and she needed to stop.

And then Susan was suddenly very close to her — she thought she might have missed a couple seconds forcing her own brain to behave — close enough she could feel the heat clinging to her, surrounded by that smooth sweet-sour scent that followed her around everywhere. Oranges?
Something citrus, anyway. And quite nearly all of her vision was taken up by Susan's face, brightly framed with that odd hair of hers, too close for Mel to see much of anything else.

And then Susan was kissing her. They'd only done this a few times before — three times exactly, she remembered — Mel was still far from used to it. It was very...distracting. It made it very hard to think very much at all. Susan was just...there, and... She was always so, so...soft, and gentle, and sweet, and warm, and, bloody hell, she even smelt good, and every tiny touch had her skin tingling and her fingers twitching, but not in the bad way she was far more used to, but like she were somehow more alive than usual, she couldn't quite explain it, and it was almost too much, some vulnerable part of her was terrified every time, cringed away and screamed at her to flee, but she mostly didn't hear it, really didn't want to...

She shivered as Susan's fingers moved, sliding back to slip into her hair, her hand coming more fully against her cheek, and Susan pulled just a couple millimetres back. Eyes flicked over her face for a couple seconds — she knew Susan was making sure she was okay, that she wasn't having one of her crazy person moments. Sometimes she really had to wonder how Susan could possibly be willing to put up with her nonsense. But then Susan's lips were on hers again, she really didn't have the concentration to think about it anymore.

Because Mel was trying to...she didn't know. Do it right. Kiss her back, she meant. She really didn't know what she was doing. She always felt stupid and clumsy and awkward. Susan always moved so smoothly and confidently, like she were some kind of bloody expert. By how it only took a couple seconds for shivers to start racing up and down her spine, she guessed she sort of was. Or maybe Mel was just, what, sensitive, she didn't know. Susan had never commented, though, so, maybe she wasn't making a complete idiot of herself. But it made her far too self-conscious, her hands twitching uselessly in her lap, when she'd really rather be focusing on...other things.

It wasn't anything crazy of course. Just...soft, slow things. Right on, ah, the surface, she guessed. Smooth and gentle and easy. Which was fine, she really didn't think she was anything like prepared for anything else. And just with that, she felt too warm, and too fluttery, but not really in a bad way. Not even a little bit in a bad way.

She remembered thinking to herself, wondering exactly what couples did with each other, that they couldn't just be kissing all the time. Now she wouldn't be surprised if some couples only did exactly that. There were worse things to do with your time.

But it only took...she wasn't sure how long, exactly. More than a few seconds, but not all that long either. She was starting to get too warm, in an uncomfortable way, and that annoying part of her screaming in the back of her head was getting louder and louder, and she knew it was stupid shite, she was only uncomfortable because of crazy person reasons, but that didn't change the fact that she was getting uncomfortable, and as the seconds ticked by it was getting harder and harder to ignore. She knew it was stupid, so she fought it for as long as she could, but inevitably...

Mel jerked away — Susan's hand instantly lifted from her cheek, as though scalded — turning to face forward again. She took a few moments to try to get control of her breathing again, which was a bit more difficult than she'd expected. Must have been missing a few there. The uncomfortable scrambling in her head gradually quieted, the tinges and the heat lifting away, and she was calm again before too long.

When she opened her eyes, she found bright, yellow ones on hers, Hedwig giving her a steady stare. Her wings shuffled for a moment in a light shrug, letting out a soft hoot before turning away again.

'You okay?'
'Yeah, I'm fine.' She glanced to see Susan was watching her, somewhat warily, leaning a bit away, seemingly very consciously trying to stay out of her space. 'It's okay, Susan. I just...' She trailed off, frowning to herself a little. This shite was really confusing, and could be a bit depressing, to the point that she generally tried not to think about it herself. She had no idea how to explain it, or if she even should. 'I just, you...make me feel things.'

A smirk gradually pulled at Susan's face, reluctantly, as though she weren't sure she should be smirking right now. 'I'd certainly hope so. I think I'd be disappointed if I didn't.'

Mel shook her head, smiling to herself a little. 'That is the problem, though. I'm not used to...feeling good, I guess.' Susan did not at all seem happy with that thought, but Mel pushed past it, no good would come from lingering on that. 'I can only handle so much at once. So if I, I have one of those moments, don't worry. You're not doing anything wrong, I'm just dealing with my fucked up brain. I'm fine, really.'

For a second, Susan just stared at her. Processing, she guessed. Then she visibly eased, a bit of the nervous tension fading away. She slid a bit closer to Mel again, and Mel did her best to hold back a twitch as she felt Susan's arm slip behind her shoulders. After a second to shove off another moment of completely irrational panic in her stupid head, Mel forced herself to relax, stop being such a bloody crazy person, let herself lean a bit into her a little. Susan was slightly taller than her, but not significantly, so it was slightly awkward, but that was fine, she ignored that. She stared down at her left arm, where Susan's other hand had ended up, fingers lightly tracing over the veins in her wrist. God, why did she smell so good? Mel didn't even like oranges!

'Well.' The whispered word, what with exactly where Susan's mouth was right now, set the hair above Mel's ear to fluttering, kind of tickled. 'Not used to feeling good. Okay. I guess I'll just have to take that as a compliment.'

Mel let her eyes close, shaking her head to herself. She was a little absurdly grateful that, due to the way they were sitting right now, Susan couldn't see that had made her smile.

Chapter End Notes

[Imperial Parliament (pun intended, he was sure)] — In case anyone didn't catch that, back in chapter twelve it was mentioned that both veela and lilin have a more bird-like form they can take, and while veela are sort of hawk-like lilin are more owl-like. A flock of owls is properly called a parliament. Technically, the Parliament referred to isn't a lilin-only thing, but roughly half-lilin and half-veela, and they don't speak English anyway, so the pun is entirely Sirius.

shewn — Archaic spelling of "shown", chosen because in her drama voice she's pronouncing the vowel slightly different than usual.
Chapter Summary

Just because she chose not to be sent to Slytherin doesn't mean Mel can't think like one when it suits her.

Chapter Notes

Late, I know. Insomnia continues to be a thing. Pretty sure this chapter came out a bit bluh, that's why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mel was somewhat surprised when, upon reaching the familiar seventh-floor corridor, she found the door into the Room of Requirement already in existence, innocently standing where a door wouldn't normally be.

Feeling inexplicably self-conscious, she took a quick glance around the empty hallway. So far as she knew, the people who knew about the Room was still rather few. She was still hesitating on whether she should show it to the study group, she knew Hermione hadn't told anyone, and she didn't think Katie had told anyone. It was possible other people in the castle knew about it. But if they did, she would figure most anyone would ask the Room to open only to them. Which meant she wouldn't see a door at all coming here, even while the Room was occupied. She and Hermione had tested it, and it was actually possible for the Room to host multiple people at the same time. Which did make sense, when she thought about it — with all the different shapes and sizes the Room could make itself, why shouldn't it be able to make two Rooms at once, for two different people?

That there was someone obviously in the Room right now, and that Mel could actually see the door, implied that whoever was in there had intentionally left the door open for her. Or other people in general, at least. Which she hadn't expected. She'd been intending to get a little transfiguration practice in, she hadn't expected to meet anyone.

After a moment of frowning at the door, she shrugged, reached for the handle. Might as well see what was going on.

She hadn't been expecting it, true, but she still wasn't entirely surprised to find Dora inside. At least, she was almost certain it was Dora, the blood-red hair flickering unnaturally with whites and oranges and blacks was a bit of a giveaway. She'd made the Room rather plain — it was just an ordinary space, maybe the size of the average classroom, entirely empty, every surface plain grey granite. Even as Mel pushed the door open, a familiar yellow-white spellglow, an incendiary curse, sprung from her wand to strike something in the centre of the room, blowing the person-sized thing there into tiny bits with an explosion of noise and fire, bits of rock flying in all directions to ping against floor and ceiling, skittering a bit before finally coming to a stop. There was quite a bit of debris in the Room, actually, Dora must have been at it for a while.

Closing the door behind her, Mel said, 'Is this a bad time?'
Dora snorted. 'Funny, Mel. You're hilarious.'

That...wasn't supposed to be funny, but, okay. 'Is something wrong?'

'Nothing, it's just—' Dora looked off at the wall to Mel's side, bouncing a bit on the balls of her feet, biting her cheek, wand tapping at her thigh. Another figure appeared in the centre of the room, looked to be a statue of a person, but before Mel could look more closely, without even glancing in that direction, Dora lifted her wand again, blasted the thing out of existence with a curse powerful enough the air shuddered. Her voice a low, vicious hiss, she said, 'There are a lot of things I can put up with. Not many things actually offend me. From men, I mean, even men I'm interested in. Men looking for a shag say some of the most ridiculous things — especially to me, I expect, being what I am. None of it usually bothers me. Probably would a normal person, but I'm well aware I'm not normal.'

Mel bit hard on the inside of her lip, painfully hard, to keep herself from smirking at that.

'Some things are annoying, yes, but they don't really bother me _that_ much. I can put up with most anything. There is one thing, _one thing_, I do not put up with. Even for a second.

'You'd think I was asking him to marry me!' she said, suddenly shouting, hands flying up above her head, whirling on one foot to start sharply pacing. 'Honestly! I just asked him out for drinks! Fucking hell, what is that man's _problem_? All going on about, blah blah, too poor—' Again, Dora blasted a statue out of existence before Mel could even catch a glimpse of it. '—too old—' Another explosion, this time the curse leaving Dora's wand before the statue had even appeared. '—honestly, what the _fuck_? I was _just looking for a shag_! Seriously!

'And I could have put up with all of that!' Mel involuntarily jerked back a step when Dora spun to face her — her eyes were inhumanly wide and unnaturally bright, really quite unnerving. 'I've had worse! But no no, he had to touch that one thing, he had to say the _one thing_ I don't tolerate from anyone ever. And he had to be so _self-righteous_ about it too, _fuck_, I was an _instant_ away from cursing him, you don't get it. That _fucking prick_, he's lucky I inherited enough self-control from my dad's side of the family, half of my aunts or cousins wouldn't have let him off so easy.'

'Erm.' Was it safe to ask? Dora did seem to be rather close to the edge of that self-control at the moment, she wasn't sure. 'What _is_ that one thing, anyway?'

Her voice turning all sarcastically melodramatic, 'Oh, _Nymphadora_—' Mel winced; had this idiot really called her that? Did he have a death wish or something? '—it wouldn't be a good idea. I'm too _dangerous_ for you. It's not like you're an _Auror_ or anything. It's not like you've studied quite nearly every dark art the Ministry monitors, and even a couple restricted only to Aurors, oh no. It's not like you can think of, off the top of your head, _eight different ways_ you could take out a transformed werewolf, _in an instant_ — _without even drawing your wand_. No, no, I would be _too dangerous_ for you. Because you're obviously a weak, incompetent _little girl_ us _big, strong men_ need to protect! Why, _of fucking course_!'

This time, when the statue appeared, Dora took long enough whirling around to get her wand in line Mel could actually make out the figure before it was blasted into smithereens. Funny, it looked exactly like Remus.

Mel let out a long sigh, rubbing at her forehead with both hands. She might have tried to claim she was surprised but, honestly? No, she really wasn't. About either side of this, really. That Dora might try to seduce him, despite him being quite nearly old enough to be her father. That, in one of his self-pitying, meandering rambles he could get into sometimes he might step in it big time, put his foot so
solidly in his mouth Ron would think it a bit much. That Dora would have to run off to blow things up for a while, so she didn't murder him in a fit of rage.

Yeah, honestly, none of that was the least bit surprising. Just sounded like Dora being Dora and Remus being Remus.

'He's not entirely wrong, is he?' Mel flinched when Dora turned to glare at her, fingers so tight about her wand her knuckles were visibly whitened, her eye twitching. Why had she said that? Why had she felt the need to defend Remus, anyway? She wasn't exactly happy with him at the moment herself, either! Jesus... 'I mean, er, werewolves are sort of a big thing, you know. Magically resistant and all. It's not from nowhere.'

For long seconds, Dora just stared at her. Then, while her wand vanished up her sleeve, another statue appeared in the middle of the room. Not Remus this time, but an oversized, shaggy canine figure Mel recognised to be a representation of a transformed werewolf. 'Werewolves are not that hard to deal with. For non-lethal capacitation alone...' She turned to face the statue, took a slow breath, seemingly calming herself. At a flick of her wrist, a bright blue-silver spell of some kind sprung from her bare hand, falling upon the statue. Nothing happened, but Mel guessed it would have been more effective had that been a real werewolf. Voice low and flat, Dora said, 'One.'

Another flick of her wrist, down toward the floor and, the air crackling, Dora brought her fingers back up, golden tendrils of hot magic springing up from the floor to wrap around the statue, so thick with power Mel's hair was standing up from all the way over here. 'Two.'

The magical chains faded away, and Dora clenched her fist, threw her arm back, and an odd black and red spellglow in the form of a long whip extended from her knuckles, a forward gesture flinging the end to twine around the statue's throat, splitting into multiple threads, twisting and clenching about its body. 'Three.'

And Dora cast again and again, most spells Mel had never even seen before, all the way up to 'Eight' without even a moment's hesitation, getting a few more out with a bit of extra thought, until she'd wandlessly thrown off eleven different spells that would apparently contain a transformed werewolf, all on her own, with hardly any visible effort.

As if Mel had needed a reminder her silly cousin could be rather terrifying when she felt like it...

Then Dora turned back to her, face sharp and calm, eyes so intense Mel felt herself cringing a little. 'A transformed werewolf is nothing. An unusual degree of resistance to some commonly-used magics, yes, but also a characteristic weakness to others. And, most importantly, they are stupid. They are mindless, raging, unthinking animals, with no other appreciable magical abilities, nothing but noise and teeth and claws. I can handle a werewolf. There are far more dangerous things out there.'

Dora's wand again fell into her palm. Her face contorting with black fury, her hair flashing a brilliant red, her skin an unnatural white, she turned back to the statue, her wand rising and falling in a vicious stab. A contorting mass of colour that seemingly couldn't decide if it were fire or lightning, the familiar torrent of green-white light burst out of the tip, smoothly sprung across the air, the temperature in the room seeming to drop a couple degrees in an instant just with its passing. The Killing Curse fell upon the statue, blowing the thing apart in an eerily silent explosion, contrasted sharply against the noisy clattering of bits of stone scattering across the room, some surfaces of the cracked and craggy granite visibly crusted with ice.

And Dora just turned back to Mel, colour returning to her skin, hair shifting a deep blue-purple, and hissed, 'I am one of them.'
Mel swallowed, her voice entirely failing her, incapable of doing anything more than just silently staring back at the enraged dark sorceress.

Well. She wasn't about to disagree, was she?

Over the next few seconds, Dora's eyes gradually softened, her hair lightening to a softer purple, eventually coming to a shade just a little too dark to be considered pink, the aura of contained violence about her fading away completely. Mel was pretty sure she knew why: she'd just cast the Killing Curse. It was hard to find proper information about this, since it was an extremely illegal spell and all, but Hermione had said more than once she was pretty sure using emotionally-fueled magic of any kind should have psychological effects. That was just how the human brain worked. In the case of the Killing Curse, channeling that much magic through hatred and fury should, theoretically, temporarily deaden the person's ability to feel those emotions. Only temporarily, but it should still happen. That people capable of stringing one Killing Curse after another — or any other major dark magic, for that matter — were actually rather rare suggested she was right.

Though, Hermione was also rather sure using a specific spell would build a kind of resistance, so the effects should gradually weaken with each casting. It was still a thing, though. That was Mel's guess for why Dora was calming down so suddenly.

If she were right, that actually sounded like a good strategy to her. For controlling herself, she meant. As long as she wasn't shooting that thing at anything actually alive, of course.

But, anyway, Dora seemed mostly calm now. Which was good, because she had a question. 'If werewolves aren't that hard to handle, why is everyone so scared of them?'

Dora blinked at her for a second before finding her voice. 'Ah, I'm probably not being entirely fair. Werewolves aren't hard for me to handle. You'd be fine, if you saw it coming in time. The average mage, who stumbles on one suddenly, doesn't have even a second to prepare themselves? She shrugged. 'That and, even if they weren't that dangerous at all, people would still be afraid of them. There is no cure. All it takes is one bite, and you'll be forced into an agonising transformation every full moon the rest of your life. A life that will be considerably shorter — lycanthropy is not easy on its host. Remus looks far older than he is, and would be exceptionally fortunate to make it to sixty, very young for a wizard. Which, sure, if I were in love—' Her voice turned low for those two words, dripping with bitter sarcasm. '—with the bloke that would be a problem, I'm not gonna deny that. So, that nonsense wasn't out of nowhere. People aren't afraid of werewolves for no good reason whatsoever. It's only bloody stupid because I'm me.

'But, really, werewolves aren't that bad. At least not as bad as people think they are. As far as "Dark Creatures" or whatever go, it's the vampires you want to watch out for.'

Well, yes, she wasn't going to even try to deny Remus was being an idiot. For one thing, Dora was only quite possibly the greatest slag to ever walk the earth — she could have told him she probably wasn't interested in anything serious. And, well, Dora. Even if werewolves were as incredibly dangerous as Mel had been given the impression they were, she wouldn't doubt for a second they weren't really a threat to a witch of Dora's power and skill. Remus really should know all that. But anyway, right. 'Ah, I know hardly anything at all about vampires, really.'

'Not surprising, we don't have any in Britain. A couple, I guess. We did do our best to exterminate them a few centuries ago, you know.' Dora frowned to herself a moment and, with an odd shuddering undulation carried across every surface, the Room shifted. The scattered rubble from all the Remus statues she'd cursed into oblivion vanished, the walls closed in around them. Soon they were in a little room, the walls wood-panelled, the floor covered in bright gold carpet, a poofy couch of yellow and pink a short distance away. Oddly, one wall seemed to be an enormous water-filled
tank, displaying heaps of colourful coral, unfamiliar fish of various sizes darting about. Er, alright, then. Dora flopped into the couch, limbs randomly splayed about her. With nothing better to do, Mel shrugged, sat on the only cushion free of some part of her silly cousin. 'Most people don't really know shite about vampires.

'They're just another race, you know. You don't make new vampires, that whole thing is a myth. They have sex and give birth like any other beings. Low fertility compared to humans, but that's how it works. They don't actually need blood from other beings to survive either, really. What it does do is extend their lives beyond their natural length. Without any donations, so to speak, a vampire might only live eighty years. But, for some reason, any blood from a being — not just humans, any being — will prevent them from aging. Seemingly, indefinitely.

'And they can be incredibly deadly, yes. They are inhumanly fast, inhumanly strong, very hard to kill. But, you know...' Dora shrugged a little, sent Mel a smirk. 'They're not monsters. They're people. Not that different from humans, psychologically speaking. Which I suppose makes them both more and less dangerous than werewolves. You'll get some who go out and murder whoever they feel like, sure, and those are some of the deadliest things in existence, but they're a very small minority of the population. Most just keep to themselves, aren't any more likely to go out and hurt anyone than anyone else. Most get their blood from willing donors. Lovers, typically. In other countries, when you'll have some rogue, murderous vampire running about, the local vampires actually help the authorities get rid of them as best they can — they don't want those types around any more than we do.

'I mean, shite, there are a few vampire clans on the Continent who've been sending their children to Beauxbatons for centuries. Nobody really cares, over there.'

Okay, most of that wasn't too much of a surprise. She'd learned already that Britain was insanely humanocentrist and blood purist compared to most of the rest of the world. These days, at least — most other magical communities had had similar philosophies in the past they'd since let go of. Lingering a bit among some of the wealthy and powerful, yes, but mostly gone. That British mages might have come up with a bunch of myths that had entirely overtaken reality where vampires were concerned was not unexpected. She'd already known they'd done the same with giants, veela and lilin, even dark magic just in general. That last one, though... 'Wait, what? There are vampire students at Beauxbatons?'

And Dora just frowned at her, as though she'd said something very stupid. 'Sure there are. Not very many vampires can actually use magic — only ten, fifteen percent of them, something like that — but the ones who can. Not just vampires either, lots of nonhumans go to Beauxbatons. It's Beauxbatons. I mean, why do you think the French veela go there, despite the school being in Aquitania? The Headmistress is an alumna, but her family lives in Venice. Not very many schools of Beauxbatons' prestige will take veela, or half-giants, or vampires. Beauxbatons does, has for a long time. Actually, they get enough veela and lilin they have their own dorms — la Colombière, they call it, because they think they're hilarious.

'If you're wondering.' Dora said, smirking a little, 'how exactly I know all this, I was almost sent to Beauxbatons. When I was younger, my parents weren't sure I'd be able to go to Hogwarts — this place is a bit selective about who they let in. They'd talked with a rep from Education in Aquitania, and he said they'd take me. But, just in time, my mum got a promotion, and could get me a spot in Hogwarts through her job. So I ended up coming here instead.'

Mel had heard about that, now that she actually knew there were other schools of magic in Britain. Hogwarts generally only accepted kids from Noble Houses, the families of a few people of sufficiently high offices in the Ministry — most of whom were members of Noble Houses already,
but not universally, the Weasleys being an example — the kids with muggle parents but no close magical family, so were unable to make their own arrangements, as well as a few wealthy people who bought their way in, if there happened to be room that year. Mel herself had only gotten to go to Hogwarts because Potter happened to be a Noble House.

Though, actually, come to think of it, with how British people tended to think about Hogwarts, it was almost certain they would have made sure the Boy-Who-Lived went, and Dumbledore surely would have pulled strings to make it happen. But, without that, it was just the Potter thing.

After a moment, she had a thought. 'They didn't consider sending you to, oh shite, what's it called? The Irish school.'

'They could have sent me to an Ollscoil, yes, but they preferred Beauxbatons. They have a better record when it comes to nonhuman beings, so my parents thought it might be a good idea, what with me being a metamorph and all. I am still technically considered human of course, but...' Dora shrugged, sending Mel a sharp sort of smirk. 'A lot of the worse pureblood supremacists seem to think otherwise. Honestly, I think it might have been easier at Beauxbatons, Hogwarts wasn't very much fun sometimes, and I don't think an Ollscoil would have been any better. But I probably would have turned out quite different, and I don't mind who I am now, so no use thinking about it, really.

'Speaking of not minding who I am now, how have you been doing?' Mel winced, already frantically trying to come up with some believable and not arsehole-ish way to deflect the question, when Dora said, 'I don't mean to make this into an interrogation, Mel. I'm just asking. It can be as brief or as detailed as you like.'

'Oh, well...' Mel shrugged — she still had absolutely no idea how to answer this sort of question. Honestly, she'd sort of appreciated how Dora rarely ever talked about anything serious. She realised Hermione had said much the same thing about herself only a few days ago. But, go to the Room, throw curses at each other for a bit, assign "homework", and then she was gone. It was simple, easy. Talking about stuff was harder. Especially vague questions like that. 'Okay, I guess.'

Sort of great, really, when she thought about it. Mostly in that she didn't think she was completely miserable anymore, just going through the motions of being a functional human being. Which was sort of strange, for multiple reasons. For one thing, she guessed she'd never realised how much of a...she didn't know, constant energy drain? Like, just staying awake for the whole day was easier now. Paying attention to anything. She had the energy to actually talk to her classmates — she very rarely wanted to, but she could, that was the thing. It was like she was lighter, and everything was easier, it was weird.

But that was weird on its own, because... Well, she'd always been like that. And now she wasn't. Which implied she'd always been miserable. Which was a very strange thought. So, she guessed "okay" was kind of an understatement, maybe? But she didn't really know what else to say...

Her voice light and mocking, Dora said, 'Okay, you guess? You know, I think the little Bones might take offence at that.'

Mel sent Dora the sharpest glare she could manage, her face clenched tight enough it almost hurt, but her intermittently insufferable cousin just kept smirking back at her. 'Sirius told you about that, then.'

'Actually, the boss mentioned it.'

'Oh.' Well, she guessed that was also a possibility. She wasn't sure how to feel about the thought that Susan was talking about her with her technically-aunt-sort-of-mother. Or, when she thought about it, the fact that Sirius apparently wasn't repeating the things she told him to other people. She did know
Sirius had been trying harder to not be so annoying, sort of belatedly growing up — twelve years of constant dementor exposure had seriously delayed that — but she still hadn't really expected it. Especially when it came to people like, say, Dora, Andi, Ted, Remus. She would have thought he'd have told them.

Actually, come to think of it, he probably had told Andi. With how inter-House politics and shite worked, he would probably have to keep Mel's proxy informed about who she was, you know, involved with. Even though the elder Bones almost certainly didn't know her not-daughter's girlfriend was technically the Lady Potter, and not a Black at all. Not the point, even if Andi did know, she clearly hadn't told Dora.

She really didn't know how to feel about this, so she just ignored it for the moment. 'Well, my life is really fucking complicated, you know. I've learned a lot of stuff from Dumbledore lately that I'm, well, not very happy knowing. And other stuff going on, it's complicated.'

Frowning at her, Dora said, 'What did you learn from Dumbledore? What did he do?'

The obvious hint of suspicion on Dora's voice made Mel hesitate more than she might have. Partially just because it was surprising — by a few things Dora had said early in the summer, she'd once idolised Dumbledore quite a bit, but it was clear from her tone that wasn't so true anymore. Sirius's influence? Oh well, not important. But she also hesitated because...

Well, she wasn't supposed to tell anyone what Dumbledore had been telling her, but this was Dora. It wasn't like she was going to run off and tell anyone, and she was a bloody Auror, nobody was going to be nicking it from her head without her knowing. So, on the one hand, telling her should be fine. And she'd probably be able to help Mel straighten out a few details she still had questions about. But, on the other hand, she wasn't sure telling her was a good idea. Considering the violent rage she had just found Dora in, explaining that she was pretty sure Dumbledore had been setting her up to die didn't sound like the best idea. She'd rather Dora not charge off to curse him, thanks.

'Ah, I'm not supposed to tell.' At the unpleasant look crossing Dora's face, Mel scrambled out, 'It's stuff related to that prophecy, you know. About me and He-Who-Smells. He said the less people who know about it the better.' She figured that was probably a good way to get Dora to drop it — she remembered how, when they'd gone to the Ministry, Dora had specifically asked her not to tell her what the prophecy said, just to confirm one existed.

By the surly pout on Dora's lips, that had been the exact right thing to say. 'All right, then. If you're having trouble you tell me or Sirius, yeah?'

'Yeah, I will.' Actually, she had already talked to Sirius more than once about how she was having trouble trusting Dumbledore these days, though she hadn't given specific details as to why. For the same reason, really. She vividly recalled a passage in her mother's journals about how a couple Ravenclaws in sixth year had been spreading rumours about how Lily had to have cheated during the OWLs somehow — obviously a mudblood couldn't manage ten Outstandings legitimately, come on — and Sirius had ended up putting them in the Hospital Wing for near on a week. Much like Dora, she didn't think it was a good idea to give Sirius reason to be angry on her behalf if she could help it.

'Good, then. Good is good.' Mel managed not to roll her eyes at that. 'Want to practise a little as long as I'm here?'

And she managed not to roll her eyes at that either. She wasn't entirely convinced Dora thought about anything other than duelling and sex. But she shrugged, slipping up to her feet. 'All right.'
If nothing else, she could say she was getting very good with minor healing charms by now.

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**February, Seventh Year**

His voice smooth and casual over the noise of people packing up to leave the Potions classroom, the subtle feel of an amplification charm about it so he didn't have to strain himself, Horace said, 'Stay behind if you would, Miss Evans.'

Lily blinked at him for a second, then shrugged, dropping her bag again to their table. While they other students made for the door, Sirius hesitated for a long moment, shooting wary glances between Horace and herself. Trying not to roll her eyes, she muttered, 'I'm fine, Sirius, honestly. It's just Slughorn. He likes me.'

'It's how much he likes you that bothers me.' Lily was pretty sure that wasn't the whole truth. Yes, he might be far better about this sort of thing than he'd been a few years ago, but he still had a completely irrational distrust of anyone from one of the traditionally Dark houses — Slughorn was a Noble House, and a matriarchal one at that, so they did lean that way. That Sirius wasn't nearly as different from his family, another (formerly) matriarchal Dark Noble House, as he liked to believe he was she guessed was beside the point. Whatever he was actually thinking, a teasing smirk spread across his face. 'I feel I have some right to be jealous.'

This time, Lily didn't bother stopping herself from rolling her eyes. 'Well, last time I was alone with him, we spent two straight hours talking about the effects of runic inlays in stirring utensils on solar-sensitive infusions. If you'd prefer I talk about this sort of thing with you...'

Sirius lifted his hands in surrender, already backing away from the table. 'Nah, I think I'm good, thanks.'

Yeah, she'd thought so. 'Third floor?'

'I'll be waiting.' And with a final smirk he was gone, trailing the last couple students through the door. A crook of her finger had the door slamming closed.

Rather harder than she'd intended. Lily winced — she'd been working on it for literally ten years, and she still wasn't great at precisely moderating the power of wandless charms. It was strangely difficult for some reason.

'I must confess I'm surprised.'

Lily raised an eyebrow at the amused tone on his voice, turning back to a grinning Horace. 'Surprised about what, Professor?'

'That young Sirius has stuck with you this long. Forgive me for the presumption, Miss Evans,' he said, his crooked smile not the least bit apologetic, 'but I have been around teenage boys a long, long time, and Sirius hadn't struck me as the type. How long has it been now?'

Her mouth already opened to answer, Lily had to pause a moment to think about it. It would have been July, right, so... 'Nineteen months? Something like that.'

'Yes, yes. Well, I wish you good luck and all that. Though, I'm not certain exactly what "good luck" would look like in this case.'

Lily smiled, shaking her head to herself. 'Thank you, Professor. I think.'
After holding his smirk for a moment, Horace straightened from where he'd been leaning against his desk, started making for the door to his attached office. 'Come, Miss Evans, there was something I wished to discuss with you.'

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Lily drifted along behind him, stepping into the long-familiar office of Hogwarts' resident Potions Master. The room was comparatively barren — Horace in fact had three offices, one off the Slytherin dorms bridging to his own apartments, one on the first floor he mostly used for after-hours meetings with parents and guests and small groups of students, especially those from other houses, and this one, which he only used to arrange lessons or mark exams or samples between classes. So, by Horace Slughorn standards, it was very utilitarian. Along one bare stone wall racks of little vials from various classes and years, most of the contents of which Lily recognised at a glance, a couple bookshelves packed with references and old exams and essays and records of various sorts, his desk empty save for strewn about papers, a few places a framed photo or some trinket or another.

She couldn't help a smug smirk when she noticed the little glass fish bowl, the construct she'd impulsively enchanted roughly a year ago now gently swimming about, kept in a place of prominence nestled among the picture frames she knew bore images of his parents, siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. When she'd told Sirius for perhaps the hundredth time Horace liked her, she hadn't just been saying that. Say about Horace Slughorn whatever you will — and God knows there was plenty that could be said, Lily wouldn't argue that. But if there was one thing he prized more than anything else, it was talent.

Which she'd always found sort of darkly amusing. She'd recently talked about her career prospects with McGonagall, of course — though it hadn't mattered in her case, she did have to wonder why the Gryffindors hadn't gotten any sort of counseling before choosing their electives for third year, when it would have actually made a difference — but it had started even before then. Practically since her first year, most of her professors, virtually every adult she had ever met, acknowledging her skill, yes, acknowledging her intelligence, but lamenting what a pity it was she was a muggleborn. Even people who weren't blood supremacists themselves, or at the least professed not to be, they could still acknowledge the deck was stacked against her, that she would be at a disadvantage every step of the way. She was the top of her class, had been made Head Girl, was by a wide margin the most powerful and capable mage in her year — she doubted it would be long before people were calling her a sorceress — but people still expected her to have little luck in the real world. Even if they didn't come out and say it, she could tell by the way they talked to her, the subtle pity in their eyes, that they were thinking it.

McGonagall had actually told her to not aim too high, to not get her hopes up! How messed up was that?!

But it was Horace Slughorn, the very picture of an entitled pureblooded son of a wealthy Noble House, the head of Slytherin, who had as a general rule made no secret of their opinions of late, it was Horace Slughorn who hadn't doubted her for a second. He hadn't doubted for a second she would make a name for herself. Exactly what kind of name he wasn't yet sure, she could tell. But he saw the way she commanded magic, heard how obviously canny she was, and he didn't doubt for a second. Of course Lily Evans would succeed, at whatever she set her mind to! It wasn't even a question to him, just the way it was.

In fact, he was so certain she would be successful, she knew, that he wanted to contribute some way, almost entirely so he could turn around later and tell people, 'See that? I helped make that happen.' That's what Horace did, see, he inflated his own reputation by taking partial credit for the successes of others. She was pretty sure that's what this meeting was about — Horace was about to offer some bit of assistance he would later claim, perhaps not even untruthfully, had been instrumental in her
rise to greatness.

She knew that’s what he was doing, that was his stake in this, but she didn’t care. It wasn’t like she’d be getting nothing from it, after all. And besides, Horace was always interesting to talk to. The old man was thoroughly knowledgeable, about far more topics besides just his professed area of expertise.

And perhaps she was just a little flattered by where exactly he’d decided to keep her gift.

Once they were both settled into their seats, Horace produced a familiar crystal bottle of brandy, gave her a questioning look before pouring too short glasses. Lily couldn’t help a smirk — this may be his more utilitarian office, yes, but he was still Horace Slughorn. Accepting her glass, Lily sat back, and was entirely unsurprised when Horace immediately led into a continuation of their previous discussion on runic inlays. She followed along, taking an occasional sip from her brandy — she’d already gotten into the habit of refusing alcohol whenever she could do so politely, a conscious decision she’d made years ago due to rampant alcoholism on her father’s side of the family, but Horace had consistently good taste, and it was just a little — simply waiting for Horace to get to the point. He wouldn’t have asked her to stay after and go so far as offering her a drink if this was all he’d intended to talk about.

After a short tangent discussing the effect of lunar-aligned enchantments on potions dealing with sleep and the mind, Horace let out a sigh, a somewhat more serious cast falling over his voice. ‘I’m sure I’m not fooling you for a second, Lily. Forgive an old man for stalling.’

She gave him an easy smile, shrugged a little. ’No forgiveness necessary. I’m used to accommodating your delicate sensibilities by now.’

An expression of exaggerated offended pride twisting his distractingly impressive mustache, Horace hissed, Delicate? ’

Lily just smirked at him, taking a slow sip of her brandy.

Horace let out a harsh, aggravated sigh, shaking his head in exasperation, but Lily could tell it was affected. It was the faint curling of a smile at the corners of his eyes, the slight twitching of a smirk at his lips, that gave him away. His eyes fell back to her, looking oddly reluctant, his voice far lower and more serious than she hardly ever heard from the characteristically boisterous man. ’I am just concerned, Lily, that is all. The end of your seventh year is coming up in a few months here. I’m sure you know by now that the legal situation for witches of your station can be...precarious.’

Oh. So this was about that, then. All right. ’I’m aware.’ Not that the thought didn’t make her bloody furious, of course. All the legal rights a person had were tied to their membership of a House, any House — essentially, any considerations made for an individual were due to the assumption that their House would protest if they were in any way mistreated. Someone who didn’t have formal attachments to one House or another were for all intents and purposes legal non-entities, something less than an ordinary citizen. Most mages were born into a House, so only had to worry about it on the off chance they were expelled. Muggleborns, on the other hand, had no House. Currently, she was considered a citizen of Hogwarts, but by the end of August that would be dissolved, and if she couldn’t find some alternative she would be terribly vulnerable.

’May I assume you have some plans in the works to mitigate that?’

’A few.’ It shouldn’t be too difficult, with the reputation she already had, to land an apprenticeship with someone. If that didn’t work, she could always go to the Aurors, or even just apply for a mastery program at an Ollscoil, where she’d almost certainly be accepted. There were options. ’I’m
not particularly worried. If all else fails, I can always just marry Sirius.' Honestly, that wasn't said with near as much reluctance as it would have been even a year ago. The smirking little idiot had grown on her. She still thought it was a bit strange, how young mages tended to marry, but, honestly, the thought of being stuck with him the rest of her life didn't bother her that much. Definitely less than she pretended the rare times it'd come up with Sev.

'Erm...' Horace just stared at her for a long moment, looking very uncomfortable. 'No, you can't just marry Sirius.'

She blinked. 'Huh?'

'He's in exile from House Black, Lily. You can't marry him until he's either acknowledged or expelled.'

That... She...

Lily let out a long sigh, rubbing at her forehead with her free hand. Somehow, she'd managed to forget about that entirely. She'd been just short of positive that, should it come down to it, she'd be able to convince Lord Black to consent to them marrying. She was a muggleborn, yes, which would be an enormous scandal. But she was well aware Lord Black liked her. When she and Sirius had first started seeing each other, and a couple times since, he had commented, and while it was never with explicit approval, he hadn't said anything against her relationship with his son either. It would have taken some convincing, and she'd expected he would arrange an adoption into an allied Noble House first, but she hadn't been worried.

She'd almost certainly have to fend off a couple assassination attempts, but those bigoted morons had absolutely no idea who they were dealing with.

But with Sirius in exile, he was in an odd sort of legal limbo, considered sort of a Black, but also sort of not. Because he was sort of a Black, he needed his Lord's permission to legally marry; because he was sort of not, he couldn't just walk up to him and ask. Before she could even attempt to talk Lord Black into consenting to the marriage, she first had to convince Sirius to reconcile with his family.

She knew her frequently irrational lover well enough to know she had a far lower chance of success there. In little more than a low groan, she said, 'Fuck, I completely forgot about that.' She spent a few moments hissing under her breath, wishing painful deaths upon Walburga, Cygnus, Druella, Arcturus, bloody Lestrange, whoever she could think of on the Black family tree who deserved it.

Horace hardly reacted at all to the murderous Parseltongue rant — not that he could understand what she was saying anyway, she guessed — his lips just twitching with reluctant amusement. 'Well, should your plans fall through... ' Horace slid open a drawer in his desk, pulling out a thin parchment folder, lightly tossing it to slap onto the surface in front of her. '...these masters are all good friends of mine, and I am certain I could convince them to take you on if necessary. That would give you some protection, at least for the duration of your apprenticeship.'

More out of curiosity than anything, Lily reached for the folder, started flipping through the papers inside. Some were names she recognised, but mostly not. Masters of Potions, of Charms, of Enchanting, of— Lily blinked, turned to glance back at Horace. 'Is it my imagination, or are you under the impression I might be seeking an apprenticeship in the Dark Arts?'

'Please, Lily,' he said, a smug sort of smirk pulling at his face, 'this is me you are talking to. Did you really think you could shadow-walk into my office without me knowing about it? I appreciate you not touching anything, by the way.'
For a long moment, Lily just stared at him, temporarily incapable of speech. Well, she guessed that was one secret of hers that wasn't quite as secure as she'd thought it was.

'As far as I am aware, you have managed to keep it from the Headmaster, which I can only assume was your goal. But I am Head of Slytherin for a reason, you know — you and young Severus aren't near sly enough to pull one over on me. If you know what I mean.'

All right, two secrets. Finally, she managed to unstick her throat. 'It should go without saying I'd rather you keep those tidbits to yourself.'

A semi-sarcastic frown wrinkling his brow, Horace said, 'Why, Lily, I think I may be offended. You know you have nothing to fear from me. Continue playing your little game with Albus and his burdensome band of boastfully beneficent bootlickers, it makes no difference to me.'

Lily barely managed to hold back an annoyed groan. Not only was Horace aware she was studying illegal magic in secret, still meeting up with her supposedly former friend, but he obviously knew why she was playing things the way she had been lately. Perhaps not the precise details, but he'd figured out she was trying to worm her way into the Light's confidence for one reason or another. That... Well, she and Sev had clearly been deluding themselves when they'd thought they could fool Horace Slughorn.

'And, should you have the worst luck imaginable, and...' Horace hesitated for a moment, fingers restlessly tapping against his stomach. 'Well, I don't think it likely to be necessary, but should worst come to worst, I'm certain I can convince my aunt to, well, make an offer.'

For another moment, she could only stare at him. By "my aunt" she was pretty sure he meant Lady Slughorn. That meant... 'What, you mean, er, a marriage?' Horace did have nephews around her age, but she'd never hardly met any of them...

'I was thinking an adoption, actually.'

'I...'

No, she had absolutely no idea how to respond to this at all. She hadn't considered Horace offering to arrange for her to be adopted into his House to be even in the realm of possibility. Oddly enough, the offer mostly just made her feel guilty. She'd had no idea he'd been worrying about her as much as he obviously had been. Which was entirely unnecessary, and she couldn't even tell him it was unnecessary.

Or...could she tell him? Lord Black had hinted to her Horace was acceptable as an emergency contact — she couldn't remember the hint he'd given verbatim, but she'd figured out who he meant easily enough. If he was in the know anyway...

Lily bit her lip, hesitating for a long moment, before nodding, bringing her wand to her palm with a flick of her wrist. How Horace's eyebrows gradually tracked up his forehead further and further with each paling against various magics an eavesdropper could potentially be using was really quite funny. Once she thought they were sufficiently protected, Lily turned a thin smile on him. 'You really don't have to worry about me, Horace. I have more allies than you might expect.'

'Varṣāh kāṅkṣāmi.' A light tap of her wand on the wood of his desk, and the charm was released. There was an instant's delay, the magic in the air shuddering slightly, soothing cool waters rushing along Lily's arm, a flash of white-silver light at the tip of her wand. And then a symbol appeared on Horace's desk, crafted of light the same shade, a ring about the width of Lily's fingers splayed, little offshoots all along curling like long thorns, looking to her much like the corona of the sun in eclipse
framing the moon. The gentle glow pulsing, as though with a soft heartbeat, rotating about the center ever so slightly.

For long seconds, eyes wide in shocked disbelief, Horace could only stare gaping at the Circle of Agastya projected onto his desk.

It took some seconds for Horace to gather himself; finally clearing his throat, shifting only slightly in his seat. After a rather larger sip of his brandy, voice sounding consciously light, he said, 'Yes, well. I must have a talk with Orion Black, it seems. Recruiting students for a war, I mean, really.'

Lily just grinned at him, forcing as much childish innocence into the expression as she could. Which probably wasn't very much, honestly, this was her. A quick flick of her wrist had the Circle vanished. 'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. It's certainly not like I'm a spy or anything. I'm only eighteen, Horace! Honestly, who could ever imagine such a thing...'

'The esteemed Lord Black, apparently.'

She smirked — he wasn't wrong. The Circle had three teenage plants that she knew of. She wasn't even the youngest. She assumed Lord Black kept doing it because her elders tended to underestimate people around her age. If she were in their position, and there were evidence of some kind of leak, she knew some kid probably wouldn't be her first suspect. Well, now it probably would be, but perspective and all that. 'You don't need to worry about it. I appreciate the thought, but it's unnecessary. One way or another, I will be taken care of. Lord Black has invested enough time and effort in me he wouldn't want to lose me so soon, after all.'

When Horace let out a sharp, aggravated huff, Lily entirely failed to hold back a low chuckle. Silly man. He was acting like it was offended pride, of course, but she could tell it was acting. She knew him well enough, could spot when he was covering something. In this case, she thought, a not insignificant degree of relief.

And here she'd thought he knew her better than that.

Mel wasn't really listening. She was too thoroughly distracted by her own thoughts, too filled with gradually building trepidation at what she was about to do. At least, she was pretty sure she was going to do it. She might end up talking herself out of it. She was planning to do it, anyway, and the thought was a bit...terrifying? Sure, why not.

Anyway. She wasn't paying attention, but she had noticed they'd picked up hecklers at some point. The study group had been meeting again — short Daphne and Tracey, who were "lying in" this morning, and Lisa, though Mel didn't actually know what she was up to — and they'd been just on their way down for lunch when a couple Slytherins, sixth-years she thought, spotted and started tailing them.

They were talking at her and Susan, she was pretty sure. The normal nonsense asking what they thought they were doing, daughters of Noble and Most Ancient Houses, associating with mudbloods and filth — she'd heard snide comments along those lines a few times from the worse blood purists this year, but she just ignored them. She wasn't even paying attention this time, really, but by how Susan's arm was gradually tightening around hers they must be being rather terrible.

She wouldn't exactly know how to explain this to someone else, but she didn't really care, whatever they were saying. She'd learned by now arguing with their sort of people was entirely pointless, they would never change. It was strangely difficult to keep her anger up about it, most of the time.
Most of their group ignored them, an occasional snarky shot back, nothing more. But, eventually, they must have said something especially bad. She didn’t hear what it was, but Hermione let out a sharp, ‘Excuse me?’ sounding halfway between mortified and enraged.

Mel looked up, was about to ask what just happened, but Blaise spoke before she could, voice easy and casual as anything. ‘Oh, they weren’t talking about you. They meant me.’

‘Why do they hate you so much?’

‘At least muggleborns are human.’

‘Oh. Right.’

A smirk on her voice, tightened somewhat with half-hidden fury, Susan said, ‘I suppose it doesn’t help that pureblooded men from prominent families keep mysteriously dying in close proximity to your mother.’

‘Hey, if they can’t take the heat...’

Mel tried to choke back a snicker, and entirely failed. She felt faintly bad about that — when she thought about it, she really didn’t think she should find that funny.

And one of the sixth-years was ranting again, starting with telling the “beast” to have greater care what “it” said around “its betters”. And then some stuff about how Lilin were a blight on the world and magic itself, and if he had his way their filth would be purged, blah blah. Standard genocidal nonsense, really. When someone actually uses the words “cleanse” and “race” in the same sentence, with complete seriousness, you know they have absolutely no self-awareness whatsoever.

Mel was a bit unbalanced, stumbling a little, when Susan suddenly stopped in the middle of the hallway, their joined arms dragging Mel to a halt. She glanced over her shoulder to see Blaise had stopped too, arms crossed behind his back, facing the two idiots. From this angle, Mel couldn’t see his face at all, but by how calm his voice still was it was probably just that faint smirk that never seemed to entirely go away. ‘You know, that’s one thing I never understood about you supremacists. Maybe you can explain it to me. You see, if you believed in the importance of established ancestral history, the absolute primacy of magic as you claim to, than I should be your better.’

Yeah, the sixth-years were not happy about that. Both boys swelled up with rage, faces visibly pinking, one spitting out, ‘What the fuck are you talking about, creature?’

‘How about the fact that, since my family is a recent branch off the First Clan, I can trace my ancestry in a straight, unbroken line all the way back to—? Well, it translates to “She-to-whom-the-Twilight-Sings”. She lived roughly seven thousand years ago, by the way — my family is literally older than human civilisation. Or, just a thought, maybe...’

Mel felt it before she saw it. Coming out of nowhere, first lightly and then sharper, little slashes of tingling cold, crawling over her like thousands of icicles sliding against her skin. Dark magic, obviously. An instant later, just as the sensations turned from barely noticeable to distracting, flames burst into existence, burning blue and black and purple, tongues seeming to leak out of Blaise’s skin, from the tips of his fingers to roughly his elbows, his sleeves somehow entirely unaffected. The air around them cooling noticeably, Blaise took a few small steps toward the older boys — who were cringing and backing away, stumbling into the wall — arms turning a bit to bring his flame-shrouded hands up to his shoulders in an almost casual-looking shrug.

His voice still even and calm, he said, ‘...the fact that I don’t even need my wand to kill you
whenever I like? I would say magic likes me more than She does you, wouldn't you say?'

The boys just quivered in obvious terror against the wall for a long moment, before finally gathering themselves, fleeing away down the hall in a frantic scramble. Mel was entirely unable to hold back a snort of laughter.

Blaise was turned around enough, watching the two run away, that she could make out the amused smirk on his face. He brought his hands together in front of his chest, then swept them out to the side again, flames separating from his skin to form letters of black-purple fire floating in the air — CUNTS. 'Well, that was fun.'

'Not about to disagree,' Susan said, with the usual smirk on her voice, 'but could you maybe put that out?'

After a moment of confusion, Blaise blinked, glanced to the side with a quick grimace. Mel followed his gaze to find Lily cringing, half-hiding behind Morag, arms wrapped tightly about her middle and visibly shivering. A reaction to the dark magic on the air, maybe? Mel had read some people were especially sensitive to such things. The flames immediately vanished, Blaise muttering, 'Right, I forgot, sorry.'

'It's fine.' Lily didn't sound quite fine, her voice shaking rather a lot, but she was already recovering, the shivering coming to a sudden halt, standing straight again. 'It's not like you can help it.'

Well, yes, that was true. In their little practice sessions, Mel had learned Blaise's entire race was so strongly attuned to dark magic he had trouble even casting any light magic at all, was always at least a little uncomfortable being around any. Even Mel's patronus bothered him. It was just the way lilin were. He hadn't meant to make Lily uncomfortable, and obviously regretted his slip, so the whole thing could be passed off as an honest mistake.

But, mostly why she was thinking this, she wasn't entirely sure the same could be said about Blaise's mother. She did keep killing her lovers and husbands, which Mel knew now wasn't on purpose — she was simply losing control of the mental abilities she was born with in the heat of the moment, she'd never meant to do it. But, well. She had to know by now there was a significant risk of it happening again, and she kept doing it anyway. At some point, you had to consider exactly how culpable she was for their deaths.

But, on the other hand, all the humans she'd been with had known she was a lilin, and by her reputation had to have known she'd inadvertently killed lovers before. And yet they'd done it anyway. So, it was complicated.

'I must admit,' Hermione said, starting to walk again, 'I do always enjoy watching you mess with blood purists.'

'It's one of my favourite past times. Did I mention that time I set Theo Nott's robes on fire?'

'What?' Mel jumped at the shout from so close to her ear, Susan turning to glare at Blaise sharply enough her arm got jerked a little. 'You set Theo on fire and you didn't let me watch? What kind of friend are you?'

Mel caught Blaise shrug out of the corner of her eye. 'It was in the dorms, back in first year.'

'Still,' Susan grumbled, 'I would have paid to see that.'

'T'm not against taking requests.'
Mel was still trying to process this — it was obvious by how (sarcastically) annoyed Susan was she had some personal thing with Nott, but she hadn't known they knew each other. Eh, might as well ask. 'Did something happen with Nott?'

Susan turned to blink at her for a second, then shrugged a little. 'Nothing in particular, really. It's just, you know, all those awful society parties and shite, most of us kids from Noble Houses saw a bit of each other growing up. Theo and I never got along. There wasn't any one thing in particular that happened, we just don't like each other.'

'Ah, okay, then.'

'Why do you ask? I mean, if you wanted to set his robes on fire for me...'

Mel just rolled her eyes.

A couple minutes later, they were walking into the Great Hall. For some reason, on the weekends, lunch was the meal of the day there were usually the most people in attendance for. She'd never quite understood why. She got people deciding to sleep in past breakfast, sure, but she didn't know why so many people missed dinner. Not like it mattered, just weird. And they were slightly late, so virtually the entire school was in at the moment. Missing just a couple professors, most notably Dumbledore — he was often gone on business over the weekends — but most of them were there, and the house tables were almost completely full.

But then, Mel knew that would be the case. She'd decided to do this today for a reason.

Her blood already racing with the building anxiety making her head tingle and skin itch, Mel hardly even paided attention to their group splitting up to their respective tables, absently followed Hermione and Lily to their usual spot with the Gryffindors. While they sat down, Mel lingered a moment, biting at her lip, glancing around the room. Did she want to eat first? It was possible she wouldn't have a chance to after, depending on exactly what happened, she wasn't sure. But she wasn't sure if she could eat before. The way her stomach was clenching and roiling, she doubted she'd be able to get anything down. Probably best not to chance it. Wouldn't want to throw up, that would be bad.

Mel took a long breath, trying to force some pathetic semblance of calm over herself. And mostly failing.

And she started walking again, ignoring Hermione's immediate question, until she was looping around the front of the Gryffindor table, walking between students and staff, moving to the right place. She was trying to not think about what she was doing, not pay attention to all the people around her, but in an idle glance at the Slytherins she happened to notice Tracey and Daphne, and was temporarily distracted. Apparently, Tracey hadn't bothered fixing her hair — she looked a bit, ah, tousled. Sitting next to her, barely noticeable under the usual façade of calm she almost always maintained in public, Mel thought Daphne couldn't decide if she were more embarrassed or amused.

Mel had to delay for a moment, fighting off the smirk pulling at her lips, an expression completely inappropriate for what she was about to do. At least they'd managed to distract her from her own stupid brain, that was something.

Turning toward the staff table, with a somewhat awkward twitch, she dragged a bit of her own magic up into her throat. In her normal speaking voice, barely above a whisper, she said, 'Master Severus Snape.' She felt her magic mix with the sound, cast out into the air, washing over the Great Hall all around her as a gentle breeze. In bare moments, the entire Hall was still, Mel unconsciously tensing as she felt the eyes fall on her, doing her very best to ignore just how many people were watching her right now. Didn't want to think about that too hard.
This was a little trick she'd found in her mother's journals recently, had taught it to herself just because it'd seemed useful. Basically, by forcing power into her voice like this, whatever she said was carried along ambient magic into the ears of anyone within range — Lily hadn't been entirely sure what that range was, but since she didn't speak to literally everyone in the world whenever she did it there had to be one. Supposedly, it could even be used to talk at people she didn't share a language with, but Lily had never had the opportunity to test that. Since this could be used to be heard by people around no matter how noisy it was, and Mel always felt vaguely uncomfortable raising her voice, it had seemed a handy thing to learn. It didn't hurt that she'd known it wouldn't take very long — since she and her mother were both Parselmouths, which was already a form of vocally-mediated wandless magic, Lily had said they had a natural aptitude for this sort of thing. Gaunt could do it too, she knew, that compulsion he put in his voice sometimes was a variant, one he'd figured out on his own before he'd even known magic was a thing. It might be the first bit of wandless magic she'd ever learned, and currently the only thing she could do consistently, but it had only taken a couple hours to figure it out. She's just a cheater like that.

By the narrow-eyed look Snape was giving her, he probably remembered this was something her mother had been able to do, and probably knew just where she'd learned it from — she had mentioned them in that weird conversation in the Hospital Wing, he had even seen one of the Potions books, he would know Mel had Lily's journals. She'd admit, that very reminder was a significant part of why she'd decided to do it this way. Snape definitely did not like her father, and wasn't inclined to think well of her for that reason, but he had been close with her mother. She'd chosen this particular way of going about it to hint at that connection quite on purpose.

Hey, she may have chosen not to be sent to Slytherin, but that didn't mean she couldn't think like one when it suited her.

Once the Hall was fully quiet, once she was sure she'd temporarily shoved away her own nervousness, at least enough to keep any embarrassing quiver out of her voice, she started the very short speech she'd planned beforehand. Good thing she had planned it, because with how scrambly her head was being right now, how distracting the eyes on her were, she doubted she'd have been able to be coherent otherwise. 'I know there's nothing I've done to particularly impress you. I know you have no reason to personally care. But I'm so done, Master Snape. I'm done being useless, I'm done being vulnerable.'

Mel flinched at the desperation she heard slipping unbidden into her own voice. Whoops. She'd been trying so hard not to think about all the people watching her she hadn't had any attention left to stop herself from thinking about other things. Dursley things, mostly — with some of the ridiculous shite that had happened to her since first arriving in the magical world, it was a bit silly that was still the first thing her thoughts turned to. There were Voldemort-related things all wrapped up in this mess too, of course, but it was mostly older memories. She didn't even want to think about thinking about them, she shoved it off as best she could. That was over, she never had to go back, ever, ever, ever. She'd never be that helpless again, not if she could help it — and, since magic was a thing, she could help it.

Honestly, in moments like this, she could see the seductive path Tom Riddle had followed all the way to becoming a Dark Lord, and she understood it far too well. If the Dursleys had been just slightly less successful in breaking her, if she weren't mostly concerned with getting people to just leave her alone, she couldn't say what she could have done, what she could have become. It would have been all too easy for her to...

Well. Her mother had apparently scared scary people, and she'd even been mostly happy growing up, so far as Mel could tell. In that way, Mel was far more like Gaunt.
She still didn't know how to feel about that.

She went on once she thought she had control of herself again. 'And no, I don't like you much either, but I don't care. You know what I need to know.

'I don't have very much, Master Snape, not much I really care about. But I would give up whatever necessary, I would do anything — *anything* — to not have to feel like this again. To never have to be helpless again.

'Please, Master Snape.' Suffocating her own sense of revulsion at what she was about to do, ignoring the shocked whispers dragging across her skin like rusty nails, Mel sank down to her knees, right there in the middle of the Great Hall. She'd consciously worn trousers to make it as easy on herself as possible — she wore skirts virtually every day now, actually, and *shut up*, Vernon, there was *nothing wrong with that* — but there was nothing she could do about the anxious twitching in her fingers, the flash of warmth she could feel climbing her face. God, did they have to *whisper* like that? They knew she could hear them, right? 'I beg you, teach me. Please.'

And there was the main thrust of what she had decided to do. Snape might have been close with her mother, yes, but he *hated* her father. She knew that. Because of what his father had been like, a few mistaken preconceptions, and perhaps a bit of projecting his own pride, he'd made some assumptions about what Mel was like. She knew that. As much trouble as that might have made for her over the last few years, it had given her the perfect card to play. As Susan had put it, the perfect sacrifice to make.

See, Snape clearly thought James had been very proud, very...self-involved? All talking about how boastful he'd been, swaggering around the castle like he owned the place. Mel hadn't any opportunity to form her own opinion of what he was like, of course, but from what Lily had written about him, she'd perhaps been, ah, a bit too quick to assume Snape was entirely wrong. Snape had obviously thought she was much the same way. Not really sure how he could possibly have come to that conclusion, but that was neither here nor there. With added Boy-Who-Lived ridiculousness, people had always assumed she had a very high opinion of herself because of that. For some unfathomable reason, she really didn't understand.

So, Snape had always thought her greatest flaw was unreasoning pride, unjustified arrogance. That she gave a shite about her (undeserved) celebrity status, that she wanted all that nonsense, that she enjoyed the (fickle) adoration of all those silly gullible people who actually bought that absurd Boy-Who-Lived myth. So, the *obvious* thing to do was to publicly humiliate herself, to say where everyone could hear that she was weak and useless, and would do *anything* to not be so weak and useless anymore. Even if that meant submitting herself to someone she *really* didn't like — a known Death Eater, at that.

Because this would come out. The significance of what was happening here might not be obvious to people right now, but it wouldn't be long until everyone knew who she was. Only about a month and a half now. And Snape knew that — Sirius had told the Order she was intending to stay like this, so they could anticipate changes to their precautions to keep her from getting dead. It would be common knowledge very soon, and Snape knew it would be common knowledge. There was no telling how people would react to the idea of the Boy-Who-Lived in a Dark Arts apprenticeship under a former Death Eater, but it probably wouldn't make very many happy at all. Even if Snape rejected her, even just asking for one like this would be a significant blot on her reputation.

Which was very much on purpose. She may have chosen not to be sent to Slytherin, but that didn't mean she couldn't think like one when it suited her.

Huh. Now that she thought about it, what she'd just said there, that stuff about being useless, not
wanting to be helpless anymore, not having very much, that all would probably seem to people very strange things for the Boy-Who-Lived to say. Out of character, so to speak. She wondered if anyone would retrospectively realise the significance of that. Probably not — the collective intelligence of British mages hadn't exactly impressed her so far.

At least, she hoped this "sacrifice" would be significant. This was really the only thing she'd been able to think of. If it wasn't good enough for Snape, she doubted she'd be able to figure out something better. She'd probably have to give up and find someone else, and she didn't have a lot of feasible options. Snape was just so convenient...

For long moments, Snape just stared at her, the rest of the staff — all of whom knew who she really was, of course — glancing at each other with various shocked expression, the whispering of the students behind her gradually building in volume. And Snape just kept staring at her, blankly and steadily, absent any expression. Seemingly unmoving, Mel couldn't even see him breathing.

As the silenced stretched on, Mel couldn't help shooting a quick thankful glance at the empty Headmaster's chair — if he were here, Mel was certain Dumbledore would have intervened by now.

Finally, after what felt like minutes, Snape smoothly rose to his feet, then tilted his head, gesturing with his eyes to the side. It took a second for Mel to realise he was telling her to leave, to go into that same side room the newly-selected Champions had been sent into last year. Mel popped up to her feet, then faltered for a moment — she must have been kneeling there longer than she'd realised, she was a little stiff. Stupid stone floors, god damn. But she gathered herself, started walking off, as calmly as she could under the steady eyes of the chittering Hall.

She was temporarily confused, walking into the room, by just how unfamiliar it was. She knew she'd been in here before, she vaguely remembered it was filled with various magical portraits, but she didn't really recognise it. Granted, she'd been in a bit of a state at the time, but it was still sort of weird. Though, come to think of it, maybe talking here wouldn't be a great idea. It was commonly believed the portraits spied for the Headmaster, and it'd be just like him to interfere later...

Mel jumped when the door into the room was noisily slammed shut, whirled around on her heel. His robes snapping behind him in that silly overdramatic way he had, Snape took a few steps into the room, his wand appearing in the palm of his hand as if from nowhere. A quick circular flourish, and a wave of blackness was springing into existence, trickling across the floor, swirling along to cover the walls, spreading over the ceiling. Perfect blackness, so absolute that, once all the lights were covered, Mel couldn't see a fucking thing, nothing but blurry after-images superimposed on nothing. After a second, she noticed it wasn't just unnaturally dark, but unnaturally silent as well — the chattering from the Hall, the low groan of wind flowing over and through the castle, all of it was quite suddenly gone. It was a bit unnerving, actually.

She guessed that solved the problem of the portraits overhearing them.

After just a moment of silent darkness, the black was split with a burst of gentle, blue-green flames, somehow soft enough they didn't glare against the darkness, the discomfort Mel would expect seeing them absent. The fires expanded, slipped around Mel to form a circle nearly as large as she remembered the room to be, brightening as they went. The black surrounding them was entirely unaffected, of course, but they were clearly bright enough Snape was perfectly visible standing in front of her. The effect was weird, a little distracting, but she did her best to ignore it.

For yet another moment, Snape silently stared at her, pale face still characteristically blank. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and thin, barely above a whisper. 'At the risk of repeating myself, I do have to wonder why so many people must put so much time and effort into protecting you, when you seem determined to go out of your way to put yourself at risk no matter we do.'
That...huh? For a few seconds, Mel could only blink at him, her mouth working soundlessly. 'What are you talking about?'

Just for a moment, a furious grimace swept across Snape's face, before again being replaced with emptiness. 'One would think I'd learn, eventually. I wonder if the day shall ever come I cease overestimating your intelligence.' Mel opened her mouth to snap something back, she wasn't sure what exactly, but Snape continued, voice slightly raised to cut her off. 'For once in your patently absurd existence, stop and think things through for two seconds.

'Did it not occur to you, in whatever fevered daydream convinced you it was a good idea to seek an apprenticeship under me, that I am regularly in the presence of a Dark Lord? A Dark Lord who considers me one of his? The same Dark Lord who has attempted to kill you on more than one occasion? A Dark Lord who, should you become my apprentice, will inevitably hear about it? Did it not occur to you, idiot child, that the very first thing he might do on learning of this is order me to abduct you and bring you to him? No?'

Oh. Well, ah, that...hadn't occurred to her, actually. Which did sort of make her feel like an idiot in retrospect, that should have been obvious. Trying not to wince, to not show just how much she was beating herself up in her head right now, Mel muttered, 'Ah, no, I didn't think of that. I don't think you would, though.' Mel was pretty sure of that. Not out of any personal affection, of course, not any loyalty to the Light as Dumbledore might claim — the thought of Snape legitimately being anything that could be considered "Light" was laughable. But she felt confident in her understanding Snape wanted Voldemort dead, if for no other reason in revenge for killing her mother. Sort of weird sometimes, the things going on around her that made far more sense since she'd started reading those journals.

Mel thought she saw Snape's left eye twitch. Could have been her imagination, though. 'That is not the point. Think. Should the time come he gives me such an order, and I refuse, what do you think happens then?'

'Oh.' If Snape said no to Voldemort's face, knowing Voldemort, he'd probably be killed right then and there. But, knowing Snape, he'd probably agree and, once he was out of Voldemort's presence, go straight into hiding. It was possible Voldemort or his followers could track him down, in which case his life would most likely be forfeit — there was no leaving the Death Eaters — but even in the best-case scenario, Snape would have to tolerate living on the run for a while, and the Order would be down their only spy, making them significantly more vulnerable. Making Mel herself significantly more vulnerable, yes, but they'd be worse off in the war as well. No matter what, it wouldn't be good. And that should have been bloody obvious. 'Oh.'

'Yes. Oh.' Snape glared at her for long seconds, Mel doing her best not to fidget, not look too embarrassed with her own idiocy. Quite likely failing, but trying, anyway. Eventually, Snape let out a long sigh, rubbing at his forehead with one hand. 'Though, you are fortunate, I suppose. That would likely have been an accurate prediction of the consequences, but it is formulated on outdated information — not that you could possibly have known that. At this time, I don't believe you have anything to fear from the Dark Lord.'

'I... What?'

'I of course have no explicit knowledge of whatever he may be thinking privately. But, so far as I know, he is making no plans concerning you at this time. He hardly even mentions you. So long as you do not make a nuisance of yourself, I can't imagine he would go out of his way to harm you.'

'I...but... No, that didn't make any sense at all. He wasn't supposed to... Okay, a lot of Mel's vague planning she'd been doing for the next couple years had been working on the assumption she'd have
to deal with Voldemort at some point. She was certain, everyone was certain, that he would come after her eventually. That he would just forget about her and move on hadn't even been one of the possibilities. 'But what about the prophecy?'

For a couple seconds, Snape just stared at her. His face was as completely blank as usual, so it was impossible to tell, but Mel had the impression he was surprised. 'You know, of course. I don't know what to tell you about that. You might have been told there are rumours the Dark Lord is even now seeking the full prophecy.' She nodded; Sirius had mentioned that in one of their mirror calls. 'However, if that were so, one would assume he would be planning some way to get at the only recording in the Department of Mysteries. Reviewing the defences in the Ministry, bribing officials if necessary, drafting allies for the actual operation. He is doing none of these things. Ergo...'

That... But...

Mel had absolutely no idea how to react to that.

After a few moments to shove off her confusion — best to think about that later, no use getting distracted about it now — she focused on Snape again. 'All right, then. So...' 

She didn't really know what to say here, and would probably end up sounding like an idiot, so took the opportunity of one of Snape's eyebrows slightly raising to cut off. 'So. I must admit, I don't understand why you are asking me, of all people. It is not as though your options are limited — your name would go a long way with most anyone. I can't imagine what pretty fantasy you've been deluding yourself with but, my history with your mother notwithstanding, I am not inclined to be...'

Snape trailed off, the slightest hints of hesitation pulling at his face, clearly not sure what word he wanted.

Mel got what he was saying anyway. 'Oh, I don't expect you to be nice to me.' She added, in a somewhat lower mutter, 'I'm honestly not even sure you're capable of it.' Snape didn't say anything to that, but he did give her an odd look, couldn't even say what kind of look exactly, which she couldn't help shrugging at. 'This might not have ever occurred to you to notice before, Professor, but adults generally aren't very nice to me. A lot of people, really. That doesn't bother me, it's just normal. You're a bastard, yes, but I honestly think I'd be a bit creeped out if you stopped being a bastard.' She winced. Ah, maybe she shouldn't have said it exactly like that, er... 'I mean, if I needed the person teaching me shite to be all sweet and nurturing—' The note of derisive sarcasm she noticed on her own voice had been entirely unconscious. '—I wouldn't have asked Dora to teach me duelling, okay. It doesn't bother me.'

A sneer of some kind was visible on Snape's lips for a bare instant before disappearing again — probably at the mention of Dora, but his reaction hadn't lasted long enough for Mel to figure it out. And he just kept silently watching her again. At this point, she was starting to think she'd prefer it if he were yelling at her, the way he just kept staring at her was slightly creepy. Finally, 'Whatever your personal opinion on the matter may be, I can't imagine your father would be happy with the idea of you becoming my apprentice.'

She was well aware she was giving him what was probably an odd-looking frown, but she really couldn't help it. Why in hell should that matter? 'Well, I suppose it's a good thing I don't exactly need his permission, then.' She couldn't exactly ask him for his opinion, what with him being, you know, dead and all. What a silly thing to say...

That, that one lasted long enough for Mel to pick out exactly what it was: Snape was smirking. Definitely smirking. Actually, he seemed almost...smug? It was very weird. He stared at her for another short moment. Then his wand was in his hand again, and with a single, sharp downward jab, the flames disappeared, the blackness dispersing, the features of the room reappearing around them.
'You will come to my office after classes on Tuesday. I will have come to a decision by then.'

Oh. So, this wasn't a yes, then. Still, it was a maybe, which was better than she'd had before. All right. 'Yes, sir.'

And then he was gone, disappearing out the door with another ridiculous flutter of his robes.

Mel didn't follow for long moments, taking a few long breaths to calm herself again. If she were being completely honest with herself, she mostly needed it just to back in the Great Hall again, after what had happened — really, that conversation hadn't been that bad at all. She knew she would be stared at, and she hated being stared at, and she knew people would be asking her questions, and she really didn't want to deal with it. She wished she could just—

Actually, you know what? 'Hey, Dobby?'

After barely a second, with the familiar odd popping noise, the over-excitable house-elf had again appeared right in front of her. She couldn't help a little smirk when she saw he was still wearing a sock over one of his ears. Dobby was so silly, honestly. 'Can Dobby be helping Miss?' he said, his voice characteristically squeaky and energetic.

'Still working on the grammar, huh?'

Dobby slumped somewhat, giving her a sheepish little shrug.

Yeah, she still found this far too amusing. Definitely, definitely going to hell. 'Could you pop me down to the kitchens? I don't feel like even walking through the Great Hall right now.' It was perhaps a bit silly that she was calling a house-elf for something she could easily do on her own — it was just a short walk, would only take a couple minutes — but, well, there was no real reason not to use a readily available resource. No matter how much Hermione would glare at her for it.

By the wide grin on Dobby’s face, he obviously wasn't even as mildly ambivalent about this as she was. In an instant he'd skipped over to her, grabbed her by the wrist, and they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

[la Colombièr] — For anyone wondering, this just means "the dovecote". They do think they're hilarious.

[a few people of sufficiently high offices in the Ministry ... the Weasleys being an example] — Due to present cultural attitudes, Arthur's position may not be a very glamorous one, and it may not pay very much, but on paper he's still a Deputy Director of the DLE.

[ten Outstandings] — In case anyone was wondering, I was intending Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Care, Charms, Defence, Herbology, History, Potions, and Transfiguration. Since this is Lily, she could have done Potions in her sleep, and the practical for Charms wandlessly. She hadn't expected Os in Herbology, History, or Transfiguration though.

Varṣāḥ kāṅkṣāṁi — Sanskrit. Pronounced roughly "ver-shah kang-kshuh-mee" (IPA: /ʋəɽ.ʂɑː.kɑːŋ.kʃə.mi/), intended to be "I await the rain". Since I'm hardly an expert
Bluuuhhh. Leave me alone, insomnia, go away...

Yeah, I think you might be able to guess what my opinion of Remus/Tonks is like. It bothers me how many people I've read talking about how oh it's so great, squee, Remus deserves to be happy, seemingly without even considering it from Tonks's side for two seconds, without considering it rationally enough to realise anyone should deserve far better than that self-involved, cowardly little shit. The added stupidity of Remus thinking he's "too dangerous" for Tonks even though she's a goddamn Auror didn't originally occur to me, borrowed from Silently Watches — that's in Black Princess Ascendant, I think — but I've definitely mentioned those fics already.

Yeah, I really don't like the canon pairings. Pretty sure this has been mentioned before.

Here's to hoping I can get back on schedule. Sleep, what is...
~Wings
It happened with very little warning at all.

They were alone in their rooms Tom had commandeered from Lucius. The sitting room, Tom in his usual armchair with yet another modern volume on Mind Healing, Bella laid out across the couch a short distance away with one of those racy novels she never admitted to anyone else she actually read. It must have been quiet for hours, which was somewhat unusual all by itself. Normally, Tom could hardly go this long without some tiresome interruption from one proud, pureblooded idiot or another, but they had apparently developed some modicum of patience. Or had just been cursed enough times by now they'd simply learned not to annoy him.

At one point he heard Bella get up, the slight swish of cloth as she walked. A moment later, by the continuing shuffling noises, the sharp spark of her mind and magic slipping back and forth, he realised she was pacing. Odd. He glanced up from his book to find her a short distance away, walking in a tight little circuit, movements noticeably jerking. One hand was lifted, rubbing absently at her chest just inside of her shoulder. Tom knew she’d been hit with a dark curse there, it’d been bothering her intermittently since long before he’d met her — she’d said from her father, but she’d been young enough she hadn't been able to recall exactly which curse or why he’d done it. The air around her was already shivering and tingling with building power, eyes set in an expression of hard rage growing increasingly wild.

Tom knew what was happening then. Which gave him only seconds to prepare himself.

'I know what they're doing,' Bella hissed, her voice low and thick. 'They think they're being careful, they think I don't hear them whispering, but I do. I always know.'

After a moment of gritting his teeth, Tom forced his mouth open. It was best to give her something real to focus on, after all. 'What are you talking about, Bella?' He had his suspicions, of course, and he could just slip into her mind and try to make sense of it himself. But he preferred to use legilimency as sparingly as possible — things got rather boring very quickly if he knew everything everyone was thinking all the time, nothing ever surprised him. And, anyway, looking into Bella's mind these days was always...unpleasant.

Suddenly much louder, her voice just under a harsh scream, she snarled, 'They are traitors, my Lord! They are plotting against you, I know it!'

For a short moment, Tom could only blink in confusion. My Lord? What? In the midst of whatever episode was going on in there, she was still aware they were in private, right?

His hesitation was long enough Bella had time to pull her wand, turned facing the door out into the rest of the manor. 'Ooh, let me take care of them.' The words slipped over her tongue suddenly all smooth and honeyed, Bella practically vibrating in place with excitement and anticipation. 'I'll show them, I'll show them what happens to those who turn their backs on our Dark Lord, I'll show them the power that belongs to His most loyal, I'll—'

'Bella.' By now he was already on his feet, approaching her shuddering figure, magic furiously snapping around her, turning the air unnaturally sharp and cold. Approaching her as though she were volatile, unstable, an enchantment so unbalanced he could set it into collapse with the smallest touch,
a potion so sensitive the cauldron could erupt at the slightest jolt. He knew, even as the simile occurred to him, it was not entirely inaccurate.

So, of course, this was precisely when they just had to be interrupted.

He felt the tingling at the proximity wards he'd set over this wing of the manor, and he was entirely helpless to control his immediate reaction. He was so done with these idiot nobles and their shite, he was already quite nearly certain they'd outlived their usefulness, all that mattered to him at the moment was Bella, and she wasn't getting better, and he didn't know what to do about it, it was unbelievably frustrating, and he was so fucking tired of being worried all the time, and he was starting to get just plain exhausted, he could not even attempt to stop, rising from deep in the back of his own mind, the sudden overwhelming tide of soul-scouring fury. He was aware, distantly, of the sharply freezing air thick and rumbling as though with thunder, the moisture in the air condensing radially out from his feet, as though tines of a single massive snowflake, aware it was happening but paying it no mind. His thoughts were instead filled with blood and screaming and death, tearing apart these entitled imbeciles who had been greedy and gullible enough to bind themselves to him, taking a last payment of their lives in exchange for all the annoyances they've caused him, watching the horror and confusion in their eyes as he—

And he was abruptly snapped out of it when he saw Bella was on her knees at his feet, shivering with a different kind of incipient pleasure, her eyes entirely mad with masochistic glee. And she started speaking, but Tom didn't have to hear it to know what she was thinking. In his own little episode he'd had there, his mind had come unbound, he was deep within hers already, he knew what she was thinking, knew she was imagining the agony he could put her in if he so chose, thinking to herself he could do whatever he wanted, she was entirely his to do with as he pleased, she had no greater purpose than—

He barely even had to think it. His magic reacted to his need for her to stop before he'd even told it to, falling upon her, locking her in place, sending her straight into a deep sleep. He didn't have to open his eyes to know his magic was still holding her upright, but she was far under already, the uncontrollable madness quieted. At least for now.

Tom thought he might be sick.

Then there was a knock on the door, soft and uncharacteristically hesitant. The fury again slammed up into his throat, the sublimation of the moisture back into the air sharply reversing, ice again spreading across the carpet. 'What?'

A short pause. Then, quiet and careful, slightly muffled by the closed door between them, 'I did not wish to disturb you, my Lord. I can come back later.'

Tom let out a sharp sigh, lifting both hands to rub at his face. Of course, it had to be Severus. He knew his former apprentice well, he wouldn't have come at all if it weren't important. He would have to deal with whatever it was sooner or later, no point in delaying it. But, he couldn't exactly meet Severus as unbalanced as he was now — not only had he long ago made the habit of showing as little emotion as possible, but with how wary Severus had been of him lately seeing him this angry would just make him annoyingly nervous. So, he resorted to a measure that, since his early years at Hogwarts, he'd only had to resort to sparingly.

He cast a calming charm on himself.

The first one barely made a dent in his honestly half-mad rage, so he tried again, this time overpowering the thing by quite a bit. And the so-cold-it-burned fury was abruptly gone, his mind returning to smooth placidity, the relief coming so sudden he sagged, his suddenly shaky knees quite
nearly dropping him to the floor. He took a moment just to breathe, riding out the moment of emotional whiplash, before turning back to Bella. A thought dispelled the charms holding her in place, and he levitated her back to the couch, gently setting her down on her back. Following a quick couple charms to bring the temperature of the room back to normal, he was just about to yank the door open with a twitch of power when he belatedly remembered to check if they were both presentable. Right, okay.

Then Severus was walking into the room, moving slow and cautious, eyes steady on him. If Tom had to guess, the young man had felt the storm of dark magic in here a moment ago, so his subtle unease was not at all unreasonable. When he finally noticed Bella, his face tightened somewhat, Tom could quite nearly feel Severus piecing what had happened together even with his legilimency bundled away again. 'She had another episode, didn't she.' It wasn't a question.

Tom just let a short sigh. That should be answer enough.

For long seconds, Severus just stared at Bella, eyes occasionally darting to Tom. There was the oddest sense of hesitation about him, of doubt, as the silence went on and on, and Tom was starting to get very distractingly curious. Before he had to ask — Severus had always been good about not making him wait too long — the young man said, his voice low and quiet, 'I've been working on a potion.'

Tom ruthlessly suppressed the sudden flash of hope threatening to overtake him. No, there was no cause for that. There had been no promise on Severus's voice, no confidence, hedging even with such a simple statement. 'Yes?'

'It would not be a cure, you understand. And it is an invention of my own I've been working on, and since I do not have access to people to test it on, I cannot guarantee its effectiveness.'

Despite himself, Tom couldn't help smiling a little. He couldn't even say exactly why. Severus had always just amused him. 'Are you getting to the point any time soon, Severus?'

Severus winced, only slightly, barely noticeable. 'You are aware of the existence of muggle mood stabilisers, correct?' He waited for Tom's nod to continue. 'Well, I was inspired by the idea to consider, if the damage done to her mind cannot itself be healed, perhaps it would be possible to circumvent it. To prevent her worse episodes from ever occurring, essentially locking her in a comparatively healthy mental state.' He shrugged. 'I haven't been able to test it, of course, but the theory seems sound.'

For long moments, Tom could only frown down at Bella, silent in sleep. That...was rather clever, actually. In fact, Tom thought he might feel somewhat stupid for not thinking of it himself. There were potential problems, of course. It would, obviously, be a potion Bella would have to take regularly, quite possibly for the rest of her life. Or until he found a more permanent cure, anyway. But that was manageable, not an insurmountable problem. But, well, he might not be quite as informed when it came to the discrete functions of the human body — he'd never had much interest in Healing — but even he could guess anything that could do what Severus was aiming for would have unintended consequences as well. 'That could work. I presume there would be side-effects.'

He wasn't looking, but he felt Severus's nod anyway. 'Almost certainly, yes. Considering the mechanism of action, I would think lethargy and anhedonia. However, without being able to test it, I cannot say for sure what they would be, nor how severe.'

Severus was being very cautious not to promise anything, wasn't he? It didn't particularly matter, though. Tom had no ideas of his own so far, this was the best bet he'd yet found. It would have to do. 'Make the potion.'
'I can have it later in the week. She'll need to take it daily.'

'All right.' Tom closed his eyes, paused to breathe for a moment, yanking his thoughts away from their previous course. The calming charm had taken care of the anger, yes, but he still found it a bit difficult to focus on anything other than Bella, on the frustratingly hopeless situation they'd been stuck in for months now. Though, if he were being honest with himself, that was no different from normal these days. Letting a breath through his teeth, trying not to look externally exasperated with himself, Tom headed back for his chair, half-buried as it was in a snow of leather and parchment. 'I'll assume you had some reason other than my problems to come visit me.'

After the slightest hesitation, flickering wary glances between Tom and Bella, Severus finally walked over to the chair across from him. He didn't relax, though — the tension in his limbs, in his face, was very, very subtle, subtle enough Tom doubted someone any less familiar with him than he was would notice. 'There was something I wished to talk with you about, yes. It's...' Severus hesitated a moment, eyes going slightly unfocused. '...sensitive.'

Being nervous and circumspect again. Severus truly was having trouble with their new dance these days. Somewhat disappointing, he must admit. 'Come out and say it, Severus. Unless you wish to make me wait forever.'

Severus didn't entirely manage to hide his wince. Not that that was surprising, really — it was generally unwise to make Tom impatient. 'I need to know...' Hesitating again. This was really not like Severus at all. Tom was tempted to slip into his head, just out of curiosity, but he'd taught him well enough he doubted he'd catch much anyway. 'Forgive me if this seems overly impertinent, but...what do you plan to do?'

For a second, Tom just stared at him. Not what he'd expected to be asked. 'Do you mean in general, or are you asking after something specific?'

'Both, I suppose.' While he left yet another awkward pause, Severus started ringing his hands, then a few seconds later seemed to realise he was doing it, abruptly stopping himself, his hands coming to rest on his knees. 'It has been nearly five months since your resurrection, nearly three since the raid on Azkaban. But, so far as I can see, you have not been making any preparations for any further... I need to know. I need to know.'

Tom considered how to answer for a second. But only for a second. He didn't think easing Severus's mind would cost him anything. It was possible he would run off and tell the High Enchanter, yes, but, if Tom were a betting man, he'd wager Albus would assume Tom was lying. And besides, he doubted how Albus knowing his plans, or lack thereof, could cost him anything anyway. It made no difference. 'You know the particulars of the Väinö's Gambit I was attempting, of course.'

Somewhat to his confusion, Severus actually looked surprised by that. It was slight, but it was there, visible for a couple seconds before he recovered. That was...odd. Had Severus somehow convinced himself...what? That that had been an act? That his true intentions had changed somehow? He didn't understand. Severus had known the plan from the beginning, he didn't understand how he could have come to such doubt.

But that wasn't important right now. Tom shook the thought off, continued on. 'Suffice to say, in the fourteen years I was incapacitated, the world changed. The pieces on the board have moved significantly. It would be foolish to continue to utilise an outdated strategy. I am not a fool.' Tom shrugged. 'I'm certain I will be retiring the whole Lord Voldemort persona in the near future. It is possible I will try to squeeze a last few embarrassments to the Ministry out of it, but it no longer serves my purposes. Does that answer your question?'
It took long seconds for Severus to answer. He was staring back at Tom, his eyes slightly narrowed. Wavering, uncertain, as though he were trying to decide if he could take Tom at his word or no. He didn't see any point in trying to convince him. It'd be clear eventually, one way or the other. 'Partially, yes.' Severus took in and out a long breath, clearly centring himself. 'I am considering taking an apprentice.'

Tom raised an eyebrow. Interesting. He had always encouraged his students to themselves spread their knowledge, but Severus was one of the ones who'd never shown much interest in it. Negative interest, honestly. He was well aware how much Severus despised yet being forced to teach — and Albus had the nerve to think Tom cruel!

He often was, of course, but at least he could admit it to himself. Though, the thought of his own cruelty also didn't particularly bother him, he supposed that could have something to do with it.

Giving his old apprentice his best attempt at a teasing smile, Tom said, 'They must be impressive, to convince you to spend a second longer than necessary out of that little lab of yours.'

Severus gave an easy shrug, as though acknowledging the point. 'I believe you've heard of her. Melantha Black.'

The name came to him after only a second. 'Ah, yes, the young woman who defeated Arianna Yaxley. One of Lord Black's adoptees, I believe.'

'The same.' Severus hesitated a moment again. Very curious. 'I have to ask, Master, but... What are your intentions toward Harry Potter?'

Tom suppressed a frown of confusion — which was far easier than usual, with his calming charm still affecting him. What did that have to do with anything? 'Well, I suppose I don't have intentions toward Harry Potter.' Severus gave him a doubtful look at that, so Tom considered a moment, searching for the right words. Since Severus was at least partially in the loop, it wasn't too difficult. 'I hadn't seen cause to inform you before, but back in August I slipped into the Department of Mysteries, and listened to the full prophecy.' Severus's eyes widened with shock, but Tom simply noted that and moved on. 'I immediately came to the conclusion that it has already been fulfilled. Since I also have no reason to continue the Voldemort scheme, so wouldn't need to maintain some enmity as would suit that role, I see no reason why I should care about Harry Potter one way or the other. The ties of fate which had bound us have now dissolved, and he was fortunate enough to come out the other side with his life. So long as he does not make a nuisance of himself, I see no reason why I should feel the need to go out of my way to change that.' There. He thought that was as honest as he could possibly be.

Lately, he had to wonder if Severus realised the significance of that. There were very few people he would permit the presumption that they were entitled to know his thoughts, very few he would bother attempting to be honest with. He doubted it, though. Severus was too consumed with his own ambivalent emotions — affection and gratitude for an old master on one hand, on the other rage and hatred for the one who had murdered his sister in all but blood. In his estimation, their relationship had changed. It probably didn't even occur to the young man that, so far as Tom was concerned, and irrespective of his own feelings on the matter, Severus had never stopped being his apprentice.

Not that he was surprised, really. He was used to watching other people's emotions obscure their understanding of a situation. Misjudging the intentions of others, reading into their actions motives and desires that didn't exist. It could be annoying sometimes, but he guessed that was the burden of being the only sociopath in the room.

Severus seemed to consider that for long moments, gone very still in thought that way he had. And
Tom sat there, waiting and watching, trying not to become too impatient. It was obvious something was going on here, something he hadn't been aware of, and Severus was considering whether or not it was safe to tell him. And Tom liked knowing things, he had ever since he was a very young child, so he could admit, at least in his own head, to some building impatience. As the seconds ticked by, the urge to simply break into Severus's head and tear the knowledge out of him was growing gradually more powerful, but he tamped it down as thoroughly as he could — it was strangely easy, in fact, that calming charm must still be working.

Finally, Severus opened his mouth, hesitating for a last moment before getting the words out. 'Harry Potter no longer exists. She is now Melantha Black.'

Just with those few words, several little things he'd noticed aligned, curious observations and deductions snapping into agreement. For long seconds, Tom could only stare, slowly blinking. Then, he said the only word he could think of to say, the only thing that occurred to him that perfectly applied to the situation. 'Fascinating.'

Severus gave him an oddly unobscured look of shock at that. Apparently, he didn't know what to think of that being Tom's only reaction. Probably surprised Tom wasn't angry with him for lying about his knowledge of Potter's whereabouts but, of course, that wasn't news — Tom had already known Severus was holding back. And, even when he'd first found out, he'd just been slightly exasperated. Other people and their silly emotions...

Just to fill the silence with something, Tom said, 'I suppose he underwent the ritual over the summer.' Fascinating stuff, blood alchemy. He'd twice witnessed that exact ritual performed, in fact, during his apprenticeship under Euše, who happened to be one of the local authorities on blood magic in her homeland. And considering just where she happened to live, that was quite a statement.

'Ah, she did not, in fact. It was instinctual. She simply went to sleep one night, woke up a couple days later, and was changed.'

Oh. Yes, he had heard that could happen. It did not happen very often, of course. The power required was only available to the greatest of mages — there was a reason the equivalent ritual had to be spread over roughly a week — and could only be motivated by overwhelming desperation brought by inescapable suffering. Both prerequisites did not often present simultaneously in the same individual.

Though, even that was a...very peculiar thought. He didn't think Severus was lying about it having been accidental magic, but he wasn't entirely sure how to process the idea. That the Boy-Who-Lived had been abandoned to suffer this terribly for this long... It didn't make sense. He was sure Albus, at the very least, would have ensured his well-being. He wouldn't have wanted the most visible of his pawns to be too mentally damaged. But just that this had happened at all meant Potter had been very near breaking. He could not understand why Albus would permit the Boy-Who-Lived to break.

After a moment of thought, he wasn't sure why he was so surprised. Albus didn't have the best record with at-risk children after all — just look at the three people in the room right this very moment, all the evidence necessary to doubt his judgement. It wasn't impossible he would make the exact same mistakes all over again. Disappointing, but not that surprising.

Tom was making some assumptions about what Potter's life had been like, yes, he didn't know much at all. But obviously there had been something wrong if his mental health had been able to deteriorate to this point without intervention. He doubted Albus would have made the exact kind of mistakes he had made with the three of them — at the least, he should have been paying enough attention to his precious Boy-Who-Lived to know if he were truly mistreated — but he was certain mistakes of some kind had been made. Certain enough he was, once again, disappointed with Albus Dumbledore.
Pretensions of fairness and compassion only carried one so far, it seemed.

Not that he understood this particular issue much at all, of course. He would confess to never having entirely grasped the concept of gender in the first place. He remembered growing up not really understanding why it was expected boys and girls would be different. There were physical differences, yes, but he hadn't understood how the physical differences could reasonably be expected to naturally lend to very consistent differences in behaviour and temperament, from things as frivolous as what they wore to as all-reaching as their general priorities in life. It had always been unfathomable to him.

Of course, now he understood that was mostly shite — such gendered expectations were inventions of whatever culture someone happened to be in. Not that Euše's explanations of why exactly someone might need the ritual had ever made sense to him. He had adopted the trappings and mannerisms of masculinity, yes, because it was what had been expected of him. If he'd been born physically female, he'd have done the same, but with the opposite gender. It honestly didn't matter to him, and he had trouble truly understanding that it might to anyone else.

In fact, he'd once seriously considered if Britain shouldn't be threatened with a Dark Lady instead of a Dark Lord, if the slightly differing aesthetics wouldn't better suit his purposes. But he'd determined before long British mages immediately associated the title with the Dark Lady Cromwell, who had been a muggleborn and quite possibly the greatest enemy the Noble Houses had ever had — the association was inconvenient, so he'd discarded the idea.

He wouldn't say he thought of himself as a man, exactly. Actually, he often didn't even think of himself as truly human, at least not in the way everyone else was, but not the point. He just thought of himself as, well, himself. It was baffling to him how few other people thought the same. He knew they didn't, he knew that to other people whether they were a man or a woman or whatever was a critically important part of their own self-concept, but he didn't understand it, not really.

Ordinary people were very confusing sometimes.

It wasn't until he'd ran that tangent through to the end that something else occurred to him. *Both must fade at the Will of the Other...*

Tom had been wrong. He'd interpreted the prophecy somewhat incorrectly. It hadn't quite been fulfilled.

From a certain point of view, it still wasn't, but it would be soon. He would be retiring Lord Voldemort sometime in the next year, but he couldn't predict exactly when. He still wanted to do something about Azkaban, he hadn't yet settled on the details, he'd have to see how it worked out. Harry Potter didn't even exist anymore. Both the "Dark Lord" and the "One", as the prophecy referred to them, had already or would soon fade away, but they would both yet live. Not as they had been, true, but that was exactly what the prophecy said, wasn't it? That they would "fade", but not die. It was clear to him now that Harry Potter being replaced by Melantha Black was exactly what the prophecy had meant, on that end.

Fascinating. Just fascinating.

'Well.' Tom forcefully yanked himself back to the present moment, turning again to meet Severus's eyes. He noticed the young man was slightly nervous, but hiding it rather well, only the slightest tension in his face and shoulders giving him away. 'I understand why you felt the need to confirm my intentions regarding young Miss Black.' He couldn't hold in a slight smirk saying the name. 'But I assure you, Severus, I bear no particular ill will for the girl. So long as she stays out of my way, I have no reason to harm her.
'In fact,' he said, after another short second of thought, 'I believe I approve. It is clear the girl has not gotten the guidance mages of our power and inclinations require, not to mention how much I'm sure our dear friend the High Enchanter would hate the thought of you teaching her. And it might do you good as well.' He nodded. 'Yes, I quite like this idea. Make her your apprentice if you will, and guide her well. I will not interfere.'

His smirk only grew wider at the sense of confusion and surprise peeking around the mask his former apprentice had worked so hard to attain. Severus had quite clearly not anticipated his easy reaction.

Silly boy. He'd think he didn't know him at all.

Draco walked through the Common Room, keeping his eyes forward and posture easy, pretending not to notice how eyes followed him, how conversations stilled as he neared, quieter whispers rising in his wake. He tried to not show any sign he noticed, but he was pretty sure he failed, the traces of a derisive sneer twitching at his face.

They weren't being very subtle at all. And they thought themselves Slytherin.

He'd fully expected this to happen, of course, he'd been prepared. He was hardly the only child of a Death Eater in Slytherin. Even before Hogwarts, most of the other children he'd known had either had a parent in service to the Dark Lord, or some other close relative. All of them knew his father's protestations of coercion were entirely false, and the vast majority even knew his father was among the Dark Lord's inner council, one of his most trusted. This wasn't a secret — or, at the least, not a very well-kept one. They'd thought they knew exactly how he'd react when the Dark Lord finally returned, it hadn't been a question.

Draco had managed to hide his shifting loyalties very well, after all. There were advantages to having Narcissa Black for a mother, and Severus Snape for a noðaþir. Not that he would have likely ever realised that, had that whole Chamber of Secrets fiasco not tarnished his ridiculously idealised image of his father somewhat, giving Mother enough of an opportunity to get to him.

He would never admit this out loud, but it was rather embarrassing, in retrospect, just how thoroughly he'd allowed his father to brainwash him.

But, of course, he couldn't get through the Common Room without being entirely unaffected. That would be too easy. Only a few metres from the door toward Sev's after-hours office, in a collection of chairs and couches half-illuminated by flickering light from the nearby hearth, just happened to be sitting a group of people he knew very well. Ris and Ceinwen, naturally, with Graham and Pansy and Millicent and Vince and Greg and Theo bloody Nott. Theo couldn't resist turning a smug smirk on Draco as he walked by, a mocking, self-satisfied light in his eyes, a cruel tilt to his lips.

Draco's fingers twitched, barely holding back the impulse to go for his wand. It hadn't been that long ago, still, when the news had gotten out that Mother had fled to seek shelter with the Blacks, the implication she'd abandoned the Dark Lord obvious. He hadn't seen fit to inform his fellow Slytherins, especially the other children of Death Eaters, of his opinion on the matter ahead of time. They'd expected him to agree with them. When they'd called Mother a blood-traitor, cast an unceasing rain of aspersions, to his face, on her intelligence, on her sanity, on every aspect of her moral and personal character they could think of. And Theo bloody Nott, the bastard, had expected they would be on the same page when he'd said, to his face, that the pathetic excuse of a noblewoman who Draco had the great misfortune to share blood with was a muggle-loving whore who should have had the sense to remain in her proper place under—
Draco could guess well enough where that sentence had been going, but Theo hadn't had the opportunity to finish it. Draco's curse had replaced words with screaming before he could.

And Theo had hardly spoken a word to him since, true, but he still gave him looks. He didn't have to say a thing for Draco to know what he was thinking. It was written all over his face. And for a moment, just for a moment, Draco wanted nothing more than to draw his wand, summon magic cold and vicious, and wipe that self-righteous smirk out of existence.

Instead, he took a deep breath, shoved the rage as solidly as he could toward the back of his thoughts, and continued walking.

He came to the solid black door, the wood almost invisible against the shining stone of the wall, knocked twice before going for the handle. He slipped his head partway in, took an instant to force cold distance into his voice. It was possible someone could be listening, after all. 'You wanted to see me, Professor Snape?'

Voice equally frigid, Sev said, 'Yes, Mister Malfoy, come in.' Draco stepped through the thin gap, letting the door click shut behind him. An instant later, he felt the wards surrounding the office snap closed, wreathing them in a humming shroud of isolating magic. The knowledge that they were safe, unobserved, no one could possibly get through wards Sev had set specifically to keep what was private private, brought a subtle release in his shoulders of tension he hadn't been entirely aware had been there.

Sev's office was, unsurprisingly, very utilitarian. Which had struck Draco as slightly odd, at first. He'd grown up among the most wealthy of Noble Houses, most given to shameless displays of vanity and extravagance, it was obvious in everything they had. They'd always treated Sev as an equal — for the most part, anyway — so he'd always assumed his personal space would be much the same. He'd been a bit shocked the first time he'd been in this office. Nothing overly decrepit, of course, just far short of lavish. The furniture was usable, tables and couches and chairs without nick or tear, but they were perfectly ordinary, made of simple wood and cloth with only the barest of enchantments. The rug covering much of the floor was, in fact, not charmed at all, very slight tracks visible from thousands of steps over the years. The hearth was simple, blocky granite, the bookshelves covering nearly every surface of the walls exceptional only in the wards crackling just under the surface. Where there were trinkets strewn about, and there weren't many, they were all simple things. Gifts from former students, for the most part, either little enchanted baubles or bottles of potions frozen in suspension, nothing that exceptionally valuable. It was a perfectly ordinary office, one he could see belonging to any other, ordinary man.

As long as he didn't read the titles displayed on the shelves too closely, anyway.

Sev was sitting behind his desk right now, a parchment letter held in his hands. Without even glancing up, he nodded in the general direction of the seats before the hearth. 'Take a seat, Draco. I'll just be a moment.'

He relaxed somewhat further at Sev using his name, how the hard chill on his voice had vanished, instead the level emptiness he maintained more often than not. It always subtly bothered him when Sev talked to him like any other student, and hearing it in his cold, angry voice was most unpleasant. But, well, Sev couldn't be too friendly with him — Draco was a traitor, after all. They couldn't have it getting back to Sev's "friends".

Smirking to himself a little at a ploy well played, Draco drifted over to one of the comfortably familiar armchairs, luxuriating in the warmth of the fire as he waited.

After some minutes, he wasn't sure how long exactly, Sev was walking into his view, pausing just in
front of his chair. It took a moment for Draco to spot the glass in his nearer hand, partially filled with a liquid a dark reddish-amber.

Forcing himself not to wince, Draco accepted the glass, then let himself sink back further into his chair. So, this was going to be one of those conversations. Sev only ever gave him rum when it was going to be one of those conversations.

For long seconds, Sev didn't say anything, standing in front of the hearth, blankly staring down at the fire. Not that this was unusual. Draco was well aware Sev enjoyed those conversations just as little as he did, only bothering out of some sense of obligation. Hence the rum. He could admit to maybe appreciating that, that Sev was willing to make himself dreadfully uncomfortable to get Draco what he needed, but only when he was thinking about it afterward, removed from the actual situation. In the moment, it was only ever, well, dreadfully uncomfortable.

Finally, after some moments filled only with the gentle crackling flames and the slow sipping of rum — which Draco had to admit he did like, the stuff Sev had always very sweet and flavourful, but it was possible he'd had his opinion influenced by now — Sev took in a short breath, the kind Draco recognised meant he was about to speak. Voice level and empty, but with the slightest hint of hesitant awkwardness, Sev said, 'I've been watching you with your housemates.'

This time, Draco failed to hold back his wince. Yes, it was one of those conversations. 'I didn't think for a second you weren't,' he said, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to say. Sev was always watching, he saw everything. Sort of unnerving sometimes, actually.

'It has not escaped my attention that you have had something of a—' The slightest hesitation, as though looking for the right word. '—disagreement with your friends.'

That was one way to put it, yes. 'I may have cast an exsculpēns on Theo Nott.'

Sev turned to face him, but probably only so Draco could see his eyebrow arched in very clear disappointment. 'And I'm sure you thought a restricted dark curse was the proportionate response to whatever he did.'

He allowed himself a momentary scowl. 'He called Mother a muggle-loving whore.'

Before Sev turned back to the fire, Draco caught the barest twitch of suppressed rage before it was fully buried away again. 'You are fortunate your lapse of discipline has caused no further complications, so far as I can tell. Do try to be more careful in future.'

'Yes, Severus.' Draco tried to put a note of proper regret and obedience on his voice, but he was hiding a smirk behind his glass.

Growing up, he'd always assumed Sev had been Father's choice for Draco's noðaþir. It had made sense at the time. They were both Death Eaters, after all, he'd known that for a long time. He'd been somewhat confused, in the months leading up to his first year, when he'd started getting the impression Father didn't really like Sev very much. It was subtle, but the disapproval was there. Not surprising, when he thought about it — Severus may be an especially powerful and talented dark wizard, yes, with enough raw intelligence and vicious cleverness for ten lesser Slytherins, but he was a halfblood, and Father could never entirely forget that. It had been something of a surprise to learn it had been Mother who had picked Sev.

Now that Draco knew the Circle of Agastya existed, and that Severus had been a double agent from the beginning, he really had to wonder if Mother had known about that, if it had something to do with making Sev his noðaþir in the first place. When the Death Eaters did eventually fall, no matter
what exactly happened to his parents, Draco would have had a connection to someone who had fought against them, and thus some level of protection. That did seem like something Mother would do.

The point being, since it was obvious Sev and Mother had a closer relationship than Sev and Father, that he would take Mother's side, and get angry on her behalf, was quite nearly a given. And Draco couldn't help a mix of amusement and pleasure at how comparatively light Sev had made his rebuke. He didn't know why, really, it was just funny.

'While I suppose it is quite clear you can protect yourself well enough—' Draco again ducked behind his rum, desperately trying to hide his lips. '—it would perhaps be wise to form new relationships. You are currently alone. No matter your own talents, being alone is a vulnerability.'

Draco did know that, of course. Nobody could be perfectly vigilant on their own, and a person isolated had the appearance of vulnerability, whether it was actually true or not, thus inviting attack. And he was vulnerable, he knew that. No matter how confidently he might claim otherwise in public, he was aware he was not that impressive of a mage. He wasn't magically weak, exactly, but he wasn't exceptional either. No matter how much the word might grate, if he were speaking honestly he would say he was...average. He did make up for it somewhat with greater knowledge, of obscure charms or unorthodox applications of standard charms the average person didn't generally know of, but as far as raw power went he was nothing special.

If his enemies in Slytherin came at him one-on-one, he would almost certainly get the upper hand, through trickery more than strength. Unless it were Ceinwen, anyway, the sixth-year was absolutely vicious — Selwyn women, not unexpected. But if they ganged up on him, two or three or morecornering him at once, he was well aware he could quickly find himself overwhelmed. No matter how much he hated to admit it, he would be helpless. They hadn't done such a thing so far, of course, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they got their revenge for what they saw as his betrayal of everything they were.

It was an obvious problem. So he couldn't help a slight sense of annoyance. Did Sev not realise he knew this already? Honestly. But he forced his voice level to say, 'I don't suppose you have any recommendations.'

'Your options are somewhat limited. Unfortunately, Monroe is a third-year, and Ingham is only in first.' Draco felt himself wince — no, that wouldn't be humiliating at all. Sev gave him a moment to recover before continuing. 'Assuming the potential political associations aren't too distasteful for you, you might want to consider getting closer to Zabini and Greengrass. They would be convenient.'

And that had its own complications. The political side Sev hinted at, well, that wouldn't be too bad. That whole circus around Sirius and Lady Zabini was a bit...well, a bit much, but most of what Draco had been able to piece together so far of their actual policy wasn't that bad. If his estranged cousin had comfortably remained Dumbledore's pawn, yes, that would be unacceptable, but his opinions these days were seemingly far more palatable. He still wasn't quite convinced the traditional Dark was entirely right about creature–being law, he wasn't sure Sirius's economic ideas were perfectly wise, and he was still somewhat too restrictive when it came to the regulation of various magical arts, but... He was acceptable. Far from perfect, but acceptable.

The problems he had with the suggestion were more personal than they were political. It... Okay, he wasn't proud of it, but it was very possible that, back in first and second year, he had said some unkind things to Greengrass about Davis. By the time news of their nascent relationship had spread late in third year, he'd been a bit less of an idiot about blood purity, so he'd been significantly less awful than he might have been a year previously. But he was honest enough with himself to admit
Greengrass had every reason to hate him. As he used to be even nastier to Davis — since even before Hogwarts, come to think of it — and the two had been quite nearly attached at the hip for going on a year now, he sincerely doubted Greengrass would be at all eager to even tolerate him.

And as for Blaise... Well...

'Is there a problem, Draco?'

He flinched, then glanced back up to Sev only to turn and avoid his eyes again. He was aware he probably looked extremely uncomfortable right now, but he couldn't help it. 'There is some bad blood between Greengrass and myself, but... With a little effort, I could maybe get through it. I think I could, but it wouldn't be easy.' It would involve a considerable amount of apologising and calling his past self a bloody idiot, and it would be humiliating, but he'd mostly come to accept he had been a bloody idiot, so he thought he could maybe manage it. It would be unpleasant but, as Sev had said, his options were limited. 'It wouldn't be quite as easy, I don't think, with Blaise.'

Draco didn't notice he'd slipped until he caught Sev's right eyebrow tick up slightly. 'Blaise?' He didn't need to ask explicitly to clarify their existing or previous relationship, it was clear enough on his drawling, suggestive tone.

With everything he had, with every scrap of will he could summon, he forced himself placid, letting slip no hint of an emotional reaction of any kind. He took a slow sip from his rum, mostly just to give him time to ensure his voice was level. 'I admit I perhaps said some unfortunate things when we were first-years, but I had mostly avoided him after it became very clear my opinion meant nothing to him.' Which had been galling, true, but not the point right now. 'More recently, just last year, it is possible there was, ah, an incident, and I find myself unsure if he can be trusted.'

For the shortest, barest moment, Sev said nothing, staring blankly at him. 'Draco, did you really shag the lilin?'

Draco felt his face flinch at the flatly-delivered, baldly-phrased question, but ignored it, forced himself calm again. 'On a few occasions, actually.'

Sev turned to face the hearth again, lifting his free hand to rub firmly at his forehead, exasperation so thick about him it was nearly visible. After a few seconds he dropped his hand to turn his eyes up to the ceiling, letting out a thin sigh. 'Of course you did. My own personal glee with this particular topic of conversation aside—' As if Draco liked it any more! '—I would think that would make you more amenable to a closer association with him and his friends, not less.'

'It's not...' Draco let out his own aggravated sigh. Myrðin, this was bloody uncomfortable. He ignored the squirming in his chest as much he possibly could, tried to keep his voice mostly level. 'It's complicated. I don't know how much was... Well, I don't know how much was me, and how much was as his magic made me. If that makes sense.'

'You are concerned you were influenced.' By the somewhat softer tone of his voice, the slight hesitation before he said the last word, Draco knew he was thinking a different term entirely, but unsure if it should be said.

Draco just shrugged the thought off. 'Yes. I don't know if you've been, ah, so close to a lilin before, but it's...' Draco had no idea how to finish that sentence. He wasn't entirely sure how much he'd been himself, yes. He wasn't entirely sure if Blaise hadn't magically coerced him, stripped him of his free will, his ability to refuse. But even so...

It had felt incredible. He didn't mean the sex itself, really, but more the tide of white-hot magic
enfolding him, the lilin's mind bright and warm and eager. Strains of passionate song slipping into his thoughts, replicating and spreading like a virus until it was all he had been, all he could feel, his entire consciousness replaced with all-consuming desire, overwhelming heat, soul-shattering ecstasy. It was quite simply the best he had ever felt.

He knew that, at some level, he didn't even care that Blaise might have forced him. He knew that, at some level, some part of him thought it would be worth it to feel like that again. Part of him would be perfectly willing to submit to the lilin's magic, all doubts about whether he was acting on his own free will dismissed. And that was what worried him.

'I do have some familiarity with lilin, in fact.' Draco blinked at the admission, looked up to where Sev was standing in front of the hearth, and was somewhat surprised to see he wasn't there. A glance around showed him walking toward his desk. Once he was behind it, a wave of his hand and the tingle of a wandless charm of some kind, he was opening a drawer, after a couple seconds pulling something out. Without a word, he tossed it through the air toward Draco.

Startled nearly enough to spill his rum, Draco still managed to catch the thing. It was a bracelet of some kind, he saw. A narrow band of plain light metal, a dense line of runes carved into both faces. Draco could read the runes, of course, but he didn't recognise the enchantment. By a few turns of phrase he picked it, it almost looked like some kind of detection spell, but he didn't recognise enough terms to decide what kind. 'What is this?'

'An enchantment of my own invention. An old one — I believe the idea occurred to me when I was a little younger than you are now.' Sev was going through another drawer now, by the occasional clinking reaching Draco's ears sorting through potion bottles. 'To put it in layman's terms, it can detect whenever whoever you are looking at is lying. Simply prime it with a tap of your wand, and watch the person speaking, and you should feel a sort of tingle against the skin whenever something the person says is not the full truth — the more egregious the lie, the more intense the tingling. It is not perfect, of course, but the level of skill with mind magic necessary to fool it is very rare, and I have had opportunity to confirm it works on nearly any being, not just humans.'

Draco turned to give the bracelet in his hand another look, impressed despite himself. So far as he knew, truth-detecting spells were extremely finicky. They did exist, but each had their own issues, their own weaknesses, enough they were often considered not entirely trustworthy. It didn't help that what exactly was considered a "lie" could often be a bit subjective. But Sev sounded entirely confident saying it, and one fact that stood out — that the response the enchantment made to untruth was modular, depending on how blatant the lie, a trick that should theoretically circumvent a lot of the problems other such spells had — already had Draco convinced he knew what he was talking about. All the more impressive, since Sev had apparently only been fourteen or so when he'd come up with it.

But, well, he wasn't considered a master of mind magic for no reason.

After a moment, Sev was walking back, handing a bottle over to Draco, small enough for his closed hand to entirely enclose, the potion inside appearing a thin, pale pink. 'This potion will temporarily confer immunity to most forms of magical compulsion. This, I have also had the opportunity to positively confirm works with a lilin’s particular brand of emotional influence. It does not last very long, however. Just a small sip will do, but it will only be effective for ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Significantly less, if Zabini should attempt to force it, but you will be able to feel that happening, giving you a few moments to get away. I suggest you get Zabini alone, and use the combination of the enchantment and the potion to ask whatever questions you need of him to ease your mind. Try not to jump too quickly to conclusions — the bracelet will twinge somewhat with inoffensive half-truths or even just proper tact. Should you ask a direct question, you should only be concerned if the
response is so strong as to be painful.'

Draco nodded, slipping the bottle into a pocket and sliding the bracelet over his fingers, settling into the hollow of his wrist. 'Thank you, Uncle Sev.'

He didn't miss the faint hint of annoyance cross Sev's face — after all, Draco couldn't count the number of times Sev had told him, over the last couple years, to stop calling him that. Letting go of childish things and all. But Sev clearly forced it back, shaking his head to himself with clear exasperation. 'It is no undue burden, Draco.'

That was something Sev had said plenty of times, or at least some variation on it. Sev was not exactly the most affectionate person on the face of the planet — not that Draco would know how to respond to it if he were. So far as Draco could tell, that was Sev's way of saying that thanking him for whatever he had just done for him was unnecessary, that Sev had done it because he'd chosen to, because he wanted to, not simply out of obligation. Well, not too unpleasant of an obligation, anyway, Draco was well aware Sev would likely have had little to do with him if Mother hadn't twisted his arm for years. Sev was just like that.

For some minutes, they again sat in silence, Sev just standing there staring into the fire. Long enough Draco would almost think that was it, that Sev had nothing further to talk to him about, but that certainly couldn't be. When he had nothing specific to talk about, but Draco was around anyway, Sev tended to talk magic theory or politics with him. Nothing personal, of course, Sev being Sev, but Draco wouldn't even consider complaining about that, especially since Sev was only one of the most learned people he knew. Honestly, the volume of obscure magical knowledge Sev had tucked away in his head was absurd, he had no idea where he'd learned it all, how he kept it all straight. That Sev was saying nothing, still standing there subtly tense, that he hadn't in some manner dismissed Draco, made it very clear there was still something else he wanted to talk about. A topic just as uncomfortable, by the feel of it.

That just made Draco wary. That little discussion just now had already been awkward enough.

Finally, Sev let out the slightest of sighs through his nose, cueing he was about to speak. Voice his usual flat calm, but also oddly hesitant, uncertain. 'If you would, Draco, I would like your honest evaluation of Melantha Black.'

Draco blinked. That...wasn't even close to what he'd expected Sev to want to talk about. What did Melantha have to do with anything? How clearly uncomfortable Sev was with the topic was peculiar as well. Hmm. 'Well, keep in mind I don't know her very well. We've only had two or three conversations of any significant length, only a few words in passing here and there. So, I'm probably not the best person to ask.'

'I'm asking you right now.'

Yes, obviously, Draco thought, nodding his head at the unspoken implication he wasn't the only person Sev would speak or already had spoken with. He took a moment to gather his thoughts, idly noting the slight air of impatience about Sev as he waited. Odd. 'There's definitely something off about her, but I don't know her well enough to say what.'

'Clarify.'

'She's...' Draco hesitated a long moment, fingers tapping at his mostly-emptyed glass. He wasn't sure how much he really wanted to talk about this with Sev. He'd read between the lines a bit, observing Melantha, and while he wasn't entirely certain whether his conclusions were correct, they were certainly private. Neither did he feel comfortable sharing just what he'd observed, without what he'd
decided it all probably meant. It just felt somehow...wrong.

Which he guessed just meant he'd inherited more from Mother than he'd once thought. If there was one thing House Black was known for, it was an absolute, unreasoning loyalty to their family. Sort of infamous for it, in fact. He may be a member of a different House, but his mother was a Black, and Melantha was still his cousin. Sev may be his noðaþir, yes, but he was not a blood relative. He was certain, if his conclusions were even close to accurate, Melantha would not be okay with him talking to someone else about it without her permission — even less so if they were inaccurate, he guessed. A not insignificant voice in his head was telling him to just tell Sev, because he was Sev, another that sounded far too much like his father talking about Blacks and their pathetic Hufflepuffish sentimentality, but he simply wasn't comfortable with it. It didn't seem right.

So, instead of answering, he said, 'I'm sorry, but, why do you want to know?'

Sev's eyes flicked over to him, one brow noticeably lifting. Surprise, he thought. He paused, for just a short moment, staring down at Draco. 'If you must know,' he said, his voice flat and soft, just above a hissing whisper, 'I am considering making Melantha Black my apprentice.'

Oh, well, that made sense. That would be what that spectacle in the Great Hall yesterday had been about, then. Well, obviously — Melantha had said so in quite explicit terms. Which had come as a surprise, and Draco had been somewhat confused over exactly what point she'd been attempting to make, but that was neither here nor there. He was somewhat surprised Sev was actually considering it, though. Far as he knew, Sev had not been in the market for an apprentice, so to speak, not even a little bit. He could probably talk about it, then. If Sev was going to be Melantha's master it was fine. Start with the easy stuff, yes, go with that. 'Well, I'm sure you've noticed, she's very powerful.'

Sev's expression shifted very slightly, a faint hint of condescension coming to the surface. 'I had picked up on that, yes.' Despite himself, Draco felt a little embarrassed. He had consciously chosen to say that as a lead-in, yes, but there really wasn't much need in pointing it out.

Melantha was almost absurdly powerful. More powerful than Granger, more powerful than Longbottom — who Draco didn't ordinarily count, since he clearly didn't know how to use the magic he'd been blessed with — even more powerful than Potter. He couldn't imagine anyone missing it. He meant, she was sorceress-level powerful, the air around her alive with the warm life and crackling energy of too much magic concentrated in too small a space. He could feel it from across a room, if he were within a few feet of her his skin turning flushed and tingling, giddy giggling at the edges of his thoughts. And she was only fifteen. It was insane. But, even more insane, was that, 'She doesn't. I mean, I know she's powerful, everyone knows she's powerful. People look up when she walks in the room, seemingly without realising it, I've seen it happen. But she doesn't know it, she doesn't understand how different she is. Or, at least she acts like she doesn't.'

Somewhat to his surprise, Sev said, 'That is not altogether surprising.' At the look on his face — Draco wasn't sure exactly what was on his face right now but, by how Sev reacted, definitely something — Sev gave the slightest exasperated shrug. 'Given her parentage it is not unexpected. And, from what I have gathered of what her previous education was like, I would not be surprised if such things had never been properly explained to her. So, it is perhaps concerning, but not surprising.'

'Her parentage?' Honestly, Draco couldn't remember if he'd heard any word on exactly who Melantha's parents were. For all intents and purposes, she'd seemingly appeared out of nothing when Sirius had taken her in back in July.

Sev hesitated for the barest of moments. 'While her father is an impressive wizard in his own right, no matter our personal disagreements, it is her mother I suspect gifted her with most of her abilities.
Her mother was a witch of Lily's calibre, easily.'

Draco blinked, for a moment silenced with confusion. He found that rather hard to believe. Judging by the evaluation of Lily Potter's abilities he'd gotten from stories Sev had told him over the years, and even bits and pieces other people knew, he was rather certain he should have heard of whoever it was, if such a powerful witch existed. Sorceresses, even ones less visible and controversial than the late Lady Potter, do not go about their lives unnoticed. Perhaps she wasn't British, Draco would grant it was far more likely he might not have heard of her if she were from the Continent.

'But that is beside the point,' Sev said, voice hard and flat. 'You are avoiding the question.' Draco winced. He was. He just wasn't comfortable talking about this. He knew what Sev had actually been asking, when he'd asked for Draco's honest evaluation. He hadn't been asking after her talents, her abilities — if he were seriously considering teaching her he should surely know all that better than Draco did.

No, he knew what Sev wanted to know. Knew what he probably hadn't been able to figure out for himself, if he hadn't been watching closely. She wasn't the first person Draco had seen the signs in, he'd seen it often enough, close enough, he'd learned how to recognise it. It never showed in quite the same way in every person, true. Longbottom was different from Bulstrode, Sev was different from Avery. If anyone, Melantha strongly reminded Draco of Davis. Not as she was now, of course, but how she had been back in first and second year, most of third, before her friendship, and later relationship, with Greengrass had slowly started changing her. Healing her, he guessed. He'd learned to recognise it, put the pieces together, he knew what it meant.

Interestingly, Potter had shown many of the same signs himself, though not usually around Draco. Draco did make Potter angry — which, he would admit, was exactly what he was going for most of the time, Potter bothered him — and anger tended to cover it up rather well. But he'd noticed. Especially last year, when he'd backed off a bit and had the opportunity to just observe, he'd noticed. He still wasn't sure what to think about that.

After a moment of hesitation, trying to decide how to put it, Draco said, 'Be careful with her.'

Sev turned away from the fire again, steadily staring down at him. 'Elaborate.'

Despite how uncomfortable he was with this whole topic of conversation, Draco couldn't help smiling a little — Sev and his one-word sentences. 'I just... More than most, I think it would be easy for her to lose herself.'

A look of surprise briefly flitting across his face, it was obvious Sev got what he meant. It was a known risk with teaching the Dark Arts, the master was well aware the apprentice might, say, get out of hand, use the knowledge they were gaining to make a mess of things. Enough it had become something of a point of pride for Dark Arts masters how few of their students had, since moving on, become criminals. And for masters who had taught more than a handful, that number was never zero. But Sev was only distracted by that thought for an instant, quickly asking, 'Why do you believe that?'

Draco winced. Of course he had to ask that. Of course Sev couldn't just take him at his word. Draco took in and out a long breath, doing his best to suffocate the guilt squirming in his throat. Melantha was going to be his apprentice. He would have to know eventually anyway. It was fine. 'I suspect she was abused. As a child, I mean.'

The change coming over Sev was instant and obvious. Before he had just seemed impatient, somewhat annoyed. And visibly uncomfortable, of course, but Sev was always uncomfortable when anything they were talking about came anywhere even close to personal. But in a blink, his face blanked. Perfectly blank, giving nothing away, his eyes cold and empty. Draco had seen this sort of
thing often enough, knew Sev well enough, that he knew exactly what was going on in there anyway.

Severus was furious.

Which, on the one hand, was completely understandable. It wasn't even a secret. At least, not in Slytherin — from what he could tell, it wasn't common knowledge outside of their little community, but they all knew. It wasn't something that was really talked about, of course, but they all knew. They all knew that, to put it lightly, Sev had not had a perfect father. Sev had actually killed his father, in a burst of accidental magic during the summer after his fifth year; fewer people were aware of that, but Draco knew it had happened, from both his mother and a back issue of the Herald he'd tracked down. That Sev would have a certain sensitivity when it came to the subject was not a surprise.

Actually, Sev was rather famous in Slytherin — or infamous, depending on who was asked — for not tolerating child abuse for even an instant. On more than one occasion, he'd made enemies for life of certain members of powerful families by quite directly interfering in their business, shielding one or another of their children. Some of the more traditional families, who believed most strongly the internal affairs of a House should never be infringed upon by a third party, rather hated him for it. Those people whining about Sev being too harsh or whatever in Potions classes weren't the only ones trying to get him fired. Even many of the families who hadn't directly run afoul of him were a bit ambivalent. They weren't entirely certain they wouldn't make an enemy of him without meaning to, and Sev was a very bad enemy to have.

The students themselves were almost unified in their opinion though: he was every Slytherin's favourite professor, with very few exceptions. He wasn't especially nice to them, of course, and they wouldn't try to claim he was. He wasn't even nice to Draco, really. But there were more important things than being nice. They knew, without a doubt, no matter what might happen, even against their own families, Sev would have their back. That was not something frequently found in the Noble Houses, historically littered with scheming and betrayal, even internally. And that was just the ordinary students — the people Sev had intervened on behalf of often had an almost disturbingly unshakeable loyalty to him. Reminded Draco of how some of the Light were about Dumbledore more than anything.

So, on the one hand, it made sense, but on the other he wasn't sure what to think about it. For one thing, Draco was a bit surprised Sev hadn't put that together himself. Sev had far more experience with this sort of thing than Draco did — if he could figure it out, surely Sev must have. But even that aside, Draco had learned by now to get a sense of exactly how angry Sev was, even when he closed off completely like this. It wasn't anything seen, exactly, but a sense on the air. Sev was a sorcerer, after all, only Flitwick and Dumbledore himself among the staff more powerful than he. When he was especially enraged, he could control his face perfectly fine, but he couldn't entirely prevent his fury from colouring the magic on the air. Some of it, at least a little bit, always slipped through.

By the slight taste of ozone Draco noticed, Sev was very angry. Shockingly angry.

That, that didn't quite make sense. Draco couldn't imagine Sev being quite this angry, unless it were somehow personal. But he couldn't imagine why he should take anything about Melantha personally.

'You are sure.'

Draco blinked. The words, heavy with frigid rage, weren't a question, not exactly. But he answered anyway. 'No, I'm not sure. I didn't think it quite appropriate to just come out and ask her, you know. But I am confident in my suspicions.' He was shot a questioning look, so he shrugged, said, 'You remember Davis, I'm sure.' Sev just nodded, but Draco hadn't needed the confirmation — Lord
Davis had been terrified of Sev since second year, he'd obviously threatened him somehow. 'She reminds me of Davis, rather a lot. I haven't confirmed it, but I'm sure enough to assume I'm right.'

A few moments passed in silence, the air gradually thickening further with power restrained. Then Sev whispered, 'I hope you are wrong.' Draco didn't say anything to that — he didn't think he was, but it would be preferable he were wrong, yes — but he clearly needn't have said anything, Sev continued after a moment. 'I would rather not risk attempting to avoid being sent to Azkaban for murdering her former guardians.'

That...

Nope. Draco had absolutely no idea what to say to that.

It didn't help that, a smirk touching his lips as he thought it, Sev rather sounded like a Black right now.

Chapter End Notes

exsculpēns — *From Latin verb meaning "to carve out" or "to elicit/extort". Draco is referring to a dark torture curse. Far milder than the cruciātus, of course, but also itself illegal.*

noðaþir — *This has come up before, but as a reminder this is a Brīþwn term interchangeable with English "godfather". Draco, being from a conservative pureblood noble background and all, almost certainly wouldn't use the Christian-origin term.*

Bluh. There was originally going to be a third scene in this chapter, but my brain is absolutely refusing to write. Been having trouble with that lately. It will have to be fused with a future scene instead, I'm afraid.

Until next time,
~Wings
Watching through a gap in the shelves, Draco felt his own eyes narrow into a suspicious squint.

It hadn't been hard to find a time to corner Blaise — Draco had been taught since childhood by multiple people to observe and understand as much as possible, and Blaise wasn't trying to hide. For some unfathomable reason, Greengrass and Davis were both taking Muggle Studies. He really didn't understand why. Davis, of course, had a muggleborn mother, so he would figure if she really had to know anything about muggles she could just ask. Greengrass didn't have the same resources, true, but he couldn't imagine why she cared to learn. No idea why either could possibly think it worth the time investment. Not too important at the moment, though.

They were both presently in Muggle Studies, but Blaise wasn't, in the library as he almost always was. It was the only time Draco had really been able to think of he could get Blaise on his own. He was hardly ever seen out of Greengrass and Davis's company — so consistently there were rumours going around about the three of them, in fact, but Draco was nearly certain they were baseless — and he would rather not have to try to make peace with all three of them at the same time. That just sounded far more complicated than necessary.

But, unfortunately, it turned out Blaise wasn't alone. He was sitting at his usual table in the middle of the library, yes, but rather than just silently working on whatever, he was having a whispered conversation with Melantha. He couldn't tell what they were talking about from here, of course, not without a listening charm one or both would certainly notice. But by the way Melantha kept glaring, how Blaise kept smirking, he figured Blaise was probably teasing her about something. Blaise did that.

He got at least a minor clue when Blaise leaned forward a bit, lightly flicked the red and gold trim on Melantha's robe with a finger, whatever he said getting a snort and a roll of Melantha's eyes in response. Whatever they were talking about, Melantha must have said or done something not very Gryffindor-ish, and Blaise was handling it with his usual lack of subtlety.

Not that Draco would expect Melantha to be too Gryffindor-ish. She had told him the only reason she hadn't been sent to Slytherin was because she'd asked not to be, after all.

And this wasn't making him happy. Considering his own uncertainties involving Blaise... He was concerned. Sure, he didn't know Melantha very well, they weren't exactly close. But that didn't mean he would stand back and do nothing while a lilin did something to her against her will.

He let out a sigh, using his last moment in private to rub at his eyes. Because of course this just had to get more complicated. He didn't know why he hadn't anticipated something like this.

A flick brought his wand into his hand, a quick tap against the enchanted band about his wrist drawing a barely noticeable burst of magic. The metal tingled against his skin, just for a moment, before going still again, the shivering of energy contained within just at the edge of his ability to detect. Slipping his wand back into its holster, he reached into a pocket, popped the seal off of the little bottle, downed the potion Sev had given him in a single draw. Much like the enchantment a moment ago, there was a brief flicker of magical fields aligning, a tingling shiver trailing up his spine, through his skull. Then it was over, any signs of the potion's presence subtle enough Draco couldn't even feel it. He'd just have to trust Sev knew what he was doing.
The empty bottle again disappearing into a pocket, one last breath in isolation, and Draco walked around the bookshelf, making straight for the table a short distance away. With the angle he was approaching from, Melantha saw him coming first, a quick spasm of displeasure crossing her face. It hadn't escaped Draco's notice that Melantha was strongly predisposed to dislike him. He wasn't certain exactly why — less-than-flattering dissertations from Granger and Potter and the Weasleys, he assumed — but she always acted perfectly polite and reasonable, so he'd chosen to ignore it. He came up to within a few steps of the table, opened his mouth to speak.

And Blaise beat him to it. Of course. His head tipping atop the back of his chair to crookedly grin up at him, Blaise said, 'My my, look who it is! It's been so long, Draco dear, I would almost think you don't like me.'

Draco managed not to glare, if only barely. He knew Blaise had only called him that to annoy him, but knowing that didn't stop it from working. 'Good morning, Zabini. Cousin,' with a quick nod at Melantha.

'Ach.' A hand coming up to his chest, an expression of exaggerated despair coming to his face, Blaise slumped somewhat in his chair. 'I've been demoted to Zabini. How cruel, Draco. I'm hurt.'

Unsurprisingly, there was a bit of tingling carried into his skin from Sev's lie-detecting enchantment, but it was weaker than he'd expected. Which didn't necessarily mean anything — Draco hadn't had the opportunity to experiment with how it worked on sarcasm, and he hadn't thought to ask. 'Must you always be so dramatic?'

His grin again spreading across his face, Blaise said, 'Come now, you know the answer to that.'

Draco sighed. Yes, he did at that. Bloody silly ponce. He noticed Melantha was giving the two of them an odd, suspicious frown, eyes jumping from one to the other, apparently reading something into this, but Draco couldn't take the time to address that even if he'd wanted to explain. He did have a limited amount of time before the potion wore off, after all. 'I need to speak with you for a moment. If you'd excuse us, Melantha.'

Somewhat unexpectedly, Blaise was already tipping up to his feet to follow him off, but even as he stood Melantha was giving Draco a suspicious glare. 'What would you have to talk with him about?'

'I'm sorry, Cousin, that's private.'

And Melantha was still glaring, eyes somewhat narrowed, flicking between the two of them. Draco realised she was concerned he was going to...he didn't know, really. She did realise Blaise was a lilin, right? What exactly did she think he would even be capable of doing to him? For that matter, hadn't she and Blaise only met back in September? A little odd that Melantha was already this protective of him.

But, well. Blacks.

Thankfully, they left the table without any more undue fuss, Draco leading Blaise into an isolated corner of the Divination section. Nobody ever came here, it'd do. He pulled out his wand, quickly snapped off a few privacy and silencing charms, then turned back to Blaise. Who actually looked serious for once. The constant smirk had disappeared, his expression looking only mildly curious. Which was odd — Draco hadn't been certain Blaise even knew how to take anything seriously. Perhaps the silly act a moment ago had just been for Melantha's benefit? Who knew. Forcing his voice as calm as he possibly could, Draco said, 'I'm going to ask you a couple questions, and I need you to actually take it seriously, if you are even capable of such a thing.'
'You want to know if I raped you.'

Draco somehow managed not to flinch at that. Yes, just come out and say it, why didn't he? Myrðin... 'Well, yes, to put it bluntly.'

'Why not? You were going to dance around the point for ages, and you call me silly.' Blaise let out a sigh, crossing his arms over his chest, falling to lean against the bookshelf to his side. 'No, of course I didn't. Is that why you've been avoiding me since, shite, March?'

And now he was trying not to glare. Not for anything Blaise had said specifically. But there was a sense in his expression, the slightest hint on his voice, that Draco was being ridiculous. That that should have been obvious, Blaise had no idea where he was getting these crazy ideas from. But the thought hadn't come out of nothing, it was a legitimate concern, so he couldn't help feeling a bit angry. 'And you're saying you can't influence me to do whatever you want against my will.'

Blaise rolled his eyes; Draco was quite suddenly tempted to hex him. 'Sure, I can. I'm magically capable. But then, so are you, with proper application of curses or potions. Should I wonder the same thing, whether my mind had been my own?' Draco opened his mouth to say something about it not being nearly the same thing, but Blaise went on before he could, voice raised slightly. 'Just because I can do something doesn't mean I will. You've been listening to too much pureblood propaganda, Draco. Not that that's news. No, I didn't influence you. There, ha—'

Draco nearly jumped when Sev's lie-detecting enchantment tingled against his wrist. Blaise broke off in mid-syllable at the same moment, staring down at the band hidden under Draco's sleeve. And he thought he could slap himself — being more purely creatures of magic, lilin could naturally feel spells and enchantments with far greater precision than most mages could without long training. That was just inconvenient. The tingling was mild enough Draco knew it hadn't been a serious lie — if he had to guess, Blaise had given him a few nudges when they'd been younger, probably in first year, which had been enough to trip the enchantment — but now Blaise would know Draco had been testing him. That would be awkward to explain. Especially since Blaise, being Blaise, would probably never let him forget it. And tell Greengrass and Davis, so they could help.

Maybe trying to make nice with the three of them had been a bad idea...

His head tilting slightly, Blaise said, 'I am a fluffy purple elephant with pink stripes.' This time, when the enchantment went off, it was sharp and piercing enough Draco winced. 'Huh. Neat.' Blaise paused, clearly thinking to himself for a moment. 'It can be somewhat hard to control sometimes, so it is altogether possible, over the last couple years, I might have been subtly swaying you to think more kindly of me, if only because I would rather have friends than enemies. If I ever did influence you at all, it wasn't intentional.' Sev's enchantment responded, with a mild, irritating tingling, an unpleasant itch. Blaise frowned down at it. 'Okay, excluding a few times in first year, when you were being a prat and I was just trying to get you to leave me alone. And I was still immature then, so it probably didn't even work very well. Other than that, I've never done it consciously.' The enchantment didn't respond at all. Blaise nodded, seemingly satisfied. 'Was that all?'

Draco almost thought he might be slightly annoyed. Not for anything explicit. Assuming he could trust Sev's work, which he figured he could, Blaise was telling the truth. He really hadn't done anything with Draco's head. Nothing significant, anyway, and not out of malice. Not even intentionally. He didn't even want to know what going to Beauxbatons would be like — that many lilin and veela in one building, not to mention vampires and various halfbreeds, that was just asking for trouble. But, anyway, he was honestly somewhat relieved. Nothing untoward had happened. It was fine.

No, it was just how...subtly dismissive Blaise was being. He couldn't even put his finger on exactly
what, or how. Just the feeling he got. It was just slightly off somehow. And Draco couldn't help being a bit annoyed about it, because he had had legitimate concerns, and Blaise just—

And suddenly he got it. 'You're offended.'

Blaise raised a single eyebrow, his expression somehow almost inhumanly exasperated. 'Of course I'm offended, you bloody prat. You came here to accuse me of raping you, the entirety of your suspicions based solely on the fact that I'm not human. Did you expect me to not be offended?' He gave a light sniff, shaking his head a little.

For long seconds, Draco could only stare at him. Well, when he put it that way, that did sound rather terrible, didn't it? Finally, he managed to find his voice again. 'That's not why. At least, not entirely.'

Blaise rolled his eyes. 'If you say so, Draco. No reason to strain anything trying to justify yourself. I know how you would have been taught to think of me and my kind growing up. Annoying, but I'm used to it by now.'

'It's not—' Draco forced out his breath in a sigh, nearly lifted a hand to run a hand through his hair before catching himself. 'Do we have to talk about this?' He would vociferously deny any accusation he was whining. No, of course not. That had been nothing but an impeccably dignified objection to an unseemly topic of conversation, yes.

'Hey, I'm not the one who came along and dragged you into a corner for a magically-augmented interrogation.' Just above a whisper, Blaise muttered, 'Lie-detecting spells, honestly.'

Draco failed to hold back a wince. Okay, now that it was clear Blaise hadn't done anything to him, and just how annoyed he clearly was with the implication he might have, Draco was starting to think it was possible he'd gotten a little...carried away. Which he knew he had a bad habit of doing, but that didn't exactly make it better. If it was such a bad idea, though, why hadn't Sev— He didn't really know Blaise at all, so couldn't effectively make an evaluation of what he might or might not have done, that was why, obviously.

True, Draco didn't know Blaise all that well either. They hadn't exactly moved in the same circles growing up. Father didn't tolerate even being in the same room as Lady Zabini if he could help it, and she didn't like him any better. They had a long-standing mutual hatred, in fact. He'd been told that, during his parents' courtship, Zabini had once gone so far as threatening his father with a very unpleasant death should he do anything to unnecessarily harm Mother. Zabini had been a friend and occasional lover to his aunt Bellatrix since their first year at Hogwarts, and apparently some sisterly protectiveness had rubbed off. From what Mother had said, she hadn't minded it that much — annoying at times, yes, but Zabini was at least entertaining, and not at all a bad person to have watching her back. But it had been Father who had controlled who he would be exposed to, so it had been his preferences and connections that had dominated Draco's early life. If Mother had been in control, he might have seen quite a bit of Blaise growing up, but as it happened they hadn't even met until their first night here.

And before last year, they'd barely interacted at all. But even with what little he did know... He should have known better. He'd just gotten scared, and getting scared had made him stupid.

He was starting to wonder if this whole magically-augmented interrogation, as Blaise had put it, wasn't ill-advised. And by "ill-advised" he meant a potentially fatal mistake.

And with how things stood with many of his former friends, it was all too possible he was speaking literally.
'I mean,' Blaise was saying, 'I sort of assumed you'd gone back to being a racist prick. Had gotten over whatever temporary insanity had inspired you to dirty yourself by partaking in an illicit affair with such a filthy creature as yours truly. I'm not sure what the point of this whole thing is. I honestly didn't expect to really hear from you again.'

The band about Draco's wrist barely twinged at all — that was exactly what he'd thought. And he'd delivered that whole thing flatly and calmly, but Draco still felt like cringing. Not from any accusation or hurt or anger on his voice, no, there was none to be affected by, but from the knowledge that Draco had said that exact sort of thing before. Sort of a lot, actually. Even to Blaise himself, back in first year. Myrðin, it was physically painful sometimes remembering some of the shite he'd said and done when he'd been younger, he preferred to avoid thinking about it. 'It's not just because you're... I mean, I don't really...' Draco shook his head to himself; he had no bloody clue what he was saying. 'I didn't mean to come off as a racist prick—' Blaise's lips twitched. '—but I just had to be sure. I wasn't really acting like myself, you know, and I just... I had to be sure.'

Blaise blankly stared at him, just for a second, before letting out a long sigh, his eyes tipping to the ceiling. 'Not unreasonable, I suppose.' The lie-detecting enchantment tingled against Draco's wrist, and Blaise shot a surly look in its direction, but didn't address it. 'But why now? That was nearly a year ago. I can't imagine you really procrastinated that long.'

Oh, this was going to be awkward. Draco took in a long breath, mentally preparing himself for...well, he wasn't sure exactly. It wasn't going to be fun in any case. 'I intend to approach the three of you. I figured it would make it easier to have the air between us cleared beforehand.'

'Why would you—?' Blaise cut off in mid-sentence, nodding to himself. 'Right, the junior Death Eaters. You're looking for protection.'

'To put it bluntly.' He could have denied it, of course, but it would have been disingenuous, and Blaise was intelligent enough to know it. No real gain in it. He hesitated a moment, not exactly sure how to phrase what he was trying to say. Eh, close enough. 'I'd like to think I'm a bit less of an idiot these days. It's been a while since I've actually been a racist prick—' Him saying that was amusing Blaise far too much. '—but I just haven't been acting like it. Politics, you know. It's time to acknowledge reality, I suppose. And I realise I've done absolutely nothing to endear myself to you three in the meantime, but—'

Blaise's lips settled into a smirk, dark eyes glinting with amusement. 'I don't know, in my case at least, I can think of a couple things...' It was very, very clear from his suggestive tone what he was talking about.

With a rather undignified scoff, Draco said, 'Myrðin, Blaise, do you have to do that?'

'Don't know why you bother asking questions you already know the answers to.' After a few seconds holding the tilt to his lips, Blaise's face fell into a far more serious expression. Cautious, Draco might call it, but it was mild enough he couldn't be sure. 'You know Daphne is going to be far harder to convince than me. I mean, I'm inclined to trust this change of heart of yours is legitimate — it does help that your mother has told mine some things, so I've heard a little third-hand— but I doubt she will.'

Draco blinked. 'Greengrass? Not Davis?'

'Nah, Tracey is used to supremacist arses treating her like shite under their boots. She gets it from her own family, after all.' Blaise shrugged, as though the implications of that statement weren't incredibly depressing. 'I suspect it wouldn't take very much to convince her to go along with it. She'll be keeping an eye on you, I expect, probably for years, waiting for the knife in her back, and I doubt
she'll be exactly nice, but that's just Tracey. No, Daphne is the one you're going to have to work to convince.'

'What did I ever do to Greengrass?' A couple comments here and there involving Davis, maybe, but never anything that bad...

But there Blaise was giving him an incredulous look. 'You're kidding, right? Isn't that obvious? What you did to Daphne is what you did to Tracey. It's not that easy to make Daphne really angry, but the one thing that will instantly put someone on her bad side is being cruel to Tracey. Which you've been doing since we were children. Tracey may be used to it, and will likely overlook it, but Daphne isn't, and won't.'

'Oh.' When he thought about it, that did make a bit of sense. Lady Greengrass and Davis's father had been friends at Hogwarts, Sev had told him, so the two had known each other for a very long time — in fact, Draco suspected spending so much time with Davis from so young is why the pureblood elitism endemic to most Noble Houses never really took hold in Greengrass. Though, come to think of it, Sev had mentioned Lady Greengrass had also been friends with Lily Potter, that could have something to do with it. Even before they'd become lovers, Davis had been Greengrass's oldest and closest friend. And, ever since they'd been young children, Draco had not been exactly kind to her. One voice among many, incessantly telling Davis they would rather she didn't exist, hating her for something she couldn't control, simply for who her mother was. And with how Greengrass could be sometimes...

Yeah. This wasn't going to be easy.

He let out a long sigh, surrendering to the temptation to rub at his suddenly aching forehead with his tips of his fingers. 'I don't suppose you have any suggestions.'

'Ah, I would think if you could somehow get Tracey on your side first, that'll help. Since much of the reason you're doing this in the first place is because the supremacist idiots hate you for supporting your mother, that might be less impossible than it sounds. I'll arrange a meeting sometime this week.' Blaise fell silent, but Draco could tell by the hesitant tilt to his features he wasn't done yet. After a few seconds, he added, 'Making nice with Mel wouldn't hurt, either. You can come sit with us until we have to go to class here, if you have nothing better to do. Though, if you make her too annoyed, I will ask you to leave, fair warning.'

'How would that help?' Not that Draco was opposed, of course, he just didn't see the connection. Actually, Mother had already told him it would be wise to get on more friendly terms with his Black cousins anyway, especially Melantha. Since they were both under the protection of their House, it was the smart thing to do, and he would be spending breaks at Grimmauld Place for the foreseeable future, so it would just make things smoother if Melantha were less warily tense around him. He'd made some minimal progress with the triplets — Persephone, technically, but he didn't think the distinction was relevant — but not so much with Melantha. He should probably work on that anyway.

Blaise gave a little shrug. 'Daphne has a soft spot for her. I wonder why.' Draco gave him a look at the sarcasm on that, getting a slightly exasperated one in return. 'An obviously volatile halfblood, clearly with a few emotional issues — I don't think I have to tell you that, you're observant enough. Let's think, who does that remind you of?' Blaise rolled his eyes. 'They even look alike.'

Well, yes, he had noticed the resemblance between Melantha and Davis. Behaviorally, he meant, though they were vaguely similar physically as well. Not unexpected, they were related. He assumed, anyway — he still didn't actually know who Melantha's parents were, but there had been enough marriages between their Houses, and Houses they had independently intermarried with, that
they were certainly cousins of one degree or another. (They were both related to him too, of course, Melantha just more closely.) But anyway, it wasn't unreasonable Greengrass might be soft on her, now that he thought about it. 'Yes, I see what you mean.' Well, if he was given an opportunity to solve two problems at once, no real reason to not take it. 'We can go now, unless you had anything else you wanted to discuss.'

'Nah, I'm good.' His lips tilted into a smirk again. 'You're not entirely off the hook yet, of course, but it can wait.' Without another word, Blaise turned on his heel, and started walking back off through the library.

After dispelling the privacy charms he'd laid, and deactivating Sev's lie-detecting enchantment while he was at it, Draco followed Blaise through the stacks. And then let out a sigh when, the instant they came into view again, Melantha pierced him with a suspicious glare, the hints of her magic thick in the air pinching at his skin. This was going to be bracing.

The things he did for his mother, honestly...

The girl was late.

Some part of him would like to be able to say he wasn't surprised. Of course she was going to be late, Severus wouldn't expect any child of her father to approach something like this — or anything at all, for that matter — with the respect it deserves. But, if he were being entirely honest with himself, he knew that thought was irrational. For multiple reasons. For one, she hadn't been raised by her father in any case, so expecting her to inherit any learned behaviours was a bit odd. For another, as far as he could tell, when circumstances outside of his control were excluded, Harry Potter had never been late for anything, punctual with almost conspicuous reliability. There was no reason to expect Melantha Black to be any different.

And, of course, she wasn't late yet. Only nearly late. A touch of energy extended to an enchantment concealed in the surface of his desk brought a glowing facsimile of a clock floating into view, confirming his internal judgement of the time had been precisely accurate — their appointed meeting was in two minutes. A flick of his fingers dismissed the enchantment, and he leaned back in his chair, trying not to be too impatient. He supposed, it wasn't that Black was late so much as Severus had expected her to be early, and that she wasn't concerned him.

Did it? He took a moment to retreat, sift through his own thoughts and feelings with the detachment mind magic afforded, as if sorting and evaluating disparate symptoms to find the root cause. Hmm, yes, it appeared it did.

Not too unusual, when he thought about it. The girl did have a history of attracting disaster.

There were maybe thirty seconds left when there was finally a knock at the door, tilting open a few degrees before Severus could say anything. 'I'm sorry, Professor,' Black said even as her head slipped through the narrow gap, 'I didn't mean to, er...'

So, she was aware she was late, then. Or nearly late, in any case. 'Well, don't just stand there, girl. Close the door behind you.' And he turned back to the books and papers spread across his desk in an unorganised sprawl, dense with handwritten notes. Which wasn't entirely an act for her benefit, of course — he'd rather not face his former master's displeasure if he'd overlooked a simple mistake in the formulation of Lestrange's potion, after all — but it didn't hurt to hint at how valuable his time was. And it wasn't like he needed to look directly at her to watch her anyway.

Black stepped inside, slowly and almost hesitantly, as though having to convince herself she really
wanted to be here. Severus could sympathise — he'd had occasion to wonder several times over the last weeks whether he hadn't gone completely insane himself. When the door clicked shut, secrecy and isolation wards snapping into place, Black jumped back, her hand sharply jerking away from the handle. Interesting. As she trailed into the room, she seemed almost...surprised, he would guess. It seemed she recognised the room. Which was odd in itself: so far as he knew, Black had never been in here. Perhaps Lily had described it in those journals she had? Slughorn had used this same office during his tenure, mostly for those insufferable club meetings of his, but he wouldn't think any description would be good enough to recognise the room on sight. Odd. Her face was a bit abnormally pink, which he'd originally attributed to perhaps having to rush here to make it on time, but he was starting to think he'd been wrong — far as he could see, she wasn't perspiring or out of breath, so that seemed unlikely. Embarrassment?

It took only the slightest bit of concentration, and he had already caught the memory playing behind Black's eyes. Black flinched away at the contact, clumsy defences raising about her mind, but it was too late by that point. 'Don't be so dramatic, Black. Teenagers will be teenagers.' The pink quickly shifted to an almost impressive shade of red, Black clearly realising Severus had seen exactly why she'd been just barely on time. Which, he would admit, he did think a bit strange — did she think it made any difference to him what she did with the Bones girl behind closed doors? Didn't seem like any business of his. In fact, he'd rather not think about it at all. Smoothing over the greater indiscretions of his Slytherins here and there was already far and away more hormonal melodramatic nonsense than he really wanted to be exposed to. 'You were not quite late this time. So long as you continue to be punctual I see no reason why what you do in private should be any business of mine, nor why you should be so distractingly guilty about it.' He nodded to his left, the circle of sofas and chairs by the fire he'd inherited from Slughorn and almost never used. 'Sit down. I'll be with you in a moment.'

With a last irritated glance — the legilimency, probably, she'd have to get used to that — Black made for the neglected seating area. In seconds Severus had recovered the folder he'd put together over the last couple days, then hesitated for a short moment, staring blankly at the surface of his desk. Wondering to himself, for perhaps the thousandth time over so short an interval, if he really wanted to be doing this. He'd always had negative interest in the entire idea before, but...

Well, he could be honest enough with himself to admit he wouldn't even be considering it if she were anyone else. It was clear nobody was inclined to put in the effort to teach Black properly — speaking of which, he still needed to have words with Dumbledore about that. It seemed Tonks had been making some progress of late, but still, it was almost shameful Lily's daughter of all people would be this thoroughly unprepared. He could just imagine how Lily would feel about it. It was unthinkable. If she were here, knew her daughter had approached him, gone so far as to publicly humiliate herself to get him to take her seriously, and he still didn't take care of it... He didn't need her here to know well enough. He could see the glare, her voice cold and sharp already biting at his ears. Myrðin, the things he did for that woman. She'd been dead over a decade, and she was still jerking him around. Ridiculous. Sighing to himself silently in his head — it wouldn't do for the girl to hear it, after all — he got to his feet. No point in delaying it any longer.

In a short moment he was resettled in the absurdly comfortable armchair Slughorn had left here, the folder falling to a slap on the gleaming low table in front of him. He turned to face Black where she sat in the couch to his left — turned to face the rest of the room and the door, he'd noticed — flatly meeting her eyes. He kept any external sign from showing, of course, but he couldn't help feeling faintly impressed she was actually managing to hold his gaze. He did generally try to be intimidating on purpose, after all — these days, most people her age, and even people his age for that matter, couldn't usually manage it.
But, then again, with the idiotically dangerous nonsense she'd found herself in one way or another over the years, he supposed he shouldn't be surprised it didn't work on her so much anymore.

'Andromeda has informed me it is unlikely you are familiar with exactly what this sort of thing entails.'

For a second, Black just blinked at him in obvious surprise. 'You talked to Andi?' Severus didn't bother answering beyond raising a single eyebrow just enough to be noticeable — there was enough of an answer already. Black clearly gathered herself, going so far as to shake her head slightly. 'Ah, no. I didn't know anything about this kind of thing until, er, Susan mentioned it. I read a bit, but I'm sure I'm still missing things.'

Not altogether surprising, if she really had been raised by Petunia of all people, as Andromeda had implied. Speaking of which, he still needed to have words with Dumbledore about that as well — he had an unpleasant suspicion Dumbledore had intentionally kept him uninformed, and he rather wanted to know why. Especially since... Well, he'd been thinking about what Draco had said, and if she had been sent to Petunia, that would explain rather a lot.

He had a feeling Petunia Dursley wouldn't live to see the new year.

Put that aside for now, not the time. 'Essentially, an apprenticeship is a contract negotiated between the master and whoever rules the apprentice's House — since you are the Lady of your House, involving any third parties was technically unnecessary, but as I didn't anticipate you to be informed in such matters I did meet with Andromeda. It is not a complicated contract, though matters are muddied somewhat by you still being a Hogwarts student. In brief, the apprentice cedes all power over educational and vocational matters to their master for the duration. The reason I am telling you this now, before I have you sign, is because I will be making some modifications to your current arrangements.'

'Wait, what?' Breaking through the surprise and confusion, Severus noticed already rising signs of that familiar simmering anger. Which, now that he thought about it...

He had been intentionally needling her since her very first day here, yes, mostly for his own amusement, and he was starting to wonder if he hadn't blinded himself to some degree. He hadn't been sure if he could entirely take Draco at his word, about what he'd observed, but it was very possible the fury and hatred he'd consciously kindled could have entirely covered the usual warning signs. It was possible she simply didn't show it in his presence, too busy being angry at him. He had noticed a little, yes, but nothing much, and nothing consistent. The impression of her temperament he'd gotten asking other people about her over the last couple days was far less ambiguous, and far more worrying.

He was starting to think his previous treatment of her had been ill-advised. Entertaining, of course — he always had enjoyed prodding at Gryffindors, watching them marinate impotent in their rage shallow and childish. But, wise? Not so much.

He dismissed the thought, again pulling himself back to the conversation at hand. 'I'm led to believe you don't speak French.'

After a brief moment of staring, Black returned the question with a slow, incredulous shake of her head. 'Well,' she said after a second, 'not really. Hermione taught me a little, but...'

'You'll be learning. I'll arrange a tutor.' He could teach her himself, of course, but his schedule had been tight enough already without making enough time to properly manage an apprentice on top of everything else. It would mean less time spent on other subjects, which simply wasn't worth it. It was
a better use of both their time to set her up with someone else.

Her face twisting with confusion, Black said, 'Why?'

And he was annoyed. That hadn't taken very long. 'With what your marks are like in History, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you have to ask.' She bristled, but he went on before she could say anything. 'It might have escaped your notice, Black, but English is not a common language among mages internationally. It is in the muggle world, of course, but that is a comparatively recent development, dating to after the Statute. French, on the other hand, is far more common. It is the working language of the I.C.W., and it is the European language mages elsewhere around the world are most likely to know. There is a reason, after all, the phrase is *lingua franca*, and not *lingua anglica*. If you ever want to travel, or ever want to communicate with mages from anywhere outside of Britain for any reason, you will need to learn French. It truly should be a requirement at Hogwarts, but instead we still teach Brīþwn, for some unfathomable reason.' He knew the reason was purebloods being idiots, of course, but that didn't make it any less absurd.

'That...does make sense, I guess.' She sounded extremely reluctant, but she had said it, at least. 'What else?'

'You will cease attending History, Herbology, and Astronomy.'

'What?! But those are core classes!' Severus didn't bother saying anything. He just stared at her. 'But... But aren't you required to take all the core classes? I didn't think you could just stop going.'

'You are required? And what mechanisms are there, exactly, to enforce that requirement?'

'I...er...' For a second, Black just frowned, blinking to herself. Apparently, it had never occurred to her to wonder about that before. 'Well, I know we have to be in school though OWLs, but—'

'No, you don't.'

Black stared at him. 'What?'

'No, you are not legally required to attend any magical school through OWL year. Neither are you legally required to take the OWLs. It is certainly recommended, however. It is almost impossible to find decent employment without having some kind of qualifications, OWLs being the easiest to obtain, and you could still be prosecuted for "underage" magic, irrespective of whatever your age actually is.' Putting a slight hint of disappointment on his voice, he said, 'Did it never occur to you to wonder how magical education actually works? The law is entirely different than in muggle Britain in every other area — surely you didn't assume it was the same here for no reason.'

Her face tightened into a glare, eyes steady and sharp on his, for all the world looking nothing but annoyed, but he didn't believe it for a second — the pink on her cheeks gave her away. 'How does it work, then?'

'It's a mutually voluntary contract, Black, like almost everything else. A contract between the school and your House. And like any contract, it can be renegotiated. And, since you are the Lady of your own House, you can do that negotiating on your own behalf without any outside approval. Judging by your marks in History and Astronomy, you are not particularly motivated in those subjects — I know you must be intelligent enough you could do better if you could lower yourself enough to care to actually try.' Black's expression flickered a bit, obviously uncertain about something. At a guess, whether she should take that as a compliment or an insult — which was exactly why he'd phrased it that way, of course. 'You could have gone to McGonagall at any time and told her you did not want to take those classes any longer. She might have asked for some concessions, but she would have
been willing to come to an arrangement agreeable to all parties. Just among Slytherins, I have students drop History or Astronomy with some regularity, and enough of my first-years wish to opt out of Brīþwn every year I've long since settled on a process to test whether they truly do know it as well as they claim to. Some families did still speak it at home. Not very many, of course, but enough fully half of his new students every year thought the elementary Brīþwn courses beneath them, and they were usually right. 'Since you will quite possibly be my apprentice by the end of the day, I will be doing that part for you. There is no reason you should continue taking those three courses, so you will not.'

Black took a moment to think about that, face turned somewhat away and eyes unfocused, so he let her. As long as she didn't take too long, anyway. Probably beating herself up for not realising that sooner — he knew he had, once he'd realised he needn't have spent so much effort on shite useless courses he hated. He and Lily had learned about that in second year, but the point remained. Finally, Black said, 'So, I just won't be studying those at all, then?'

'Not necessarily. Unless you have some interest in the more esoteric ritual magics, there is no reason you would ever need Astronomy. That subject is totally useless for the vast majority of people, and there is no good reason to continue expending so much effort on it. History, I will simply be assigning you a bit of reading, and verbally quizzing you on it on occasion. Not very much, though — it's not truly a priority — but still enough you'd probably do better on the OWL than you would solely attending those abysmally boring lectures in any case.' He felt a slight curl come to his own lips, the barest hints of a smirk. He wasn't sure if it was really visible, but by how Black's eyebrow twitched she must have noticed something. 'As for Herbology, I will be teaching you only the things that are legitimately useful to know which, unfortunately, Pomona spends far too little time on. Most everything she teaches in her classes are entirely useless if you don't intend to go into the field. I've tried to convince her it's a waste of everyone's time but she won't listen to me. Says I'm biased.' Which, admittedly, he was, but that didn't mean he was wrong.

'Is there really anything useful in Herbology at all?' Black had a very clearly doubtful expression on her face. Which he did not at all blame her for.

'The average person will brew thousands of simple potions over the course of their life.' That was just meant to be a framing comment to lead into his point, but Black gave that idea another doubtful look. Severus couldn't entirely hold in a sigh. 'Come, girl, that can't be that much of a surprise. Prepared potions will often run you two to four times as much as the components alone, more for certain brews, and there is always at least some inherent risk in taking a potion you did not brew yourself — you have no idea what else might be in it, if it was brewed correctly, or even if it is what you were told it is. What?' he said, again cutting off his explanation at the flicker of something unreadable crossing her face.

'Nothing, it's just I—' She shrugged. 'It just occurred to me, I've taken more different potions than I can count from Madam Pomfrey, and I don't think I've ever even asked what they are.'

He was half-tempted to chastise her, but dismissed the idea after a moment of consideration. It was breathtakingly stupid in the general case to just accept a potion from someone without even asking what it was, but at the least she realised that without needing to be beat over the head with it. And besides, 'Licensed Healers are the largest exception. They are sworn to give their patients the best care they possibly can, which includes confirming the provenance, safety, and effectiveness of their potions. It is generally safe to trust them — so long as you are certain they are truly a licensed Healer, anyway, and not just claiming to be one. As it happens, I brew most of Poppy's potions personally. Blindly accepting what she hands you is not itself a mistake, but you should never do the same anywhere else if you value your life.
'As I was saying, it is generally more cost-effective for the average person to brew the simpler potions they might want for themselves. Especially should our theoretical average person have been so unfortunate as to not be born into wealth. However, potions ingredients do not last forever. Like everything, they do spoil in time. Some grow less effective as they age, and some more, requiring different proportions in the more sensitive brews. An otherwise perfectly-brewed potion might turn out to be useless slop, or even deadly poison. Or perhaps, quite simply, the apothecary you purchased it from gave you the wrong thing. If you cannot recognise by sight what something is and whether it is in acceptable condition, you could do great harm to yourself without meaning to quite easily. The entire purpose of the Herbology course here is to teach you all that, but Pomona would rather force her students to spend an ungodly number of hours fruitlessly mucking about in the dirt. She refuses to listen, however. Because I'm biased.'

'And therefore automatically wrong.'

Severus paused a moment, staring at the girl. That had had an almost impressive bite of dark sarcasm to it, actually. For a moment he considered taking another peek into her head — it was obvious from the expression on her face she had been thinking about something else saying it — but chances were it was something he didn't care to know about anyway. 'Clearly. It would be an unfortunate waste of the investment of my time and effort if you were to accidentally kill yourself—' For some reason, Black's lips twitched with poorly-hidden amusement. '—brewing with unsatisfactory components at some point down the line, so it is a gap in your education I will be taking it upon myself to fill. You will still be studying History and Herbology, but not the same material as your peers, and you will not be attending classes with them. Any further question on this?'

Black shook her head. 'No, sir.'

'Is that a problem? Would you prefer to continue in those three?' It made absolutely no difference to him if she did, of course — they were a waste of her time, he'd be withdrawing her whether she wanted to or not. He was merely curious.

But, not entirely to his surprise, Black's lips tilted into a somewhat sheepish smile. 'Ah, no, really. Now that I know I can, I would probably do it myself anyway.'

Severus nodded; he personally didn't understand why nearly so many people hadn't opted out of History and Astronomy. He'd gone to Slughorn to get out the same day he and Lily had learned they could. 'Your duelling lessons with your cousin will continue.' An expression simultaneously surprised and relieved crossed the girl's face — if he had to guess, it hadn't occurred to her he might request otherwise. 'Direct combat of that sort had never truly been my speciality. Not to say I'm helpless, of course — your mother was very insistent about practising with me whether I wanted to or not — but I was never as talented as she was. Or your cousin, for that matter.' But then, very few people were, so that wasn't actually saying much. And Tonks certainly wasn't an unsuitable instructor in any case. From what she'd said, Black had progressed shockingly quickly, blowing through what took the average mage months to learn in a matter of days. True, she had been behind to start with, so she was really just catching up, but it was impressive all the same. It was clear Black had inherited at least some of Lily's talent, but her progress was certainly at least in part due to Tonks.

Not that he'd be saying any of that out loud, of course, to either of them.

'I know you wanted to learn runic casting.' Black answered with a sharp nod. 'You'll be learning basic wandless magic alongside. One does lead into the other well enough, and the potential of the skill cannot be overestimated. A little mind magic would probably be wise. You're delusional if you thought you would get out of this without learning some alchemy, and I'll probably end up teaching
you a fair few topics we don't normally cover in depth in ordinary Potions classes — I am primarily an alchemist and potioneer, after all, my peers will expect you to show at least some ability. Was there anything else you wanted from me?"

Black hesitated, but only for an instant. 'Shadow magic.'

Ah, yes. That would be on the list. 'I suppose we could do some of that. I didn't take to the field anything like your mother did, but I know a bit.'

Looking slightly suspicious, Black said, 'You're listed on the Dark Arts registry. Sir,' she added after a second, with the clear sense of an afterthought.

No real gain in calling attention to it, though. 'Unregistered practise of any of the restricted Dark Arts is unlawful. Since I do know some shadow magic, and use a few applications with some regularity, registering seemed wise. I would hate to give the Ministry a supposedly legitimate excuse to prosecute me, after all.' As he continued, and rather despite himself, he couldn't entirely prevent the touch of a smirk from coming to his lips. 'And besides, I didn't say I had little ability myself. I simply said I'm not as skilled as your mother was. Surely you've come to realise by now few people are.'

It was obvious Black was trying to hide the noticeably smug smile on her face, but she wasn't doing a very good job of it. After a moment of silently struggling, it was replaced by a thoughtful sort of wariness, her eyes flicking from Severus to the table and back again. 'Ah, see, I read a reference to a ritual.'

Severus forced himself not to tense; some of the most extremely unnerving conversations he'd ever had had started with some variation on that sentence. 'Yes?'

'I'd heard Susan mention familiar bonds, and I looked it up.' She bit her lip for a second, showing an entirely un-Gryffindorish degree of diffidence, before squaring herself and pushing on. 'I found reference to a ritual to invoke one, but not any details. It's blood magic, you see.'

Yes, he did. 'I know of the ritual, though I've never performed it myself. I am also registered in blood magic, however. I assume that's what you're really asking, if I would teach you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm not opposed. Just don't play with it. Botched blood magic can result in some, shall we say, unpleasant effects. In many cases, death would be preferable.' Of course, blood magic could do some rather disturbing things to people on purpose as well. He was certain Black already knew that, though, having spent so much time with the least intelligent and least subtle of the Weasleys. Many British people did have a disproportionate fear of blood magic in particular, the so-called Light families especially, and he doubted that Weasley was inclined to develop an informed, nuanced position. Or even capable of it.

Come to think of it, with how obvious it had been in previous years the idiot Weasley had been influencing Black's views on wizarding matters quite a bit, he was rather surprised she was even asking to learn so much dark magic. Some combination of Lily's journals and Tonks's lessons piercing through some of the propaganda, he'd expect. Convinced her what the Light said about these sorts of magics was complete nonsense, derived more from feeling than fact, people's irrational fears driving them to defame that which they did not understand, could not control, in so doing leaving themselves vulnerable to those less susceptible to such sentiments. Her own half-hidden amusement when he'd said the bit about not giving the Ministry "a supposedly legitimate excuse" seemed to suggest so.
Or, perhaps, the girl had realised that all of her enemies had absolutely no compunction using illegal magic on defenceless children, and that her life was more precious than principle. In which case, he could respect that as well, he supposed. What use, after all, have the dead for such things? Principle, honour and loyalty, these were privileges reserved for those fortunate multitudes who live comfortable lives, never having faced true suffering.

It was starting to become quite clear to Severus she wasn't one of those.

As he finally came to a conclusion — yes, Black was legitimately seeking to learn restricted dark magics, this wasn't some unfathomable ploy — he found himself fighting to repress a smirk. Dumbledore had learned about this, of course, only hours after that scene in the Great Hall, and before the evening had drawn late he'd already stuck his crooked nose into places it wasn't welcome. Severus had been asked (ordered) to confirm Black really knew what she was getting into. To talk her out of it. It was true Black had been becoming rather willful of late, Dumbledore had said, but her true nature certainly hadn't changed. Just a bit of adolescent rebellion. She wouldn't want to sully herself with such distasteful magics, of course not. If she truly knew what she was asking for, she wouldn't be interested. Severus was to make sure she understood and, if she didn't reconsider on her own, find some way to convince her to. It didn't really matter how. Or simply refuse her, but then she'd likely try to find someone else anyway. No, no, Severus had to turn her off the matter entirely somehow, that was the only way to...

To what? Save her? Save her from what? Most of what she'd asked to learn wasn't even restricted in many other places in the world! For fuck's sake, they taught runic casting and blood magic at Beauxbatons! Beauxbatons! Parselmouths were treated with a reverence just short of worship in certain places in southern Asia and central America and Africa, true masters of shadow magic were considered national treasures in Egypt. He was never sure how to interpret just how...unwavering, insistent Dumbledore was in his beliefs about some magics. Was he delusional enough he didn't realise the facts weren't on his side, that his was the minority opinion? Or did he simply not care?

But this wasn't the time to decipher Dumbledore's nonsense, oh no. He'd been so convinced. So convinced Black was one of his good little children of the Light. Perhaps in something of a rebellious phase, sure, but deep down she, well, how would Dumbledore put it? Something about love being the greatest magic? Would do what was right rather than what was easy? Some trite platitude, it's all white noise to Severus by this point. He'd been so convinced, as though the possibility he could have misjudged Black entirely hadn't even occurred to him.

He wondered how Dumbledore would react when he finally came to realise Black was no longer his.

Though, come to think of it, it was possible he might never notice. Severus had never been his. Dumbledore had been a means to an end to him, nothing more — any rhetoric about seeing the error of his ways, returning to the Light, all that shite, those were Dumbledore's words, not his. He played along, yes, but only to protect Lily. And once Dumbledore had failed at the only thing Severus had wanted from him, the only thing he'd asked of him, why in hell would the old man ever expect him to continue to have any loyalty to him? Thomas had killed Lily, true, but Dumbledore had failed to properly protect her as he'd sworn he would. He wasn't entirely innocent himself. Severus still played along, yes, but only because the act was currently useful for him. Once it was no longer useful, he wouldn't blink if someone murdered the self-righteous prick right in front of him. In fact, depending on how exactly it was done, who exactly did it, it might even be a bit satisfying. He really didn't care. And the silly old man seemingly hadn't put that together either, so convinced his own preconceptions reflect reality.

So, he guessed it was very possible Black would be free from further meddling for some time, until
their most august High Enchanter finally pulled his head out of his own arse. Which was good. He really didn't like getting into arguments with that insufferably self-righteous old sorcerer. He'd rather put off the inevitable attempted guilt trip for "corrupting" his precious little saviour for as long as possible.

'There are only a couple more things to make clear, then you can sign and we can move on.'

Black nodded. 'What, exactly?'

'I'm unsure how much you know of what an apprenticeship actually entails. On a day-to-day basis, I mean.' By the slightly confused look on Black's face, essentially nothing. All right, then. He tried not to sigh, and was mostly successful. 'To put it briefly, the apprentice reflects on the master, and vice versa. Do anything to embarrass me, and I will be...displeased.'

A wary sort of expression fell over Black's face, with just the beginnings of fury building behind, like fire hidden behind a pall of smoke. Not a metaphor that usually occurred to him to use, but the sharp, flickering heat the magic about her always took when she was angry was quite suggestive. It didn't seem like she even realised she did that every time, Draco wasn't wrong about that. 'What are you talking about, specifically?'

That...was an odd reaction. She clearly thought he was going to ask her to change something she was doing, and that was making her angry. But what? 'I meant in the general, Black. I didn't have anything specific in mind.' Even as he spoke, he quickly stole into the girl's thoughts, only taking an instant to find what she feared. This time, he entirely failed to hold back a long, exasperated sigh. As he pulled away, Black twitching at the withdrawal of mental contact, he said, 'I'm not going to ask you to stop seeing the Bones girl. I don't see how it's any business of mine. So long as you two are, shall we say, civil about it, which you have been, I have nothing to complain about.'

Somewhat to his surprise, the obvious hints of anger about the girl hadn't faded away. If anything, she seemed even more annoyed than she'd been a moment ago. 'Do you have to do that?'

He felt an eyebrow tick up without his consciously putting it there. 'Do what?'

Black grit her teeth for a moment, glaring across the table at him. Finally, she ground out, 'You keep reading my mind. I can feel you there, you know. Sirius taught me occlumency over the summer.'

Severus let out a sharp, derisive snort. Mostly, to cover his own surprise and confusion. She was still calling him by his name? Hadn't he told her? He would have thought the most annoying of the Blacks would have told her he was her father at the first opportunity, but it was true he hadn't heard one way or the other for certain. With her staying with him most of the summer, and making plans to be adopted into House Black, well, Severus had assumed he'd mentioned it at some point. It was possible, he guessed, that he had told her, and she was still calling him by his name anyway. It wasn't like she'd ever had a father before, he wouldn't expect using such terms of address to feel natural. Or perhaps she was just annoyed with him for running off and getting sent to Azkaban like a bloody idiot, so had consciously chosen not to acknowledge their relationship most of the time. Not unreasonable, Severus would probably do something like that in her place.

Of course...it was possible Sirius Black wasn't her father. Lily had never told him one way or the other for certain. That far along into the war, they hadn't spoken of personal matters habitually anymore, and he hadn't thought it important enough to ask. Lily had admitted, during her brief engagement to Potter, that she'd started having sex with him too — both of them were hers anyway, so why not? Black still rather a lot more often than Potter, which was not a detail he'd really needed to know, but she still did. With what he remembered of events around the Battle of Hogsmeade, when the girl should have been conceived, what he knew of where the three members of their odd
little family had been and when, what they'd been doing, he'd always thought Black the far more likely...candidate, so to speak. They'd claimed both in public and among friends that Potter was the father, but of course they would. He was her legal husband, it was expected they would say so even if it wasn't true, and Potter and Black looked similar enough no one would ever know. Inbred Noble Houses and all that. He'd always assumed the claim Potter was her father by blood was a lie, but it was possible he'd assumed incorrectly. He was almost certain, but not entirely certain.

But this wasn't the time to wonder about that. Not that he even cared that much, honestly. What did it matter to him which her father was? He'd never quite enjoyed the company of either. It was just curious. 'Apparently, he didn't teach you very well. Your skill may be sufficient to resist someone bludgeoning at your mind with their magic like a child, but to a true legilimens your defences may as well not even be there. I didn't say I'd likely be teaching you some mind magic for no reason, after all.'

'But...' That was odd. He wasn't cheating currently, true, but if he had to guess, Black had come up with an objection, but it didn't feel like she really believed it. Like it was something she thought she should say, but wasn't convinced it was legitimate. Hmm. 'But Dumbledore tested me, said I was fine.'

Ah, yes. She was no longer Dumbledore's. He'd noticed that already. That explained it. 'As I said: sufficient to resist someone bludgeoning at your mind with their magic, like a child. From what I can see in those glimpses I took, I am certain you'd at least be able to buy yourself time against quite nearly anyone using that pathetic charm. You might even get lucky against a user of Dumbledore's calibre. But that is not true legilimency. It is a pale imitation. You can defend yourself against them, yes, but I doubt you could stop me for a second no matter how hard you tried. At your current level of skill, you probably wouldn't even feel my former master in there at all.'

Black's eyes narrowed, just a little. Just that, but he was still certain she knew who he was talking about.

'Does that bother you?' When Black just looked confused, he raised both brows a bit, staring hard and steady back into her eyes. 'You know who my former master is. Some of the magic I will be teaching you I learned with Lily, teaching ourselves what nobody was willing to. Some of it, though, I was taught by Thomas Gaunt. Of course, most people know him by another name.' He tilted his head slightly, allowing a smirk to pull at his lips, just a little. 'Doesn't that bother you?'

For a long moment, she simply stared at him. Barely moving, barely even breathing, her expression barely changing the slightest bit. It was almost impressive, actually. After some seconds, she muttered, 'You don't care that he killed her?'

He felt his own cheeks tighten slightly, fingers clutching about the arms of his chair, the only external sign he allowed. That it was that limited was only due to long practice. His chest and throat were suddenly suffocated with fiery fury, magic icy cold and razor sharp contorting with deadly rage, barely held back through iron will. He took a few seconds to force himself under proper control, teeth joined so tightly his jaw hurt. One would think he'd be used to that sort of comment by now. Eventually. Yes, someday, it would stop. He took a slow breath, forcing a note of chill calm onto his voice. 'Take care what you say. You don't know what you're talking about.'

'I didn't mean to...' Black shifted in her seat a little, looking disproportionately awkward. Disproportionately, because he really wouldn't think anything that was going on should really be that sensitive for her. Odd. 'I don't know. I just mean... Well, you still call him the Dark Lord, your former master. Using his proper name and everything...'

Forcing down the last of the protesting power at the back of his mind, he tilted his head a bit, gave
her a look with just a shade of disappointment. 'I'm simply showing the proper respect.'

Black's eyes narrowed, the familiar green glittering with an equally familiar suspicion. 'Why, though? I mean, if you cared, I wouldn't think you would still, you know...'

'I don't need to like the Dark Lord to respect him.' Black opened her mouth to say something, but Severus cut her off with a look, the disappointment turned for more intense, whatever she'd been about to say choked off. 'You don't respect someone or something because of any warm feelings you may have. Respect isn't about you. It's about them.

'You respect the threat inherent in the cold when you put on a cloak before leaving the castle. You respect the power of fire by not sticking your fingers into it. You respect a venomous snake by not needlessly poking at it without protection. In my class, you take precautions with certain components, certain processes, because if you are not careful they can harm you. You are respecting their ability to harm you. You are cautious with certain more dangerous spells, in any of your wanded classes, for the same reason. You respect the power of magic itself, so you are careful. The same is true of mages. Mages more powerful than you, mages more experienced than you, mages who have mastered magics you cannot even imagine, they deserve respect. Not because you like them, not because they are nice to you, but because they can exercise power over you if they choose to. By respecting them, you are acknowledging the power they could use on you, so they have no need to.

'That is one thing you have never understood, Black. Take our interactions over the years. In your mind, I had done nothing to earn your respect, so you felt your insolence was justified. What you never understood is that any respect you give is not about you. I do not deserve your respect because I have done anything to earn it, nor because I have done anything to endear myself to you. I deserve your respect because of who and what I am. I deserve your respect because I have power over you. Authority through my position, yes, but also magical ability. If I choose to, I can horribly murder you at any moment, and you will be completely helpless to stop me, and nobody will ever know. That I do not choose to does not change the fact that I can. You are at my mercy, every second you are in my presence, but you did not act like it. Since you did not respect me, I saw no reason I should respect you.'

For a second, he paused, wondering to himself if she realised the significance of the past tense there. She certainly didn't like him, true, but at the very least she respected his abilities now — she wouldn't have publicly humiliated herself in front of all her peers for the dubious pleasure of learning from him if she didn't. That was significant. But, honestly, he doubted it. She'd shown little aptitude in this sort of thing in the past, after all.

'It is the same with the Dark Lord. You should show him respect, not because of anything he has done, but for what he is, and what he can do. He is powerful, and power deserves respect. Even the Dark Lord himself respects those with abilities and qualities he admires, even when they possess them in degrees lesser than his own. And just because you respect someone does not mean you cannot hate them.' His voice turning low and dark, 'Just because you respect someone does not mean you cannot wish them dead.

'Do you understand?'

Black was silent, just for a moment, staring back at him with a crooked expression he couldn't quite read. Without cheating, anyway. Then she nodded, eyes dropping to the table. 'Yes, sir. I understand. Is that why you...' She trailed off, looking weirdly awkward again.

He managed not to sigh. 'Don't mumble, girl. It's annoying.'
'Is that really why you were such an arse before? Just, the not being properly respectful thing. I mean, I can barely remember how it went exactly, but I'm pretty sure you were an arse to me before I was an arse to you. I would think the first time, at least, you wouldn't have had a reason for.'

'Do I need a reason?' Black gave him a painfully exasperated glare at that, and it took a fair amount of effort to not smirk back in response. 'I may have been somewhat harder on you than most of your peers, true, but surely you must have noticed by now that I am not known as the kindest of all professors at this fine institution. I go out of my way to be aggravating, to be honest. As long as I'm going to suffer, I figure all of you may as well join me.' Of course, it didn't help that he simply didn't like children. Even when he'd been one himself they'd annoyed him. And this wasn't something he would usually admit to — he'd given to Dumbledore excuses hinting at emotional trauma he was supposedly dealing with, which the old fool was gullible enough to believe — but Black was going to be his apprentice within a few minutes here anyway, so why not.

Black didn't realise what a privileged position she was in to actually know his honest thoughts on the matter, obviously. She just blinked at him for a second, then said, 'Why?' as though Severus were making absolutely no sense, and this was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

'Come now, Black.' He had to hold in a smirk when she flinched at his low, mocking drawl. 'You can't honestly believe this is what I wanted to be doing with myself. Do I seem the type of person who would be drawn to the idea of becoming an educator? Really, now.'

'Then, why?'

'Much like many others, this ridiculous circumstance can be explained with two simple words: Albus Dumbledore.' Hmm, now that expression on Black's face was interesting. What did she have to be so annoyed with Dumbledore about? He could just slip into her thoughts and find out, he guessed, but there was no real point. He'd almost certainly find out eventually, and chances are he wouldn't really care when he did, it was probably asinine nonsense.

And, perhaps, his former master hadn't been entirely incorrect when he'd said using legilimency too much could make life very boring very quickly — when all mysteries were solved, there wasn't much point doing anything anymore.

'In exchange for his protection from the law in the aftermath of the Dark Lord's first defeat, our esteemed Headmaster demanded I take up the post of Professor of Potions here at Hogwarts. He knew the Dark Lord wasn't truly dead, you see, knew he would return eventually, and he would need me as a spy when he did, so wanted to keep me close. Not to mention I'm a handy insight into certain sectors of society he isn't welcome.' Not that he ever actually told the old man much. It generally wasn't wise to inform on one's more useful friends and associates for no good reason. 'So I am forced, day in and day out, for years, to deal with class after class after class of selfish, melodramatic, arrogant, short-sighted, empty-headed morons.'

'Did you think I enjoy this? Lecturing on the most basic principles of my chosen field, concepts I had mastered before even entering Hogwarts, fruitlessly attempting to force them into the heads of children who, with a few notable exceptions, really couldn't care less, have no respect for or appreciation for or motivation to learn the art at all. Again, and again, and again. The same simplistic potions, the same idiotic mistakes, the same infuriating dunderheads who never seem to listen no matter how many times I try to correct them. Again, and again, and again. And just when I have the idiocy properly beaten out of them, once the fools are trained enough to brew without becoming an immediate danger to everyone around them, they are gone, and are replaced with a fresh batch of insipid imbeciles. It never ends. The great, perfect Albus Dumbledore has put me in my own personal hell, and I am certain by now I would have lost my mind entirely if I hadn't found some
way to entertain myself.' Which he knew was unfair to the poor children so unfortunate as to be exposed to his nonexistent mercy. He could acknowledge that, but he really didn't give a damn. 'If I'm going to suffer, all of you may as well join me.'

The look Black was giving him was very strange. But, in a way, that wasn't entirely surprising. It was possible he'd let a bit more emotion colour his voice than he usually allowed, it was possible the idea that he even had this constant struggle going on had never even occurred to her. Not that he would expect it to — it often didn't occur to children that adults had internal experiences that had absolutely nothing to do with them. It took long seconds for Black to shake off her surprise, and she finally asked, 'What would you do, then, if you could?'

'I was planning on becoming a Healer.'

He could quite nearly taste the shock from here. Black went completely still, eyes so wide he would be surprised if she weren't straining something, mouth sitting pointlessly open for a short moment. 'A Healer?'

'Yes, a Healer.' To her lingering doubtful expression, he said, 'Not for the reasons I imagine most Healers have. Wanting to ease the suffering of their fellow men and all that sentimental nonsense, oh no.' Surprisingly, Black's lips were twitching with a repressed smirk at that. 'No, it is quite simple, really. Tell me, Black, do you like riddles?'

She frowned at him. 'Riddles?'

'Yes, girl, riddles.'

For a short moment she just frowned, then shrugged, clearly dismissing her own confusion. 'Ah, not really, I guess? I never really got the point.'

No surprise there. 'The point is an exercise in cleverness. To test your wits against another's. I always liked them, you might imagine, liked being able to find an answer, to solve a problem, that others couldn't. Healing is like solving a riddle, but far more complicated. You are given hints, but some hints might be missing. Some observations that seem like hints might not truly be hints at all, completely unrelated to the problem. Perhaps there is no one answer, but multiple answers, and before you can even attempt to go about solving it you must determine which hints belong to which answers. And the magic itself is interesting — the human body is an incredibly complex machine, so logically the magics to manipulate it must be just as complex. The problems found in Healing are the most complex problems in the world. The entire field is inherently fascinating, filled with riddles I could spend my entire life attempting to solve.' Severus shrugged. 'Instead I am stuck here.'

'But, we are quite off topic. I was clarifying a few things you needed to know before we can finalise this perhaps ill-advised apprenticeship of yours.'

Black's face split into a grim smile at that. 'Yeah, I guess.' Whether she was referring to the apprenticeship being ill-advised or that they had gotten distracted, Severus had no idea.

And he didn't care. 'There is etiquette that is involved, but I do not particularly care about it. For the most part, so long as you are not annoying me unnecessarily, it makes no difference to me. There will certainly come a time, however, when I am invited to some function or another, and you will attending as my apprentice. I would request you observe the proper niceties then.'

Lips curling and fingers twitching, looking to be quite nearly cringing away from the very idea, Black said, 'And what exactly are the proper niceties?'
He flipped a few dismissive fingers at her, shaking his head. 'Honestly, I wouldn't know. I was taught proper society manners as pertained to men, I wouldn't be able to tell you how to go about it. Ask Andromeda when you're home at the end of the year. She's a proper pureblood lady, she'll know. You won't need to know it before then.' Black just nodded. Still didn't seem pleased with the idea, but good enough — and he could always confirm she'd done as bid with Andromeda later. 'The last is, perhaps, the most important. If you do not obey, there will be consequences. Severe ones. I don't think I need to remind you about what I can choose to do.'

Pathologically contrary as she seemed to be — yes, he noticed the hypocrisy — Black gave him a raised eyebrow at the half-veiled threat. But she nodded all the same, said, 'No, sir, I remember,' easily enough. Cheeky girl.

He stared at her in silence, just a moment, eyes cold and sharp and unwavering the way he'd long ago perfected. Originally copied from Lily, not that he'd be telling Black that. 'What I will be teaching you is for you alone. You will not share it with any of your little friends. You will not share it with any of the other Blacks. You will not even tell anyone else what exactly I am teaching you. The topics in general will be a matter of public record, but not specific details. This goes double for everything else. By the end of our arrangement, I am sure you will know an uncomfortable proportion of my secrets. That is the way these things go. As my apprentice, you are allowed to know, but no one else. I will also certainly learn quite a bit of your personal matters myself, but I will keep them to myself. As your master, I am allowed to know, but no one else. And it will stay that way.

'To the vast majority of mages the world over, the bond between master and apprentice is sacrosanct. Break it, and you will regret it. Not only because I will be displeased with you, though I certainly will be. Betray me and I will ensure everyone the entire world over knows you cannot be trusted. That is not a light burden to carry for your entire life, believe me. But, do not betray me, do not abuse what I teach you, and...' He flipped the folder open slid the contract over to settle in front of Black, a flick of a finger and a light flash of power bringing a self-inking quill floating over to land right next to it. 'Well, I do have quite a lot to teach. No one would accuse me of being helpless, after all, would they?'

Save for the constant crackling of fire in the hearth to Black's back, the room was still and silent for a long moment. Black stared unmoving at the parchment in front of her, and Severus simply waited, trying not to be impatient. Which was easier than usual — at the least he could understand a bit of hesitation in committing oneself to something like this, it wasn't unreasonable. Finally she picked up the quill, but didn't sign right away, the fingers of her off hand idly playing with the feathered end. 'The, er, the Dark Lord, he was your master.'

All right, then. 'Yes.'

Black hesitated for a short moment, by the barely noticeable hints visible from the outside biting her tongue. 'What was he like? I mean, really? It feels like... Well, what I know doesn't all fit. It doesn't make sense, and I'm not sure what to think.'

For a couple seconds, Severus paused, staring steadily over at the girl. Mostly, trying to figure out how to answer that question. 'Thomas Gaunt is a very complicated man. I am one of only a handful able to make any half-legitimate claim at truly understanding him. However, those are secrets I have kept for many years. I will not tell you. But I may tell my apprentice.'

Black shot him an exasperated look at that. But, with a clear air of reluctance, she turned to the contract. And started actually reading it. Good, she wasn't completely hopeless. Her face tightened with annoyance in a few places, but she didn't say anything. At least not until she got to the end. 'I
have to sign as Harry Potter, don't I.'

'Yes.'

'But, when this is filed at the Ministry, wouldn't that be a problem? I mean, apprenticeships being public record and all that. I'm sure someone would take notice if the Boy-Who-Lived was suddenly in a Dark Arts apprenticeship.'

For a couple seconds, Severus couldn't speak. He was too blindsided by the bitter hatred on that ridiculous hyphenated monstrosity. Fascinating. Eventually, he pulled himself together, forcing an irritated tone into his voice. 'Did you think that hadn't occurred to me? The documentation will be under an illusion until the appropriate time. Before you ask, yes, that is illegal, but I'm not one to care.'

To his annoyance, the girl wasn't at all satisfied with that answer. 'What kind of illusion? Only, I would figure the Ministry would expect that kind of thing might happen occasionally. Shouldn't they hit everything with a general dispel, at least?'

'Really, Black? I thought you would have learned by now not to give the Ministry too much credit.'

Just for an instant, Black's doubt was replaced with a flicker of amusement. 'But you are right: they do have a process to detect any interfering magics on sensitive documents. However, I am a more capable wizard than whoever they have handling such things at the Office. It'll be under a displaced enchantment. I will not be explaining the technique right now. Suffice to say they are extremely difficult to create, but almost impossible to detect. It's taken care of. Don't worry about it.'

After one last moment of hesitation, Black brought the tip of the quill to the parchment and, with a very clear grimace of distaste, signed her birth name on the empty line.

Another flick of his fingers cast another wandless movement charm, sending the contract floating over to a waiting envelope on his desk. 'There. Was that so painful?'

Black gave him another impotent glare. He was starting to suspect, by how easily and lightly she gave him, there wasn't any real feeling behind them. Just a thing she did. 'Will you tell me about him now?'

'I suppose I could. It is relevant to your own position, after all.' He dithered for just a moment, then internally shrugged — why not? It was possible he'd developed something of a habit dealing with Draco. A few more flicks of his fingers brought a hidden bottle of rum floating over to the table, closely tailed by two obediently following glasses. He didn't bother lifting his arms from his chair, pouring the glasses with magic instead. The girl would probably think he was showing off, but honestly he only did it this way because handling the bottle by hand was slightly awkward.

Also, force of habit. Nothing like a casual demonstration of superior magical ability to silence annoying blood purists.

Ignoring the distrustful glare Black was shooting the glass in front of her — if he'd wanted to poison her he'd have done it before making her his apprentice, honestly — Severus settled a little further into his chair. The long, leisurely sip he took from his glass was definitely not just to delay this conversation another moment. 'I'm sure Lily mentioned, in those journals you have, our Professor Horace Slughorn.' Looking only slightly confused over where this was going, Black nodded. 'She might have mentioned he would throw these insufferable little parties every once in a while. Slughorn may have been a Professor of Hogwarts, yes, and perhaps the greatest Master of Potions of his generation, but he was also an incorrigible influence broker. An academic matchmaker, if you will.
'At first, he wasn't interested in having me at his fancy parties. I was not a very pleasant child, you see. I assume he figured I would embarrass him by making a spectacle of myself. But, eventually, it became very clear to him that I had exceptional talent, exceptional enough to overlook issues he found in my temperament. Lily vouching for me also might have helped. He'd always favoured Lily.'

He paused when, immediately after taking a sip from her own glass, Black burst into a noisy coughing fit, enough she had to set the glass down to prevent herself from spilling. Once she'd finally quieted, which took a surprisingly long span of time filled with increasingly breathless gagging, Severus drawled, 'Do try not to choke to death. I would hate to have gone through all this tedium only for you to die now.'

'Sorry, I just...' Black let out a noise something between clearing her throat and another cough, indicating the glass of rum with a tilt of her head.

'Never had spirits before? I find that hard to believe. From what Minerva tells me, the Weasley twins smuggle enough firewhiskey into Gryffindor to lay out the entire tower on a regular basis.'

'They do. I stick to butterbeer.' Black returned Severus's look with an awkward shrug. 'The butterbeer bottles are still sealed, the firewhiskey is always opened. Never take anything from the Twins that isn't in a sealed package, from a brand you recognise.'

That wasn't entirely idiotic, actually. Dismissing the topic without another thought, Severus returned to the previous one. 'One day, in third year, Slughorn was throwing another one of those annoying parties. He introduced me to a man, telling him I was the best talent in Potions he'd seen since the other had graduated. Perhaps even better. Slughorn told me this was the Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Gaunt. The Lord himself said that was a bloody mouthful to be saying every time, so I should just call him Thomas. We talked for half of the night, mostly about potions and alchemy. At one point, that I'm a halfblood came up, and I was rather surprised when not only did he not care, but he is one himself. A halfblood, a Lord of a Noble and Most Ancient House? Who had ever heard of such a thing? At the end of the night, he said something about it always being wonderful to meet rising talent, and if I wouldn't mind overmuch if he wrote me on occasion, just to keep up with what I was doing. I said he could though, honestly, I didn't expect him to. I figured a Lord of the Wizengamot had better things to do with his time than bother with me.

'I got the first letter within a week. And another soon after I replied, and another, and another. For months we wrote back and forth, about all sorts of things. Mostly academic, only the barest bit about our personal lives — far more mine than his, admittedly — a little politics here and there. That summer, one day he simply showed up at my parents' house in Cokeworth. No warning, I hadn't even told him where I lived. With no explanation, rambling off about something to do with enchanting, I don't remember what, he dragged me off to Diagon Alley. Bought me some more suitable clothes over my protests, then to lunch somewhere I certainly wouldn't have been able to afford on my own. Once I was thoroughly confused, he threw up a few privacy charms, and told me he was quite impressed with me. So rarely, he said, did he meet someone with quite so much natural talent and intelligence, nor quite so much drive to prove his worth despite constant jeering and interference from the increasingly powerful blood supremacists of the day. He would like to make me his apprentice, if I was willing. I said he couldn't, my mother likely wouldn't agree. He said, Well then, I would have to be one of his secret apprentices, wouldn't I?

'So he taught me. All kinds of things. And I didn't even learn about his involvement with the Death Eaters until over a year later.' Severus paused a moment, apparently to take another sip from his rum, but really to plan out how to approach the point he wanted to get across. 'Tell me, have you ever heard of Väinö of Livonia?'
Black blinked at him for a second, clearly unbalanced by the apparent change in subject. 'Erm, nothing? Don't think I've ever heard of...him?'

'Yes, him.' Not altogether surprised, Severus admitted. It wasn't a topic usually covered in History, and most don't educate themselves beyond what was needed for class. 'How about the Brotherhood of Dark Lords?'

'Erm, didn't they try to invade Scotland or something? The Founders fought against them, I remember that. They were famous for that even before Hogwarts, I think.'

'That is correct — before Hogwarts was a school, it was their base of operations in their war against the Brotherhood. Is that the sum total of your knowledge on the subject? You know nothing about them, only that the Founders fought them?'

At the very least, Black had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed about that, shifting in her seat a little. 'Ah, no, I don't really know anything else.'

Severus let out a short, thin sigh. Not surprising, but still annoying. He really wished Dumbledore would get someone else to teach History. That bloody ghost was useless. But he shook his annoyance off, settled in to explain far more than he'd like.

A lot of people think the title "Dark Lord" is in reference to the person using dark magic, but it originally wasn't. In fact, the title or an equivalent isn't even used everywhere in the world, just Britain and a couple other places in Europe. It is a reference to the Brotherhood, though even then was a mistranslation. The original Norse did not refer to darkness, but the night, and the connotation was not negative — a single hundred might have one leader who dealt with non-magical affairs, and another who dealt with magical ones, referred to respectively as their chiefs of day and night. The Brotherhood was nothing more than a regional cooperation of numerous chiefs of the night, not all too dissimilar from the muggle pug.

The old Nordic Dark Lords weren't necessarily cruel people, but they sometimes were. Give enough people enough power, and some of them will inevitably abuse it. Most did use what modern mages would call dark magic, of course, but in most places in Europe at the time their concept of exactly what dark magic was was entirely different — it generally wasn't illegal, for one thing. The majority used dark magic back then. They did have a tendency to impose themselves on foreign peoples, but so did their muggle counterparts. They weren't so terrible as British stories tend to make them out to be.

In fact, the historical Helga Hufflepuff was a "Dark Lady" named Helga Einriðisdóttir, a member of the Brotherhood and already a famous dragonslayer before defecting to join the other three Founders. The soft reputation she has in modern times was originally inspired by how she brought every single member of her clan with her to the Valley — she left behind not even those who had to be carried, the story went. The expression on Black's face when Severus mentioned that was simply priceless.

But it is true they participated in the various raids and invasions on foreign lands their muggle cousins were so infamous for, and they were just about as gentle. Which is to say, not very. Black would have learned at least a little bit about the defensive war the Celtic Nations fought against the Brotherhood, but they weren't the only people so assaulted. One such place was Livonia, modern-day Estonia and Latvia.

Väinö was a young child when Norse raiders, led by the Brotherhood, fell upon the defenceless village of his birth. Most of the people were either slaughtered or abducted, every structure burned to the ground, only a small handful escaping with their lives and freedom. One was Väinö, now consumed with an intense hatred for all things Dane, and especially the Brotherhood. He swore to
himself he would see them all destroyed, no matter what it took.

His revenge took years, decades. He left his homeland, made his way to Scania and ingratiated himself into the local culture. Learned their customs, learned their language, learned their magic. After years of planning, years of work, years of fighting and politicking and backstabbing, he was finally respected enough among his enemies to be honoured with an invitation to join the Brotherhood. Once he knew where they would be meeting, he planted a few enchanted plates of his own devising.

When the Dark Lords of the Brotherhood arrived, the air turned to poison, and they died gasping. Every single one. The loss kept Scandinavia magically vulnerable for the next century or two.

Every single one except Väinö, of course, who hadn't been stupid enough to get caught in his own trap. He returned to his homeland, openly bragging about his accomplishment. His victory would be immortalised, songs sung and legends written about him for generations, and even into modern times similar schemes are still referred to as uses of Väinö's Gambit.

Finally coming around to the point after the long, unfortunately necessary detour, Severus finally said, 'The day my former master revealed to me he was this Lord Voldemort people were whispering about, he also explained to me why. He asked me, just as I asked you, if I'd ever heard of Väinö of Livonia. And he explained his plan to see them all destroyed. Every single one.'

'I'm not sure I understand.' No, Severus was nearly certain Black did understand. She just didn't necessarily want to understand. It was too great of a shift in her perception of the last few decades, too sharply contradicting everything she thought she understood. Not that he could necessarily blame her for that — she had been fed lies her entire life, after all. 'Destroy every single one of who?'

'Use your brain for once, Black, and it should be obvious. Consider what Väinö of Livonia did. Consider the implications of my former master telling me his intent with Lord Voldemort was to accomplish much the same. Connect the dots. It's not complicated.'

'He...' Black frowned down at the table, her fingers tight about the glass she'd barely drunk from at all. She swallowed, closed her eyes for a moment, making a very clear effort to keep herself externally calm. And not doing that great a job of it, honestly, her magic was still roiling about her in a nauseating tempest. She really couldn't tell she was doing that, could she? 'He wants to...to get rid of the pureblood supremacists.'

Severus nodded. 'Yes.'

The confusion shifting to rage so quickly Severus almost didn't notice it happen, the magic about her turning thick and hot enough he could feel it prickling at his skin, Black nearly shouted, 'But, but that doesn't make any sense! With how many muggleborns and halfbloods and not terrible— There had to be a better way to do it!'

'How?' The simple, flatly-delivered question disorienting Black enough there was no longer any danger of her breaking anything, Severus paused a moment to take another sip from his mostly-drained rum. A moment he drew out far longer than necessary, just because. The way Black's left eye twitched with irritation was quite amusing. 'From nearly the beginning, I wanted to bring Lily into my master's confidence. Partially to make her survival more likely, partially because I knew she'd be useful. Finally I convinced him, and arranged a meeting between them, spring of our fifth year. When it had all been explained, Lily had the same problem you do: too many good people would die in the process. Later, when I asked her if she had any better ideas...' Severus shrugged. 'She couldn't think of anything either.'
Black did seem to be slightly pleased with that — the parallelism with her mother, he'd assume — but by the tense air about her she wasn't quite settled. 'But... But why? I mean, why does he want to kill them all so much?'

'Is that really so hard to understand? For his first couple years at Hogwarts, everyone thought he was a muggleborn. Sorted into Slytherin. This particular prejudice was not quite so overwhelming then as it is now, even in Slytherin, but you can safely assume he did not have a good time. When he finally confirmed he was a halfblood, it didn't make his situation any better. This arrogant, penniless halfblood attempting to claim not only the name of a Noble and Most Ancient House, but the Lordship as well? Consider how much these people would have hated him. More than an ordinary halfblood, even an ordinary muggleborn, this one thinks he's *special*. This one thinks he's *one of us*.'

Severus shook his head, setting his emptied glass on the table. 'No, Thomas Gaunt grew up facing an endless litany of prejudice and violence, propagated at the direction of mindless bigotry. He has every reason to hate the purebloods of Britain. He has every reason to plot the destruction of their entire way of life. And he was going to use the character of Lord Voldemort to do it.'

Not that Severus had been entirely confident of that until very recently. He'd thought... Well, he didn't know what he'd thought. That his former master had seduced him into his service with talk about destroying the hold blood supremacy had over the British government, but hadn't intended to actually do it. That it had been just words. He wasn't even entirely sure why he'd come to think that.

No, that wasn't true. There was no point in being dishonest with himself. He'd killed Lily, and Severus hadn't been able to be rational about him anymore.

But now, now he was certain. It was the only thing that made any sense. If his former master had only been out for power, or his own entertainment, he would be *doing* something. Something, anything. But he wasn't. The obvious answer, the *only* answer, was that the means he had available no longer suited his purposes. Voldemort had been designed to attract the worst of the blood supremacists to himself. To root them out wherever they hid and gather them all in one place, so they could be efficiently disposed of. He no longer thought the original plan could work. So it had to be abandoned.

In his own head, he could admit dangling the Boy-Who-Lived in front of his face had been something of a test. Lily would not be pleased with him for that, gambling with her daughter's life. But it had turned out well in any case.

He would come up with a new plan. Severus was certain of that. He couldn't leave the situation unresolved. He was like Severus in that way — if he saw a problem, knew the solution, and had the power to enact it, he was entirely helpless to stop himself from doing it. It was just the way they were. Whether it was in their own best interest or not, whether the people involved permitted their interference or not. Problems necessitated solutions.

And Thomas Gaunt would solve them. He was capable of nothing less.

He should have known better. Severus should have known. That he could doubt his master like that... Hadn't he said it himself, only minutes ago? He was one of the very few who could claim to know Tom with any legitimacy. He'd known what Tom was, from quite nearly the beginning. And he'd let himself become blinded. By his own *feelings*. It was quite embarrassing. Thomas would be so disappointed. Lily would be disappointed, come to think of it.

Actually, his former master was probably already disappointed. In retrospect, he doubted he could have hidden his internal conflict nearly as effectively as he'd thought he had been. Tom surely knew. That was a bit embarrassing.
But he was supposed to be informing his apprentice here. Jesus, that sounded absurd, even in his
head. *Melantha Black, his apprentice.* He suffocated an involuntary shiver, started reaching for his
rum only to find the glass emptied. Yes. This was going to take some getting used to. 'You do not
have to worry about the Dark Lord any longer. I asked him what his intentions are with you. He said
he had none. So long as you do not get in his way, he feels no particular need to harm you. And it is
unlikely you will find yourself in his way.'

Disbelief so thick on her voice she nearly choked, Black said, 'And you trust him?'

'As absurd as it may sound?' He raised a single eyebrow a tick. 'Yes. The Väinö's Gambit he had
devised will no longer work, so he is abandoning it. By this time next year, there will be no Lord
Voldemort. That I certainly trust. His actions confirm his words. If he will not be Lord Voldemort, he
has no reason to care about the Boy-Who-Lived.' If anything, he'd probably be inclined to favour
Black, recognising her new status as his former apprentice's apprentice. If his numerous apprentices
were the closest Thomas Gaunt would ever come to having children, those they apprenticed in turn
were the closest he'd ever come to having grandchildren. But she wasn't likely to believe that if he
tried to explain it anyway.

'But, that...' Black trailed off, leaned forward in her chair, rubbing at her face with both hands.
Severus let the silence hang. He could imagine this was quite a change of circumstances for her to
wrap her head around. Many people in the Order had been talking about the Dark Lord's return like
it was the end of bloody days. It was only natural she'd have trouble adjusting to the idea it wasn't.
So he waited, long moments, trying not to be impatient. Or at least not to look it. Finally Black
straightened, let out a long sigh. Her eyes slightly unfocused on the wall behind him, she said, 'Then
why are we doing this, then?'

'Doing what?'

'This whole apprenticeship thing.' Black's eyes darted back to his, only for a second, before jumping
down to the table. 'I mean, the whole reason... The point was to defend myself properly. From
Voldemort. And if he's not a problem...'

'Surely you don't think the Dark Lord is the only threat you will ever have to face.' Black winced at
the scathing ice on his voice, the message obviously sunk partially through already. But Severus had
never been one for half-measures. 'You are the Boy-Who-Lived. Though, I suppose—' He felt a
smirk touch his lips. '—we'll have to do something about that title now.' Normally he'd rebuke Black
for rolling her eyes at him like that, but the whole myth was ridiculous enough he'd let it slide this
time. 'People all over the world know of you. Less so in other nations than in Britain, but all the
same. Eyes will be on you for all the days of your life. You cannot escape it. And you are an
exceptionally powerful witch. You may not realise that yet, but the rest she faced with only a visible
sense of disgust. Almost petulance. He wasn't sure what to think of that. 'And what exactly am I supposed to do about it?'

'People will try to harm you. I can't tell you who, or when. But it will happen. You must be prepared
to stop them when they do. But it's more than that. No matter what you do, people will assume you
want something. Want to do something. With the power you will have at your disposal, people will
assume you must. They would, in your place. They won't believe you if you tell them you only wish
to be left alone, no matter how true it may be. Power going unused is much like a river ceasing to flow, the winds never blowing, the stars freezing in the sky. If you do not give them something, they will invent it for themselves.' Severus shrugged, the gesture as easy and casual as he could make it. 'It is better to come up with something. That way, people don't dictate your image for you. You can control, at least to some extent, how people will see you.

'So, Melantha Black, tell me.' He leaned forward a bit, staring hard and steady. Staring right into her eyes, those unnervingly familiar eyes, willing the message to be heard, to sink in deeply, and stay there. 'What do you want to accomplish with your life?'

Black stared blankly back, silent. But she didn't have to actually say anything, he knew the answer already: she didn't know. She had no idea what she wanted to do with herself. All that untapped power, all that unharnessed talent, and she had not a single thought at all.

But that was fine. He could work with that.

Chapter End Notes

Ping — A word in various Germanic languages for an assembly of free men, one form or another of which governed most historical Germanic societies (in pre-feudal times, anyway). The Anglo–Saxon Witenagemōt is a rather late, French-influenced iteration of the same thing, where JKR got the name Wizengamot. So, the Brotherhood of Dark Lords is essentially the Norse equivalent to the Wizengamot. That's on purpose.

[Helga Einriðisdóttir, a member of the Brotherhood and already a famous dragonslayer] — Yes, this is actually headcanon, not Severus just fucking with Mel's head for shiggles.

Väinö — In case any nerds out there are wondering, it's far more likely Väinö was named after the god/hero Väinämöinen, which Väinö is short for, and not the other way around.

In case anyone was thinking it, yes, my headcanon Snape is basically magic Doctor House.

And yeah, this chapter got really late. Sorry about that. First the TLG chapter went long, then sleep stupidity happened again. And, well, then I drove roughly seven hundred miles, which threw off my writing a bit. It's possible I might have invaded LeighaGreene's house. She's in the room, right over there, as I type this. Which is sort of absurd. Did you know all those words on the internet are, like, real people? You learn something every day.

Hopefully I'll be able to keep something resembling a normal schedule moving forward, but we'll have to see.

Until next time,
~Wings
November 1995 — Questions Answered and More Withheld

Chapter Summary

Mel gets answers to questions she never thought to ask.

Chapter Notes

*Oops. Uh. Finished this chapter a week ago, forgot to post it on AO3. Ha ha.*

*This chapter contains a few quotes from Prisoner of Azkaban. Some of the wording is intentionally off a little, Mel imprecisely remembering what was said.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mel hesitated, just for a moment, her hand floating inches off the wood of the door. Then she took a last breath in private, knocked as hard as she thought she could without hurting herself. The doors in the castle were really thick, it could be hard to hear sometimes.

She'd waited for a couple seconds before there was a barely discernible flutter of magic, the door clicking open of its own accord. Ignoring the casual display of what had certainly been wandless magic as well as she could, Mel slipped inside, pushing the door closed behind her. She wasn't entirely surprised when she noticed the sharp tang of privacy and isolation charms snapping into place — they weren't nearly so strong as those around his office, but Snape had clearly seen fit to ward the room they were meeting in today too.

She didn't notice Snape at the long-abandoned instructor's desk at the side of the room until he spoke, in that same flat, emotionless voice he used with her pretty much constantly now. Unless he was annoyed about something specific, anyway. 'Sit down,' he said, pointing to the floor in the middle of the cleared room, where there would have been desks if the room were in use. Sort of looked wrong, actually, a classroom with no desks in it. Right where he was pointing, there was a circle in the floor, lined with a string of runes. Not carved into it, or painted or drawn, but formed out of a soft, silvery light, seemingly set into the stone, close enough to the surface to shine through.

Trying to ignore the distracting tingles setting in along her neck and arms, Mel started for the circle. 'Leave my wand outside of the circle, right?'

'Anything with any sort of magic on it.' Snape's eyes narrowed, just slightly. 'You did remember to wear muggle clothing, yes?'

'Yes, sir.' She hadn't actually had any muggle clothes before Snape had explained and scheduled this lesson here, at the end of their meeting a couple days ago, but she'd been motivated enough to make sure it was taken care of — the thought of needing to undress for a lesson with Snape was mortifying, completely unbearable. It was mildly surprising Snape couldn't tell just looking. The skirt and jumper she was wearing weren't too distinctly muggle-ish, but the cloth was visually different enough she could tell. Though it was possible Snape just payed less attention than...
Come to think of it, she wasn't entirely sure when she'd picked it up herself. She had the sneaking suspicion she must have been paying far more attention to her clothes than she was entirely comfortable with. Did it still count if she wasn't consciously aware she'd been doing it? She didn't know, she'd managed to confuse herself...

Anyway, yes, okay. They were doing a thing now. Mel walked up to the edge of the circle, dropped her bag outside. After a bit of fiddling with the buckles, she placed her holster, complete with wand, balanced right on top. Right. Stepping over the line felt slightly weird, though she couldn't say exactly how. A wave of prickling static washing over her, every inch head to toe — which was a bit uncomfortable, she tried to ignore that. Just for an instant, the air tasted somehow sharper, a faint hint of metal on the air, before disappearing again as she stepped fully inside, instead turning...stale? That wasn't the right word. Somehow empty, somehow dead. Getting down to the floor was more awkward than it had to be; if she'd known there wouldn't be chairs, she might have worn something else. She hesitated a moment, glancing shortly at Snape, before deciding to just sit with her legs folded, crossed at the ankle in front of her. Somewhat odd in a skirt, yes, but it was long enough and loose enough she could get away with it.

Snape delayed another brief moment — writing something, clearly, no clue what. After some seconds, that oddly empty voice was again drifting across the air, so softly she almost missed it. 'I suppose you haven't practised any wandless magic. I know you can manage that trick with your voice, but that is a simple extrapolation for a Parselmouth.'

She thought for a second. 'Not technically, no.'

He glanced up, inhumanly steady eyes meeting hers. It was really quite unnerving, the way he had of just staring at people. 'Elaborate.'

'I've done wandless magic, er...' She broke off a second to count. 'Three times? I think it's three times. Well, three times not counting, you know.' She gestured at herself with a hand — that had technically been wandless magic, right? 'But I'm not sure they really count.'

'Describe these incidents.' So Mel did. The first one she mentioned, when Remus had made her angry and she'd nearly destroyed the room before venting her magic intentionally, Snape quickly declared was accidental magic. More directed than usual, but the same basic idea. Then she talked about blasting open the doors in Dumbledore's office without even drawing her wand, despite that he'd magicked them closed somehow. It could be her imagination, but Snape's face actually shifted a bit, eyes wider and both brows raised. Barely, but noticeable. 'That likely wouldn't qualify either. Nonetheless, impressive. Not entirely surprising, I suppose, but impressive all the same.'

'I'm sorry, sir, what's impressive about it?'

Snape gave her a look at that. She wasn't sure what kind, but there was definitely something there. She hoped it wasn't because she was still calling him "sir". She'd gotten a response from Andi about apprenticeship etiquette shite, with a very direct warning that wasn't everything, and she'd be told more in person over winter break. She knew that, technically, she was supposed to be calling Snape "master" now. Which, no, she would not be doing that. If they were in some...proper society thing, whatever, some formal context it was expected, she would swallow her revulsion and just do it, but when she wasn't required to, nope, not gonna. Snape had told her he didn't care about that stuff — since he was a halfblood himself, and had been raised mostly in the muggle world, that wasn't so strange — so she hadn't expected him to mind. She really hoped he wasn't going to make an issue of it, that would be dreadfully uncomfortable.

Also, apparently, being his apprentice also meant she was allowed and even expected to use his first name, Andi had mentioned that too — the proper address wasn't "Master Snape", but "Master
Severus” Wasn't supposed to use it without the title, but still, the thought was very strange. She'd been calling him Snape in her head for so long she couldn't imagine switching to anything else.

‘One day, Melantha—’ Of course, he got to use her first name too. At least she hadn't winced this time. ‘—you will have to acknowledge just what you are.’

She frowned. That wasn’t an answer. That wasn’t an answer at all. 'And what am I?'

For long seconds, Snape just stared at her, eyes heavy and cold. God, she hated it when he did that. She tried not to fidget too much, but she was sure it was very noticeable. 'It is really quite simple. You could break Dumbledore's sealing charm as you did because the instinctual magic you cast was more powerful. Simple.'

'You're saying I...' She could hear the doubt on her own voice, thick and slow and dragging. '...overpowered Dumbledore.'

'I'm certain he did not put everything he had into keeping those doors closed, but you managed to overwhelm what power he did commit, yes. From what I know of the Headmaster, and I would say I understand him quite well by now, he put what he thought was more than enough into his sealing charm to prevent you from breaking it. In fact, I suspect he only let you leave because he was, shall we say, unsettled by your display of unanticipated magical strength. He likely would have kept you there otherwise.'

That... Even granting Snape's assumption Dumbledore hadn't put everything he had into it, the thought that Mel could have come anywhere close to matching him in raw power was...insane. Just insane, that's all. 'But... But, he's Dumbledore. Am I really that...?'

Now Snape looked slightly annoyed. The expression was mild enough it was hard to tell from halfway across the room, but she was nearly certain his eyes had narrowed, lips curling. 'Yes, of course. He's Dumbledore. How silly of me, I must have forgotten.' Mel opened her mouth to protest — though, once again, she wasn't entirely sure what the hell she was going to say — but Snape went on before she could think of anything. 'Far too many people give our High Enchanter too much credit, but simultaneously not enough. Albus Dumbledore is not an especially powerful wizard, Melantha. Or, to be more precise, he is not innately especially powerful, was not gifted with greater magical potential at birth.'

Well, of course. Of course she was going to be wrong about that. She'd been figuring out she'd been wrong about so many fucking things these days, she honestly shouldn't expect to be right about anything anymore. 'Then why does everyone say he is? And, you know, he can do a lot of magic other people can't...'

'Dumbledore is not especially gifted magically. However, he is especially gifted intellectually. Even as a student, he was accomplishing magical feats far beyond his years, inventing new spells or applications of existing magics previously unknown. This was not because he is especially powerful, but because he is especially clever. While power is a great asset for most forms of spellcasting, a sufficiently sharp mind can often make up the difference.

'Of course, Dumbledore is far more powerful than most mages you've ever met, but this is a more recent development. You should have learned in Magical Theory, back in second year, that the total volume of magical energy a person can channel at once gradually increases with each spell cast. Not by a lot, but noticeably. Dumbledore is older than virtually every mage you know, by a significant margin. He has been casting magic every day for roughly a hundred years. So he is powerful now, but he was not always so. Even a mediocre mage who uses magic as often for as long as he has will, in time, become just as powerful.'
Oh, well. Mel guessed that did make a bit of sense. They had talked about that in class — that had been years ago now, but she vaguely remembered. She had heard it mentioned before that Voldemort was more powerful than Dumbledore, but Dumbledore had still won all their duels without too much difficulty, suggesting very clearly that raw power wasn't everything. Many people seemed to think Voldemort had done some dark ritual or another to augment his magical abilities, but Mel thought it should be possible Voldemort had just been born more powerful than Dumbledore had. Dumbledore would have been able to overpower him for a while, yes, but Voldemort would also grow in power as he aged just naturally, inevitably outstripping the elder sorcerer — Mel recalled something about that minuscule increase in power being proportional to the amount they started with, so more gifted mages grew more powerful more quickly.

Wait. Wait a second. Oh, how had she never noticed this before?! Hermione had constantly nagged Ron and herself about not just doing their written work, but practising their wanded spells to perfection. For the most part, they'd done their best to avoid doing it. She remembered, back in first and second year, that she could easily reverse most of Hermione's spellwork — if she even knew how, she meant — while Hermione had sometimes had trouble cancelling even simple jinxes from Mel. By the time fourth year had come around, and Hermione had been helping her prepare for the Tournament, it had been an entirely different story. Mel had been powerless to dispel her hexes (unless sufficiently angry, anyway), Hermione had more than once completely overwhelmed her shield charms (much as Mel could now do with their entire study group, in fact). Obviously, Mel had started more powerful, but Hermione's almost constant use of magic over the years had eventually carried her to surpass Mel's inborn talent.

Of course, Mel was now more powerful than Hermione again — it wasn't even hard to shatter her shields or dispel her curses or reverse her transfigurations, just a slight tick of effort more than normal. Which...now that she thought about it, that was very strange. She'd been using far more magic these last couple months, both more powerful spells and more often, than she ever had before. But that was comparatively recent, only starting in September, and she suspected she'd already passed Hermione again by some point in the summer. How did...

Snape obviously noticed she'd been distracted thinking of something, letting out a soft, impatient sigh. 'Well, spit it out, then.'

Right. Oops. Supposed to be having a conversation here. 'Ah, sorry, sir. It's just, is it just me, or... I have the feeling I'm more powerful now than I was at the end of last year.'

'You're not wrong. I believe your little transformation is responsible. The phenomenon has been observed before. While it does not normally make such a dramatic difference, this is not entirely unexpected.'

Oh, okay then. Snape would be more likely to know than she, she hardly knew anything about the whole business. Though, it suddenly occurred to her, it was also possible the horcrux formerly in her head now being gone could have contributed too. She could imagine some of her magic might have been, she didn't know, tied up shielding herself from it, or something, and only now could she actually use it. That seemed reasonable to her. Okay. 'So, I am one of those especially powerful mages, is what you're saying.'

Snape's eyebrow ticked up slightly. 'Yes. In fact, as of this season you are the single most powerful student in your year.'

'Really?' She'd noticed she was toward the more powerful end, sure, but...

'With the possible exception of Longbottom.'
Mél blinked. 'Huh?'

As Snape spoke, he did sound annoyed — that slightly sharp, slightly chill way he got — but he wasn't even looking in her direction, eyes narrowed at the wall to his right. So it was probably annoyance directed at Neville, not her. 'Longbottom is, perhaps, the single most naturally gifted mage I have ever met. Not entirely surprising — his father was one of the more powerful Aurors, and the only reason his mother wasn't the greatest mage of our generation is because she happened to be the same age as Lily. He would likely already be considered one of the rising stars of your generation if his potential weren't crippled by extenuating circumstances. His own emotional issues, exacerbated by what I gather to be a less-than-ideal home environment. Lady Longbottom foolishly insisting the boy use his father's wand, which is so idiotic I hadn't thought she were capable of it. Disappointing.

'Although...' Snape trailed off, turning his head a bit to give Mél a steady, considering sort of look. 'Filius and Minerva have mentioned Longbottom's work in wand-intensive courses has improved dramatically in recent months. You wouldn't happen to have anything to do with that?'

Oh. Erm. Mél was really starting to wish they'd just gone straight into the lesson, because this was awkward. All too aware of how much she was shifting in place, she muttered, 'Er, it's possible I might have given him my wand. Sir.'

It could be Mel's imagination, but she thought Snape might be stunned. His eyes were slightly wider, leaning slightly further back in his chair, the silence stretching longer than it should have. His mouth even opened, only to close a moment later, before opening again to actually speak. Huh. 'You gave the Longbottom boy your wand.'

'Yes, sir. My old one, I mean.'

'Your old one?'

She nodded. 'My first wand stopped working for me after my, ah, little transformation, as you put it. I didn't need it anymore, and we gave it a try, and it worked better for him than it did for me. It seemed the thing to do.'

'It did? Fascinating.' Snape was silent a moment, blankly staring at the desk in front of him. Rather than interrupt his thoughts, which she'd already learned after only a couple days never went well, Mél waited as patiently as she could, her fingers tapping at her knees. 'Did you notice anything else? Differences in your own magical performance, I mean.'

'Other than being a bit more powerful than before?' She shrugged. 'Not really? I mean, my magic seems to be far more easily affected by my moods than before — I remember one time I accidentally almost destroyed a toilet when I was really angry, those times with Remus and Dumbledore — but I think that's related to the power thing.' Snape gave a slight nod, a confirmation that hadn't been really necessary. 'Oh, and my _patrōnus_ changed. Haven't really noticed anything else.'

'That's not entirely surprising. Was it a large change? I mean, is it now an entirely different sort of animal than it'd been before? And are you using a different memory to inspire it?'

Mél stared at him, the answer to the first question frozen in her throat when she caught the second. 'A different memory? That matters?'

'Yes.' With a flick of a wrist, Snape's wand appeared in his hand; Mél tried not to flinch. Still sitting behind the desk, Snape gave an absent wave. She noticed he was casting it both silently and without the proper wand movements. Nonetheless, a stream of white-silver light flowed like water from the
tip, quickly collecting into the form of a large eagle. Hawk? Some sort of bird, anyway. It was somewhat odd seeing a *patrōnus* without feeling the pleasant rush of protective white magic that universally came with it — the circle she was in must be blocking it off, seemed reasonable. After a single circuit of the room, Snape visibly gathered himself again. With a brief, furtive look in her direction, he cast the charm again, this time taking the form of a large feline of some kind, she wasn't sure which. She did note it looked strikingly similar to her mother's in that memory, what her own looked like these days. Once that one dissipated, he did it again, this time conjuring an ethereal doe. One more time, and it was a...a fox? Yes, that looked like a fox. When that one dissipated, his wand vanished up his sleeve. 'A different memory, slight nuances in the shade of the emotion, give rise to a noticeably different expression. Such magics are often finicky in that way. It's not uncommon for a master of the charm to be able to cast a *patrōnus* in several different forms. Lily had three, that I know of.'

Huh. Somehow, that had never come up in Remus's lessons on the subject. Though she was inclined to believe these days Remus hadn't been precise in what he'd been teaching anyway. None of the memories Mel had ever used to fuel a *patrōnus* had been what she would call happy, not exactly, but it'd always worked for her anyway — there must be more to the charm than Remus had told her. 'What were they?'

'A leopard, a doe, and a jay.'

'A jay? The bird, you mean.'

'Yes, the bird. It was her animaga form, apparently.'

For a couple seconds, Mel could only stare at him. 'What? My mother was an animagus?'

Snape gave her a slightly exasperated look. 'It's properly "animaga" when speaking of a woman. And yes, she was, though I never had opportunity to see it for myself. Apparently, Lily grew quite bored trapped in one place inside a *Fidēlius* for so long, because she took the opportunity to become an animaga for no better reason than to have something to do. She told me she was a jay, mostly red and orange with black wings speckled blue. Now, have we finally exhausted your questions for the present moment?'

Mel couldn't help a wince. 'Ah, yes, sorry.'

He didn't move on right away, though. An intensely uncomfortable expression taking over his face — intense enough it was *very* clearly visible, which hardly ever happened with him — Snape hesitated for a long moment, eyes flicking between her and that spot on the wall. 'It should probably go without saying that it would be best to not draw attention to the fact that Longbottom is using your wand around the young Lady Bones.'

Despite herself, Mel felt heat rising in her cheeks, had to look away. She was aware mages put a lot of cultural importance on wands, obviously. But since she hadn't grown up as one, it was just a thing she *knew*, not something she *felt*. She had absolutely no problem with letting Neville have her old wand, especially since she didn't even need it anymore. But she knew other mages would see that as very unusual, and very significant. Given that they were opposite sexes now, the immediate assumption would be... Well, er, lovers, yes, that's what people would think.

Hence Neville getting all weird around her lately. He'd been somewhat more awkward around her ever since the girl stuff started happening anyway, yes, and he'd been really embarrassed when she'd given him the thing in the first place. But he'd been far more prone to awkward stammering and inexplicable flushes ever since he'd started using the thing, clearly somewhat uncomfortable with the implications, even while knowing she didn't mean it that way.
Not that Mel was particularly worried about Susan finding out about it. She hadn't told her, but she knew she would understand. Probably with another exasperated shake of her head and something about forgetting sometimes she'd been raised by muggles, but it wouldn't be a problem.

It was just...unspeakably...unsettling having Snape point it out. She had absolutely no idea how to react to that.

'I believe there was a third event you were thinking of, yes?'

'Erm, yes.' Mel took a short moment to gather herself, forcing back her discomfort as far as she possibly could. Which still left her itching, but it was enough. 'Ah, you know about the thing with Yaxley, right.'

Snape's lips twitched, just barely, faint hints of repressed amusement. 'I may have heard something about it, yes.'

Right. Though she'd long been in the habit of ignoring such things, it hadn't escaped her notice that Melantha Black was starting to get nearly as many fascinated looks and whispers directed at her as Harry Potter had. Arianna Yaxley was infamous, one of the most wanted criminals in magical Britain, so taking her out virtually by herself was naturally going to get her noticed. Slightly disappointing, but people had already been paying her more attention than she'd been entirely happy with due to the whole House Black thing, and, well, she was used to it. 'I defeated her with wandless magic.'

Eyes turning so tightly focused his gaze was almost painful, Snape stared down at her, silent for long, agonisingly slow minutes. 'How?'

'Ah, well, I was bound by some runic spell she'd cast, couldn't even move. No idea where my wand was. And she was about to cast the cruciatus on Susan, and I just...' She trailed off, not entirely sure how to explain it. She'd just been so angry, her magic tight and hot and furious about her, and she...

'Well, I set her wand on fire. Her hand up to her elbow too, actually.'

'Which spell?'

'Calōre vindicāns.'

'Yes, you do like that spell, don't you.'

No real point in saying anything to that. He wasn't wrong.

Snape was silent for another moment, still intensely staring. She shifted under his gaze a bit, doing her best to meet his eyes, waiting for it to end as patiently as she could (which wasn't very). 'Was it intentional? I mean, did you consciously use that particular spell?'

She had to think about that for a moment. It had happened so fast, the whole series of events chaotic as all hell, it was hard to remember for sure. 'I believe I did, yes. I didn't really think about it. It was just the first spell that came to mind. But yes, I do think I did it on purpose. I didn't say the incantation, but I didn't have time, and I didn't have my wand either. I just thought of the fire, and took all my magic I could, and I was so angry, and I just sort of...pushed it at her. I guess?'

'Yes.' Snape nodded to himself for a moment, eyes unfocused, clearly thinking to himself. 'Well, it seems you have performed legitimate wandless magic on at least one occasion. It is likely that “push” you mentioned was how you perceived focusing your will upon reality without some catalyst to guide the process. It is not an entirely inappropriate way to put it. You may wish to attempt replicating the phenomenon if you have the time, though I would advise doing it only with the
simplest of charms for the time being — ineptly-focused wandless magic can sometimes have disastrous consequences. All things considered, you are exceedingly fortunate you only set Yaxley on fire, and not the both of them. Or even yourself, for that matter.'

Mel nodded. From some of what she'd read in her mother's journals, she'd gotten the very clear impression wandless magic could be extremely temperamental and unpredictable. She wouldn't have even attempted it if she'd had any other choice.

'Which brings us to the matter of the day.' Snape stood, starting walking toward where she was sitting on the floor. She suppressed the urge to fidget, to jump to her feet — him standing over her like this was making her exceedingly uncomfortable. Once he was within a couple steps of the circle of runes on the floor, Snape reached into his pocket, tossed something in her direction, the thing sending sparks flying as it crossed the wardline.

Without even thinking, her hand moving into place without her input, she caught it. Tingles sprung across her skin at the contact, the tiny rivulets of energy making it all the way up her arm and halfway across her chest. It was a little disc of metal, runes carved into the surface in straight, sharp lines, little gemstones set into the corners, each subtly sparkling with inner light. Which made it a bit harder to read than usual, but Mel managed it after a few seconds. She didn't recognise the specific enchantment, but she recognised enough parts to put it together. This thing was gathering ambient magical energy into itself, and then storing it there — probably why the metal and the gemstones, in fact, substances that retained magic far more readily than stone or wood or ceramic, and why it was making her tingle so much. 'What's this for?'

'The first few steps in developing any skill in runic casting will always be a precarious process. The method you found in Lily's journals is how the two of us learned it, yes, but it is far from the safest. As you might have noticed.' Mel held in a flinch, but only barely. 'I will be guiding you through an introduction I've adapted from the course in the subject at Beauxbatons — I twice had the opportunity to discuss such things with the current instructor there. I did not learn it this way myself, of course, but it is no different in principle.'

'So we're starting with runic casting, then?'

Snape nodded, giving her a slightly exasperated look. 'Yes, obviously. Alongside other studies, of course, runic casting will be first. The skill is easy to pick up, doubly so given how very useful it can be, which, given the study you have already put into runic magic in general, you should be able to exploit to the full extent of your imagination in short order.'

Completely unable to keep a doubtful expression from her face, Mel turned to frown up at Snape. 'I can master it that quickly?'

'Master it?' He actually almost looked amused. 'No, of course not. Runic casting is not a branch of magic but a method of performing magic. Mastering the art is no simpler than mastering the use of a wand, and that you have not yet managed despite four full years of practise. However, it is only a single skill, and as such requires a minimal amount of study to become reasonably proficient. It will take years to master, perhaps decades, but you should be able to use it reliably and hopefully with some confidence before the end of the year.'

'Huh. She hadn't realised it would be that easy, honestly. Especially since she assumed Snape was underestimating her abilities, as he virtually always did, which meant it shouldn't take hardly any time at all. Okay, then. 'And after runic casting?'

Still looking slightly annoyed, Snape answered anyway. 'After your abilities with runic casting have developed sufficiently, we will move on to refining your ability to cast freely. That is, wandless
magic. In other magical communities around the world, it is known this order of doing things eases the process — myself, I could hardly manage wandless magic at all until shortly after I'd learned runic casting. Once you are proficient enough there to continue practising on your own, we will move into shadow magic, which is most easily cast wandlessly. However, unlike runic and free casting, shadow magic is not a method, but a branch of magic deep and complex enough people dedicate their whole lives to studying it, a division in our understanding of magic as fundamental as that between charms and transfiguration. That will take years for you to learn properly, so once we get to that point I will be intermixing those lesson with ones on blood magic, alchemy, or whatever else occurs to me.

'Now, unless there is anything else you must know at the moment?'

She shook her head. 'No, sir.' She realised she might be getting a little annoying sometimes, but she couldn't help it. As odd as it might sound, over the last few days Snape had abruptly become one of the very, very few people who, when she asked him something, actually answered. She meant, gave a reasonably full explanation, without prevarication or platitude. Sure, some subjects he skirted around entirely, and it was very clear he'd avoid anything even approaching personal matters like it were deadly venomous, but he gave satisfactorily clear, full answers. Sometimes almost too full, rambling on far longer than she thought should be entirely necessary. It was...odd. It was nice, of course, but she had absolutely no idea how to feel about the fact that Snape was quite nearly the first person ever to sufficiently accommodate her curiosity.

Not to mention, he actually talked about her mother. Not a lot, and with very little obvious sentiment. But...in a way, Mel thought that was... Oh, she wasn't sure what was the right word. Most people, whenever they'd said anything about her mother, it was obvious in retrospect they were just telling her what they'd thought she wanted to hear. Always talking about how kind she was, how beautiful, how intelligent, nice little things that really meant less than nothing, especially since she knew now the first one, at least, was mostly shite. Not to say Mel thought her mother had been a bad person, certainly not that, but she wouldn't say she'd been an unconsciously kind person either. No, Lily had been far more complicated, far less innocent, than anyone had previously led her to believe. That had been changing a little bit recently — Ellie very bluntly, Sirius when he wasn't thinking about it too much, Remus only when he'd been backed into a corner — but it was still mostly the case. And they always treated anything they said about her parents as though it were this big, important thing, telling her this, a sense of gravity about it all that she didn't entirely understand.

And then Snape just... She didn't know why. The way he'd, just, casually drop a reference to something she'd done or said, or been able to do, just random little tidbits, like it were the most natural thing in the world. It was...fascinating? Was that the right word? Just, nobody had ever talked about her like this before, or even really this side of her, and... She didn't know, Mel just thought it was...

She could admit, at least in the privacy of her own head, that part of the reason she kept asking him things was just from curiosity, sure, but also a subtle yet omnipresent hope she'd learn something else about the mother she couldn't even remember.

But she brushed the thought off — she had absolutely no idea how Snape would react to either of those reasons, she wasn't about to explain — hefting the little enchanted disc in her hand. 'So, how does this thing work?'

**June, 1978**

'Where the hell are we going, Sirius?'
Sirius just shrugged, not even turning to look at her. Lily was starting to think there was something very seriously wrong. When he'd dragged her away from her books — she'd claimed to be studying for her Arithmancy NEWT, because she probably shouldn't admit to designing dark curses in her spare time, even to Sirius — she'd assumed he was just bringing her someplace sufficiently private, motivation obvious. For her sake more than his, as she wouldn't be surprised if he would be perfectly comfortable with the idea of screwing her on the table in the middle of the common room. But it was very clear by now that wasn't what he was looking for.

Though she had no bloody idea what he was looking for. He was obviously nervous, almost twitching with it, avoiding looking at her whenever possible. Almost to the point of being scared, in some way that focused on her. Which was odd. Lily would admit she could be a bit...much. Considering she didn't hide who she was with Sirius nearly as much as she did normally, he would know that better than most. But it almost seemed like he was scared of her, which raised the question: why? He had to know she wouldn't hurt him unless he gave her a very good reason to. So why was he...?

She didn't know. This was weird. She was starting to get a bit nervous herself.

Eventually, after what felt like much too long, Sirius was leading her into an unused classroom on the fifth floor. Lily was somewhat surprised to see secrecy charms spread across the door. Hmm. Inside, all the desks were pushed to the desk. All but one, transfigured somewhat into a wider table, a couple chairs sitting around it. In one of the chairs, James, looking even more nervous than Sirius. As the door closed behind her, the privacy charms snapping closed with the slightest of flashes, Lily turned a glare on Sirius. 'Okay, are you going to tell me what this is about now?'

Sirius just shrugged, seemingly incapable of speech. The answer came from James, but even then it wasn't much of one. There was a slight tapping noise, a slight rustling, and Lily turned to see James was indicating a sheet of parchment on the table. His voice shaking slightly with obvious tension, he said, 'Read it.' With a last suspicious glance at Sirius, Lily walked toward the table, snatched up the parchment. It only took her a couple seconds to figure out what it was.

A betrothal contract.

Between herself and James bloody Potter.

She was entirely helpless to stop it. Before she could even think to try to control it, so fast she barely noticed it happening, her throat and chest were tight with overwhelming fury, unnatural heat racing across her body, familiar tingles itching at her skin as her magic woke. She couldn't even slow it down, the unthinking rage was spilling into the power always waiting at the back of her mind, turning it bright and tempestuous, she couldn't hold it back, she could feel it crackling at the air, like lightning flashing between clouds, claws digging into flesh, fire snapping and biting. Her breath was hot and hard in her throat, almost choking her as she tried to keep some modicum of control over herself.

She might have managed it, if the boys didn't do something very stupid.

Sirius, at least, knew well enough to take a step back, hands raised somewhat, but Potter must have no fucking clue what was going on. He'd sprung to his feet, darting closer to her. Too close, obviously moving to... She didn't know. Touch her somehow.

Even the thought of him touching her, no matter how minimal and innocent it would be, was more than she could handle right now. The incandescent cloud of fury about her clenched, her eyes narrowing on the approaching figure. Without even consciously thinking about it she'd sent him
rocketing backward, slamming into the table before rolling over it, crashing to the ground. The force of the impact had even knocked the table over, actually.

Sirius had nearly moved to help his idiot friend, jerking in place slightly, but in the end didn’t move, eyes focused on her with visible wariness. ‘Lily, calm down. We can—’

Calm down? Calm down? Sirius had bought her here to just hand her off to her old creepy stalker and he wanted her to calm down?

Perhaps Sirius didn’t know what he was doing better than Potter. He should have known saying that would just make her more angry.

Magic in the air about her turning so thick she could see it, ethereal flickerings of red shadows and glowing blacks, Lily just glared at him, a single flick of her fingers bringing him stumbling toward her. Another twitch brought him down to his knees — by the grunt and the clenching of his face, rather painfully. Leaning over him, she took a moment to breathe, forcing her voice as level, as comprehensible as possible. And hopefully not in Parseltongue. ‘Explain yourself. Quickly, or I’m leaving.’

‘Lily, it’s nothing, we just—’

She glanced quick in Potter’s direction, a sharp stabbing gesture of her arm sending a yellowish hex sailing straight at his chest. Potter’s eyes went wide, hands jumping to his throat, fingers scrambling to grasp something that wasn’t there. After a couple seconds, he fell to his knees, face rapidly turning red as he tried to breathe, but couldn’t.

Even if she forgot to take the thing off, it wouldn’t kill him. The charm would dispel itself as soon as he passed out. But, she guessed, Potter probably didn’t know that.

And, by the increasingly panicked set of Sirius’s face, he didn’t either. ‘Lily, please, let us talk this out, we just—’

‘Sounds like you’re about to make excuses to me.’

‘I just need you to be safe!’

Lily blinked, the magic roaring about her ears weakened slightly by confusion. What? What the hell was he talking about? He certainly sounded sincere — it was hard to tell for sure, with how obviously terrified he was, but it seemed like it. But what could he...

Without even really thinking about it, Lily tipped Sirius’s head up so their eyes could meet, and pushed her way into his mind.

She wasn’t nearly as skilled with mind magic as Sev was, of course. Which was only to be expected, since he was a legilimens and she wasn’t. But she had learned enough from him to manage a little, and the force of her lingering anger was more than enough to blast through whatever occlumency Sirius might be using, she didn’t even notice it. It obviously wasn’t an entirely painless process, his jaw clenching and eyes narrowing, but he didn’t try to look way, even summoned the relevant memories for her convenience.

Not that she was entirely sure how to feel about them. Sirius had been worrying about this for months, apparently. All of Lily’s legal rights in the magical world were derived from her status as a Hogwarts student. By the end of August, that would be dissolved. Since she didn’t have any relevant connections to any House to fall back on, she would become, legally speaking, helpless. Since a lot of people really didn’t like her, that was not exactly a good idea. It would be far too easy for
someone to accuse her of some crime, perhaps even arrange to have her convicted in absentia, and there would be absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Sirius had actually gone to Potter, asked if he wouldn't be willing to marry her, since he couldn't do it himself due to his own complicated legal situation. He'd even made it explicitly clear that it was only for legal purposes, that he hadn't yet talked about this with Lily, that she'd probably be very annoyed about it, and chances were it would remain a charade, for appearance's sake until they could arrange something else. With surprising reluctance, Potter had agreed — not like he had anyone he was planning on courting in the near future himself, it didn't cost him anything. If it would protect Lily, and if it was what Sirius needed of him, he was perfectly fine with it. Even if it meant having to deal with an exceedingly unhappy sorceress on a regular basis.

Sirius had even warned him it was very possible Lily would curse the both of them before they could make their intentions clear. Potter had just laughed the warning off, clearly not believing him. Yeah, apparently Potter still had no fucking clue what she was really like.

Though, she guessed he likely had a better idea now.

Here in his head, it was clear even Sirius didn't like this idea. In fact, he hated it. He hated that he couldn't protect Lily himself, that he couldn't do something even so simple as marry her, just because the family he'd been unfortunate enough to be born into was fucking terrible. He hated that this was the only thing he could come up with, the only way he could be certain Lily would be covered. He hated it had to be James, of all people, who had been annoying about Lily for so long, someone he knew Lily really didn't like. But he couldn't think of anything else. He'd been agonising over it, for months, and it was all he could come up with.

Of course, the obvious solution of making amends with his family seemingly hadn't even occurred to him. But she wouldn't have expected it to — Blacks can be stubborn that way.

Somewhat reluctantly, Lily released the charms holding Sirius in place on his knees. A glance in Potter's direction and she'd dispelled the hex strangling him as well. 'Give me a moment.' To make sure she wouldn't be interrupted, she cast a silencing charm on them powerful enough she doubted they'd be able to break it, even using her wand to be safe. Then she took a few steps away, putting her back to them. And started attempting to regain some semblance of control over herself.

Sometimes, she almost thought less powerful mages actually had it easy. They didn't have to worry about shit like this. Power augmenting their emotions, circling back in a positive feedback loop. Intense rage inflaming her magic, her magic energising her body and mind, stoking her rage higher, her power bursting further out of her control in response. Further and further and further, until she was a danger to everyone around her, took all the restraint she had not to indiscriminately incinerate her surroundings. This wasn't something that happened to normal people. And it was very annoying sometimes.

Dumbledore wasn't entirely wrong when he said anger was dangerous, and hatred was toxic. It just seemingly hadn't occurred to him it only mattered for people like them, and only if they couldn't learn to control it.

Which she would have never been able to manage if Sev hadn't been helping her with mind magic. It was difficult to do, but not impossible. It was an internal separation, throwing a wall down in her own mind, isolating the part her emotions lived from the wellspring of magic deep in her soul. It was difficult, yes. It took long minutes for the storm of magic about her to settle, most of its fuel blocked away. But not impossible.

Of course, then she was still left with the anger itself. But without her magic intensifying her own
feelings, without the threat of unintentional arson or murder at her own hands, that was far more manageable.

With a last slow, calming breath, Lily turned back to the other two. They were watching her, still and silent. Sirius looked mostly relieved, but Potter seemed more than a little terrified, rubbing at his throat. Despite herself, she felt a smirk pulling at her lips. Yes, somehow Potter had managed to make it this long with his delusions about her intact. She had to wonder what he thought about the glimpse he'd just gotten.

She could just slip into his mind and find out, she guessed, but that seemed excessive.

'Sorry about that. I think I can talk about this without killing you now.'

Potter looked a little sick, but Sirius just smirked. 'I do appreciate that, love. Have lots of living left I'd like to get to.'

Lily rolled her eyes.

A few short moments later, they were all seated at the little table, Lily reading through the contract they'd written up. Every line just made her more and more confused. Perhaps "confused" wasn't quite the right word, but it wasn't what she would have expected in any case. She'd read up a bit on these sort of things out of curiosity, even read through a few examples, and this one... Well, it was exceedingly generous, was probably the way to put it. James was technically Lord Potter now, with his parents recently deceased. Any marriage between them would make her Lady Potter, though her rights as such would depend on particulars in family law, and always inferior to his, since she wasn't born into the family.

But this phrase here, saying she would be granted the Ladyship quasi sit hērēditāta suō iūre... She wasn't an expert in magical law, but just from the Latin it was clear she would have full rights to the title, as though she had been born into the House and inherited it normally. That was not, by any means, something that was normally in these sort of contracts. In fact, she'd never even heard of such a thing. James was, essentially, handing over full control over House Potter to her. He would still have equal powers, yes, but exactly equal, no more or less.

James was also waiving any legal right to act on her behalf in any situation, which was exceedingly strange — it was normal that married couples would be able to do that with each other, it was a part of the entire concept of marriage. Even muggle marriage worked that way.

A portion of the Potter wealth would be set aside for her to take with her should they ever divorce. That wasn't unusual at all, especially in Noble Houses, though it was somewhat strange in her specific case, since most people marrying into Noble Houses were nobility themselves, and would be bringing with them...well, it wasn't technically a formalised dowry or dower, but that was the basic idea, which obviously didn't apply to her.

Even more strangely... Well, it wasn't at all unusual for these things to specify what should be done where the couple's children are concerned. Between Noble Houses, this sort of thing can get exceedingly complicated, all Houses tending to put down on paper which family has what rights to the children, just to prevent disagreements later. This part was weirdly... Okay, for one, any children of hers would be considered a member of House Potter, the firstborn the heir to the title irrespective of their gender. Whether or not these theoretical children were Potter's was irrelevant — in fact, from the way it was written, she was pretty sure James was assuming Sirius would actually be the father. Also interestingly, should they decide to divorce after she'd had children, she would be free to take any children with her when she left, but they would still retain all rights and privileges of their position in the House, including the Lordship should it come to it. They could voluntarily sacrifice
those rights, yes, and James could expel them if he had sufficient justification to — Lily recalled House Potter only allowed expelling members, the heir especially, under very specific circumstances — but just leaving with her didn't strip them automatically.

This... This was an extremely generous offer, when she got down to it. So generous, in fact, it was extremely unlikely she would ever get a better one. Even an adoption into a friendly House would grant her fewer freedoms and saddle her with more responsibilities than this.

Lily set the parchment down, glanced between the two men. It was startling how alike they looked in that moment. Of course, they had always looked alike — they were, what, first cousins once removed? And from inbred Noble Houses at that. But their expressions, their posture, usually made more than enough of a contrast to tell them apart easily, even without any physical differences. Now they looked eerily alike, sitting tense in their chairs, giving her almost identical warily expectant looks.

She took a long breath, rubbing at her forehead with one hand. This entire situation was completely ridiculous.

'You're really okay with this?' she said, her quite likely suspicious eyes on James. 'I mean, this isn't exactly a normal contract.'

James shrugged. 'Sure. I did help Sirius write it, you know. I wouldn't have agreed to anything if I weren't willing.'

'Why?'

He gave a somewhat awkward glance to Sirius, another helpless shrug. 'Because I can, I guess. Whatever you may believe about me, when it comes down to it, this isn't even about you. Not for me, anyway. That it is you specifically is a bonus, I'll admit, but I'd do it anyway.'

She frowned, not entirely sure if she should believe that. James had been disturbingly obsessive about her since practically the first time they'd met, after all. 'For Sirius, you mean.'

He nodded. 'There isn't much I wouldn't do for Sirius. I mean, he's the closest thing I've ever had to a brother.'

Mumbling a little, Sirius said, 'That doesn't mean much to a lot of people, you know.'

'Yeah, well, fuck them,' James said, smirking a little. Turning slightly more serious again, 'He would be miserable if something happened to you, and I can help, so I will. And it's not like I get nothing out of it.'

Lily raised an eyebrow, if only to stop herself from glaring at him. 'Oh? And just what do you think you're getting?'

Ignoring the implication and the threat in her voice, James said, entirely flat, 'Power.'

Er... 'What?'

He smiled at her, eyes dancing with amusement. 'Come now, Evans. I'm sure you know magical ability is most often inherited from the mother. Potters are generally more magically gifted than average, yes, but any children of yours are assuredly going to be almost as absurdly powerful as you are. Just one of them could be a boon, but if you had three? four?' He shrugged again. 'My House is almost dead. I'm the only one left. Well, and my sister too, I suppose, but I sincerely doubt she'll ever be having children. A generation of Potters with your magical abilities... Well, imagine how much
they could do to lift my House from the brink of death. No, I'm not getting nothing out of it. That's enough for me.'

'You're aware I'm a dark witch, right? I don't think you would like some of the magics that come easy to me. I'm even a Parselmouth and everything. James started — apparently he hadn't known that one. 'Any children I have will probably be the same.'

'Erm...' James glanced at Sirius quick, but then shrugged. 'I guess that's fine. As long as they're not doing anything too awful with it. I don't see why I should care, really.' He sounded slightly leery of the idea, but not so far as revulsion.

'Does killing people count as too awful? Because, you know, I have done that.'

He blinked at her. 'Death Eaters?'

'Well, yeah, but—'

He shrugged. 'That's fine, then. I'm sure whoever it was deserved whatever you gave them.'

For long moments, Lily could only stare at him. That whole thing, and that stuff about Sirius, and... It was true James had abruptly dropped the whole stalker act when she and Sirius had started being a thing, in general started being far less annoying than he'd been before, but...

When the bloody fuck did James Potter of all people become an adult? Because apparently she'd missed it.

Lily stared at him for a second longer, seeing nothing but sincerity and a slight hint of bashful awkwardness, before turning again to Sirius. 'And you're okay with this?'

'Sirius didn't entirely stop himself from flinching, but he gave a reluctant nod anyway. 'No, not entirely comfortable, but fine. They'll know the truth anyway, and it's not like I won't be around. I won't be happy about it, but that'll have to be enough for me, I guess.'

At least he was being honest about it. 'And if I started sleeping with him too? Not that I presently intend to, mind you,' she said, shooting a narrow glare over at James. Turning back to Sirius, 'But you have to realise, if we go through with this it's not impossible that could start happening one day. It's very likely, in fact.' Honestly, that thought didn't bother her as much as it probably should. It was a bit weird, sure, but he wasn't nearly so annoying these days as he used to be, and, well, it wasn't like he was unattractive, physically speaking. As long as he didn't start expecting anything else from her, she could see herself doing it.

And, hell, what would be the point in having a husband and a boyfriend if she weren't shagging both of them? Seemed like a waste, really.
Oddly enough, Sirius didn’t seem at all uncomfortable with the idea. At least there was no immediate negative reaction like last time. Instead he just smirked at her, wide enough she caught a glint of teeth. ‘I suppose that depends. Do I get to watch? Or even, say, participate, maybe?’

Despite herself, she almost laughed. But instead she buried the impulse, nailed Sirius in the shoulder with a quick stinging charm. It wouldn’t do to reinforce that sort of behaviour, after all.

Of course, knowing Sirius, she probably should have skipped the stinging charm if she was really trying to discourage him. But it was possible she was just making excuses to herself. It wasn’t her fault the way he yelped and cursed at her was so amusing, the way he rubbed at his shoulder and pouted so adorable. It took far more effort than it really should to keep a teasing smile off her face.

Sometimes, she thought this would all be so much easier if she hadn’t fallen in love with him. Arsehole.

Lily hesitated. But, really, she didn’t have to for very long. She doubted she’d stumble across any better options. As long as James didn’t make too much of a nuisance of himself, this was practically ideal. No use sitting here and moaning about it, she should just sign the bloody thing.

Letting out a long-suffering sigh, she picked up the waiting quill, and just signed the bloody thing. She set the quill back down on the table, turned to James. ‘I suppose I have to pretend to like you now.’

James had the nerve to look amused. ‘Well, I suppose I’ll do my best to make it easy for you. I’m sure Sirius has tips.’

‘Oh, yeah, I have a list, stupid shite to avoid if you don’t want to be hexed. Remind me back at the dorm and I’ll give you a copy.’

Lily rolled her eyes.

November, 1995

Mel stared at the page, thick with her mother's now-familiar handwriting, trying to make sense of what she had just read.

She didn't understand. She meant, no, the words were perfectly comprehensible, sure. And she could understand her mother's reasoning just fine — it was something she'd personally have trouble going through with, but it wasn't so foreign she couldn't even understand it, it made a certain kind of sense. But... She'd always thought...

She'd learned rather recently that Mum had never broken up with Sirius, yes. That they'd always been a thing, even after she'd married Dad. Hermione had even tracked down a couple of the less-than-flattering *Prophet* articles about it for her. Apparently there was a different newspaper... *The Northern Herald?* Something *Herald*, anyway. But Susan had gotten her aunt to send copies of a couple mentions she'd saved that were far less awful about it. She'd known it was a thing that had happened, that they'd been, er, a triad? She thought that was the word Hermione had used.

But she hadn't thought...

This just felt, off, from how she'd thought it would be. She didn't know what she was thinking.

She was getting a very strange suspicion. She wasn't sure she liked it.
Mel jumped out of her bed, through the curtains, noticing at a glance and with no small relief she was alone. She went for the bookcase next to her bed — she hadn't had one before, but with how many books she'd been going through recently it'd become necessary. Her finger tapping the wooden surface, she scanned along the shelf she'd put her mother's journals in, looking for the right box. *Sixth Year (II), Seventh Year (I), Seventh Year (II), Seventh Year (III), August 78 – February 79, March 79 – July 79, August 79 – December*

With her fingers spread to prevent the neighbouring boxes from being dragged out with it, Mel yanked out the one dated for the latter end of 1979. She set the box on the floor, slipped out her wand, shot off a quick dispel. The shrinking charm dissipated, the book-shaped wooden box expanding to its true size — a foot deep, two wide and three long. Mel slid the top off, started searching through the various muggle journals packed inside. There had to be dozens of them, and these only covered about five months! She couldn't imagine how Mum could possibly have found this much to write about it, especially since most of them were academic projects, research and theories and experiments, and doubly so because by this point she'd also been fighting in a bloody war.

Sirius had mentioned more than once that Hermione sort of reminded him of Lily sometimes. It hadn't made sense at first, but with what she knew now Mel could definitely see it.

Right, here it was: her personal diary for November and December. Mel turned to sit on the edge of her bed, riffling through the pages, trying to ignore the continuing twinge of discomfort she got reading these things sometimes. Her fingers seemed to be shaking a bit too, that was annoying. She quickly flipped forward to a couple weeks into December, then moved more slowly, skimming the entries, looking for anything relevant. On the entry for December Seventeenth, she finally found what she was looking for.

It took reading the same couple paragraphs three times before it sank in. The words just didn't stick, slipping through her head and sliding away again. And the shaking in her hands was only getting worse. One sentence, though, kept repeating itself in her head, over and over, until the words hardly even seemed real.

*I suppose I should figure out how the hell I'll be going about telling Sirius he's the father of his best friend's child.*

...*how the hell I'll be going about telling Sirius he's the father of his best friend's...*

...*telling Sirius he's the father...*

...

What...

But...

But that didn't make any sense! If Sirius were her father, wouldn't someone have bloody *told* her at some point? That seems like the sort of thing that should come up! Especially since people had *always* told her it was James! That, just...

And suddenly she was remembering something Remus had told her, weeks ago now: *'James is almost certainly your father. Not that it would make any difference, I suspect. They would have claimed it was James for legal reasons, even if it was really Sirius.'*

Okay. Okay. She guess... She guessed that sort of made sense. Lily had been Lady Potter, and Noble
Houses could be weird about this kind of shite, so they would have claimed any kids she had would have been James's, even if they weren't. For inheritance reasons. They wouldn't have told anyone, just in case — not to mention Mel had gotten the very clear impression Remus simply hadn't wanted to know those kinds of details about his friends' relationship. Right. Okay. She understood that. Fine.

But...it still didn't make any sense! People would have noticed if she had been Sirius's! How many fucking times had she heard people tell her she looked almost exactly like James had at her age? Er, before the girl thing, anyway. They...they...

Frowning to herself, Mel stood again. She dropped Lily's journal back into the box of them, went to her bookshelf again. She didn't have to look to find the photo album originally given to her by Hagrid, added to by Hermione over the years. It didn't take her long to find a picture that happened to have both James and Sirius in it — one of the wedding photos, she'd looked at this blasted thing a million times. Her eyes flicked back and forth, James to Sirius to James again, looking more carefully than she thought she ever had, so closely her nose was almost touching the surface.

They...

They looked practically identical.

How had she never noticed that before? Their eyes were obviously different colours, James's a striking hazel and Sirius's that same deep grey most everyone in House Black seemed to have. (Plus Tracey, for some reason.) Their hair was the same shining, almost glimmering black as hers, though James's was an untameable mess cropped rather short, Sirius's a wavy, curly river framing his face and falling over his shoulders. It was very possible Sirius's only seemed less insane by comparison because it was longer, the weight holding it more in place — hers had been much like James's back when she'd been a boy, but now it was far longer and more like Sirius's, might be significant. The curve of their brows over their eyes, the set of their nose, their lips... Their cheekbones were noticeably different, each carrying faint scars and blemishes the other didn't... Chop Sirius's hair down to the length of James's, take off James's glasses, have them close their eyes, and it'd be difficult to tell them apart. They could easily be brothers.

But, then, they were rather closely related, weren't they? Bringing up the Black family tree in her head, something she could only do because Andi had forced her to memorise a chunk of it, and she quickly confirmed what Lily had said in that journal entry. James's mother was Sirius's grandfather's sister — they were first cousins once removed. Of course, James's grandfather was also Sirius's great-grandfather's brother, so they were also second cousins once removed, because Noble Houses and incest. Mel was pretty sure they were second or third cousins or something through the MacMillans too, but she didn't know how off the top of her head.

Purebloods sometimes, honestly.

Mel noticed she was getting a bit lightheaded. When had that happened? Apparently she hadn't been breathing properly. She paused a moment, her elbows perched on her knees over the photo album, hands covering her face, and just took long, deep breaths. She kept going, probably for minutes, until the odd tension in her chest had lessened some, the fuzziness in her head eased a bit. Okay.

Returning to the book, she slipped the photo out of the page. At least, she tried to — her fingers were practically useless, almost numb, she couldn't deal with the tiny, flimsy things, it was impossible. After long seconds struggling, cursing under her breath, she grabbed for her wand again, and just summoned the thing out. Once she had it, she flipped closer to the back of the book, the pages Hermione had added.

It felt somewhat odd, looking at pictures of herself back when she'd been a boy, but she did her best
to ignore the almost queasy feeling in her stomach, the uncomfortable itches along her spine. She found a picture with a comparatively near shot of her face, one she wasn't moving too much — Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and herself, packed into a couch in the common room, looked like third year, judging by their ages. And by "their ages" she mostly meant Hermione and Ginny's figures, not that she'd ever make that point out loud. Wow, past her really did look uncomfortable squeezed in there, she was amused despite herself. Anyway, right. She brought the wedding photo up right under it, meticulously comparing her face to James's, Lily's, and Sirius's. She didn't have a, er, more recent photo to compare with, but it didn't matter — it wasn't like her parents had changed in becoming Melantha, it shouldn't make a difference.

She noticed almost right away everyone was full of shite: she hadn't looked exactly like James save the eyes. (Nor Sirius, for that matter.) The similarity was very obvious, yes, helped along by the hair and the glasses, but nowhere near identical. The nose was about right. Her lips, chin, that area, didn't look quite like anyone, but she thought it was most like Lily. Not just the colour and shape of her eyes, which did look almost completely identical to Lily's, but her eyebrows, that part up there, seemed to lean more toward Lily than...whichever was her father, anyway. The rest looked more like them, though, enough they did look very similar, she'd give virtually everyone she'd ever met that. But not identical.

So, not only had everyone constantly talked to her like she were a little clone of James Potter, which was always extremely annoying, but it wasn't even true. Jesus, she really hated mages sometimes.

Mel focused on the few features she'd noted James and Sirius didn't share. Their noses were slightly different, but extremely similar, and Mel's didn't match either of theirs exactly in any case. Nor Lily's, even, so skipping that. Lips, mouth, around there, hard to tell. She'd already noticed she looked a bit more like Lily there anyway, so it was very lik—

She froze, an odd thrill of lightning shooting up her nerves. She leaned closer, squinting at herself. There was this single little fold, right there, in the middle of her top lip. Not extremely prominent, but it was there. A short examination of Lily's, she didn't have it. James didn't either.

Sirius did.

She followed the curve of her cheekbones, the line of her jaw, the twisted little shapes in her ears. Then she checked the others.

Sirius didn't look exactly the same, a bit narrower, a bit sharper. But similar. Very similar.

The remainder, she thought, was mostly Lily. There was similarity there too, most pronounced where she and Sirius differed, but less noticeable.

And James was completely off. Not even close.

She...

But...

The book slipped through numb fingers, covers pressing closed as it fell between her legs. Mel let herself fall onto her back, squeezing her eyes shut against the hot pressure crawling up her chest and throat. Her arms came around her stomach, clenching around the roiling nausea, doing her best to ignore it all, trying to stay calm.

How had she never noticed? Why had nobody told her?

She would figure someone, at some point, should have mentioned Sirius was her bloody father.
The heat clenched at her throat again, flinching at the idea. No, no, that wasn't right, she had to be missing something. She did look more like Sirius than James, sure — and wasn't it frustrating nobody had ever noticed that before, all things considered — but that could just be coincidence. She'd hardly consider herself an expert in genetics, and they were both purebloods! Extremely similar-looking purebloods at that! Everyone knew the self-important fuckers were so hopelessly interbred, she had no idea if that superficial an examination was reliable anyway.

And her *patrōnus*! Back when she'd been Harry, hers had been the same as James's. Dumbledore had explicitly told her that was meaningful, that couldn't just be a coincidence, that—

'A different memory, slight nuances in the shade of the emotion, give rise to a noticeably different expression.' Mel winced at Snape's voice suddenly ringing in her head, but was entirely helpless to consider the thought. Maybe... Maybe what everyone said about a *patrōnus* being specific to an individual was complete shite. Since people could have more than one, that seemed like a logical conclusion. If the form of the *patrōnus* were dictated not by the person casting it, but by the memory they used to motivate it... Perhaps, for the sake of argument, the memory she had used before *just so happened* to be very similar, in essence, to the one James normally had. It *could* just be a coincidence. In fact, that argument was sounding more convincing by the second.

Which meant Dumbledore had flat-out lied when he'd said the shared expression of the charm between James and herself was meaningful, but she'd grown well-used to the idea by now that people had been telling her what they thought she wanted to hear. It was very possible Dumbledore had just told her something to make her feel better, regardless of whether it was perfectly accurate or not.

Of course, it was also possible Dumbledore simply didn't understand the *patrōnus* as well as Snape did and Lily had, but she was willing to assume he did. Her mother and Snape were mostly interested in dark magic, after all, and the *patrōnus* was pretty much the opposite. It was more Dumbledore's area of expertise — if they knew, he certainly did.

So, there was one data point to toss out.

But, that couldn't...it couldn't...

And she was remembering, back when she'd been leaving on the Express at the start of this term. Sirius had been looking uncommonly morose, he'd said, 'I can't remember a lot of what happened before I was sent there. I assume the happy parts — that's what they take first.'

*He didn't remember.* Sirius hadn't told her, because *he didn't remember.*

But, that bit when she'd gone with Dora and Sirius to the Ministry... Sirius had forgotten who they were, what year it was... He couldn't remember *all the time,* but it slipped through, here and there...

Sirius on the edge of tears, arms about her tight and shaking, 'If I hadn't run off after the rat like a bloody idiot— Myrðin, it's all my fault. I hate that you had to go through that, kitten, I'm so, so...'

'Do whatever you want with the room. It's yours, kitten, you don't have to ask.'

That *look,* that *look* Sirius had given her, the first time he'd seen her after her little transformation... She knew now the resemblance would be far more obvious, with the glasses gone and her hair longer, he must have, just for a second...

In fourth year, fourth *fucking* year, it'd been so monumentally stupid! He had half the fucking Aurors in the country after him — *Aurors!* Mel knew now that was no small thing. He'd been safe,
somewhere out of the country, and he'd come back, as soon as he heard about the Tournament, even *slipping into Hogwarts with half the bloody Ministry there!* Was he fucking insane?!

And third year...third year...

He'd been there. He'd been there, in Little Whinging, the day she'd inflated Marge like a fucking blimp. Why? He had to know where the Weasleys lived, they were in the Order together, had to know Pettigrew would be there. Why go to...

>'Then I saw Peter in that picture... I realised he was at Hogwarts with Harry, perfectly positioned to act, ready to strike the moment he could be sure he had allies... I had to do something... It was as if someone had lit a fire in my head...it wasn't a happy feeling, it was an obsession...'

Mel furiously scrubbed at her face, annoyed with herself, but she couldn't stop it. Stupid fucking eyes, stupid fucking throat, she did still have to breathe...

>'Black's been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: "He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts...”'

>'Believe me,’ his voice thick and shaking, cracking so hard Mel could barely understand it. 'Believe me, I would have died before I betrayed them.' Eyes empty and face haunted, so broken, so defeated...

Turning around only minutes later, speaking to Pettigrew, 'You sold Lily and James to Voldemort—'

Lily and James. Lily and James, not James and Lily...

So loud Mel's ears had been ringing, '...for a year before Lily and James died!' Lily and James. Lily and James, not James and Lily.

He'd said it both ways, that night, he said it both ways still today. But when he wasn't in full control of himself, when he was emotional, moving on instinct...

Then, later that night, after she and Hermione had broken him out... Gracefully perched on Buckbeak's back, eyes steady on Mel's, exhausted and sorrowful, glittering with unshed tears. He'd stalled, stalled longer than was entirely safe, just staring at her...

>'You are...’ He'd broken off, swallowing thickly, eyes flicking away from hers for just a second. '...truly your father's son, Harry...’

For just a moment, there...

Mel let out a long sigh, her own breath thick and tense, rubbing at her face. She was struggling to keep herself in one piece, mostly succeeding, but her throat fucking *hurt*, her face more wet than she was entirely pleased with. She was fine. She was fine. She was fifteen fucking years old, she wasn't going to sit here crying like a *fucking* baby, she *refused*...

He'd known. He might not remember most of the time but, for just a moment there, he'd known.

He hadn't meant James.

She had absolutely no idea how to process this information. She just... She didn't even know what was going on anymore.

Sure, she'd been learning she'd been dead wrong about a lot of things she'd thought she'd known, but
learning her father was someone completely different than who she'd been told for her entire life was a pretty fucking big one. She didn't know what to do with that.

At some point, her life had become entirely absurd, and she hadn't even noticed.

She jumped as the door was abruptly thrown open, slamming against the wall with a shuddering crash. 'Hey, Mel, you wanna— Oh, is this a bad time?'

Mel sat up, avoiding Fay's eyes as she took a moment to wipe away all signs of her near-breakdown just there. 'I guess that depends on what you wanted.' But, really, knowing Fay it was probably—

'I'm putting together a pickup game, and I was just wondering if you wanted to join, is all.' Yes, quidditch, of course. Of the Gryffindor girls who weren't Hermione or Ginny, Fay was really the only one she'd known before this term, and only because she was almost invariably in any pickup game she joined. Not that she'd ever been given much choice.

Honestly, Fay'd always somewhat intimidated her — she was just, loud, and energetic, and unnervingly assertive, taller than most of the boys and even as a second-year had had distractingly visible muscles in her arms and legs. Well, other places too, Mel knew now that she'd seen her without a shirt on, but still. She was the best beater in Gryffindor after the twins, and a good enough keeper she was even on the team this year, with Wood gone. Actually, she'd been getting a lot of credit for Gryffindor winning their match against Slytherin last week, she and the chaser girls, with the surprisingly effective addition of Ginny, keeping a solid enough lead Malfoy had caught the snitch as soon as possible just to stop them from running up the score.

Mel probably wouldn't have played half as much quidditch if Fay hadn't constantly roped her into taking one of the chaser spots. (Pickup games didn't usually have seekers.) So she didn't really mind too much. Interestingly, now that Mel was a girl, Fay actually asked instead of just dragging her off. But that could be because Fay hadn't a bloody clue who she really was.

So Mel had a moment to consider if she really wanted to play quidditch right now. But she barely needed a few seconds — she'd rather not be stuck alone with her thoughts right now, all things considered. 'Yeah, sure. I'll be down in a minute.'

'Chaser?'

'Yep.'

And without another word, Fay was gone, the door slamming closed again behind her.

Mel just sat on her bed for a couple seconds, trying to put what had just happened behind her, not think about it. Now wasn't the time to think about it, she couldn't. She needed...time, yes, just to make it less immediate. She guessed. Maybe.

Hopefully.

She shoved herself to her feet, exchanged her skirt for trousers, yanked a jumper over her head. For some reason, she still got cold strangely easily, which seemed a bit absurd to her — she was far less unhealthily thin than she used to be, should be more insulation, not less. Hermione had rambled some long thing involving sexual dimorphism and steroid hormones and vasoconstriction, but Mel had only understood every other word. The jumper should be fine but, come to think of it, the trousers were probably too thin. It was November...

Eh, fuck it. She could always cast a warming charm later. A quick minute to lace up those boots she'd gotten multiple snarky comments about, and she was grabbing her Firebolt and thumping down
the stairs.

Wait a second. She just wore these because, honestly, most girl shoes were weird and uncomfortable. But, apparently, the whole reason various people found her preference for these things funny was because it was some kind of House Black stereotype. Duelling boots, family with a history of producing women famously deadly with their wands, yeah, whole thing. Mel had always just brushed it off because, well, she wasn't a Black, not really. Just using the name for convenience.

But...it turned out she actually was a Black. She just hadn't known that at the time.

Holy hell, she wasn't even a Potter. Er, sort of. According to that journal entry of her mother's, James had been entirely aware any children of hers likely wouldn't be his, but he'd wanted them to carry his name anyway. For reasons Mel didn't quite understand, but magical British nobility, they're weird. So, she was legally a Potter, confirmed as the heir to the title when she'd been just three months old, she'd seen the papers, but...

Wait, wait, wait. She fully intended to dissolve the House of Potter, er, next month. But...she wasn't even technically...she...

Ugh, this was all so fucking weird. Stop thinking about it.

And she managed to put her mind off the subject entirely, for a while. Wandering through the halls of the castle, ignoring the few people who acknowledged her passing — she realised now that, if she'd wanted to avoid people noticing her, assuming the Black name had been a shite idea — her thoughts solid on the topic of runic casting. It was fascinating stuff, okay. She hadn't managed a single successful casting yet, true, but it'd only been a couple days. The idea was just cool. Snape had forbidden her from practising it without him, since it would be rather easy to severely hurt or even kill herself if she fucked up, but that didn't mean she couldn't come up with a few simple spells she'd like to teach herself eventually, useful things she should be able to manage with only a glyph or two...

Mel had herself suitably distracted until she was all the way outside, biting autumn wind pulling at her hair. When some of it blew into her face, Mel couldn't help a quick huff of annoyance — she still had it loose, she couldn't fly with it like that, it'd end up a hopelessly tangled mess. Sometimes this shite still completely slipped her mind. Mel set the point of her broom's handle against the half-frozen ground, holding it upright cradled in her knee. Wand in one hand, balancing on one foot, she soon had her hair in a braid all the way down. Which she wouldn't have been able to manage without a couple charms Parvati had taught her, some of those were just bloody useful.

Not that she'd be mentioning that to Hermione. She could imagine the knowing look she'd get well enough, too embarrassing.

Wand squirrelled away again, Mel dropped her foot, bringing her broom back in place with an easy twirl. Just as the end hit her shoulder, Mel froze, steps halted even as they started again.

Her broom...

Doing her best to ignore the shaking in her own hands, Mel shifted, moving to hold her broom level in front of her.

This was...

Her unsteady fingers tightened around the wood, her knuckles bleaching white, that same tight heat crawling up her chest and throat again.
This was the first Christmas gift she'd gotten from her father. The first thing her father had ever given her.

Before she realised what was happening, tears had already blurred her vision into uselessness.

'My mother has confirmed we're doing a vigil over the New Year again. If you wanted to come, I'm sure you're all welcome.'

Susan's eyes narrowed slightly, running her tongue absently over her teeth as she stared at Zach. Everyone else was already responding, either they had nothing else planned and would attend, or they had prior engagements that would bar them from doing so. Susan was well aware she would be expected to agree to attend — in fact, she suspected she was the whole reason Zach was bringing it up — but she wasn't entirely sure if she could.

Not because of the politics of the situation, though she wasn't ignorant of that whole mess. House Smith was somewhat unusual among British families, in that they were a very old family, and a comparatively wealthy one, but had never managed to be raised to nobility. Of course, that was mostly because they'd been a client house of a succession of Noble and Most Ancient Houses — first Slytherin, known to have already been one of their vassals at the first meeting of the Wizengamot (though they'd used a different name at the time, obviously), then Hufflepuff, and most recently Maðyc, passing from one to another as their patron house died off. They'd been independent since shortly after the Statute, and had been jostling for political influence ever since with some mixed success, but hadn't yet managed to secure their own title. Not that the current Mistress of the House wasn't still trying her damnedest.

Zach had been trying to cosy up to her since the moment they'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff together. Even before, actually, at any social function they both happened to be dragged to, but he'd started fawning over her with almost single-minded intensity about then. Which was perfectly understandable — her House may be down to only two members, but they were still filthy rich, and they were one of the very few Ancient Houses left. It wasn't unexpected Zach's Mistress would tell him to try to befriend her by any means necessary.

Honestly, it was almost adorable sometimes. Zach was a bit too stodgy and meticulously proper for her tastes, but the earnest innocence thick in all of his overtures was at times endearing. Enough she put up with his more annoying moods.

That he'd made himself known as one of her suitors at practically the moment of her fifteenth birthday was still mortifying, though. Understandable, but really.

Once the babble at that announcement had died down a bit, Susan said, 'I honestly don't know if I can make it. I'll write your aunt when I have an answer.' Mistress Smith, she meant, technically Zach's great-great-aunt. Overly-friendly woman kept insisting Susan use her first name, which had always made her uncomfortable. She realised she was Lady Bones and everything, so technically her social better, but the woman was, no joke, a hundred years older than her...

Zach blinked in confusion for just a second, accusing eyes then jumping to Tony. The other boy immediately raised both hands, said, 'Woah, woah, don't look at me like that, Smith. I have nothing to do with it.'

'Oh? Who else, then?'

'Black.' It wasn't just Tony who said it. Somehow, most of the table — Hannah, Megan, Olivie, Terry, Ernie — managed to say it almost in perfect unison. And then broke into giggles, just because.
Susan waited it out, shaking her head at them with a tolerant smile on her lips. 'Yes, yes, laugh it up, you ridiculous people.'

Smirking, Hannah muttered, 'Hypocrite.'

'Well, I mean, yeah.' Before anyone else could say anything, and a few people were opening their mouths to try, Susan raised her voice slightly, cutting over them. 'I will come if I can make it — your aunt knows how to throw one hell of a party.' Enough calling it a "vigil" seemed inappropriate, honestly. 'But I have no idea what Mel's plans are like over break, it's possible something might come up. So no promises.'

Olivie gave her a strange look at that. Well, really, most of the table did, but Olivie was the first one to say anything. 'You haven't talked about it?'

Susan just shrugged. They'd only been together for a couple weeks. Especially with Mel being the way she could be sometimes, she thought it perfectly reasonable to hold off making plans for break. Which was slightly annoying, yes, when people kept bringing her invitations like this one, especially since Mel's House, newly revived and all, didn't have any established traditions she could try to plan around. But it wasn't annoying enough it was worth making her extremely skittish girlfriend uncomfortable over. It was just stupid shite, it would work out, no big deal.

'You'll be there on the Solstice, though.'

She winced, avoiding the eyes of the group's sole Slytherin. It wasn't odd Millie would ask, since Houses Bulstrode and Travers were co-hosting it this year, but she hadn't a clue how to answer. Normally, she would assume Mel knew about the ridiculous society ball on the Solstice Susan was essentially obligated to attend, but Mel didn't know a lot of things, she wasn't sure. And, since she had absolutely no idea whether Mel would be at all interested in going to that kind of thing, and since they had only been together a couple weeks, she hadn't mentioned it. She definitely should mention it sometime before the end of classes, assuming she didn't scare Mel off somehow before then, but she hadn't yet. 'I should be there, yes. We'll see.'

'You haven't asked her yet, have you.'

Susan shot Hannah an entirely venomless glare. 'Shush, you.'

Silent, Hannah smiled sweetly, eyes bright with internal teasing.

Ugh. That expression had been far less annoying back when Susan could just kiss her whenever she did it. Maybe it had been a bad idea to encourage it so much...

A bitter edge on his voice, Terry said, 'I fucking hate going to those things. Warren always finds me, she never leaves me alone.'

'I'm shocked, Boot, so dismissive of a fair maiden's affections.'

'She's twice my age!'

'You know what they say about experience and all that.'

'Well, fine, but she's definitely not a maiden.'

Susan couldn't repress a snort. He wasn't wrong. She was pretty sure Cassie Warren's virtue had been a lost cause before Susan had even been born.
'Oh.' Zach frowned for a moment, drawing a few curious looks, before turning to Susan again. 'It's that swotty newblood friend of yours.'

'Maïa?' Susan turned in her seat, looking over her shoulder across the public common room, to find Hermione picking her way through the tables. She'd only caught a second's glance of the other girl's face and her heart was already sinking into her stomach. 'Ah, shite.'

'What's wrong?'

'I don't know, but Maïa's worried about something.'

'Please tell me she's not freaking out about exams already.'

Susan rolled her eyes.

Everyone stopped their chattering the instant Hermione reached the table. She hadn't even been standing there for a second, giving Susan zero chance to say anything, before blurting out, 'Something's wrong with Mel.'

She blinked. Well, okay, then...? 'I'm gonna need you to be more specific.'

'I don't know what's wrong! She won't talk to me.' Hermione looked extremely put out by that, even pouting a little. 'I just found her up a tree, and she won't say anything and she won't come down.'

'Er...' Susan glanced around the table, but instantly wished she hadn't. A lot of the expressions she caught implied less than flattering thoughts about Mel. Suffocating her own annoyance, Susan turned back to Hermione. 'Which tree?'

A few minutes later, and Hermione was leading her out the front doors. Before the chill November wind could bother her too much, she drew her wand and cast a warming charm over herself — she hadn't planned on going outside, after all, she really wasn't dressed for it. Hermione turned toward the nearest edge of the forest, partway up the cliff over the lake. Loose rocks skittering down ahead of them, they slipped through a line of naked bushes. The subtle sense of trepidation Susan had been doing her best to ignore grew slowly stronger as Hermione led the way, picking over roots and fallen branches, closer to the edge of the cliff. It wasn't nearly as high here as it was on the other side of the castle, but still, there was no way that boded well.

Susan was getting rather seriously worried when Hermione stopped, nodding at an ancient oak just at the edge, the craggy trunk within an arm's reach of a twenty-metre drop to the glittering water below.

She took a deep breath, trying to force the coolness, the calmness out toward the unpleasant itching crawling along her arms. It was fine. Come on.

Susan slowly picked her way toward the tree, staring up through the branches. If they weren't entirely barren of leaves, it would have been almost impossible to see her from down here, but she was pretty sure... 'Mel?' That had to be her, right? The figure half up the tree was facing the opposite direction, out over the water, so Susan couldn't see her very well, but who else could it be?

Orbiting the trunk to get a better angle, sending a cautious glance in the direction of the cliff edge every couple steps, Susan could eventually make out her face. Yes, that was definitely Mel. She was pretty sure she even recognised the deep purple jumper she was wearing, probably seen it before, and that was her Firebolt she was hugging tightly to her chest. It was hard to tell from this far away, but it looked like Mel had been crying. Was still crying? She couldn't hear anything from down here, but it was a bloody tall tree, and it was a rather windy day, whistling in her ears and setting empty branches to creaking, so it was possible it just wouldn't carry this far. 'Mel? Can you hear me up
there?'

She waited, long seconds, but Mel didn't say a word, glance down in her direction. Barely even
moved.

Raising her voice a bit, Susan called, 'Are you going to make me follow you up there? Skirts aren't
great for climbing trees in, you know.'

Silence. Stillness. Mel might as well be a statue for all she reacted.

Susan let out a sigh, taking a few seconds to just curse in her head. Sometimes she couldn't image
why she bothered. Mel could really be a pain to deal with. But there was no use lying to herself. She
didn't need to imagine.

Not that she didn't imagine anything at all Mel-related, of course, but it was a rather different kind of
imagining. Which she would be keeping to herself, for the time being. She doubted Mel would react
at all well to Susan talking about that. Such a skittish little thing, honestly.

Susan glanced the direction they'd come, noted Hermione had left at some point. Right, good. Skirts
really weren't meant for tree climbing, and Hermione would get very uncomfortable should Susan
start flashing her knickers at her. Even accidentally. Pulling her skirt up a bit, making sure the hem
was a fair bit above her knees, gathered the excess material at her left hip, twisted it about, making a
little knot she was pretty sure would hold. She jumped in place a couple times, just to make sure.
Okay. After a couple seconds of glancing between the tree and her own feet, Susan let out another
sigh, kicked off her shoes. Soft leather and tree bark really don't mix. A glance to confirm nobody
else was in sight, and Susan quick shimmied out of her tights, crumpled the muggle fabric up into a
ball, shoved it into one of her shoes. A quick charm set her shoes to glowing softly, on the off-
chance she should nearly forget them. Not likely, granted, but she'd once had a nasty habit of
running all around the manor grounds barefoot, so just in case.

And by "nasty" she mostly meant she'd been repeatedly yelled at for it. Blah blah, injure yourself,
blah blah, behaviour unbecoming of a young lady, blah blah, your mother would be embarrassed,
blah. Of course, she'd already been in muggle tights. The first time Neine Rhonwen had caught her
wearing those she thought the irrationally incensed woman would have a bloody stroke. Still glared
and muttered at her every time.

But then, it was possible that, after Hannah had first shown her some muggle stuff years ago, that
was a part of why she'd started wearing them in the first place. Neine Alis thought it was hilarious, so
she was in the clear.

Getting up the first little bit was annoying. The trunk was bare of branches up to well above her
head, high enough Susan had to wonder how Mel, who was significantly shorter than her, had ever
made it up there. Oh, wait, she had her broom with her, never mind. Susan picked a branch, then had
to take two quick steps and a jump off the trunk to reach the bloody thing. She hung off the branch,
her shoulders yelling at her more with each second as her feet fruitlessly scrambled at the trunk,
eventually managing to get enough friction, pulling her hips up over her head. An ankle up over the
branch, shifting a bit to get her knee over. She couldn't hold back a groan of a pain as she pulled
herself around to the top of the branch, the bark scratching at the insides of her legs. Once she was
settled on the branch, her thighs still angrily stinging, she glared up at Mel, luxuriating in a few
seconds of surliness before she had to start being nice. She hoped Mel appreciated her coming after
her, climbing this cursed thing in a bloody skirt, shite...

After a moment of quietly fuming, Susan brushed her own annoyance away, then started pulling
herself back to her feet. She wasn't exactly an amateur when it came to climbing things not meant to
be climbed — blah blah, injure yourself, blah blah, behaviour unbecoming of a young lady, blah blah, your mother would be embarrassed, blah — so it didn't take any time at all to get herself up to where Mel was. Just as she passed within a few metres, there was an odd tingly feeling, like lightning on the air. She frowned. Was that a silencing barrier? Something?

When she moved to pull herself up onto one last branch, Mel jumped, head snapping around toward her. Probably a silencing barrier, then. No wonder she hadn't responded to her yelling at her, all right. And she'd definitely been crying, Susan noticed, eyes red, tracks from dried tears striping her cheeks. Past tense, though, she wasn't crying at the moment. 'Susan! What are you—?' Mel broke off, face flushing, pulled one hand away from her broom to scrub at her face.

'You don't need to do that, Mel.' She froze, eyes flicking up to stare at Susan over her wrist against her cheek. 'People cry sometimes. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Mostly just annoyed you made me climb up this tree, honestly.'

Mel frowned at her. 'I didn't make you do anything.'

'I suppose not,' she said with a little shrug. 'But you were up a tree crying, and didn't seem to hear me when I tried talking at you.' Mel winced — yeah, silencing barrier, for some reason. 'What was I supposed to do, walk away? Throw a shoe at you?'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to...' Mel sighed, turning to stare down at the lake. 'I just needed a moment, is all. People were being noisy, so...'

'Yeah, it's fine, I get it. I was just worried, is all.' A slight churlishness came over Mel's face, wasn't sure how to read that. 'All right. As long as we're up here, move.'

Mel snapped back to face her, blinking. 'Huh?'

'Scoot forward a bit.'

'Er...' Giving her a disproportionately suspicious look, Mel shifted a little, slid a few inches up the branch. Susan rolled her eyes, gestured to move more. Taking far more encouragement than really seemed necessary, Mel had moved a couple feet along, carefully balanced on the branch — though, it looked like she was using the flying charm on the broom to cheat a little, clever.

With a bit of maneuvering, nearly falling when her foot slipped, she got herself to standing on the same branch Mel was on, just behind her. She dropped one hand away from one of the branches she was propped against, hitching her skirt up a bit more — seemingly unconscious, Mel's eyes jumped down to her thighs then, flushing red faster than Susan would think possible, turned to face forward, her shoulders visibly tense.

Since she wasn't looking at the moment, Susan didn't bother repressing a teasing smirk. Silly girl.

Sitting down was a bit awkward, since she there weren't any branches in convenient places to support herself. Now that she was actually up here, it was increasingly obvious Mel hadn't climbed this thing at all, just floated up on her broom. She managed it eventually, the trunk scraping at Susan's back through her clothes. One foot planted for balance on a branch just down to the side, the other floating free, Susan let out a breathy sigh. 'Okay, we're good. Come on, then.'

'Huh?'

Susan shook her head. This girl sometimes, honestly. 'Sit back, come on.' Mel turned to stare at her over her shoulder, looking an odd combination of embarrassed, reluctant, and grateful. Then, with a girding breath, Mel was moving again. Very obviously using her broom to float over, there was no
way she could stand on the branch like that and not fall over, but she guessed Mel was a ridiculously good flyer. Once Mel was close enough, Susan had her hands on both her shoulders, guiding her closer in. So she was in place to feel Mel going rigid, tension turning her hard and stiff. Not unexpected, honestly. Soon Mel was settled, flush against Susan hip to shoulder, more or less — Mel was a bit shorter than her, but still. Susan wrapped both arms around Mel's waist, hugging the smaller girl against her, propping her chin on her shoulder. And she waited.

Given how extremely uncomfortable she could get extremely easily, it didn't take that long at all. Mel started off unaccountably tense, as though expecting an attack at any moment. Susan had had plenty of time to think about this sort of thing, and while Mel hadn't told her much of anything at all, she'd still picked up enough to really not like the implications. But, slowly, bit by bit over long seconds, the tension gradually dribbled away, Mel slowly relaxing against her. After maybe a minute or two, she'd dropped her broom to balance across her legs, her head leaning to rest against Susan's chest and shoulder with a soft sigh. She didn't have to see to know her eyes had fallen closed by now.

All right, good. Moving on, then. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

Mel didn't answer for a long moment. She partially tensed with the question, relaxing again far more quickly than last time, but then sat in silence for what felt like minutes. Finally, 'I probably should.'

'You really don't have to if you don't want to. I'm not going to make you, or anything.'

'I don't know.' Mel let out a long sigh, leaning further into Susan, somewhat to her surprise. Not unpleasant surprise, of course, but still. 'I've learned just keeping shite to myself doesn't fix anything, but I still want to most of the time. Habit, I guess.'

'I guess.' Susan pulled one arm away from Mel, flicked her wand out into her hand. She dispelled her warming charm, then recast it, slightly weaker and redistributed to focus mostly on her legs. She had gotten a little hot climbing this cursed thing, and Mel was warm. Her wand fallen back into its holster, she returned her arm to Mel's waist, smirking a little when Mel actually moved her own out of the way a little for her. 'That doesn't mean you have to talk to me, though. If you'd rather, Maïa, Lord Sirius...'

Mel tensed again, suddenly, even holding her breath. Huh. 'Talking to Hermione can be hard sometimes. It's complicated. And Sirius... I can't talk to Sirius about this. I wouldn't know what to say. But I... She trailed off, sinking a bit more against Susan. Without entirely meaning to, she tightened her arms a bit, hugging her closer. Yes, very warm. Would almost think Mel was an elf or something, so tiny and running so hot. Her voice low and shy, so quiet Susan almost couldn't even hear it, Mel said, 'You are my girlfriend. I should be able to, you know, tell you things.'

'You don't have to.' In fact, she'd already resigned herself to Mel remaining a mystery half the time, she was fine. Somewhat frustrating, yes, but some people are just private like that. 'I'm always happy to listen if you want me to, but don't force yourself on my account.'

Voice turning somewhat darkly amused, 'Why are you so nice to me?'

'I'm a nice person, didn't you know?' Mel let out a snort. 'Hey, come on. I think I'm offended. I am the picture of a perfect Hufflepuff, kind and loyal and true.'

'And also humble.'

'Yes, very humble. Few people are more humble than I. It's a gift, I'll admit.'

Shaking her head against Susan's chest, Mel chuckled under her breath for a moment. 'You're
ridiculous.'
'We've established this, yes. If I weren't ridiculous, would you still like me?'
Mel shrugged. 'Probably not.'
'There you go, then.'
'Mm.' Mel was silent a short moment, the fingers of one hand lightly trailing along Susan's arm. 'I
was reading my mother's journals.'
'Oh, yeah.' Susan would admit to herself she had a little flash of jealousy whenever Mel mentioned
those — her own mother hadn't left behind anything like that at all, and Mel seemingly
had hundreds of the bloody things. She kept it to herself, though, hadn't said anything to Mel and
didn't plan to. Because she knew enough to be jealous, she knew what it was like, she could imagine
what it would be like, she didn't want to take away from it even a little if she could help it. 'Found
something bad?'
'Not...' Mel took in and out a long breath, her head shaking a little again. 'Not, not bad, exactly.
Just... I don't know what to do with it. It's...weird. And a little bad, I guess, but not really bad. I don't
even know why I ran off like I did, I don't know why I'm feeling like this, I just...'
'What happened?'
Another breath, this one shuddering a bit. Mel's fingers tightened around Susan's arm, which was
curious, but okay. 'It's... You can't tell anyone, okay.'
Normally, Susan might be offended by how often Mel kept saying that about shite she told her. It
was a little insulting, that Mel thought she ever would just go blabbing anything shared in private.
But she knew Mel didn't mean anything by it — she would guess all the idiocy that had happened to
her over the years just on account of being Harry bloody Potter did lend to paranoia — so she always
tried to ignore it. 'I swear I won't.'
Another breath, a tense shiver running along her spine. 'I... James Potter isn't my father.'
Susan blinked. Then she blinked again. 'Huh. But then, wh— Oh, obviously, Sirius?' Mel nodded,
then leaned a little over, the side of her head coming against Susan's cheek. She hugged Mel a little
closer, burrowed a little further into her neck. 'I really don't know what to say here.'
'I guess I wouldn't expect you to.'
Silence lingered for long seconds. The anxious shaking that had overtaken Mel for a moment there
was gone again, relaxing into Susan far more than she usually allowed herself. Which she
was definitely not complaining about. Susan cast about for something to say — it wasn't very easy,
she was getting a bit distracted by thoughts of Mel's neck and the kissing of it, which probably
wouldn't be taken very well just now — finally stumbling on something. 'Ah, and he didn't say
anything about this?'
'No. I, er, don't think he remembers? You know. Azkaban.'
'Oh.' That... That was fucking terrible. The dementors had fucked the poor bloke up so badly he
didn't even remember his own daughter. She'd wondered before if foreign nations hadn't the right of
it when they censured Britain over Azkaban, and it was shite like this... He was innocent in the first
place, but even if he weren't! Seriously... 'Are you going to...'


'What? Tell him?' Mel let out a harsh sigh, the hand on Susan's arm lifting to rub at her face. 'I probably should eventually, but... Jesus, what am I supposed to say? How do I even—? No, I don't know. I wouldn't even know how to start.'

'Yeah, I don't think I would either.' Not that that was a problem she would ever have. No one doubted Dilwyn Bones was her father, and he had died before Susan had even been born. She wondered if she would end up feeling jealous over this too. She didn't at the moment, but it wasn't inconceivable she might later.

'But it's not even that, really.'

'No?'

'Or, not just that, anyway.' Susan noticed Mel tensing up again, so she snuggled into her further, but Mel didn't react at all. Both hands had gone to the broom again, so tight Susan saw her fingers changing colours. 'Fay came and recruited me for a pickup game, so I was going down, and... It occurred to me, this, right here, is the first thing my–my father ever gave me. It was a Christmas present, third year.'

Susan frowned. 'Wasn't that the year he broke out of Azkaban? He sent you a Firebolt for Christmas while on the run from the Aurors?' She wasn't sure if she should be more amused, impressed, or exasperated.

'Yeah, well, Sirius.' She couldn't see it from this angle, but the smile was clearly audible on Mel's voice. 'Funny in retrospect. I didn't get to keep it right away, you know. Hermione ran off to McGonagall, it was confiscated while it was stripped down and tested for curses. See, Hermione thought it'd been sent by escaped mass-murderer Sirius Black, who everybody knew was trying to kill me.'

'Oh, Maïa. Even when she's wrong, she's right.' That was kind of funny, yes, but Susan was honestly a bit distracted by Mel calling McGonagall, well, McGonagall. Did Gryffindors not call her by her first name? It was possible Pomona was just a massive Hufflepuff...okay, it was likely Pomona was just a massive Hufflepuff, but that honestly felt weird to her.

'And, I was thinking... For a second there, I...'

When Mel hadn't said anything for maybe a half minute, feeling all tight and nervous, Susan prompted, 'Mel?'

'I... I was pleased. I was pleased Sirius is my father instead. Because... Because James is dead, and Sirius isn't, and... Mel let out another long sigh, this one thick and wavering, a slight hint of tears squeezing the edges. 'I just... I just feel like a terrible person, that's all.'

Oh, wow, this was a bloody mess. Susan had no idea what to do with this. 'You're not a terrible person, Mel.'

'And you're an expert, are you?'

'On terrible people? No.' She turned her face into Mel's neck a bit, skin warm and soft and smelling of...well, she wasn't sure what exactly, but vaguely sweet and flowery. Some body wash or shampoo or something, obviously, but she couldn't tell what it was suppose to smell like. Mel's breath hitched a bit, starting, but she didn't say anything, and she didn't attempt to pull away. 'I'd like to think I'm not entirely hopeless when it comes to good people, though.'

Mel gave a thin, slightly nervous-sounding laugh.
Susan waited a moment, just long enough to be sure Mel wasn't intend to say anything. 'I really don't know how to help, Mel.'

'I wasn't exactly looking for help.'

'I know. I just... I just want to.' Fuck, she wanted to. She knew she hadn't anything close to the whole picture yet, but she still knew Mel had a lot of awful shite in her life, and it just... She just really hated it sometimes. A week or so ago, she'd been laying awake in bed at night, silently raging at the world over it, the thought suddenly hitting her she must care about Mel more than she'd been looking for going into this. Or this soon, for that matter. But that was fine, she wasn't complaining. It was like reaching for a knut and pulling away a galleon.

A lot of things about this so far have been sort of like that, really.

'If there ever is something I can do for you, you'll tell me, right? Cause, you don't make it obvious, and I want to help if I can.'

Mel took another shaky breath. 'Yeah. If there's something, I'll try to tell you.' That was probably the closest to her word she was going to get.

A subject change. This needed a subject change. Mel needed a subject change, really, it was quite obvious she didn't want to think about this anymore. All right. She thought for a second, trying to come up with something, and immediately snapped back to the conversation she'd been having when Hermione had found her. That would do. 'I was wondering.'

' Hmm?'

'What are your plans like over break?'

'Er...' Mel hesitated a long moment, then shrugged. 'Just, legally changing my name, stuff to do with that. I know there's a House Black...thing...we're doing on, er, the twenty-third? I think it's the twenty-third. Think that's it. Why?'

'Well, there's this thing on the Solstice. Silly society party, you know, with expensive food and fancy music and pretty dresses, the whole thing.' Mel nodded — obviously, she'd heard of the things before. 'Since I'm technically Lady Bones, I'm more or less required to go. The thing is from sunset the twenty-first to sunrise on the twenty-second, officially. We wouldn't have to stay that long.'

Mel was quiet, very still. She hadn't gone all tense again, though, so it probably wasn't a bad quiet. Susan didn't know how to read it. 'You're asking me to go with you.'

'Yes.'

Silence again, but only for a couple seconds. 'Are we allowed? I mean, two girls, you know...'

Susan was again reminded Mel was raised by muggles. The things they got worked up over, seriously... 'Nobody cares about that. There'll be others too, doubt anyone will even comment.'

'Right, forgot. And you know people will probably know who I am by then. I mean, who I was. You know what I mean.'

'Yes, I know what you mean. So?'

'Well, just...' Mel shifted in place a bit, obviously venting some sort of awkwardness. 'People will comment. Everyone is stupid over the Boy-Who-Lived shite—'
'You know, they're going to have to find something else to call you all the time.'

Susan could feel Mel rolling her eyes at her. 'Still, it's a lot... People are stupid, it's just a lot of annoying attention, and people are going to be awful...'

'That's not really anything new, Mel. I'm one of only two members left of a Noble and Most Ancient House. A Noble and Most Ancient House that still has most of our wealth. And I'm young, and unmarried. And I'm me — proper society types have never been exactly happy with me, and they make no secret of it.' She shrugged. 'I'm used to annoying attention, and people being awful. If it bothers you, that's one thing, but it doesn't bother me.'

'Well...' She let out another sigh, and when she spoke again her voice was slightly faster, slightly thicker. If Susan had to guess, and she really didn't, they were at the actual source of Mel's reluctance. 'I just don't want to— I've never done anything like this before, really, and I'm sure I'm going to look silly, and I'm going to make an idiot of myself, and—'

'Mel.' That was enough to get her to stop, but Susan didn't speak immediately. She just held Mel close, face pressed to her neck, waiting for her to calm down again. Or possibly just feeling and smelling her, okay, but that was slightly creepy, she shouldn't admit to that. 'Don't worry about that stuff. I don't expect you to be a perfect lady or anything. Those types are boring as shite anyway, honestly. If you "make an idiot" of yourself, well, I usually make an idiot of myself at these things anyway. On purpose, to annoy them.' Mel let out a little startled laugh at that. 'So, it doesn't bother me. If it bothers you, that's one thing, but don't hold yourself back on my account.

'And, well...' This would be awkward. Why did they have to be up a bloody tree for this conversation? Susan pulled back slightly, leaning against the trunk, tilted a bit to the side. She brought one hand up, softly prodding at the side of Mel's head, getting her to turn. The angle was slightly awkward, and Mel's face was very close, practically touching, but it would do. She trailed her fingers gently over Mel's forehead, along the hairline, down her cheek. Mel's breath hitched slightly when she slipped over her lips, Susan couldn't help smiling a little. Then down along her neck, lifting away at her collarbones — yeah, Mel would react badly to that. She replaced her arm around Mel's waist, tipped her head to bring her forehead to meet Mel's. 'You won't look silly,' she said, eyes steady on Mel's as much as she could, cocked at a weird angle. 'You're beautiful. Put you in a pretty dress, all made up and everything, well, I can't imagine you being anything else.'

Mel just stared back at her. Her eyes would flick away every once in a while, her mouth opening only to silently close again. She shifted in place slightly a couple times, seemingly unable to get comfortable. Well, no wonder, they were up a bloody tree. Finally, she said, 'I, erm...' She trailed off immediately, paused to clear her throat. 'Right, okay, I'll go.'

'You don't have to, you know. If you want to.'

Mel let out a short laugh, Susan's hair fluttering with her breath. 'Well, Ellie keeps telling me I won't know what I want until I try it. How about we find out?'

Despite a lingering worry she would just be dragging Mel into something she'd hate, Susan couldn't help smiling. It helped that Mel had just sort of committed to a date over a month from now. That was nice. 'How about.'

'Susan?'

She blinked. That was an odd tone of voice. Sort of... No, no idea how to interpret that. 'Yes?'

'Can...' Mel shifted again, pushing herself back against Susan, tilting slightly to the side. Which
involved flexing her back in a way that was extremely distracting. 'Can you, er, kiss me up here without knocking as both over?'

Her first impulse was to laugh, but she choked it back. She smirked instead. 'I don't know. Let's find out.' Turned out? She could. It involved tilting her neck at an almost painful angle, but she found Mel's lips with hers after only a second. Mel was still a bit clumsy with this, but, well, that was to be expected, wasn't it? Susan was pretty sure she was the first person Mel had ever kissed.

And, honestly, she made up for it in... Ah, Susan wasn't sure what the right word was. She was just so...soft, and sweet, and cautious, and...delicate? She wasn't sure, she had no fucking clue what she was talking about. But the way Mel kissed her back, all slow, and hesitant, slightly awkward, but at the same time with an almost painfully vulnerable need, just barely felt in each slight motion of her lips, each pass of her breath, each shift of her body against hers...

Well, there were reasons Susan had been taking rather more alone time than usual lately.

She was so intensely focused, absorbing each cautious touch, each hitch to her breath, every tiny fold in her lips, Susan nearly jumped when she felt Mel's fingers slip into her hair, totally unanticipated. And it was Mel pushing harder into her, hand pulling down on her head slightly, Mel leaning up a little into her. Not a bad thing, of course, she was nearly smirking in fact. Just, somewhat out of character.

Perhaps she should do things like that beautiful bit there more often.

But this angle was getting slightly annoying, so Susan lifted her shoulder a bit, turning, nudging Mel up into sitting. It took her a moment to get the message, but then she was moving. Not taking her mouth from Susan's, of course — though she did pause, lips unmoving light against hers, hot breath slipping through — turning and lifting a bit until she was sitting sideways right in front of her.

And then her other hand was in Susan's hair too. What about the broom? Eh, she'd probably set it to float next to them or something, whatever. She was quite incapable of caring at the moment. Mel's breath was turning thicker and louder, and without really thinking about it Susan had tilted her mouth open, and Mel started a bit when Susan brought her tongue, soft, gentle to her lower lip — was it bad all these little twitches of hers made Susan feel a bit smug? — but she recovered almost instantly, pulling herself tighter into Susan, cautiously welcoming her.

She wouldn't push too far with that today. She knew Mel wasn't at all used to this sort of thing. She had to try a little, though, Mel tasted a lot like honey at the moment for some reason, she was just...

Susan had pulled her elbows closer, her fingers coming to Mel's sides, her back, feeling each press of her breath, the little jerks and stutters of muscles randomly twitching for one reason or another. Each one sent Susan shivering inside, growing all too warm and tense and impatient, very distracting. She hesitated, just a second, then decided to hell with it, slipped her fingers below the hem, then up under the jumper and the shirt beneath it. She expected Mel to react badly, to push her away, but she couldn't help herself, she was nearly shaking with the need to touch her, come quite suddenly out of nowhere, and her back was too soft, and too hot, and too perfect, and even if Mel was annoyed with her it would be worth it.

What she didn't expect was for Mel to moan into her mouth. Sharp and sudden, the sound all high and nasal and tight, as though she'd tried to hold it in and couldn't, her back arching with Susan's fingers, pushing her chest into hers, and...just...she...

Bloody buggering fuck, she wanted her. Now, right now.
So, of course, they had to be *up a bloody tree*.

Before Susan could even start weighing the pros and cons of fingering her girlfriend half up a tree on the edge of a cliff in the middle of the Hogwarts grounds, Mel was jerking away, scrambling back so suddenly Susan was left oddly dizzy. Suddenly enough Mel lost her grip around this stupid branch, would have fallen if her flailing hands hadn't managed to catch her broom, floating just to the side. Susan was extremely tempted to move after her, but, no, that would be a bad idea. Very skittish. Wait. Don't scare her off.

And Mel did look scared. Though that might not be quite the right word. She was intensely flushed, almost a painful-looking red, eyes sprung wide, breaths coming in heavy pants, continuing long after Susan had fully recovered. Long enough Susan was starting to get worried, actually. By the time, well, it had to be a minute or two, Mel was still sitting there, desperately breathing, half facing away from her. That...didn't look good.

She hadn't just fucked up, had she? Because...well, that would be bad.

She held out, watching Mel's breathing only *slowly* calm, for as long as she could before she just had to know. 'Mel? You okay?'

Mel shook her head, her breaths turning clearly conscious, slower. Finding a spot to speak in? 'No, I'm...I'm fine. It's okay.'

'You're sure?'

'You didn't...' She paused to swallow, the break from breathing enough she nearly gasped when she was done. 'You didn't do, anything wrong. It's fine.'

'Oh. Erm.' It really didn't look like it. But what was she going to do, try to convince Mel to be annoyed with her?

Mel gave her a slightly exasperated look, as though realising she didn't entirely believe her. 'Really, Susan. I just...I don't know. It's fine, I'm...That was just a bit...'

'This is one of those things I'm supposed to take as a compliment, isn't it?'

She wasn't entirely sure she liked the tone of Mel's breathless laughter.

**Chapter End Notes**

*Just as a reminder, this Severus is still less than nice to his students, but he isn't so awful as in canon. The difference is enough he didn't feature as Neville's boggart, though he's still most everyone's least favourite professor. Consequence of the differences I had to make to his character to make him at all believable as a consistent, thinking human being. Considering a couple things said in the first scene, I thought it prudent to mention this again, in case anyone was wondering.*

[James is almost certainly your father. Not that it would have made any difference, I suspect...They would have claimed it was James for legal reasons, even if it was really Sirius.] — *Quoted from chapter nineteen, imprecisely. Mel isn't reproducing what Remus said verbatim, but the essence is close enough.*
Neine Rhonwen — Rhonwen Prewett née Fawley, Susan's mother's mother. "Neine" is a somewhat childish Brīþwn word for grandmother. (Bones is a mostly Gaelic family, but the Prewetts and Fawleys are strongly Brythonic; the use of Brīþwn here reflects Rhonwen's preferences, not Susan's.)

Neine Alis — Alis Prewett née Łuyełin, Susan's mother's father's mother. Great-grandmother, technically, but Susan still uses "neine" for her.

Several reviewers have been waiting for that confirmation. There you go, then.

Yeah. Sorry about forgetting to post this here. My bad.

Until next time,
~Wings
'Is that a good or a bad thing?'

Mel winced at the question from Ellie, retreating slightly further into the familiar chair, warmed by the fire in McGonagall's private sitting room. The problem was, she couldn't entirely decide. It'd been a couple days since she'd found out the truth about her father, and she still wasn't sure how to feel about it. Just say that, then. 'If I had a simple answer to that...'

Her lips tipping up into a wry smile, Ellie shrugged. 'Well, don't say for sure one or the other, then. Just tell me what you think.'

'It's just...' Mel sighed, letting her head fall against her knees, pulling her legs closer against her. She'd pulled her feet onto the chair to hug her legs again at some point, she honestly hadn't noticed. 'It's mostly just kind of weird, you know. I mean, I thought my father was James for as long as I can remember. Sure, I didn't know much of anything about him until recently, but that's not really the point. And then it turns out that was total shite, and it's actually been Sirius the whole time. It's just...'

She frowned into her legs for a moment, shrugged a little. 'I dunno. It's not bad, really, just weird. Not to mention complicated.'

'How's it complicated?'

Mel let out a sigh, her head lifting only to fall against the back of the chair. She stared blankly up at the ceiling, only partially because she didn't have to actually look at Ellie this way. 'Because Sirius doesn't know, okay, that's why it's complicated.'

'He doesn't know? You're sure?' Ellie sounded a bit odd saying that. Part surprised, part concerned? Mel couldn't see her face to confirm at this angle.

'Yes, I'm sure. Well, okay, most of the time he doesn't know. It's a dementor thing, see.'

'Ah.' That tone was far less ambiguous: obvious sadness.

'Yeah.' It was pretty sad, when she thought about it, but it didn't actually bother her that much. It didn't really make any difference. She meant, it wasn't like she'd had a father before anyway. 'I still haven't told him, and I have no idea when I'm going to. If I ever do. I mean, what would it change? I'm already living with him. And he's already doing an uncomfortably consistent job of taking care of me.' It'd been months now, and it still felt sort of strange to have someone out there who actually cared. Sirius still insisted on having mirror calls nearly every night. Many were very brief, yes, but just to check in. Which was still just...weird. She went along with it, and it was even nice sometimes, but she still wasn't used to having any adults in her life who give a shite.

Well, she guessed she actually had a few now, including the Tonkses, and Remus, and even Snape
should probably count, in a far more formal, standoff-ish sort of way. That didn't mean it wasn't weird.

Anyway, moving on. 'I wouldn't even know how to start that conversation. And... I don't know, this might sound terrible, but I'm not really sure I want him to know? I mean, he might be...weird about it.'

'Weird how?'

Mel shrugged. 'I dunno. I guess... Well, I've been practically on my own the last fourteen years, you know. I've never really had parents, or even anything close enough to... I just wouldn't know how to handle it, you know. How to...' Mel sighed, the sound coming out noticeably exasperated even to her own ears. 'I don't know how to explain this. How to be someone's kid? Like, I don't know how to do that. He'd probably want to treat me differently, and I'd probably be expected to treat him differently, and... I've never had that kind of relationship with someone before, and I'd have no idea what to do with myself. It'd just be awkward.'

She realised that was probably really depressing-sounding, but that's what it came down to in the end. Honestly, talking to other people, observing them, reading between the lines in other stuff they said, she didn't understand parent–child relationships. The entire concept was just foreign to her. She couldn't count how many times she would sit in the Burrow watching the Weasleys, watching everyone interact, feeling like she was...she didn't know, missing some subtext. It just didn't entirely make sense to her, especially when things the Weasley kids would then later say about their parents. It was baffling. Or listening to Hermione talk about the Grangers. Couple other people here or there. More recently, Susan talking about her aunt — she did call her "Mum" most of the time when they were in private, so Mel thought that should count. It was all just confusing.

She couldn't even say why exactly. Just... The way people would care about their parents' opinions of them, and the shite they would do all related to that. Like Hermione, originally looking into Healing because her parents were in a similar field, and it was something they would not only be proud of, but was a magical profession they could actually understand without too much explaining. Susan and the Weasleys repeating a lot of their respective guardians' opinions or political views without thinking, as though they were just fact. Ron only being able to find proper motivation by thinking of how his parents would react should he do too badly. It was just so...

She wondered if this was a thing that's she'd missed. If the reflexive...daughter stuff, she guessed, would just never become natural to her, because she hadn't been properly raised by anyone, so simply couldn't think that way. Or maybe there was just something wrong with her. She would admit it was possible there was — if her time with Ellie had taught her anything, it was that her brain made very little sense sometimes, she didn't quite think or feel the way she should. It was possible that, even if she had had any proper parental figures growing up, it still wouldn't be intuitive to her, simply due to her brain being her brain. It was impossible to tell for sure.

'So anyway,' she said, 'I'm not really sure I want him to know. It might just make things extremely awkward. And, I don't really need him to know. I don't need him to be my dad. I'm fine with what we have now.' Slight lie, of course, since she still wasn't entirely used to the relationship they had already, it did make her uncomfortable sometimes. But near enough to truth, anyway.

Ellie was silent a short moment. 'I suppose that makes sense.' Somehow, Mel wasn't entirely sure how, she knew Ellie didn't entirely agree. That part of her thought Mel should make a point of telling Sirius, of...acknowledging, or connecting, or whatever word Ellie would use. That Ellie thought she would in her place, but understood Mel well enough to know she didn't feel the same way, that suggesting she do this against her will would be counterproductive. Which Mel appreciated,
honestly.

Apparently, she'd started to get nearly as good at reading Ellie as Ellie was her.

'So, let's leave that aside for now. I get the feeling this isn't the whole problem.'

Like that. 'It isn't, really. I just feel kinda guilty.'

'About?'

Mel considered refusing to answer, but Ellie would probably resist changing the subject, and would certainly come back to it later anyway. Fine. 'I just, it hit me, shortly after I found out. I was just thinking in the, er, abstract, I guess, at first, but then I realised it wasn't so simple. See, honestly, in another situation, I might not actually care. One or the other, does it really make that much of a difference who it is? I realise that sounds kind of terrible, but in some ways I'm not entirely sure why who my father is should matter to me. All being equal, if you know what I mean. But then I realised, they aren't equal choices. James is dead, but Sirius is, you know, here.'

'I don't think that's terrible,' Ellie said, the lilt to her voice making it very clear she'd shrugged in saying it.

'But it kind of is, though! I mean...' Mel broke off, leaning forward to press her face into her legs again. She had no idea what she was saying. She didn't even know what the problem was, really. She just felt bad. 'I mean, I shouldn't be pleased about this, that Sirius is my father because James is dead.'

'Why not?' Mel opened her mouth to speak, but Ellie got there first, cutting her off. 'Are you pleased James is dead?'

She frowned. 'Well. No.'

'Then why should you feel badly about it?'

For a few seconds, Mel could only blink, the difference in her vision between open and closed rather minute with her face against her legs. 'Er, well...' Okay. She was even more confused than she'd been a moment ago. 'I... Well, I have all these Potter things. There's the Cloak, and my vaults, and the businesses and properties and stuff...'

'From what you said about the contract Lily signed, James wanted you to inherit everything, whether you were his biological child or not.'

'But I'm going to be dissolving the House and everything.' She winced — it'd just occurred to her she'd be ending the family of her legal father and bringing all the wealth and everything to that of her biological father. That just seemed somehow...she didn't know, seemed wrong, in a way she couldn't quite explain.

She didn't have to be looking to know just from her voice Ellie was smiling. 'It's all yours. You can do whatever you want with it. That is sort of how inheritance works, you see.'

Mel rolled her eyes. 'I somehow doubt James would have wanted me to dissolve the House.'

'Probably not, no. However, he had to have known it was a very real possibility. Before marrying your mother, there were only two members of the House left — and nobody expected Elizabeth to ever have children herself, so there might as well have only been one. A House reduced to a single family like that almost never recovers. People don't expect them to. James had clearly hoped his
marriage to your mother would revive his House, but he would have gone into it knowing it was more likely it wouldn't be enough. He would have known it was a very real possibility that his House would cease to exist in a generation or two. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he thought this a good contingency should the worst happen — if his House's wealth is to be absorbed by another, better one led by someone he trusts.’

She frowned. ’But Sirius wasn’t Lord Black back then. He was in exile, even.’

’True. But I doubt anyone expected his exile to last forever. Eventually, he would have made amends with his family, and eventually he would have become Lord Black. It was inevitable, really, something the Blacks knew as well. Don’t you think it curious he was the heir while still in exile? House Black famously passes the title by selection — Lady Cassiopeia could have stripped him of his rights at any time, yet she didn’t.’

Huh. Cassiopeia, Mel knew, her grandmother’s sister — her grandmother in her cover story, not the point — had been Lady Black immediately before Sirius. She’d died spring or summer last year, couldn’t remember exactly, the title passing to Sirius. Despite him being a fugitive at that point, despite him still being in exile. And, since Sirius had been thought to be innocent by a large portion of the public, and Cassiopeia had never been involved with the Death Eaters, that was likely to be significant. She hadn’t had a lot of options, but still.

Oh. Wait. Cassiopeia wasn’t Mel’s grandmother’s sister. Dorea Potter wasn’t actually Mel’s grandmother — Walburga Black was. Which meant Cassiopeia was actually her great-grandfather’s sister.

God, this was confusing.

’I...’ Mel sighed, lifting a hand from around her shin to rub at the side of her head. ’I don't know. I guess it doesn’t entirely make sense. I can’t help that I feel sort of bad anyway.’

Mel still wasn’t looking, but could hear the smile on Ellie’s voice. ’No, our feelings don’t always make sense, do they? It’s a good start, anyway. I can’t really help you past that. No one can.’

Despite herself, Mel let out a little derisive snort. She could feel Ellie’s eyes questioning eyes on her. ’Nothing, just, something Susan said about it. Saying she had no fucking clue how to help. Just being silly, don't mind me.’

’You told Susan about this?’ Ellie sounded slightly surprised.

’Well, yeah. See, when I found out, I kinda...ran off and climbed a tree.’ She knew by now, rationally, that Ellie probably wasn’t looking at her like she was a completely fucking crazy person for that. Ellie tended not to look at her like a completely fucking crazy person. But she felt like a completely fucking crazy person, so she gave a defensive shrug anyway. ’Yeah, I know. She chased me up there, so I felt like I kind of had to tell her. I mean, I didn’t really think I had to, I just...’ She shrugged again.

’As long as you’re not giving Susan more of yourself than you’re comfortable with.’

’I'm not.’ At least, not really. It was extremely awkward actually sharing things most of the time. But that’s just because she was uncomfortable talking about things. She never minded Susan knowing these things afterward. Mostly.

It was even sort of nice sometimes, though she couldn’t explain exactly why. She just, by this point Susan knew more about her than practically anyone. Only Hermione and Ellie came close. And,
honestly, she'd thought all this honesty would, she didn't know, be bad. She meant, she'd thought Susan would have stopped liking her by now. Only she hadn't. If anything, it seemed Susan liked her more than she had at first, which was just confusing. Mel was certain she hadn't told Susan anything that made her seem that...likeable. It was mostly just her neurotic shite. Some of the more horrible things that'd happened to her over the years most people didn't know about — she hadn't necessarily come clean on the details, but Susan knew the basic outline, at least. Which was a bit... She didn't know. She just didn't understand.

But even if it wasn't entirely comprehensible, it was obvious Susan still liked her. The way she kept hanging around her, even if they weren't talking or doing anything, just sitting somewhere reading or whatever. The way she'd smile at her, she couldn't say exactly what about it, just all weirdly warm and soft, it was a thing. The way she... Well, this one was somewhat awkward, but the way she kept touching her. Not, like, big things, she meant, just, like, taking her hand or her arm while walking down the hall, sitting close enough in their study group and their few shared classes their arms or legs touched, a couple times just lightly leaning against her when they were sitting reading. Just little things, all the time.

Of course, then there were the not so little things. The memory hit her in a breath-stealing wave, her skin tingling at the sense of Susan's lips and tongue and teeth, her breath carrying a faint scent of lemon and honey, soft hair smelling of oranges, the tingling turning almost to itching as Susan's hands slipped under her shirt, smooth, cold fingers trailing up her sides, her back, but more than itching, Mel had felt something in her shift, and she'd...

It'd been too much. Just too much. She smelled too good, and she tasted too good, and it'd felt too good, and she'd been suddenly too hot, too tense, like a spring stretched too far, but at the same time soft and unsteady, she doubted she'd have been able to stand at the time. And she'd...

She knew Susan wanted to... Well, wanted her, she guessed. It was a normal teenager thought to be in her head, really, and Susan hadn't exactly been taking pains to hide it. She wasn't really, er... Mel wasn't sure what the right word was for what she was thinking. Susan didn't make a point of it, didn't call attention to it, downplayed it if anything, but Mel was certain the thoughts were there. Susan didn't hide it that well. But then, up that tree, just for a moment, she'd...

She'd never felt like that before. For just a second, she hadn't... She'd wanted Susan to touch her, to keep touching her. To just...not stop. Just for a second, she'd been too hot, and too tense, and she'd shivered at the thought, she knew where not stopping would eventually take her, shivered enough to nearly take her apart inside, but she hadn't cared. Just for a second, she'd wanted it, she'd felt it come over her, she'd barely been in control of herself, she'd just wanted to be closer, she'd just wanted more, and she hadn't cared, god, she'd even made a very obvious noise, that was embarrassing in retrospect, but she hadn't cared at the time, she'd barely been able to even think, she'd just...wanted her.

It was bloody terrifying.

Ellie could obviously tell something was going on in her head — she felt the warmth on her own face, and for some reason she seemed to have developed a complete inability to sit still, legs and shoulders fitfully shifting — so she asked what she was thinking. And, more than a little awkwardly, Mel told her. About how she'd felt up in the tree, about how she'd been uncomfortable even looking at Susan the last couple days, about how every time she remembered it she felt so excited and scared and warm and...and thick and tense and just...confused and frustrated. It'd even interfered with her sleep the night of, she'd been too hot and shaky and energised, couldn't stop thinking about it, she hadn't been able to get comfortable.
She had no fucking clue what she was doing, and it was getting rather annoying. One would think she'd be used to it by now.

If anything, the bit about not being able to sleep that first night seemed to be making Ellie somewhat confused. Her head was a little cocked, her eyes just noticeably narrowed, staring at her. Which Mel could only see in her peripheral vision, still refusing to look at her directly. Then her confusion abruptly melted away, replaced with a look of realisation, eyes slightly widened and both brows raised. 'Ah. No, that wouldn't have occurred to you, I suppose.'

Mel frowned. 'What wouldn't have occurred to me?'

For just a second, Ellie hesitated, visibly wary, then nodded. Mel recognised that look: Ellie knew Mel wouldn't be at all comfortable with this topic, but had decided they should talk about it anyway. It was so familiar because Ellie did it rather a lot. 'You're about to be extremely uncomfortable, by the way. Just as a warning.'

And Mel was the one feeling rather wary, turning fully toward Ellie to give her a suspicious frown. She never warned Mel like that. She used to, yes, but not anymore, not for some time. That was...concerning. 'Er, uncomfortable about what?'

Voice perfectly easy, as though confirming whether she'd had breakfast today, Ellie asked, 'You've never touched yourself before, have you?'

Mel just stared back at Ellie, doing her best to squash all external sign of her internal struggle against her rising mortification. It was obvious what she meant. For just a moment, trying not to squirm in her seat, ignoring the intensifying heat on her face and neck, Mel considered whether she should pretend to not understand what she meant. But that was probably a terrible idea. If she pretended she didn't know what Ellie meant, Ellie would then explain what she meant, and that sounded somehow even more embarrassing. 'No.' She flinched — she'd tried to say it flat and short, but it'd come out sounding far more...well, hysterical than she'd wanted.

A smile twitched at Ellie's lips. Mel had the random urge to curse her in the face. 'Never? Not even back when you were Harry?' Mel shook her head. 'Has the thought ever even occurred to you?' Mel just shrugged at that one. 'That's not really helpful, Mel. Are you capable of a verbal answer?'

Mel glared at her. Sure, she was capable of a verbal answer. She just didn't want to. But she doubted Ellie was going to drop it, and they did have another ten minutes by her count, so she let out an exasperated sigh. 'The thought has occurred to me before. Only out of curiosity. I mean, I knew that, erm, it was a thing people...do. Kinda hard not to notice. Caught Dudley a couple times.' Not to mention she did his laundry. Did not want to think about that more than she had to. 'Don't even get me started on Seamus, that boy has no concept of privacy. And, this term, Fay's, erm, forgotten her silencing charm, a couple times.' Her face had been so red it'd almost hurt every time that'd happened, scrambling to cast the charm herself. Then, when Fay'd eventually shown up again, hiding behind her own curtains while the other girls had started teasing her for forgetting again — apparently, a couple years ago Hermione had even taught Fay a perimeter silencing barrier for this exact purpose, every time had gone into a whole disappointed teacher routine, it was ridiculous.

Her silence had apparently gone on long enough, because Ellie prompted her again. 'So you've wondered what it was like.'

She shrugged again. 'It's occurred to me. I mean, people keep...doing it, so there has to be a reason. But it just...didn't... I don't know, I could never bring myself to even try. It's just too weird.'

' Weird how? '
Mel's only answer was another shrug. And that wasn't being evasive, she really didn't have an answer for that one. No clue what to say. The thought had occurred to her, yes, she'd been mildly curious, but she'd never really thought about it seriously. She'd never really thought about anything, er, sex-related seriously. A bit of morbid curiosity, she guessed. Though, she wasn't sure why the word "morbid" felt appropriate, whatever. Until that time in the tree with Susan... It had just never seemed that appealing. Mild curiosity, sure, but not enough to actually...just, do it. Not really.

'And you've never been, ah—' Ellie hesitated for a second, eyes flicking to the ceiling, obviously searching for a suitably indirect way to say what she wanted. '—interested, shall we say? Physically, I mean.'

Mel winced, shifted in her chair a little again. Yes, she knew what Ellie was saying. And yes, she had been. She'd just... 'I've never done anything about it. Never even wanted to.' Not really. 'I just... Try not to think about it and wait for it to go away.'

'And you couldn't sleep that night, I suppose, because it was refusing to go away.'

She shrugged. That had been the problem, really.

Her voice still smooth and easy, though with a slight hint of caution underneath the surface, Ellie said, 'You know, you could have just made it go away.'

'True,' she muttered, low and slow. She technically could have, yes. Honestly, the thought hadn't even occurred to her at the time. Which might be slightly weird, come to think of it, but she was more than slightly weird. 'What are you trying to say?'

'I'm merely suggesting—' Tone light and airy, shrugging just a little. '—that you give it a try next time. That's all.'

Oh, that's all, is it? Mel shook her head, ruthlessly crushing the urge to shift in her seat, holding herself rigidly still. The blush was still there, of course, but she had no control over that, could only try to pretend it wasn't happening. 'I don't really know what that would accomplish.'

A slight smirk pulling at her lips, Ellie said, 'Other than helping you get to sleep sooner?'

Mel rolled her eyes.

'Potentially, all kinds of things. It is good for you, you know. Emotionally speaking, I mean. It can do people with problems like yours quite a lot of good. Honestly, I would have brought this up a long time ago, but gender-related issues can make the prospect rather more complicated. From what I can tell, though, you're past the point where that shouldn't be a hindrance anymore. Not to mention, your relationship with Susan is starting to force the issue.'

Oh, thank god. A bit of confusion to distract her from the uncomfortable direction of her thoughts was exactly what she needed. 'Huh?'

Ellie smiled, only slightly. 'You're rather taken with Susan, yes?'

'Well, yes...’ Honestly, the whole...relationship...thing...that part was still kind of weird and confusing, but Susan was great, yes.

'And you're not planning on breaking up with her any time soon. Outside of some extraordinary something messing it up, I mean.'

'No...?’
'I'm sure it's growing very clear to you by now where things between you two are headed. Physically.'

For that one, she could only manage a shrug.

'Well, if you're not comfortable with yourself, do you really think you would be comfortable with Susan?'

She frowned. That...was actually a good point. Not that it particularly mattered yet. The idea was still, well, terrifying. She wasn't anything like ready for that sort of thing.

But...she had been. For just a second, a couple days ago. Up that bloody tree. She'd wanted to, for just a second. Her silly neurotic nonsense had reasserted itself pretty quickly, but she'd never... It would get easier, she knew that, she'd gradually get used to it, less uncomfortable, her annoying fucking brain shutting her down later and later and later, and eventually... Eventually, it would happen. If she and Susan stayed a thing for long enough, it was inevitable.

Considering it specifically, explicitly, the thought was still a bit...much. But in the abstract, she didn't mind it. Eventually, she would like to be...she didn't know, mentally healthy enough, she guessed. To be a bloody normal person, she meant, at least as much as she was capable of being. To do normal person things, to have normal person relationships. Sex was something normal people did in normal person relationships. Eventually. It was something she wanted in the abstract, and she knew it would eventually be something she would want explicitly. Once she was comfortable enough with herself.

And she wanted to be comfortable enough. She didn't want to be a ridiculous neurotic mess forever.

Susan specifically, well... She didn't mind the thought of it being Susan she was comfortable enough to have a normal person relationship with. She didn't mind at all. She liked Susan. She was nice. Well, of course she was, she was a bloody Hufflepuff. But she never wanted to talk about the stupid shite a lot of girls babbled on about, so Mel was hardly ever bored, and she knew and did all this interesting stuff. And, possibly because of who her aunt was, she was even a bit into duelling — couldn't keep up with Mel, true, not even close, but she doubted anyone in her year could at this point.

Hmm. Maybe she should teach Susan a bit. With the Yaxley thing, it was obvious Susan would almost certainly need to defend herself at some point, and if she stayed with Mel long enough her own shite would probably start causing problems for her eventually, just by association. Mel knew she would hate herself if Susan got hurt and there'd been something, anything she could have done to prevent it.

But Susan could mostly keep up with her, and wasn't so far beyond her, like Hermione, that Mel could mostly keep up with her in the things she didn't have her handily beat. And she wasn't boring. At this point, Mel couldn't imagine ever finding Susan boring. And she liked being around her. And sometimes she made her feel just... Well, with how she'd reacted to that whole...the thing about the silly dance thing, all holding her and smiling at her, and calling her beautiful, and obviously meaning it... She'd just been, there was obviously a thing going on there, Mel wasn't sure what. Not a bad thing, definitely not a bad thing, she just didn't know what to call it.

And, of course, she was pretty. More than pretty, really. Mel wasn't so blind not to know that, nor so dishonest with herself to claim it made no difference. Yes, she thought Susan was attractive, okay, enough it was actually a bit distracting sometimes. Shite, sometimes Susan only had to smirk at her and she was practically melting, which, yes, was extremely fucking embarrassing. And she knew Susan knew it, she wouldn't look so smug all the time otherwise.
And she knew Susan was being very patient with her. With her silly brain weirdness. More patient than, honestly, Mel thought she had any right to expect. But eventually, she knew, Susan's patience would run out. Nobody could wait forever. She knew Susan wanted a normal person relationship with her, she wanted a normal person relationship with Susan, but she didn't have forever to get it to work. Susan would give up eventually.

Mel really didn't want that to happen. She wanted this to work. She needed to sort her own fucking stupid brain out. Anything that could help should be worth trying. Especially if it didn't actually take that much effort.

As far as things to get her brain to stop being fucking stupid went, this should really be rather easy. It was a normal person thing practically everybody else already did anyway.

Mel took in and out a long breath as she came to a decision. All right, then. Fine. Okay.

It wasn't quite so easy as all that, though. 'I... I really wouldn't how to...you know.'

And there Ellie was, just fucking smiling at her. Mel was considering cursing her in the face again. 'It's really not that complicated. People have been doing it literally forever, you see.'

Mel rolled her eyes again.

'Go somewhere you can be alone for a while, put up a few privacy charms so you won't be interrupted. I know you know far more of those than you would need, that won't be a problem. Then just take off your clothes, and...' Ellie shrugged. 'If you're having difficulties, there are a few things I can give you that might help. I don't have them on me today, but I can come prepared next week. But until then, give it a shot, and see what happens.'

Despite herself, she felt a wry smile pulling at her own lips. Ellie seemed to say exactly that about fucking everything.

Of course she wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it. She shouldn't have expected anything else by this point.

Mel had been lying in bed for...oh, she didn't even know how long. A while, anyway. The dorm was dark around her, silent save for the intermittent breathing of her roommates. It was a cool night, chill November winds buffeting the tower sucking the heat from the air. Mel had actually started hitting her sheets with a warming charm before climbing in, she couldn't imagine what it'd be like come January. She'd probably have to keep a warming charm going the whole night. Which she could do, of course, it was just ridiculous she would have to.

And she couldn't stop thinking about it. Her conversation with Ellie earlier today. Particularly a certain part of that conversation. But not just that. Intermittently about that, but... Honestly, she was probably thinking about Susan more. And other nonsense. Her brain did have a tendency to ramble sometimes, she really couldn't help it. But it kept coming back to...

Well.

It hadn't been that long she'd been lying here, impatiently waiting for sleep to finally claim her, but it'd been long enough. More than long enough. Long enough she was starting to get annoyed, which would just make getting to sleep even more impossible. It was pretty much hopeless by this point.

So she should just...do that. She meant, might as well. She wasn't getting anything else accomplished here.
She couldn't help a snort. Apparently, masturbating counted as an accomplishment now.

Taking a long, shaky breath, Mel gradually pushed herself up to sitting, back against the headboard, reached through her curtains toward her wand, waiting on a table just to the side. Ignoring how her heart seemed to be trying to climb up her throat, the steady pounding turning her breath even more unsteady than it'd been a second ago, Mel silenced the curtains with a wave, then froze them in place with a sealing charm. She hesitated a second, then shook her head to herself, cast the sealing charm again, but massively overpowering it this time. Thing was so powerful the air tingled. It could be her imagination, but she thought she saw the curtains glowing a little. Barely, just a slight hint of blue-green light, dim enough she wasn't certain it was actually there. No way any of the girls would be able to dispel that. Then, just in case, she ran down the list in her head of privacy and eavesdropping charms, including a notice-me-not. She realised she was going a bit overboard with her precautions here but, well, she wanted to be sure.

After some moments, once she finally couldn't think of anything else to cast, she shot a sticking charm high on the headboard, placed her wand against it. She lifted her hand, poked at her wand to make sure it was holding. Okay, good.

Okay. Time to do the...taking clothes off part. Right.

Even before she started moving, she was already feeling more than a bit awkward. She'd only ever, in her entire life, taken off her clothes long enough to change or bathe. For various reasons, she'd almost always done those as quickly as she could. So, even just the getting undressed part felt uncomfortable all by itself.

With another shaking breath, in and out, Mel reached for the hem of her top. Avoiding thinking about exactly what she was doing with as much force of will as she could gather, she pulled the thing over her head. And shivered as the open air struck her exposed chest and back — fuck, it was cold. She nearly just tossed the bundle of cloth in her hand away, before remembering she'd be wanting to put this on again before getting out of bed, and the curtains were sealed anyway. Feeling oddly sheepish, she set it down next to her on her bed. Then she had a thought, and tucked it under her pillow instead. There. A couple seconds to undo the ties on the thing, and she slipped the archaic-looking magical-made shorts she wore to bed these days under her pillow too.

But by then, she was getting really fucking cold. Almost flailing in her haste, Mel pulled the sheets and blankets up again, slipped back down to her back. She pulled the blankets up to her neck, turned on her side and wrapped her arms around herself, starting somewhat when she felt the bare skin of her sides against her fingers. Right, she'd just taken that off, ha ha. She just lay there for a few moments, shivering slightly, waiting for the chill to pass.

Once she was already comfortable again, it belatedly occurred to her she could have just grabbed her wand and cast another warming charm. Dammit.

Letting out a sigh, she rolled over onto her back, staring at the dimly visible outlines of her curtains, the ceiling above. She took a few, long breaths, fighting against the annoying twitching in her own mind. Which was silly, she was alone, nobody could see her, there was no reason to be being ridiculous. Slowly, she let her fingers slip down her sides — she suddenly remembered Susan's fingers doing the same thing, felt herself shivering again, this time while still comfortably warm — starting up the slight curve of her hips, shortly coming again to cloth. Soft and smooth to the touch, fabric thin and light.

Her knickers, see. She'd have to get rid of these too.

She wasn't entirely comfortable with that. Once they were gone, she'd be lying here naked, and that
was just sort of...odd. She'd never been naked anywhere that wasn't a bathroom or the hospital wing a couple times. It was odd.

But she was being silly. There was no reason to be so ridiculous about this. She should just...do it. Yes. Okay.

After a second's thought, she tipped onto her side. Movements cautious and stuttering, the fingers of one hand shifted over her stomach, dropping to the laces mages had to use because they apparently hadn't ever heard of elastic. It took longer to untie the fucking things than it really should have, her fingers were being stupidly clumsy and useless. She finally felt the waist loosen. Taking in another shivering breath, brought a hand to either hip — which was slightly awkward with the left one, since she was lying on it, but a little tilt up of her knees and she managed it — started pushing them downward. After a bit of awkward wiggling, she had the things over her hips then, with her knees pulled somewhat toward her chest, she yanked them up toward her knees. Letting go with one hand, she dragged them down her shins, the laces tickling against the insides of her left leg a bit, twitched her feet out. Then, faster and jerking, shoved her knickers under her pillow with everything else.

For long moments, she just lay there, on her side in bed, completely naked.

Which just felt sort of weird. She'd never been naked in bed before. It didn't help what with, you know, being able to feel the sheets all down both sides, it was just, it was just weird.

Eventually, she was undistracted enough to remember what she was supposed to be doing. Of course, she hadn't the first clue how the fuck to actually go about that.

With another sigh, Mel tipped over onto her back again, lifting both hands to rub at her face. It couldn't be that complicated. After all, people had been doing it for fucking forever. Heh heh, fucking. She should be able to just... Well, hopefully, she'd, erm, get enough of a, she guessed, reaction out of herself, hopefully quickly enough, that it'd be obvious. Figure-out-able. Yes.

Though, it might help if she... Well. Got herself...thinking. Yes.

God, she had no fucking clue what she was doing...

But...that was mostly fine, wasn't it? It didn't seem like Susan minded too much. Though it was possible she was just better at hiding what she thought than Mel was at seeing through it. That was very possible, actually, Mel didn't expect herself to be perfect at reading Susan at all. She didn't think so, though.

In the darkness of the dorm, she saw Susan smirking, face framed with fiery hair, eyes bright with hidden laughter. 'I guess I'll just have to take that as a compliment.'

She smiled despite herself, shaking her head a little. Yeah, at least for the moment, she was pretty sure she was fine. It was hard to trust Susan sometimes, to believe she really meant the things she said, but...

Like...

Like a couple days ago. Up in that bloody tree. She'd been having one of her... Okay, she realised she was ridiculous sometimes. Some of her weird neurotic nonsense was ridiculous. All of it, really. She had been worried she would just make an idiot of herself, if she went to one of those absurd society parties. With all that training in proper manners and shite Andi had shoved down her throat, it'd honestly be a bit hard to, but that wasn't the point. And she had been worried she would just look silly. Still sort of was, honestly. Maybe it was a bit ridiculous to still feel this way at this point, but
she always expected, when she was dressed up all girly and pretty, for it to just look...wrong, somehow. She knew, rationally, that she didn't, that it was all in her head, and she was just being ridiculous, but it was still the automatic assumption. That she would look like...well, a boy. That it would just seem wrong.

And Susan had been holding her, soft and warm, that way she had of making Mel feel like she were surrounded in a shell of heated blankets, completely consumed, and she'd been touching her, her fingers running all slow and smooth and impossibly gentle, her eyes impossibly sharp, tracing over every bit of her, absorbing every detail, like Hermione with a book. Voice so soft, just the slightest hint of amusement on it, but gentle and warm, and so thick with affection Mel had felt her face flush even further than it had already with only the sound of it. Telling her she was beautiful, that she couldn't imagine her not being beautiful.

Normally, Mel wouldn't be able to believe that sort of thing. She would automatically dismiss it, without even thinking. But when Susan was being that intensely focused, that... It was obvious she'd meant what she was saying.

Mel wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that. The very concept still seemed strange somehow. A piece that didn't quite fit.

But she'd still felt...

It terrified her how Susan made her feel sometimes. She got her into this, she didn't know, whatever, her random warm feelings running away with her, far too much for her to be completely in control of herself. And she didn't like not being in control of herself.

Agreeing to go to the damn stupid party had been easy. She'd felt that, in that moment...she would have given Susan pretty much anything she wanted. She just had to ask. And that was terrifying. *Fuck*, it was terrifying. But it wasn't only terrifying.

She'd never wanted to kiss Susan more than she had in that moment.

She realised she'd been acting slightly out of character. She was usually, well, extremely passive. Part of that was, just, not having a clue what she was doing, part of it being awkward and unsure. But she hadn't really been thinking about it. Her warm feelings had been running away with her, and Susan's hair had been *right there*, and, God, she loved Susan's hair, she still hadn't gotten over that. That weird mix of red and pink, still seemed unnatural to her, it was fascinating. Soft and thick and always smelling of oranges, which Mel had started to really like by this point. Which was a bit odd, because she didn't even like oranges.

She'd had both of her hands in Susan's hair, up to the wrists, and had had...some of the weirder thoughts she'd ever had. She'd held them in, though. She had no idea how Susan would react to her, well, pulling at her hair at all. Honestly, a positive reaction could have been just as disconcerting as a negative one.

She hadn't done it, but she'd wanted to clench her fingers into fists. She'd wanted to pull Susan's head to the side, she'd wanted to bring her lips to her neck instead. They'd never done anything like that, yet, but she'd seen other people do it, and she was curious, and she'd wanted, to just for a second there.

But she had no idea how Susan would react, and her nerves had failed her.

Apparently, Mel hadn't needed a warming charm. It was starting to get pretty warm under here.
They hadn't done anything like that before, no, but they'd done something that time they hadn't done before. Susan's fingers had never made it under her shirt before. By the way her hands had moved, she knew Susan had considered it any number of times, but always changed her mind. Worried Mel would react badly, she knew. Apparently, an entirely unnecessary worry. She was still mildly embarrassed over that noise she'd made. She didn't know why she'd reacted so strongly to just...

Mel brought her hands down under the sheets again, crossed her arms high over her stomach, her fingers to her own sides, almost hot under the blankets. She trailed her fingers up from her hips toward her ribs, mildly surprised at the tingles racing across her skin, shivering a little as they broke.

No, she had absolutely no idea why that'd affected her so much. No idea why it seemed to be doing it, a little bit, again, right now. Not as much, but still. She didn't get it.

And she was starting to get really warm. But, judging by the slight thinness of her own breath, the slight shake in her own fingers, the insistent tingling running along her spine, she was pretty sure now it actually had very little to do with temperature.

She wondered if Susan would make noises. Well, she was rather certain she would. She was pretty sure that was just, you know, normal. From overhearing Fay, Alicia that one time, Dudley and a couple of the boys in her year more than she really wanted to think about, yeah, she was pretty sure. Not to mention the fact Ellie had reminded her to put up a silencing. So Susan would, definitely. That was an interesting thought.

She wondered what it would sound like.

Her thoughts wandering on that topic for a moment, Mel let the fingers of one hand slide over toward her middle, slipping over her stomach. She noticed the slight lines cut into her skin, felt herself frowning. That wasn't weird for a girl, was it, to have the visible hints of muscle she did? There wasn't a lot, true. The chaser girls looked pretty similar, on Katie perhaps slightly more obvious than on herself. Way more obvious on Fay, that girl was almost scary strong. She let her fingers trace the lines in her abdomen, tingles almost to the point of tickling, wondering what Susan would think of it.

She meant, she didn't mind it. She'd seen it on other girls before, and she thought... Hot? Was that what she wanted to say? She thought it was sort of hot, okay. More than once, they'd been having their practice duels, and Katie had been getting a bit sweaty and gross, apparently, because she'd just throw off her shirt and faced off with Mel in, well, she wasn't sure what it was actually called, but little more than a bra, really. And, yes, her chest was a bit distracting like that, but honestly she'd found her stomach more so. Not to mention her back. Maybe she was just weird, but she found it completely impossible to keep herself from staring, she always lost those matches.

She'd wondered before if Katie did that on purpose.

And she was remembering, one of their duels, after they'd been practising for hours already, Katie in those tiny little shorts she usually wore, legs bare from the tops of her boots all the way to quite high up her thighs, just barely under her hips, really, arms bare, shoulders but for thin little straps, her hair tied up to show far more of her neck than usual, running unbroken down below her collarbones, rising again in very distracting twin curves before finally vanishing under tightly-bound cloth, a couple lines of lower ribs visible, then just sweat-streaked skin, cut with sharp lines, she couldn't look away, framed by ones above curving down and around, two more below slicing across and curving under—

Oh, yep, okay, it was happening again. Insistent tinges running all along her spine, across her skin, soft and hot nearly setting her to shivering. Low in her body, warmth under her skin, like hot chocolate running down her throat, an odd sort of tension, like...well, sort of like a muscle cramp, but
a lot weaker, nowhere even close to painful. Just a sense of, of wanting to move, of energy restrained, begging for some sort of release. She wasn't so ignorant as to not realise what that release was.

Somewhat distantly, very distracted, it occurred to her she'd just, er, turned herself on, she guessed? Whatever. By thinking about a girl who was not her girlfriend. She wondered if she should be feeling guilty about that.

She didn't, of course, but she was very distracted, so she wasn't sure it counted.

Speaking of distracted, she should be... Yes. Okay.

She let her fingers slip slowly downward, breath turning thinner and harsher in her throat with each centimetre. Little hairs were scratching at her fingers, and her voice in her head was screaming at her, sounding far too much like Vernon, telling her that she shouldn't be doing this, it was wrong, she was an unnatural freak and she should stop, but she could only really half hear it, partially deafened by her own blood pounding in her ears. She did wuss out slightly, her hand drifting slightly to the side, edge of her palm coming to rest against the very top of the inside of her thigh.

For a few short seconds she sat there, practically shaking, breath light and quick, trying to wrest into submission the flitting strains of panic in her own stupid bloody brain, far too aware of the greater than normal heat she could feel against one side of her fingers. Soft heat, like steam from a boiling pot, but far milder, barely noticeable.

Or perhaps not too aware, really. It was sort of fascinating.

Finally, once she was steady enough, once she felt her mind wasn't about to be shaken into pieces, she brought her fingers back inward. She'd judged the angles and such slightly wrong, a slight adjustment, and her fingertips came against flesh soft and smooth and hot and noticeably damp, but Mel was mostly distracted by a sudden thrill of white lightning snapping along her spine, leaving an odd warm, squishy feeling in its wake, sending another breathless shiver through her.

She paused for a moment yet again, allowing a moment to breathe, collect herself. Okay, then.

She moved slow and cautious, feeling out exactly what she was working with here, giving herself time to ride out each new wave of very distracting hot tingles crashing over her. Not too distracting, though. The first one had been, okay, where had that come from, but now she knew what to expect, it was fine. She felt what she was quite sure was an embarrassing noise of some kind clawing at her throat, but it was fine, she had it under control, yes. Fine.

So, of course, in the little exploration mission she had her fingers on, they just had to stumble on something that instantly shredded every single bit of her feeble delusion of self-possession.

She twitched as an overwhelming rush of something sprung away from the gathering heat low in her body, shivers running along her limbs turning them to jelly, tendrils of fire crawling up her stomach and into her chest, turning the air in her lungs hot and thick in a flash, a short cry launched from her throat before she could stop it, she instinctively turned away, legs defensively curling into her chest, face turning into her pillows, breath high and harsh and suddenly desperate.

Part of her, that black, cold, voice always at the back of her own head, was protesting wildly, small and shaking and terrified. It snapped back at the fire in her belly, the unsteady quivering of her arms and legs, the shivers possessing her spine, the dizzying sparks of static in her head. This was against everything it knew to be right, everything it knew of what she was, how the world worked and her place in it. This wasn't supposed to be, she wasn't supposed to feel like this, this was wrong.
Because, quite simply, that had been the best thing she'd ever felt. And she wasn't *supposed* to feel good.

But she didn't listen. She didn't want to listen, and she *couldn't* listen. She didn't even entirely mean to do it. Her fingers were already moving, as though with a mind of their own, searching for that spot again, that spot that had turned her body into pleasantly hot mush and her brain into a sodden sponge. She didn't think about it, she didn't care.

She hugged her pillow to her face, free hand clenched tight in her own hair burying herself away, her own breath hot and wet against her skin, her own voice muffled to her ears, and she didn't care about a thing.

Mel's eyes snapped open as a reverberating crash shook the air, scrambling to sit as her hand moved instinctively for her wand. She froze, blinking in confusion when the curtains refused to let her hand pass through, impossibly solid.

It only took her a second to feel the curtains about her bed were held in place by a sealing charm. An especially powerful sealing charm, and most likely her own work, by the feel of it. A couple seconds later, she noticed, blinking to herself, her wand had already found its way into her hand, seemingly by instinct. She felt the fading traces of a sticking charm, and remembered — she'd stuck the thing to her headboard last night, right.

As Hermione admonished Lavender for tripping over her own trunk, even while healing whatever damage the clumsy girl had done to herself, Mel slowly started feeling very strange. Something just seemed... off somehow.

A peculiar realisation broke over her still sleepy thoughts, whipped the sheets off her legs, confirmed her suspicion at a glance. Right. She was completely naked for some reason. That was weird. A niggle of memory itched at her, and she lifted her pillow to find the clothes she normally slept in waiting bunched underneath. Huh.

It was right about then her brain fully rebooted, and she remembered exactly *why* she'd gone to sleep without a stitch on.

Oh. Right.

Feeling unaccountably embarrassed, enough she felt the mild heat as her cheeks pinked — which was *ridiculous*, stop being silly, it wasn't like anyone could see this, stop it — Mel reached for her clothes, covering herself again with a bit more force and speed than was entirely necessary. Her heart abruptly hard in her chest, breath catching high in her throat, she sat for a last moment in private. Then she started dismantling the privacy charms, the shit so thick and overpowered it took multiple dispels.

God, she hoped nobody realised what had been going on in here. She had left the privacy charms up, which was *something* of a giveaway. She hadn't *meant* to do that, but she'd gotten a bit...tired...and she'd...forgotten. If her roommates *had* put it together, fuck, she hoped they had the tact not to draw attention to it at all. That would just be mortifying, just no.

So, of course, when the privacy charms were finally gone, and she whipped her curtains aside to stand up, her way was blocked by Hermione. Standing there, already fully dressed for the day, hands behind her back, face pulled into a brilliant grin.

Shite.
Trying not to look guilty — not like there was anything to be feeling guilty about, _shut up you fucking piece of shite_ — Mel glared up at her, forcing a bit of annoyance into her voice. 'Do you mind?'

Voice bright and far too cheerful, Hermione said, 'Nope, I don't mind at all.'

'I _meant_ , do you think you could—'

But Hermione spoke over her, her sparkling eyes trailing up to her curtains. 'You did go quite out of your to make sure I wouldn't mind, after all.'

Oh. Well. Ignoring the sinking of her own stomach, Mel forced herself to roll her eyes. Of course Hermione had figured it out in two fucking seconds, she shouldn't have expected anything else.

'You might want to look into a scent-neutralising charm next time, though, if you really feel you need to be so discreet. Just a thought.'

She could... She could _smell_ it? What?!

'Er...'

'Anyway, here.' Still grinning like a fucking lunatic, Hermione brought one of her hands forward, holding up a book.

Mel hesitantly took the thing, giving Hermione a suspicious look the whole while. There was no title or anything, just a plain leather book, thin, hardly longer than her hand. She glanced up at Hermione, her bright expression giving absolutely no clues. Out of a lack of anything better to do, Mel flipped the book open to a random page. The heading was incriminating on its own, but Mel only had to take one glance at the, er, illustration on the opposite page, which seemed to be _moving_, before realising _exactly_ what this book was. She clapped the thing closed, hard enough it gave off a sharp snap, cursing at the mortified flush she felt crawling up her neck.

'There's a lot of useful stuff in there,' Hermione was saying, voice still bright and easy. 'Both for use, ah, by yourself and with other people. In particular, you might want to make sure to look at page...'

Hermione trailed off, but Mel was too embarrassed to glance up to check her face. 'Actually, come to think of it, you probably won't need birth control for the foreseeable future, will you? Never mind.'

Hermione just... She was just... Ugh, no, Mel wasn't dealing with this. Her hands shaking far more than she was entirely comfortable with, still unable to look in anything like her direction, Mel held the book up to give back. 'I don't— Just, keep your book, Hermione.'

'I have my own copy still. That one's yours. Bought it for you back in August. I would have given it to you right away, but I figured you wouldn't have taken it well at the time.'

Mel _almost_ laughed at that. Because, see, she was obviously taking it so well _now_.

'Anyway, I'm hungry. See you downstairs, Mel.' Hermione's shadow fell away, the soft padding of footsteps on wood signalling her retreat.

'I hate you sometimes, you know.'

'No, you don't.' And she was gone.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Mel flopped onto her back, staring blankly up at the ceiling. No. No, she really didn't. Sometimes she thought it might make things easier on her if she did, though. Things could have been a whole lot less...she didn't know, complicated, whatever, if she'd had a less annoying best friend.
Ignoring for the moment the fact that she'd almost certainly be dead by now if not for Hermione, of course.

'This is all your fault!

Ellie met her glare with a patient stare, eyes slowly blinking. *Trying* not to look amused, Mel could tell, but not quite so successful it wasn't faintly visible. 'What is my fault, exactly?'

'I can't stop!'

A single eyebrow ticked upward. 'Stop what?'

Mel just glared at her.

'Ah.' Ellie gave a single, sharp nod. 'Still too shy to directly speak of this sort of thing, I see.'

She didn't stop glaring.

'Well, give me an impression of exactly what we're dealing with, here. The magnitude of the situation. You say you can't stop. Just how often can you not stop?'

Mel blinked. Odd way of putting it. Okay, then. 'I, er...' Ooh, this was embarrassing. Some part of her really, *really* didn't like that she was admitting this. It felt a bit... She didn't know, whatever, weird. 'Once or twice a day, I guess.'

'You guess?'

She glared again.

Ellie's lips twitched, just slightly. 'Once or twice a day, okay. So, what consequences have there been from you briefly losing control of yourself once or twice a day?'

The question was enough of a surprise to temporarily shock Mel out of her mixed embarrassment and annoyance. 'Huh?'

'Are you attending all your classes, keeping up with your schoolwork?'

She blinked. 'Well, yes.' Excluding the classes Snape had told her she didn't have to go to anymore, anyway...

'You've been following through on your work for your apprenticeship, making it on time to all your meetings with Snape?'

'I mean, yeah...'

'You've been going to those meetings with your study group? You're still spending more or less the same amount of time with your friends as always?'

'Yes, but—'

'Still hanging out with Susan too, I imagine.'

'I do, but—'

'I don't see a problem, then.'
'But... But...' Mel let out a long sigh, burrowing her face into her hands. She'd known, at some level, that Ellie would have an immediate response to this...problem of hers. That she wouldn't consider it a problem at all. At some level, she'd expected it. It was still annoying. 'I just...' She didn't know how to deal with this. She didn't know what she was doing.

'Honestly, Mel, once or twice a day isn't that much at all. There are people who do it way more than that. If you can work up the nerve, ask some of your friends, especially the boys — you might be surprised and, knowing you, quite possibly horrified. As long as it's not interfering with the rest of your daily life in any meaningful way, which it doesn't appear to be, than it isn't a problem. Should it ever become a problem, that would be something for us to talk about, but...' Mel wasn't looking, but she could hear Ellie shrug.

'It just...' No, she couldn't finish that sentence.

In fact, she didn't want to talk about this anymore. It was obvious Ellie wasn't going to take it seriously — and was perhaps correct in not taking it seriously, Mel's mind being stupid shite again — so there was no point humiliating herself further. She quite firmly changed the subject, ignoring the smirk Ellie gave her for the very ungraceful diversion.

It just felt too good. It felt too good, and she couldn't stop. And it made her feel rather...guilty. And she couldn't even explain exactly why.

She really hated her brain sometimes.

'I'm sorry I'm just sitting here reading again,'

Susan, lying on her side, the top of her head a couple inches from Mel's leg, tipped her face away from her own book, propped up on a table just in front of their couch, just enough to give Mel a smirk. 'Don't worry about it, Mel. If I were bored or annoyed I would say something.'

Mel bit her lip, turning away to glance around the room. A few days ago, Mel had decided to show Susan the Room of Requirement. A reasonable way to deal with annoying people randomly bothering them, she felt. Susan had requested this room, a plush living room in blues and whites and blacks, a bank of windows letting in a river of sunlight tinted a deep orange. (Which should be impossible, considering they were surrounded by castle on all sides, and it wasn't even close to sunset yet, but magic.) Susan had said when Mel had asked that this was a reproduction of a room in the private wing of the Bones family manor, the first place that had come to mind when she'd been thinking of a place to relax.

Mel had been temporarily surprised by all the blue — far as she knew, Boneses were almost always in Hufflepuff or Gryffindor. But, well, it wasn't like they were entirely incapable of using other colours, she guessed. Besides, they were a Noble and Most Ancient House, which technically made them older than Hogwarts anyway. Much older, in fact: the ancestors of Susan's House were known to have already been an established clan when Greek traders first made contact with the British Isles over two thousand years ago, one of only three modern British Houses confirmed to have been in existence at that time, in one form or another.

Of course, House Black was another one, but there had been branches of the originally Belê family all around Europe and the Mediterranean going back through most of recorded history. They were cheating.

Ugh, she was getting randomly distracted again. She kept doing that. 'I just... I realise I've been studying a lot lately. Even more than I was before. Not really planned, you know, just kind of
happened.’ Honestly, if she were still going to Astronomy and History and Herbology it would probably mean less work — the volume of reading Snape had assigned her was a bit absurd. True, she had until OWLs to finish it all, he'd just given it to her all at once, but still. 'Not being very interesting.'

'No, not really. But you don't have to be interesting all the time. Really, no need to be apologising about it.' Her head tipped around to face her again, splitting into a smirk. 'Besides, you're entertaining enough just being around most of the time I doubt I'll get too bored.'

Mel felt her own eyebrow ticking up her face. 'Entertaining?'

'Sure,' Susan said with a shrug. Which had to be somewhat awkward lying on her side like that. 'You're fun. Can't imagine that comes as a surprise. I mean, if you didn't think I were entertaining, would you really put up with me at all?'

Luckily, Susan turned away again immediately, returning to her book. Luckily, because Mel had absolutely no idea how to respond to that, and she was feeling rather suddenly awkward. She looked down to her own book in her lap, thinking how to put it into words. Because, it was that...sort of. Susan was entertaining, sure. But... 'It's not that, really.'

'Oh?'

Mel stared at her book for a moment, silently blinking to herself. 'It's complicated.'

'Well, I figured it would be. This is you we're talking about.' Mel wasn't looking at the moment, but she could feel the teasing amusement on Susan's voice.

So she rolled her eyes, turning just a little to make sure Susan would be able to see it. 'I mean, it's a lot of things now, really, but what made me put up with you in the first place...' She sighed, biting her lip. This was probably going to make her sound fucking crazy. Eh, Susan should be used to Mel sounding fucking crazy by now. 'The Dursleys sort of fucked me up, you know.'

She still wasn't entirely looking in that direction, but she could tell Susan was reacting somehow anyway. A sudden tenseness in the air, a sudden coldness. Her voice sounding thicker and harder than normal, just slightly, Susan said, 'I...had gotten that impression, yes.'

Okay. Good, then. Mel had never really talked about any of that explicitly, that would be far too uncomfortable, so they could just skip over it. Right. 'Well, it's a thing, it's really sunk in for me over the past couple months that...' Of course, that didn't mean this still wasn't incredibly awkward anyway. Mel shifted in place a little, a squirming and protesting part of her wanting to just drop it, but she shoved it down, forced herself to concentrate on saying things. 'You know, I was always a girl. Even when I was Harry. I just didn't know it, really. But, when I was really young, I can barely remember, I was doing, you know, girly shite without thinking about it. And, well, the Dursleys didn't like that. On top of the magic stuff, I guess that was just a bit too much freakishness for them.' It'd become very clear, looking back on it, that magic wasn't the only thing they'd been trying to beat out of her.

'You shouldn't say that.' Susan's voice had grown even thicker with suppressed rage, enough she was almost hard to understand. 'It isn't—'

Mel somehow managed not to roll her eyes. 'I know that, Susan. I was just quoting them.' Or, at least, she knew it most of the time. There was still a little voice in the back of her head that reacted very badly to...well, a lot of the things she did these days. But it was getting quieter, she mostly didn't even notice it. 'Anyway, they didn't like it. They wanted me to be normal, you know. Nobody
fetishises being normal like the Dursleys, it's insane. So they did everything they could. They did everything they could to shatter me apart into little pieces, rearrange them the way they wanted, hide away the ones they didn't like.'

'Is this going anywhere not depressing?'

She couldn't help a short snort of laughter. 'Sort of? See, ever since I've figured out I was always, I was supposed to be a girl the whole time, I've been wondering. If all that hadn't happened, if I hadn't been broken, who this Hazel girl was, who she would have been.'

'Er. Hazel?'

She blinked; had she really never mentioned that to Susan? Huh. 'Oh, it's, Sirius says that's what my name would have been. If I'd been born a girl normal-like, I mean. And I've been wondering. And, there are moments, here and there. Where I catch little flashes of her. Just glimpses. I just... I get a lot of them when I'm hanging out with you. Sometimes I can almost see the girl I was supposed to be, would have been. And I rather like her. I...'

Mel broke off, cursing to herself as she felt her voice wavering. Shite, stupid fucking thing, why did her everything have to be retarded? Ignoring Susan's gaze on her best she could, she furiously wiped at her eyes, working the kink out of her throat. This was ridiculous. She'd just been talking about normal shite, honestly. Or...what was normal for her, really. Her life was a absurd, so...

With a long, thin sigh, a flicker of a smile at a wide-eyed Susan, Mel shrugged and moved on. 'And I like that girl, you know, I'd rather like to be her. I want it, I want to be...so badly it hurts sometimes, but...' She shrugged. '...it's nice. It may seem a bit odd, but it's nice. So, that's why. I mean, there are other reasons now, but that's why I started putting up with you in the first place. You know.'

Susan said absolutely nothing, the air about her yet still and tense. So, feeling a bit self-conscious, Mel tried to focus on her book. Only tried, because it wasn't working very well. Seemed to be having concentration issues, and the bubbling nausea in her throat, itching running all along her arms, really wasn't making it easier.

Finally, after what felt like minutes, she turned to Susan to find her just...staring at her. Blank-faced and wide-eyed, still and silent. Odd. Trying to make her voice as calm as possible, Mel said, 'What?'

Face still blank, voice perfectly level, meticulously slow, Susan muttered, 'I think that's the single most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.'

Mel blinked. 'Really.'

'Really.' A smirk pulled very weakly at her features, her eyes dancing. 'I think you could ask me for anything you want right now, and I'm so sweet-talked I'd do it without thinking.'

Mel shook her head. She couldn't imagine why. She really didn't understand what part of what she'd said was supposed to be...all whatever, she didn't know. But Susan could be weird and confusing sometimes, she decided to just shrug it off. 'Really.'

'Yes, really.' The smirk twitching slightly wider, Susan whirled around onto her knees. 'Quick! Tell me to do something before it wears off!' Said grinning like a fucking lunatic, of course.

It took some effort to keep herself from giggling at her. Susan was just so adorably silly sometimes, she couldn't help it. 'Nah. I'm good, thanks.'

Susan's face collapsed into a pout. 'Darn.' With another whirl of muggle-made blouse and jeans,
Susan flopped over onto her back, sending the ceiling an exaggeratedly morose expression, as though it had somehow betrayed her.

'You're very silly, you know that.'

The fake sadness was pulled apart by a warm smile, eyes falling closed. 'Mmhmm.'

That conversation apparently done, no obvious sign Susan was planning on doing or saying anything, Mel turned back to her reading, and got down to it.

Or tried to, anyway. She was just...very distracted. It was Susan's fault, of course. Or perhaps Ellie's fault. That bit about Susan doing whatever she wanted was still ringing in her head, no matter that Mel had instantly dismissed it out loud, and she was just lying there. Turned back to her own book, but... Well, okay, Susan was in muggle clothes at the moment — still slightly surprised that a pureblood from a Noble and Most Ancient House raised entirely by mages did shite like that, but that wasn't really relevant. What was relevant was that, well, the blouse she was wearing right now had a significantly lower neckline than the robes she usually wore.

And it was distracting.

Mel took a long breath, shook herself, tried to focus on her book. And continued to fail. Dammit, Ellie. This was her doing. Mel had been having far too many...er, sexy thoughts, lately, and that was all Ellie's fault. Yes. She could never get her brain to shut up on a good day, and with this new stuff...

'I can feel you staring, by the way.'

Mel jumped, so sharply her side dug into the armrest of the couch more than was comfortable, and she nearly managed to drop her book. She cursed in her head, doing her level best to ignore the heat rising on her face. 'I'm sorry, I was just, er, I—'

'It's okay, Mel.' She risked a glance at Susan's face to find she was smiling up at her, lips tilted somewhat with amusement. 'You're allowed to stare, you know. If I had any sort of problem with it, I would have worn something else. Or, you know, never started flirting with you in the first place.'

'I guess, I just...' Mel shrugged, somewhat disappointed when the gesture didn't make her feel any less jittery. 'I just, you know. My brain is shite right now.'

'What, more than usual?'

Mel rolled her eyes. 'Yes, more than usual. It's been going on all the fucking time, ever since Ellie suggested I—' She jumped again, clapping her hand over her own mouth. No, what was she doing?! She wasn't supposed to say that!

If anything, Susan just seemed more confused than she'd been a second ago. 'Suggested you what?

'Er...' For a moment, she evaluated the likelihood she could get away with shrugging it off without answering or just changing the subject. Probably not great odds, no, Susan sounded far too curious. Shite. 'Well, you know, er...' She desperately scrambled for some way of saying it without saying it. *Fuck,* this was awkward. 'Er, find time to, you know, be alone.'

She risked a glance to Susan, but she was just staring at her, slowly blinking, still looking confused. Then her mouth rounded with an unspoken *oh.* 'Right, okay.' Then her forehead drooped into a slight frown. 'You mean, you weren't masturbating before? Like, ever?'
Mel turned away, entirely to avoid Susan's eyes, fidgeted with the pages of the book in her lap, entirely to have something to do with her hands. 'Erm. No.'

'Huh.' Silence for just a moment, before Susan's voice returned, somewhat lower, absent-sounding. 'Don't think I can imagine that, personally.' Susan must have sensed Mel's confusion, because she immediately added, 'Not having done it before, I mean. I can't remember a time before I started, honestly.'

Mel blinked. Then she blinked again. 'What?'

Susan was close enough she could feel her shrug through the couch. 'I dunno. I mean, I remember when I was like, I don't know, four or five? Maybe a little older than that, not sure. Mum was all talking about what sort of things are okay to be doing and saying around what kind of company. At one point she specifically said that I shouldn't be going touching myself if there's anyone at all in the room with me, that's a by-yourself-alone-time thing. I mostly remember because I didn't entirely understand why, so I asked, and she gave one of those it's just what people do answers, which were never good enough for me, so I only got even more confused. So, I know I must have started before then. It started feeling a bit different by the time puberty came around, true, but I'd already been masturbating for ages by then.'

For long moments, Mel could only stare down at her. She realised she was a, er, late bloomer, so to speak, but that seemed like a bit much.

Susan, who had been facing her book again, tipped up to give her a look. 'What?'

'SThat just...seems a bit...early?'

Susan shrugged. 'It's just what's normal to me. But, from what I've read and heard from other people, I'm the weird one here.'

Mel had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. Well, beyond fuck yes, you're weird, but that somehow didn't quite seem an appropriate thing to say in this situation. She floundered for a moment, before deciding fuck it, and just going back to her book. She doubted her input was really required by this point, anyway.

Why had that topic even been brought up anyway? Well, she knew why it had, her mouth got ahead of her brain. But... Ugh, why did she have to say something like that in front of Susan of all people? God, this was mortifying...

Mel had an urge to glance at Susan, but immediately reigned it in, kept her eyes on the book in front of her. Entirely failing to read, but that wasn't the point. It had just occurred to her she had just...rather indirectly, true, but she'd just said that she'd been...well. Lately. That was the most direct they'd ever been about...this kind of thing, so far. Which, true, wasn't saying very much, but they usually avoided the topic entirely. Or, to be more accurate, Susan avoided the topic entirely, and Mel would just generally not have sexy thoughts in the first place.

The point was, she was somewhat...worried? Sure, worried. She was somewhat worried Susan was having sexy thoughts. Possibly. Which... Well, honestly, she wasn't sure exactly what she would want to... She meant, she was sort of curious, and she was far too shy to ask, obviously, so part of her wanted to look, try to figure out from the set of Susan's face what was going on in her head. Not that she was even sure she was capable of doing that in the first place. Not the point. She just...

Ugh, she had no fucking clue what she was doing. She was being ridiculous. She should just focus on her book, some history text Snape was making her read. Thing was dry as hell, honestly, but she
would have to read it eventually, and thinking about this was better than thinking about other things, so she'd just try to do that.

She tried, and didn't entirely fail. She might have gotten rather farther along if she hadn't gotten distracted.

They'd both been reading for a while. Some minutes, Mel had no idea how long exactly. The room had been perfectly quiet, save for the soft passing of their breath, an occasional rustle of a turning page. So when the sound came, Mel heard it easily. It wasn't loud, a fraction above a hardly audible breath, a soft sigh interlaced with...with...

Well, "moan" was the first word that came to mind.

Mel glanced to the side, eyes falling on Susan. She'd tipped onto her back again, head tilted to the side and eyes reduced to the barest slits. Not looking any out of the ordinary, really. Maybe slightly sleepy. Or at least nothing would look out of the ordinary if she hadn't looked further down her body. It seemed, at some point, without Mel hearing it or noticing, Susan had undone her jeans. Mel couldn't see much of anything from this angle, but with how a good half of Susan's hand had disappeared down the front, it was pretty bloody obvious what she was doing.

She could claim she was surprised. But, honestly, after what Susan had said just a few minutes ago, that would be a lie.

Mel didn't really decide to do it, not consciously. It was just... She wasn't sure she'd ever felt more uncomfortable than she did in this moment, stomach shifting so hard it hurt, the urge to fidget coming so overwhelmingly she was jittery. She snapped her book shut, slipped it into her bag — her hands were unsteady enough it took a couple attempts — popped to standing with all the suddenness and gracefulness of one of Neville's less fortunate cauldrons, spun on her heel to—

She jerked to a stop, locked in place by a hand solidly clenched about her wrist. She stumbled for a second, getting her feet properly arranged, before glancing down toward Susan again. It was her other hand she'd grabbed Mel with, not the one she'd stuck down her own jeans, which was still there — but then, of course it was, Mel honestly hadn't expected it to not be.

'It's okay, Mel.' Her voice was somewhat thinner than usual, higher and breathier. 'You can... I mean, if you're so uncomfortable you have to leave for you, that's one thing. But if you were leaving for me...' Eyes still half-lidded, Susan's lips pulled into a crooked smile. 'I'd rather you stay.'

Er...

Was that a normal thing to...? Mel had absolutely no relevant experience to measure this against. She was completely fucking lost.

Well, what did she normally do when she was completely fucking lost?

'I...' Whatever she'd been about to say was interrupted by the sudden, irrepressible need to swallow. She couldn't see much of anything, of course, but what she could was still distracting. Mel was completely incapable of stopping herself from tracing her eyes over the thin band of skin revealed between blouse and trousers, following the slow shifting of Susan's, erm, occupied hand, the rising and falling of her chest with her breath, here and there hitching just noticeably, in time with the barest twitches in her face. It was just...

Fascinating? Was that the word? Sure, she'd go with that.
'Well, it just seems...’ Mel trailed off in mid-sentence as Susan let out another of those sighs, too distracted to properly speak English. The abnormally hard pounding in her chest and the warm tingles already stitching across her skin really weren't helping. 'Erm, I mean, just sitting here reading while you’re— It just seems kind of...'

'Well, you could—’ This time, there was absolutely no mistaking that as a sigh. That was definitely, definitely, definitely a sex noise. The nasal moan shot through Mel's skull and instantly had her shaking inside, suddenly far too unsteady and far too warm. The way, in the next moment, Susan's eyes slipped open, finding hers, face tilting into a very clear smirk, no, that really wasn't helping. 'You could kiss me.'

Well...

Mel hesitated a short moment, eyes flicking between Susan and the door, unreasoning terror clashing against building heat and excitement. Her decision was made for her when, obviously reorienting her hand to slip her fingers under her knickers — muggle cotton ones, looked like, odd — Susan let out another very interesting noise.

Yes. Mel could kiss her. No problem.

That, at least, was something she knew how to do by now.

Chapter End Notes

So, that happened.

In case anyone was wondering, Susan masturbating as a very young child is unusual, yes, but not unheard of. It happens. In fact, there is no such thing as a minimum age people will start at — there's an ultrasound out there somewhere of a girl still in utero masturbating to some sort of climax, it's this whole thing. Childhood sexuality is acknowledged to exist, but it's not anything like adult sexuality. Mostly in that, in the absence of adult hormones and such, children are incapable of being sexually attracted to other people, so any sexual behaviour is entirely centred around self-stimulation. (Simple curiosity and the rare precocious exception aside, generally speaking.) It's not something Western society usually acknowledges for cultural reasons, and hasn't at all until recently, but it is a thing.

Anyhoo. Poll on my profile.

~Wings
July

William Weasley, alone in the garden behind his parents' home, let out an exasperated sigh, complete with the harsh, throaty catch in the back of his throat the goblins always did. And it didn't even hurt when he did that anymore. 'I don't know what else to tell you, Ghrinršt,' he said, the dominant goblin language smoothly spilling over his tongue with the ease of long practice. So far as Gobbledegook was ever smooth, anyway. 'With the way things are going here in Britain, I really don't think I'll be making it back to Kemet any time soon.'

Interpreting goblin facial expressions always did take some guesswork. Everything looked like some variation on scowls and sneers at first glance, just due to the minor differences in facial structure between their species, and picking up the critical distinctions could be difficult if he wasn't paying attention. The life-size construct haphazardly formed of dirt and grass into the form of his boss's boss — fascinating stuff, goblin magic — made reading the goblin woman's face even more difficult. But he was almost certain that was annoyance. 'I really don't think I care. You left in the middle of a job, Xšquniz.'

He'd been given that name ages ago, shortly out of Hogwarts, and it'd stuck. Names in Gobbledegook always literally meant something, and this one did as well: With-Soft-Fingers. By the smirks of amusement he always got whenever anyone said it, he assumed it had some cultural meaning he'd somehow managed to not pick up yet, but he hadn't thought it wise to question or protest it. They wouldn't have given him a name in their language at all if they hadn't considered him worth talking about when he wasn't around, so he'd long ago decided to take whatever it was as a compliment. Probably back-handed, but that was hardly the point.

Bill snorted. 'Barely. There can't be more than a week's work left by now. All the really tricky stuff had already been taken care of long before I left.'

'That is not the point,' she snarled, voice significantly harsher than usual. And for a goblin, that was saying something. 'You signed a contract.'

'A five-year contract. It's long since terminated. Check with the home office, I've been an at-will employee for years now.'

For a long moment, wearing a twisted expression of surprise, the golem with Ghrinršt's face silently blinked at him. Even from thousands of miles away, he could practically feel her counting how long he'd been around in her head, realising he'd stayed significantly past his original obligation. 'That is most curious, Xšquniz. Most humans leave the moment the terms of their contract are fulfilled.'

Bill was aware, and not entirely surprised. The warding and cursebreaking division of Gringotts tended to train their employees, human and goblin, on the job, so to speak. The contract all human employees signed was, in essence, an apprenticeship. By the end of their initial commitment, a human contractee would have at least one mastery, but usually multiple — and, since the goblins' programs were infamously unforgiving, they weren't qualifications to sneeze at either. The rate at which people sustained permanently disabling injuries or outright died was rather concerning, to say the least, but it was still tempting enough Gringotts got a steady trickle of fresh blood from the sectors.
of society where open minds and a certain lack of safer prospects met.

Of the eleven men and women he'd originally signed on with, three had died, one had taken a
transfer out of the field and started a family, and the rest had moved on to less risky work, leaving
only Bill beyond. He could have found work elsewhere, of course, he'd simply never wanted to. His
pay had taken a significant bump once he'd been fully qualified, and the job was challenging and
interesting, no two projects exactly alike. He would have decided to move on eventually, of course,
but he hadn't been planning on doing it any time soon.

He'd admit the fact that the home office was in Kemet and actual jobs took him all over the world,
and thus very far away from his nosy, overbearing mother, had been a factor. Not the most important
factor by any means, but he'd be lying if he claimed that hadn't played some part in his decision to
even sign on in the first place. Honestly, ever since he'd come back, even before he'd decided he was
staying, she'd been gossiping loudly about open positions at the Ministry, or going on nonstop about
his clothes and his hair and his jewelry, a couple times asking if he was seeing anyone, didn't he
think it was time he found a nice girl and settled down, even making a few suggestions. It was
maddening.

More than once, in the desperate hope it would finally sink in he did not want her input, he'd almost
snapped and admitted the last person he'd had any sort of intimate relationship with, ended only
when he'd realised his stay in Britain would be much longer than he'd originally intended, had been
wilderfolk. But he'd decided that would cause more problems than it would solve. In Britain,
wilderfolk were still considered creatures. While Mum didn't give a whit about blood purity she
could be uncomfortably racist and shockingly humanocentrist — yeah, he could go without
witnessing her explode over his foreign wilderfolk ex-girlfriend.

But here he was, back in Britain, quitting his very entertaining job and moving back in with his
parents (hopefully briefly). The resurrection of a supposedly dead Dark Lord did have a way of
throwing a niffler into a bloke's plans.

But anyway, Bill grinned back at the golem. 'Why, I'm offended, Ghrinüstü, I truly am. I thought you
would have realised I'm not most humans.' His grin slanted a bit. 'Besides, quitting means never
seeing your face for quite possibly the rest of my days. Forgive me my weakness, but I just couldn't
stomach the thought of excising such beauty from my life without a very good reason.'

Ghrinüstü gave him an unamused, toothy smirk — a quintessentially goblin expression, one he still
wasn't sure how to interpret half the time. 'Whenever I go without speaking to you for a few weeks at
a time, I somehow always manage to forget your reputation isn't the slightest bit exaggerated.'

He just kept grinning.

After a long moment of glaring, the golem sighed, the expression exaggerated enough the tufts of
grass rising from her shoulders waved in the air. 'I suppose you may be released from your
obligations. Your name shall not be obliterated from the halls of our ancestors, and your position
shall be waiting for you once this silly Dark Lord situation is dealt with, should you wish to return.'

Bill could only blink to himself for a moment in mild surprise. In what had once been a fertile river
valley, but was now deep within the North African desert, the goblins had long ago made their
home. Most of the city had now long been abandoned, but the temple at the centre, complete with the
massive subterranean complex attached to it, was still maintained. Goblins were no longer religious
in any meaningful way, but they had once practised a form of pantheism, with heavy elements of
ancestor worship. While their old faith was no longer observed, some traditions had remained. On
the walls of these halls were written the names of every goblin to be born since the temple's
construction — to be precise, only those clans sworn to the central monarchy, which even in the
modern day was most of them but not quite all. Some names had been wiped out of existence, excommunicated by the culture of their birth for one reason or another. Professor Flitwick's grandmother, as an example.

For most of history, the goblins had also kept the names of their allies. Originally heads of state of neighbouring nations they were on good terms with, but eventually branching out to other humans, or veela or lilin, or vampires, anyone who had performed some service for their nation, and were thus deserving of the honour. Working as a cursebreaker for Gringotts got everyone who signed one of those contracts written on those walls, but people who simply left at the end of their five-year obligation were then obliterated.

Apparently, Bill staying as long as he had, and being as generally agreeable as he had been, was contribution enough to earn his name a spot in their halls in perpetuity. Assuming he didn't do anything to bollix it up, his name would remain there for millennia after his own death. Interesting.

That was pretty much the end of the conversation, only a few pleasantries and farewells left to check off. Bill took the opportunity to go about it as flirtatiously as possible, just because, trying not to look too amused with how increasingly aggravated Ghringšt was getting. Finally, their call was ended, and the magic she was using to communicate with him dissipated, the golem crumbling back to the ground, once again no more but dirt, stone, and grass.

Well. That had been a thing.

Bill glanced at his watch quick. Right, he still had time. His parents' wards hadn't been scripted with war on the mind, they could use some modifications. He'd been meaning to do that for a while, but he would need to physically check the wardstones to compare against the impression of their effects he had already, and with how hectic things had been lately he simply hadn't had the time. But with everyone off preparing for the move to London, with practically the whole day to himself...

He turned on his heel, set off for where he knew the nearest wardstone lay in wait, idly whistling to himself.

Bill hadn't been entirely sure what to think, when the High Enchanter had shown up at the Burrow to speak with him in particular.

His parents were ardent supporters of his, yes. Perhaps not the most useful, considering what few resources they had to offer, but certainly some of the most dedicated. And yes, he did intend to lend support to this Order of his, possibly join it outright, which Dumbledore certainly knew by now. But he still wasn't sure how he merited a private meeting. He would admit he had greater skills to bring to the table than most people he knew were members, but most of them weren't immediately useful. He wouldn't say he was useless in a fight, but combat was not at all his forte. He wasn't sure exactly what use the Order had for his talents, to be honest.

Beyond warding safehouses, anyway, but he'd heard they already had one under Fidelius. It wasn't like he could do any better than that. Not that he would recommend the Fidelius himself, but it was certainly effective.

For whatever Dumbledorean reason he might have, the High Enchanter had decided to have their talk in the garden. Each had a glass of cognac, somewhat warmed by the heat of the summer sun, both staring out over the gardens with unrushed placidity. Well, the last part was mostly only Dumbledore, honestly. Bill kept throwing the much older sorcerer curious looks, incapable of stopping himself from wondering just what the hell this was all about, and when exactly they would be getting to it.
He wasn't at all eased by just how much he wasn't sure how he felt about Dumbledore anymore. He'd been raised to revere him, of course, his parents being how they are, and he had unquestioningly most of his childhood and through Hogwarts. But he'd been spending most of his time around goblins recently. Goblins did not like the High Enchanter, not even a little bit. No one had ever explained exactly why, the few times he'd asked. He assumed something to do with laws either in the Wizengamot or ICW Dumbledore had endorsed at one time or another — Bill didn't know, he hadn't the head for politics — but they were in general distrusting of the powerful sorcerer to an almost paranoid degree.

And, as the muggles like to say, where there's smoke there's fire.

At least it was a pleasant evening, a gentle breeze playing at his hair, and the cognac was a bottle he'd bought himself, not that cheap firewhiskey Bill could barely choke back. There were drinkable firewhiskeys out there, of course, but the red label Ogden's Dad always insisted on buying was awful. So he just stood there, intermittently sipping at his cognac, waiting for Dumbledore to get to the point.

Finally, after what had felt like ten minutes, Dumbledore shifted. 'I have heard from some friends of mine among the goblins that you have left your position at the home office to remain in Britain more long term.'

Bill shrugged. He somehow doubted Dumbledore had goblin friends, with how they seemed to dislike him as a whole, but he just ignored it. 'With Voldemort back, it seemed the thing to do. I wouldn't leave my family to face him again alone.'

Dumbledore nodded, a severe but somehow respectful look on his face, as though Bill's motivation were both perfectly understandable and admirably noble. Not that he understood the latter, really. He wasn't sure what else he would do, just seemed appropriate. 'I must admit, I am somewhat surprised you didn't seek employment with Gringotts here in London.'

The derisive snort came too quickly for Bill to moderate it. The goblins themselves viewed the banking division of Gringotts as more a necessary evil than anything else; unpleasant, and tedious, but something they just had to hold their noses and tolerate to ensure their own survival. It was possible, after so much close contact with goblins, he'd absorbed their feelings about the bank.

Honestly, the assumptions mages made involving the goblins and Gringotts seemed really strange to him now. He wasn't sure exactly how people rationalised a warrior culture giving a rat's arse about gold and interest rates and fees. It was absurd.

But not the point at the moment. 'No, I have no interest in working for the banking division. I think some colleagues of mine would be offended if I tried.'

Dumbledore chuckled a little, knowing twinkle in his eye. Bill suddenly got the impression Dumbledore knew exactly what goblins were like, and hadn't been fooled as so many other mages seemingly had. 'I suppose they might at that.' Dumbledore paused, taking a slow sip of his cognac. 'Well, as you are unattached at present, the thought struck me that you might be able to help me with a problem of mine. I happen to know a curse in need of breaking. All the better, I hear you have quite a way with wards.'

For a second, Bill was confused, before realising he'd said wards, and not the similar-sounding words. That was unnecessarily confusing. Knowing Dumbledore, he wouldn't be surprised if he'd done it entirely because it was unnecessarily confusing. 'I wouldn't proclaim myself to be the best there is, but I do have not inconsiderable talent and experience, yes. Was there something you wanted help with, High Enchanter?'
It was hard to tell behind the obscuring white curtain of his beard, but Bill was certain he saw the old man's face twitch into a smile. A slightly crooked smile, knowing, suggesting. 'Tell me, Master Weasley: have you heard the rumours of a curse on the Defence Professorship at Hogwarts?'

For long, dragging moments, leaves rustling in the breeze, birds twittering, gnomes grumbling, Bill could only stare at the Headmaster in absolute disbelief.

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_August_

This might be the most decidedly strange occasion of Bill's life.

He'd been in a lot of unusual situations, yes, but this was different. He'd been humiliated, he'd been terrified before, he'd been simply confused. This was nothing like anything he'd ever done before, an uncomfortable sense of strangeness, of wrongness, that he couldn't shake. It simply wouldn't go away, no matter how much he tried to sift the feeling away, either through occlumency or just restlessly shifting in his seat. He couldn't ignore it. This was so outside of anything he'd ever imagined himself doing, he couldn't rid himself of his vague discomfort.

He was sitting in the Hogwarts staff room, at a long table made of deep, rosy wood, surrounded by all sides by his former professors, waiting for the High Enchanter to call a start to the first staff meeting of the year.

He had no other word for it. It was simply surreal.

Eventually, Dumbledore's whispered conversation with McGonagall came to an end, and he looked up, sending a slightly absent, beatific smile along the table. As though responding to some unspoken signal, everyone in the room abruptly fell silent. 'Thank you for your timely arrival, everyone,' he said, voice smooth and warm. 'And welcome to another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

'First order of business, as you might guess...' Dumbledore turned his head slightly, indicating Bill with a gesture of his free hand and a twinkle of his eyes. 'Master William Weasley here has kindly consented to take up the ever-tumultuous post of our Professor of Defence. He comes to us from Gringotts, where... How long exactly were you a cursebreaker, William?'

Bill hesitated in answering, just for a second, gauging the expressions of the others around the table. Most of them had had him as a student, of course — there was only one face he didn't recognise, who presumably taught Muggle Studies, since Quirrel was the only one absent. Well, Kettleburn was gone too, but Bill obviously knew Hagrid. Most were just giving him friendly smiles, a few eyes widened at the mention of his previous work. Excluding Flitwick, whose face had twisted into a moue of displeasure at the mention of Gringotts, and Snape, who just looked bored. 'Ah, seven years, sir. Almost eight.'

'Now, now, young man,' Dumbledore said, smile wide and laughing eyes somehow a more brilliant blue than normal, 'there is no need for this business with _sirs_ and titles. We are colleagues now, aren't we?'

For a second, Bill just blinked. The thought of calling the *Supreme Consul and High Enchanter Albus Dumbledore* by his first name just seemed...inappropriate somehow. Disrespectful, just short of rude. For another second, he glanced around the table, catching the faint pained expressions on a few faces. It seemed he wasn't the only person who thought so. But he swallowed his protests, held back a grimace, and just said, 'Yes, sir. I mean, er, Albus.' _Wow_, that just felt odd...
To his mild surprise, Snape was almost smiling. "Smile" probably wasn't the right term, but still, he hadn't thought Snape was physically capable of such honest amusement...

'While William here is with us,' Dumbledore was saying, after accepting the strained use of his given name with a pleasant nod, 'he will be going over the castle wards, looking for irregularities, perhaps see if he can determine if there is any truth to the rumours of a curse on—'

'Oh, I've found that already.'

The room fell into dead silence, all the older professors — if barely, in the case of Vector — staring at him with blank disbelief. He tried not to fidget in his seat like a teenager. Being stared at like that was giving him distracting flashbacks to his school years.

Flitwick was the first to rouse himself, voice high and excited. 'Already? Why, you've only been here a couple days! Term hasn't even started!' He didn't sound suspicious, just impressed.

Bill shrugged. 'It wasn't that hard. It was on the wards. First place I checked.' A storm of displeased muttering swept the room at that, professors turning to each other with solemn whispers. Nobody missed the potentially catastrophic implications of someone tampering with the Hogwarts wards. Sprout's face had gone white, and he was almost certain Sinistra had grabbed McGonagall's hand or leg under the table.

Distantly, he was tempted to ask if the rumours about them were at all true — it had never seemed appropriate to say anything about it when he'd been a student. But he decided it was irrelevant for the present moment.

Besides, Babbling was being a bit distracting. After a moment of staring at Bill in wide-eyed shock, she collapsed, her forehead hitting the table with a loud thudding sound. Hands coming up to thread into the hair at the back of her head, she let out a long groan, muffled by her face still pressed against the table. 'I'm an idiot. I am a bloody, blithering idiot of the highest order.'

A short, sharp scoff came from Snape's direction. He was the only person at the table (besides Dumbledore) who seemed mostly unaffected by the whole thing. Still staring moodily at a wall, occasionally sipping from his coffee — which he'd brought with him, refusing to drink the offered tea, which by how nobody had blinked an eye must be a usual thing. 'I hope you don't expect me to disagree with you.'

'Someday, Severus, you will die.' Bill started at the flatly-delivered statement. Babbling's face was still pressed against the table, making her tone rather hard to read, but he decided by the amused and/or tolerant looks on everyone else's faces this had to be a joke. A not infrequent one at that. 'Someday, you will be playing in that lab of yours, and you'll blow something up, or poison yourself, or inhale some fumes that ought not to be inhaled. And you will die, and I will laugh, and I will tell the sad handful of pathetic souls who bother to show up to your funeral all about what an abysmal human being you are.'

Snape sniffed. 'You wouldn't be telling them anything they wouldn't already know.'

The spectacle apparently over with, Babbling sat back up, hair wildly flipping back over her head. Eyes sharp on Bill's, she asked, 'What is it, anyway? I've always wondered, it's never the same thing that happens, always something random and unpredictable...'

Bill nodded, not even bothering to attempt to keep the smug smile off his lips. 'It's luck magic. A curse inducing Chastainian Chaos, specifically.' Horrified looks again crossed most of the faces at the table — not surprising, luck-based curses could get very bad very quickly. 'Interestingly, the trigger is
dependent on an external referent, something outside of the wards at large. If the enchantment can't trigger, the curse will never come into effect, so I decided that would be the best way to disarm it. I would rather not tinker with wards this powerful if I can help it. I'm working on a method to track down whatever the referent is targeting. Probably an enchanted object somewhere inside the school, shouldn't take too long to find it.'

There were a few questions about how Bill had found the curse, exactly what Chastainian Chaos was, what this referent might be, how Bill was planning on finding it. In the end, Biill was a bit annoyed with answering questions about cursebreaking and enchanting and warding from people under-informed on the topics, and the tangent had probably extended the meeting by a good twenty minutes.

And then the conversation turned to the Head Boy and Girl for the year, along with the prefects. Sprout was being almost adorably giddy, bouncing up and down in her seat. Were Head Boys and Girls really from Hufflepuff that rarely? Or was Sprout just especially excited over that Diggory kid? Whatever, not important. The Head Girl was some Ravenclaw whose name was vaguely familiar — this was the twins' year, he'd likely heard of her from them at some point.

All the prefects were names he recognised, even if he didn't know the people they were attached to. He knew of Abbott — her grandfather was rather well-known, and he'd met her father a couple times — and while he didn't know this particular Macmillan he obviously knew of the House. There was some surprise from others that Sprout hadn't picked Bones and Smith, but they moved on quickly. Flitwick had picked a Goldstein and one of the Patil girls for his prefects. McGonagall had picked Hermione — absolutely no surprise from anyone on that one — but the boy was—

'You're kidding.' Snape was staring at McGonagall, face perfectly blank, eyes dark and sharp. 'This must be a joke. I simply cannot accept that you would be so foolish as to elevate Ronald Weasley—' He had been speaking with a flat, empty sort of calm, but as he said the name derision and condescension and hatred rushed into his voice so thick Bill almost felt it clinging to his skin, like a mist of half-congealed burn paste filling the room. And Bill could say that with some confidence, he'd had opportunity to know exactly what that felt like. '—to a position of any sort of authority at all.'

And Snape wasn't the only person to express doubt over whether Ron really deserved such recognition, or could handle the position anywhere near responsibly. None with quite so much venom as Snape, and some with apologetic glances in Bill's direction, but nobody defended his youngest brother.

Not that he was inclined to do it either. He was rather disappointed with Ron himself. But that was neither here nor there. He really didn't think Ron should be made prefect, from what he'd heard of his time at Hogwarts, but he didn't think it quite appropriate to say anything about it either way. So he just shut his mouth and waited for the topic to change.

There were just as many protests about the Slytherin prefects — a Nott and a Parkinson Bill had never heard of — but Snape had just said something about his hands being tied, giving Dumbledore a significant look, and the Headmaster forced the discussion closed. Because that wasn't suspicious at all.

And then they were talking about a few particular students, people who Bill gathered had less-than-ideal home lives. Judging by who took what parts of these conversations, these students were disproportionately Slytherins and Ravenclaws. That didn't really surprise him, to be honest. Another tangent about the children of known Death Eaters came up — this one actually did surprise him, in particular how insistently Snape refused to see these students treated any differently because of their
parents' crimes, at least until their own actions incriminated them. But, then, they were mostly Slytherins, so taking care of them to a certain extent was his responsibility, and it was very possible he’d known many of them before they'd started at Hogwarts as well. Being a Death Eater himself, consequences of being in the same social circle, all that, it wasn't that strange when he thought about it.

After they'd been sitting here what felt like hours, Dumbledore sent another warm smile down the table, casually opened what Bill hoped was the final topic for the day. 'Most of you, I'm sure, have heard of the exoneration of young Sirius Black, and his subsequent efforts to reform his House.'

The looks shot around the table were very much mixed. Some looked unsure, wary, as though not quite certain they could believe that Sirius had been innocent this whole time. Others looked faintly pleased, happy things were finally going right for a former student. Snape looked like something were rotting, and he was trying to avoid breathing the tainted air. But nobody said anything, perhaps as eager as Bill was to finally get out of this bloody room.

'Due to the recent changes of their circumstances—' Bill almost snorted, and he was pretty sure Snape actually did, Vector next to him rolling her eyes; he guessed that was one way to put abruptly finding oneself a member of a Noble and Most Ancient House, a change in circumstances. '-'—a number of Blacks who were previously barred from admittance have recently become eligible. Three new students will be transferring into the fourth year at the start of term in a couple weeks: Artemis, Persephone, and Selene.'

Snape's voice was so cold and sharp Bill felt it as a physical sensation crawling unpleasantly around his throat, icy daggers an inch from slicing into his jugular. 'Black triplets named for the three faces of Hecate. I'm sure there is absolutely nothing there to be concerned about.'

'They're not bonded, are they?' Vector was giving a Dumbledore a superficially hopeful look, the substance without the essence, already sure she was going to hear what she truly didn't want to.

Dumbledore, though, didn't seem to notice the mix of horrified and wary stares. Or if he did, he ignored them entirely, voice bright and innocently gleeful, eyes twinkling like mad. 'Oh, they are. Quite fascinating, really. It's not often you'll see triplets or quadruplets or quintuplets who have gone this long without severing their bond. Twins sometimes go most of their lives bonded, but multiple births of greater numbers almost always see fissures in their bond, either intentionally or inadvertently. It is very interesting.'

The room was silent, for a short instant. Most of the newer professors seemed mostly unmoved — if a bit concerned, wondering if these triplets would be as bad as his own little brothers, he assumed — but everyone who could actually remember having Blacks at Hogwarts just stared, flat and still, eyes filled with mute horror.

'Fuck.' Bill blinked, turned to Sprout, head bowed and hands rubbing at her face. He hadn't known Sprout to curse like that. Huh. 'There are going to be three of them? Myrðin, I thought we were done with Blacks...'

'Five, technically,' Dumbledore said, still beaming. 'Though one will be a first-year, so no extra attention must be given him, he'll find his way as anyone else. And there's Melantha. Her situation is somewhat more complicated, however.'

Bill then sat through one of the more absurd conversations in his entire life: the Hogwarts staff discussing the fact that the Boy-Who-Sodding-Lived was a girl now, and would be attending Hogwarts as one. Secretly. That part specifically there was some contention over. Snape gave a particularly surly rant about "the Potter brat" being granted privileges no one else would; everyone
seemed annoyed with him, some even almost enraged, sniping or shouting back at him with references and comments that mostly didn't make sense to Bill, he didn't know enough context. Except for Sinistra and Vector, at least, who just sat impassively through the whole thing, thereby silently communicating that while they agreed with their fellow Slytherin they didn't really feel like arguing about it.

And...honestly? Snape might be being an enormous arse with the way he was going about it, but the enormous arse had a bloody good point. It was a privilege nobody else would get in her position. If Dumbledore weren't personally invested in her for whatever weird reason Bill wasn't sure he wanted to know the details about, if she weren't Harry Potter — er, hadn't been? — it was not at all something they would be doing. In fact, it was even illegal: from what he'd heard it involved a bit of intentionally fudging official documentation, something the Ministry wasn't known to look on kindly, to put it briefly. But they were doing it anyway, because she was (had been?) the Boy-Who-Lived, and Dumbledore insisted on it for inscrutable Dumbledore reasons.

So, Snape was being an arse. Which was like saying the sky was blue, Snape was always an arse. But he was being a correct arse, a distinction Bill thought should count for something.

But this conversation didn't really involve Bill either, so he just sat back and waited for it to end.

Until, suddenly, it did involve him. At some point, the conversation had turned to rather personal questions about Melantha's emotional well-being. It was quite baffling. Dumbledore had dodged the questions mostly, but had said Bill would likely know himself, since they'd lived in close proximity for a couple weeks until he'd left for the castle. And then they were asking him things that...

Well. Bill had noticed before people could be a bit odd about the Boy-Who-Lived. For some reason Bill had personally never understood, most people seemed to think they...he didn't know, knew him? But more than that. That he belonged to them somehow, that his entire life was the entire bloody country's business. That they were somehow entitled to personal information that they themselves would only offer to their most intimate of family and friends, would draw great offense at the same being demanded of them from a perfect stranger. The hypocrisy going right over their heads, of course.

So, Bill debated how to answer for long seconds. He was extremely tempted to tell them to piss off. But in the end, he just sighed. 'She's better, than how she was, or so I've guessed. I didn't actually know her before, not really. Still a bit unsteady, I suppose, but with all the shite she has to deal with, who wouldn't be?'

Mercifully, they seemed to realise they weren't getting anything further than that from them, and he could go back to just sitting here and waiting for the meeting to end.

He thought he understood the condescendingly amused look Vector had given him when he'd walked in now.

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**October**

Bill stood in the middle of a hallway in an out-of-the-way corner of the seventh floor, biting at his lip in sheer frustration. He glared at the smooth, seamless, faultless stone wall in front of him, willing the thing to reveal whatever it was hiding, but it refused him with a stubbornness Bill usually wouldn't credit an inanimate object. He wasn't sure if he should be more annoyed or impressed.

That was a silly thought. Maybe he'd been getting behind on sleep. It could be easy to forget to do
Tracking down the unknown target of a vague referent in a place this huge and complicated was not an easy job. He'd had to tweak his own scanning algorithms multiple times to properly filter out the ambient magic thick in the valley, the jumbled amalgam of innumerable enchantments held within the castle, threaded through the stones themselves. Searching one room then the next, one hall then the next, with a slow, methodical pace he was honestly starting to drive himself insane with, sometimes having to repeat places just to be sure, or if he'd noticed a hole in his own work somewhere. It was tedious as all hell.

Not that actually having to teach was any help at all. Not just going to classes, but it was amazing how much messing about with parchment he had to do, considering he had quite intentionally decided he would only assign the bare minimum of homework (and probably not even that). The intensive extracurricular seminars he occasionally held for the OWL and NEWT students were almost worse despite being so rare, catching people up on all the material they'd missed over years of awful instruction was, just, terribly time-consuming and terribly boring.

On a related note, he really wished his students would take the hint and stop making eyes at him. He never knew what to say when they did that, it was awkward. One particularly shameless sixth-year Hufflepuff had even directly propositioned him, so fucking mortifying.

He'd finally found it though. It'd taken a while to isolate the ping he was getting, filter out any interference to get a proper directional signal. A bit of simple triangulation, and he'd pinpointed the room his target waited in. The only problem with that was that there was no room there. Nothing! He'd been scouring through this corridor for anything, anything! Illusions, doors or passages transfigured shut, dormant enchantments, even simple mechanical buttons and switches and such. Nothing. Air wasn't even flowing through the room, from this side or any side. Which was really weird — no matter how carefully hidden, carefully isolated, there was always some activity, however minimal.

It was almost like the room just...wasn't there.

Bill let out a sigh, and decided to surrender. He'd wanted to solve it by himself, but it was starting to look like that wouldn't be happening. Whatever it was was simply hidden too well. Whatever the blow to his pride, he would just have to cheat. It wasn't like he had forever. The curse hadn't yet been triggered, he'd been rechecking the wards weekly just to be sure, but he couldn't have any idea what would trigger it until he could examine this thing. Could be anything; there was no reason to assume he was safe, and every reason to assume he wasn't.

So, trying to hold back any sign of embarrassment, he called for elf assistance. The solution to his problem was made clear surprisingly quickly.

He couldn't help being impressed. The Come-and-Go Room, as the elf called it, had to be an original part of the castle — he couldn't imagine trying to link something this complicated into the wards after the fact, it would be hopeless. Which meant the bloody thing was nearly eleven-hundred years old. That was impressive because he wasn't sure it was something even the greatest masters of runic magic in the present day could reproduce. The basic idea wasn't too complicated — automated conjuration and transfiguration was a problem solved millennia ago, many places had variable space-expanding spells to stretch and shrink the room as needed to comfortably hold whoever happened to be in there at the time, enchantments to change an object's colour or texture or shape based on the mood of the person holding it weren't difficult at all — the mechanics feasible if exceedingly complex in execution.

It was the... How to put it? The vagueness of it, that the Room would take only a general idea of
what you wanted or needed, and fill in the gaps as determined necessary. Assuming the elf was describing it accurately, this was an exemplary achievement in enchanting and mind magic, quite possibly unique. There were similar magics here and there throughout the world, but nothing quite this powerful, nothing quite this versatile.

Assuming he could get the curse dealt with in short order, he was now certain he would be spending the rest of his time at Hogwarts metaphorically tearing the Come-and-Go Room apart, groping at the secrets hidden within.

But that was for later. For now, he followed the elf’s instructions. He paced back and forth in front of the blank stretch of wall, filling himself with thoughts of the place things is being hidden, with the need for the place, to find it and know it and search it.

Obediently, with the complete lack of fanfare characteristic of the oldest magics at the heart of the castle, a door appeared. Not giving himself time to doubt, he pulled open the door and stepped inside.

He froze a few steps later, for long moments only staring, wide-eyed, over the enormous piles of shite stretching out over probably several thousand square metres of space. This was... Bloody bugging fuck what even was all of this—

No. With ruthless force of will he crushed his desire to go exploring into nothing. No, he had a job to do. He could go investigating this place later.

Considering the size of the place, and the legendary mess it was filled with — Mum would probably cleanse the entire hall with cursed fire to just be done with it — he’d expected his search to take weeks. Months, maybe.

In fact, it was over shockingly quickly.

He’d only gone a few metres into the cavernous junk heap, curving around a garish stuffed troll — fake, of course, trolls were infamously resistant to all the tricks taxidermists over the centuries had devised, but it was tasteless in any case — when he felt it. It was something he had felt before, though it was rather hard to put words to exactly. One of his instructors at Gringotts had described it as lightning in a bottle: power and life and will so dense and so bright it hurt, packed into a tiny space, seemingly far too small to hold it, tense and lonely and unstable. It seemed as good a comparison as any. The instant he felt it he knew what it was. It was, after all, far from the first he’d been around.

That was a horcrux.

Following his nose, so to speak, it didn’t take long to find it. Sitting out in the open on an acid-scarred cabinet, a silver diadem — actual silver, judging by the tarnish — with a few tear-drop gemstones a deep blue dangling from the band. At what would be the middle of the wearer’s forehead, there was...

Bill felt his heart rising into his throat, disbelief mixed with excitement turning his blood to tingling in his veins.

In the centre was an eagle, wings spread wide, formed out of intricate gold filigree. Or copper, possibly — it did look rather greenish, but it was possible that was a trick of the light. Some alloy? Whatever. Running along the band to either side was text, old Insular cursive formed so gracefully smooth it had to have been set with magic. Quickly casting an isolating field about himself, he leaned in to read. He did have some issues with ancient handwritten scripts, being far more used to the often
very different scripts carved into monuments or whatever, the invariably different signs used for magic, but he knew the Insular script well enough he could read it without difficulty. On one side, *non expendatur sapientia*; the other, *non sumatur thesaurus*.

For some reason, Bill had expected it to say, *Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure*. But that was stupid, English hadn't even existed in a recognisable form back then. Hell, the iteration of Ravenclaw's creed he was familiar with had originally been in a bloody play written centuries after she'd died.

And it was definitely, *definitely* a horcrux. The magic was unmistakeable.

A quick dispel of the isolating field, he twitched the stylus he'd enchanted quick at *Ravenclaw's motherfucking diadem*. Not only was it horcrux, but it was also the very thing he'd been looking for this whole time, that critical piece he'd been missing in the stubborn puzzle of the curse on the Defence professorship.

... 

Well.

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*December*

Bill gave his array of enchantments and wards a last examination, before standing back and letting out a long breath. Right. That should do it, then.

Anyone who knew anything about horcruxes specifically and the ancient world generally knew the things had been made thousands of times over the course of human history. Before certain advancements in warding, it was not at all uncommon for the more complicated arrays, the ones that begged more deliberative responses depending on the particulars of the situation, to have an immortalised human soul at the heart, to manage the whole mess. It was particularly common in Egypt, where virtually all of the major post-unification sites had, at their time of use, had at least one, and it'd been frequent even earlier. Somewhat more rare, but not at all unheard of, a scholar of special prominence or a religious authority or what have you would be preserved in the same fashion, to serve as adviser for generations to come.

People who realised this knew that, as a matter of course, cursebreakers and archaeologists must run into horcruxes with some frequency. He'd spoken about it with some people in the know but outside of Gringotts, and they seemed to believe it was standard practice to destroy the wretched things the moment they were found.

Bill had somehow managed to keep a straight face.

There was a process they followed every time, of course, but it didn't involve destroying them. The moment the horcrux was identified, it was put into isolation, and ferried to a more controlled environment. A suite of complex isolating and containment wards and mind magic enchantments were set up. The horcrux was prevented from interacting with the outside world in any way, but people outside the wards were able to verbally communicate with the consciousness inside the thing. The translation of thoughts into speech could get a bit finicky at times, but it was reliable enough.

If, after some weeks of interrogation, the horcrux was determined to be intransigently hostile, it would be locked away somewhere to be revisited in a few centuries, when it might have changed its mind. But most were unsurprisingly cooperative. Oftentimes, educating future generations was
exactly why the person had had their soul copied and bound in the first place. Add in the loneliness of being forgotten for centuries, sometimes millennia, and they were usually all too eager to share everything they knew, if only to interact with anyone again in some way.

Many were trustworthy enough they were eventually removed from isolation. A few had even been set into golems, free to directly interact with the physical world, if somewhat awkwardly, talk and touch and read and laugh.

That the goblins had decided to do this was not at all surprising, to someone who actually understood goblins the slightest bit. The goblins were, before anything else, a warrior people. Due to treaties they'd been forced to sign with one magical race or another, they were barred from practising most of their old traditions, but the native mindset was still there, their psychology fundamentally unchanged. Old goblin wisdom said weapons were one thing, yes, skill in using them very important, simple numbers carrying the day if you had not else, but the most critical thing for a warrior, for a commander to have, was knowledge. Knowledge can win a war when supplies and skill and numbers fail, sometimes without a single battle being fought.

The goblins had been hoarding the academic accomplishments of both their own races and all the others they could get their hands on for millennia. Horcruxes, in their own way, were often considered unique treasure troves of wisdom — somewhat dated in most cases, yes, but sometimes useful knowledge had been forgotten, sometimes the difference in perspective was useful in itself. The goblins had hundreds of the things, maybe even thousands, either freely aiding them in their efforts to further educate themselves or hidden away, waiting the day their secrets can be unlocked.

It was speculated it had originally been a horcrux, from somewhere east, that had suggested the goblins maneuver themselves to gain control of the magical economy. It had grown very clear centuries before the Statute that the goblins were losing to humans on the battlefield, the time would come when they would be subjugated entirely. Instead, they surrendered, and "offered" their "service" in managing their enemies' wealth. Bill honestly found it incomprehensible that his own people didn't realise the goblins now had them at their mercy — it would be all too easy for Gringotts to decide to strangle their entire economy on a whim. And, knowing goblins, they would do it if their pride was too severely impugned. They could win the war, without a single battle being fought.

So, of course, stupid fucking pureblood wizards keep poking at them. Because it's not like there's a chance of that blowing up in their faces.

Bill was mostly certain he had all the containment spells and such set up properly. This was something he'd done before, of course, but always as part of a team, and always with a more experienced supervisor. It all looked right to him, though. It wasn't like he could be possessed anyway — he'd long since undergone a goblin ritual to protect his own mind from all external influence, totally worth the intricate design of rather ugly scarring covering most of his back he'd been left with and had to keep. So, even if it went wrong, it should be fine. Yes.

He still couldn't help looking at the horcrux, hanging seemingly unsupported in the air in his wards, with distrust in his eyes, a tingling of anxious anticipation working across his skin. With a last fortifying breath, he waved a hand, a very particular part of the containment lifting away, rolling back like a veil dragged off of a face. 'Hello, in there.'

The response came instantly, the voice even, inflectionless, androgynous. Rather like a robot from some muggle film, he'd always thought. 'Well, if this isn't a fascinating bit of magic. I would presume you had previous experience working as a cursebreaker, then.'

For a long moment, Bill just stared at the floating diadem, twinkling gently in the glow of the wards, blinking to himself in mild bafflement. 'Well, yes, in fact.'
'Gringotts, I would assume. Something about these wards feels...' There was a shiver in the air, sparks dancing across the inside surface of the containment. Bill's hand tightened on his wand, waiting for some signal something was going horribly wrong, but the sparks vanished after a moment, the magic still, the gentle blue-green glow again overtaking the room as though nothing had happened. 'Yes, definitely Gringotts. This is impressive work, Professor Weasley.'

Bill was not at all surprised the thing knew, or had guessed, his name. It was connected to the wards, after all. 'It's standard practice at Gringotts, actually. It's what we always do when we find a horcrux.'

'Curious. I'd always been told they were immediately destroyed. Of course—' Was it Bill's imagination, or was that a slight hint of amusement? He wasn't sure that should be possible in this particular setup. —I had never quite believed it. The goblins could never bring themselves to, not without first attempting to scour the things for whatever they might know.'

Someone who actually knew the first thing about goblins, then. Bill shouldn't be that surprised, since it was bloody obvious, but most mages didn't know shite about goblins, while simultaneously believing they had them figured. It was unusual for someone who hadn't worked with them closely to know even something like this. 'Did you once work for Gringotts yourself?' Of course, the horcrux had done no such thing — if anything, the person who'd created it might have, but that wasn't quite the same. Though it wasn't technically correct, this was just how people went about talking to the things.

'No. I have had dealings with the goblin people, though in very different circumstances.'

'What sort of circumstances?'

'That's a long story, one I doubt you would be interested in at the present moment.'

Bill shrugged — fair enough. He supposed he wasn't, really. There were more important things to be getting on with. 'By the way, who am I speaking with?'

There was a very brief pause. 'I suppose that depends on what you mean. The mind and magic that is what I am was donated, shall we say, by Ciardha Monroe, but—'

'Wait, the Ciardha Monroe? The famous author and cursebreaker?' Bill had heard of the man, of course, he'd read all of his books. Monroe had disappeared, sometime in the late sixties, suddenly and without a trace. His House had blamed his death on one of their rivals, but when Voldemort and the Death Eaters started rising to greater prominence in the following years it was later assumed he'd been one of their early targets. Nobody really knew for sure.

'Yes, the same. My identity, the one that has overwritten his, is that of Thomas Gaunt. Whether I am one over the other, both or neither, is a complicated question I have spent much time considering.'

Bill followed that point easily enough. While the ritual to make a horcrux did erase all the memories of the original person, it was not perfectly effective at eliminating all traces of their personality — some not insignificant shreds remained, enough there were differences in the behaviour of the horcrux and the person who had made it. They were very similar, of course, similar enough the sympathetic magic to anchor the original soul to the physical world could work, but not quite the same.

Which meant that, at some level, this horcrux was Ciardha Monroe. Bill couldn't help a sudden flash of giddiness, overriding the last traces of wary caution.

It immediately came rushing back a second later, of course, when he placed the second name. 'Wait a
second. The Lord Thomas Gaunt? Weren't the Monroes your allies in the Wizengamot?"

'Yes, they were. They never suspected what I'd done to their favourite son, of course.'

'Of course.' He knew Gaunt had been powerful, but he'd only been one man — House Monroe may be much less than it had once been, but enough to enact their revenge against a single man, more than enough. He was slightly impressed despite himself. 'You wouldn't happen to know what happened to Lord Gaunt? He just sort of disappeared around— No, wait,' he said, shifting in place and somehow resisting the impulse to slap himself, 'you've been here the whole time, of course you wouldn't know. Never mind.'

Another short pause from the horcrux. 'Are you saying you don't know? I'd assumed you were close with the High Enchanter. Or at least had some business outside of simply being his newest Professor of Defence.'

Bill blinked. 'How did you know that?'

'You and Professor Snape spend far more time alone with him than any other among the staff. I assumed it had something to do with the High Enchanter's little vigilante movement.'

That was both so obvious he felt a bit stupid and more than a little confusing. Had the Order even existed back when Monroe had died? It was possible he could gather some information through the wards — Bill wouldn't be surprised if he could read the minds of most anyone in the castle — but it was unexpected. 'Ah, sort of, I suppose. Headmaster Dumbledore hired me to teach Defence for the year, but also to try to identify the curse supposedly placed on the position.'

'Which I presume you have.'

'Well, yes. That's how I found you.'

'Congratulations are in order, I suppose. My little trick has stood undetected for some decades. Though, I'm not really sure if you should feel that proud, honestly — it's not really too complicated. I expected it to be found much sooner than this.'

Bill shrugged. He didn't disagree.

'Thomas Gaunt disappeared on Hallowe'en, Nineteen Eighty-One.'

'Well, yes, I knew it was something around then, but—'

'No, Professor Weasley. You fail to see that which you do not wish to.' The horcrux paused again, and when it started up the artificial voice was slow, plodding, oddly meticulous. Bill wondered if he was finding a way to manipulate the thought-to-speech spells somehow. 'Thomas Gaunt disappeared. The same. Night. As the Dark Lord. What does that suggest?'

The implication was obvious.

For long moments, Bill could only stare, mind blanked with disbelief, wide-eyed at Voldemort's horcrux, hanging innocently in the middle of his containment spells.

But...

But that...

Shouldn't someone have figured that out? If Voldemort were Lord Gaunt, he meant. He couldn't
imagine nobody, in all those decades, had put the two together. He hadn't been around at the time, of course, but he thought someone should have. Dumbledore, Black, someone. Why wasn't this common knowledge? He didn't...

And, okay, now that he was thinking about that, it made absolutely zero sense. Lord Gaunt had not been a Voldemort supporter. In the last couple decades of his life, he'd been increasingly active in the Wizengamot, and had been the most consistent, most reasonable, most impassioned Dark voice speaking in opposition to the Death Eaters. He'd been one of their most effective political opponents. This horcrux was claiming they had been the same person, and that same person was also himself, but that...

'That doesn't make sense, though,' Bill said, his voice slipping out as a dazed murmur. 'I mean, Lord Gaunt and the Death Eaters weren't even close to allies. They hated each other. But...

The robotic voice somehow sounding casual, the horcrux said, 'Tell me, Professor Weasley: what do you know of Väinö of Livonia?'

'Oh. Oooohhh.' Bill just blinked for a few seconds, staring at nothing. 'I suppose that makes a lot of sense. Actually, it explains a lot. I always thought the Death Eaters were weirdly ineffective in ways they shouldn't have been. Not to mention far more purebloods died fighting each other than actual muggleborns were murdered.'

'Yes, I thought it was quite clever myself.' It could be his imagination, but Bill thought he heard a shade of smug pleasure on the edge of the supposedly emotionless voice. 'Something obviously went catastrophically wrong, of course, not that I have any idea what it was. That was after my time.'

By which the horcrux meant that was after it had been created — Bill nodded, though the thing couldn't actually seem him anyway. 'Well, that explains a whole hell of a lot. Including how the Dark Lord is still around.' One of the main uses of horcrux, after all, was to anchor a person's essence to life should their body be destroyed. Spend long enough as a formless wraith and a person would eventually lose all concept of themselves and fade into nothing, leaving the horcrux behind, but that process took decades, centuries. Voldemort hadn't been gone long enough. 'I really have to wonder how much of this Dumbledore knows.'

'Most of it, I assume. He certainly knew Thomas Gaunt and Lord Voldemort were one and the same, though he may have confused which was the actor and which the character. I wouldn't be surprised if he has some idea how I've guarded myself from death either. Dumbledore may avoid using the darker magics, but that doesn't mean he knows nothing about them. He should know horcruxes exist and that I likely have the requisite knowledge to make them, at the very least.'

'But, if he knows who you are, why didn't he—'

'You are asking the wrong person, Professor Weasley. I have long since ceased attempting to reason out why the High Enchanter does the things he does, believes the things he believes. After decades of doing my best to try to understand the man, I have come to the conclusion that I simply never will.'

Well, it wasn't like Bill could disagree with that statement. A lot of things Dumbledore did didn't make a whole lot of sense. He'd always trusted that they made sense to Dumbledore himself, and Dumbledore probably knew what he was doing, so it didn't necessarily have to make sense to Bill. Some of his beliefs about the nature of magic had always bothered him, though — they were demonstrably false. Dumbledore asserting something questionable or behaving irrationally was one thing, but the way he continually proselytised about the corrupting nature of dark magic, and irreversible damage to people's immortal souls, and all that nonsense, when all the evidence known to
It was hard to trust Dumbledore knew what he was doing when he was wrong about so much. Bill knew his parents didn't see it, but they hadn't studied dark magic the way he had. They had far lesser experience with other magical cultures, other magical races, so much of which disproved Dumbledore's beliefs just by their very existence. He followed Dumbledore, yes, because he knew Voldemort and his pureblood cultists were a threat to their way of life and because Dumbledore seemed the one wizard around able to oppose them most effectively. But that didn't mean he thought the man was infallible, as his parents and too many others seemed to.

And, assuming this horcrux here was telling the truth, it seemed Voldemort wasn't even the threat he'd thought he was. That made things simpler, and at once far more complicated.

But that was all rather beside the point for the moment. He was here about a curse. 'Why exactly did you curse the Defence Professorship? If this was all a clever Väinö's Gambit, I mean.'

Now Bill was certain the horcrux was messing with the spells holding it somehow — it actually sighed, the sound odd and groaning but recognisable. That shouldn't have been possible. 'The Headmaster was interviewing candidates to fill the position, and the way he was going about it bothered me. Many eminently qualified mages expressed their interest, but weren't even granted interviews. Some were, but were promptly rejected. But the people the Headmaster was staying in communication with, obviously considering, were completely unacceptable. As filled with ridiculous ideas about the Dark Arts as he, patronising and self-righteous and ignorant. They were, simply, unacceptable.

'So, I came up with a plan. I would work a curse into the wards of Hogwarts, and leave a piece of myself here. I would observe whoever the Headmaster had hired, and if I found them unsuitable I would trip the curse. They would be removed, and the Headmaster would be forced to replace them. Until he found someone actually qualified for the job, who was actually teaching their students what they needed effectively.'

The horcrux forced another artificial sigh. 'It shouldn't have taken this long. Dumbledore keeps hiring the most laughably incompetent idiots I have ever seen, one after the other after the other. In all the decades since I laid my curse, he has hired a total of three people I have approved of, and two of them only stayed for the year. One by their own choice, the other by circumstances outside of my control.'

That... Okay, on the one hand, he really wanted to blame the horcrux for that. It was possible he simply had standards far too high, and with every Professor he eliminated the post seemed that much more unseemly to anyone who might think to apply. But, at the same time, he really couldn't argue that Dumbledore hired good professors. Even his hires for other subjects weren't great. 'What about Ciardha Monroe? Instead of killing him, you could have—'

'He had already been interviewed for the post, and rejected.'

It took Bill a second to find his voice again. 'What?! Dumbledore rejected Ciardha Monroe?!!'

'Yes. From what Master Monroe told me, Dumbledore thought some of his exploits and his attitudes about magic inappropriate.'

'But... But he was Ciardha Monroe!" The man had been self-taught, most of his early knowledge gained from the library at his family's manor and at Hogwarts. He'd left before even taking his NEWTs, travelling around the world, funding his multi-decade excursion by taking freelance warding and cursebreaking jobs as he went. Over his travels, he discovered a lengthy list of sites and
artifacts long considered lost, was made an honorary member of several reclusive cultures and even nonhuman peoples, his skills becoming so widely praised his assistance had been regularly requested from all over the world by the wealthy and the needy, by organisations and charities, even governments. He got wrapped up in heists, in every holiday celebration imaginable, in miniature battles with law enforcement in a dozen countries, in ridiculous high-society drama, in rebellions and civil wars and international wars, in politics both regional and diplomatic.

Eventually, he'd taken one curse too many, and had to retire to a far more sedentary life in Britain. He'd taken up writing, publishing his own adventures hidden with only a thin veneer of fiction.

Bill had read them growing up. He owned every single one. They were what had originally inspired him to become a cursebreaker in the first place.

And Dumbledore...had rejected him when he'd applied to Hogwarts.

He had absolutely no idea how to feel about that. It was entirely incomprehensible.

'Well, anyway.' It was time to wrap this conversation up, he thought. He'd already isolated the horcrux from the wards, which meant the curse was neutered — it was still there, of course, but without the horcrux to trigger it, it would remain inert. The thought of further interrogating Lord Voldemort's horcrux was a fascinating one, he would admit, but he really did have other things to do. 'I'm going to have to end this educational conversation here. I don't suppose if I asked whether you have any backups in place should you have been discovered, you would tell me honestly.'

'No, no, you're fine. Assuming you're not putting me back, the curse should be entirely nullified. Not that you would have had a problem with it anyway.'

Bill blinked. 'Huh?'

'There would be no point in killing professors indiscriminately. Honestly, Professor Weasley, what do you take me for?'

There was really only one thing to say to that. 'I take you for a Dark Lord.'

It was probably his imagination, but he thought the definitely supposed to be emotionless artificial voice sounded slightly amused. 'You and many others.' Bill wasn't entirely sure how to interpret that. 'I have been observing each new Professor of Defence through the wards and a bit of mind magic — it is only semi-reliable from this distance, but needs must. If I determine the individual is unsuitable for their position, I activate the curse. If I approve, I do not. You are the third person in these long decades to have won my approval. Congratulations, Professor Weasley.'

'I...' How the fuck was he supposed to respond to that? Honestly, he hadn't exactly anticipated fielding compliments from the bloody Dark Lord any time soon. 'Thanks?'

'You're welcome.' The last traces of amusement that really shouldn't have been there in the first place abruptly vanished. 'I suppose you'll be destroying me, then.'

'Why would I do that?'

There was a short pause. If Bill had to guess, he'd managed to shock Lord Voldemort speechless. That, he could actually take as a compliment without any discomfort. 'I assumed, being in Dumbledore's circle as you are, you would feel the need to either report my existence, which would certainly see me dead in short order, or simply take care of it yourself. My original self is still out there, you know. He cannot truly die as long as I exist.'
That wasn't entirely true — horcruxes outlived the original soul all the bloody time, otherwise the goblins couldn't possibly have collected so many — but it didn't seem necessary to point that out. 'You obviously have others. As long as they are safe, as I can only assume they are, whether I destroy you or not is irrelevant.'

'How do you know I have others?'

Bill gave the horcrux an exasperated look. Which was a bit pointless, since the thing couldn't see him anyway. 'You left yourself here. You say the entire reason you left a horcrux here, tied to the curse, was to ensure the tenure of a competent Professor of Defence. Well, a competent Professor of Defence should almost certainly find the curse, and eventually trace it back to you. Most Masters of the Dark Arts worth their name should recognise a horcrux when they see it, and be able to destroy one. This here was a suicide mission. You intended to be discovered, and inevitably destroyed. That suggests you almost certainly have others.'

Another short pause. 'You impress me once again, Mister Weasley.'

'I get that.'

'I'm sure. If you're not destroying me, what do you plan to do with me?'

'Well, winter hols are coming up in a week here.' Bill felt his own lips tilting into a smirk, a reckless giddiness filling his chest with almost uncomfortable lightness. 'How do you feel about goblins?'

Chapter End Notes

Ghrinşt — Gobbledegook, roughly "green-nersht" (IPA: /ɡʰɾɪnʃt/). And yes, anyone who can actually read that IPA, I'm aware that's a hell of a thing. No one said Gobbledegook was easy to speak properly.

Xşquńiş — Gobbledegook, roughly "hiss-coo-neezh" (IPA: /xʃ. queryString/). And hey, I can actually pronounce this one!

Wilderfolk — A (comparatively) rare headcanon magical race, originally created by animagi men impregnating animals while transformed, though several populations have grown to the point human involvement isn't necessary anymore. Theoretically, an animaga mother isn't impossible, but it is far more impractical, since changing back means an instant miscarriage. (Still a thing if the father is human, can't transform safely while pregnant.) They have more or less human intelligence and longevity, and are born with the ability to switch at will between human and animal form. However, despite their greater intelligence, their behaviour/psychology is almost always far more influenced by their animal heritage; most never even learn to speak any language. Wilderfolk mages, especially ones with enough of an education to do much of anything, do exist, but are exceedingly rare. Bill's wilderfolk ex does speak Gobbledegook, and is even a Gringotts employee, but can't cast a single spell.

[the Slytherin prefects — a Nott and a Parkinson Bill had never heard of] — Due to the slightly different political situation within the Death Eaters as compared to canon, Severus thought Nott would be a safe choice that would put Draco at far lesser risk later.
Non expendatur sapientia; non sumatur thesaurus — I hope I didn't slaughter the grammar too badly there. There are nuances I intentionally slipped into the word choice, the use of sūmō especially, but it's nerdy shit most of you probably don't care about anyway. The inscription really shouldn't be in English. And especially not modern English.

Yeah, super late, I know. Actually posted this to the other site a couple days ago, but even that was about a week late. Insomnia and actually having a job has been a real bitch, barely been able to write at all. Which is rather unfortunate, considering I had been anticipating this chapter. That always seems to happen, when I get to something I'm looking forward to I'm never in the mood to actually write it...

And, ah, about Bill sending the diadem horcrux off to be kept by the goblins...

*flees*
The Room of Requirement was a pretty interesting place. Not just conceptually — the magic that had to be behind this, she couldn't imagine — but in the practical uses of the thing. Susan had only been in here a few times, and always with Mel, so she'd not had a lot of time to explore it. But it was fascinating.

Like now. They needed a place to duel, somewhere with enough room and they wouldn't be heard, wouldn't be interrupted. And here it was. Grass and stone, large as the Great Hall, larger. Large as the quidditch pitch maybe, the ceiling high enough careful fliers might actually manage a game. Somehow, the air wasn't even properly still, shifting as though with a gentle breeze. It was rather nice. She had an idle thought, of reproducing this room, but instead of the simulated daytime sky, a carpet of stars. Could she put a stream through the middle? Maybe a few trees. Bring a couple blankets, some food. And Mel, of course. Could be nice, she should look into that...

Oh, Myrðin, she was having idle romantic thoughts. Not sure how to feel about—

She was startled out of it by a voice, a drawling whisper, low and cold. 'Well, isn't this sweet.'

Susan's eyes darted toward Professor Snape, only to flick away the next instant. Her random romantic thoughts were well and truly gone now.

'I know you're being sarcastic, but I think it rather is.' That was Dora. She looked weirdly ordinary today, come to think of it. Dressed ordinary, anyway, in just standard Auror black and red. Her hair was a dizzying swirl of brilliant blues and purples, but that was just expected, really. She wouldn't be Dora with normal hair. 'They're just so adorable. Don't you think they're adorable?'

Snape's face took one of those Snape-ish expressions — a very inexpressive sort of expression, hardly more than a slight upward tick of a single eyebrow. Mel, standing across from her with her wand out and loosely held at her hip, visibly reddened, red climbing her neck and face. Considering she was obviously feeling something akin to embarrassment, and not mildly at that, her face was impressively neutral. Still blushing, though, had to work on that one. 'I remain unmoved.'

'Do you enjoy living life as a joyless lump of snark and petty cruelty?'

'Do you enjoy living life as our national slattern and an interminable aggravation to everyone unfortunate enough to suffer your company?'

'I do, actually. You should try it sometime. You aren't doing bad with the aggravation bit on your own, but I can help with the slattern bit, if you like.'
And Mel's just blushing even worse, face practically on fire by now. Not that Susan could really blame her — by how uncomfortably warm she was getting, she was rather certain she was pinking a bit herself. The thought of Dora and Snape was just...uncomfortable.

But of course, Snape's face didn't even twitch. 'I'm afraid I must decline.'

'Awww...'

'If you two are done flirting,' Susan said, 'perhaps we could get on with it.'

She almost expected Snape to yell at her. Well, not yell, really — Snape didn't seem to do yelling. He didn't need to. Instead he just gave her a look. As far as Snape looks went, a rather mild one. She almost thought he would spit on her if she were on fire. 'Was our flirting—' He put a slow, careful emphasis on the word, the feel of his cold, dragging voice inexplicably making her want to shiver. '—in any way interfering with you getting on with it?'

Susan didn't really have anything to say to that. Well, that wasn't entirely true — after a second she thought of a handful of hopefully amusing ways to suggest she'd been incapable of tearing her eyes away out of some horrified fascination. But it was probably wisest to just say nothing.

So she snapped a bludgeoning hex off at Mel instead.

She'd been mildly concerned Mel would have been distracted by the conversation and not see it coming, but before the hex had barely left the tip of Susan's wand Mel was already moving. The hex was deflected away with an easy flick. A flick that was quickly turned into one of the better binding hexes. Susan stepped out of the way, fell into a simple little chain Mum had taught her ages ago without really thinking — tongue-tie, bludgeon, disarm, stun — but she might as well have been shooting off sparks for all the good it did. Mel caught all four of them on a single, oddly corporeal-looking shield charm.

The thing didn't even flicker. Well, if that wasn't a hit to the pride — Susan had actually put a bit of power behind the disarming hex...

The instant the shield dropped, Mel's wand was again tapping at the air with soft little flicks. *Flammae lūdiōrum,* Susan recognised the thin streams of gently hissing fire easily enough. With a flourish, Susan was surrounded with a glimmering blue shield charm. She'd always thought this thing rather impressive for someone of her age, thick and brightly glowing enough to hint at considerable durability. And she would still think so, if she hadn't seen Mel cast one about three times better just a few seconds ago. Even so, it took the hits from the lūdiōrum well enough, the flames striking one at a time, *fsst, fsst, fsst, fsst,* and then holding there, futilely crackling. Her shield had flickered momentarily when the last one had hit, but Susan had just forced a bit more power down her arm, gritting her teeth, and it'd shored up fine.

Through the haze made by her shield charm and the suspended flames, it was difficult to see what exactly Mel was doing. Susan thought she saw movement, a shift in her stance, a swirl of her wanded wrist. She noticed much more clearly the ends of the lūdiōrum touching her shield condense, clench, just the tips changing to look almost solid, like four yellow-orange gemstones pressed against her shield. Carved gemstones, carved with hooks and daggers, thin tendrils stabbing. Before she could even think what to do about that, some spell was being channelled through the lūdiōrum, transmitted through the sharp bits into her shield charm. She could feel it, a shivering, shuddering wail of disharmony, making her shiver, bones aching. Pulses of interference rushed out from where the lūdiōrum touched, like waves spreading across a disturbed pond, the shield wavering and flickering. She saw a spiderweb of cracks abruptly flash across its surface.
And then it was gone, the cracks expanding in a flare of white light until there was nothing left. Susan stumbled back a few steps, propelled by the rush of released magical energies, crackling and hissing at the air. Once it had cleared, she could only stare at Mel for a second. What the hell was that?! Had she just used *lūdiōrum* to tear Susan's shield apart? She'd never even *heard* of that...

Before she could react, a disarming jinx was already falling on her, but she started into motion, neutralising it well enough. She dodged a follow-up stunner, blocked a tripping jinx, raised a shield to an unfamiliar purple spellglow, then barely managed to lean out of the way as the thing seemed to ignore her shield entirely, must be a dark spell, snapped back with a couple random jinxes, barely managed to get a shield up in time to catch another stunner, her shield bowing and shivering from the power Mel had forced into the simple hex, before moving to—

'Stop.'

Susan winced, the bludgeoning hex leaving her wand an instant after Snape had spoken. But Mel stepped out of the way, looking almost casual, just turning to face their instructors for the day, seeming to dodge the hex only as a coincidence. Oh, well, okay, then. Susan looked toward Dora and Snape, finding the two wearing oddly similar expressions — Dora's was much more obvious, of course, but they were hinting at the same emotion in any case. They both looked a bit exasperated. A glance back at Mel showed she was just watching them, waiting, not moving to say anything. The silenced stretched a few awkward seconds, but Susan tried to ignore it, waited. Mel would know what was expected better than her anyway.

Finally, Snape took a slow breath in through his nose, and spoke. 'I wonder if you somehow feel you are being respectful. Perhaps that isn't the right word.'

Looking far more annoyed than Susan thought there was any reason for, Dora said with clear derision on her voice, 'Patronising? Condescending?'

'I doubt Melantha is behaving so out of any conscious intent. I was searching for the appropriate term for what she *thinks* she is doing, not what she actually is.'

'I know, but fuck it.'

Snape sighed.

'I don't understand. What am I doing wrong?' Mel said it easily enough, but Susan could tell she wasn't being entirely truthful. It was that slight tightness on her voice, always there when she was withholding something, the fidgeting of her fingers. Susan still had no clue what was going on, though.

'Do not act the fool, Melantha.' At the sudden freezing sharpness on Snape's voice, Mel flinched. 'I know you are not near the idiot you seem to be so often. You are holding back.'

Dora sniffed. 'A lot.'

For a moment, Susan almost thought she was offended by the implication. Sure, there'd been an obvious skill difference in their little interrupted duel there, Mel certainly would have won before long, but Susan wasn't *that* bad.

But only for a moment. Susan remembered, a good month and a half ago now, fighting Yaxley and her cronies. Mel had knocked the other two out in a single spell, an elemental thing Susan probably wouldn't be able to cast nearly that quickly nor effectively if she had a week to practise it, trading a dizzyingly swirl of curses with Yaxley. Then, at the end, Yaxley's hand bursting into flames — the
moment before she could get the Unforgivable out. Mel's wand hadn't even been in her hand.

Yes. Mel was holding back. A lot.

'Why?'

And Mel suddenly looked guilty. Her cheeks were pinking a bit, her fingers twitching even more than they'd been a second ago. She took a quick glance at Susan before looking back to Snape. 'I, er... What is the point of this, anyway?'

'I know you're a Gryffindor and all—' Dora rolled her eyes while saying *Gryffindor*, the House had a very ambivalent reputation among Hufflepuffs, Susan wasn't surprised. '—so this sort of thing probably hasn't occurred to you. But, see, the bad guys aren't always going to be bad guys. I mean, clear bad guys. They're not always going to be people like Yaxley, or Death Eaters, or whatever. Sometimes, they're just going to be ordinary people. Desperate, or confused, maybe bewitched. Sometimes, the attack might come from the side. Someone you know, someone you trust.

'Let's say, somewhere down the line, for whatever reason we don't know yet, the triplets end up finding themselves on the other end of your wand. And they're not going easy on you, real curses, you could find yourself dead if you blink. You have to fight them. Tell me, do you think you could? You think you could curse Selene, if you had to?'

Well, this was an unpleasant lesson. Mel didn't say anything for long seconds, just stared back at Dora, her fingers clenched on her wand tight enough Susan could see the tendons in her wrist, her eyes hard and still. Which Susan thought was answer enough, really. 'I don't expect to have to.'

'We are not saying you will have to,' Snape said, voice still in that low whisper of his. 'Not the triplets specifically, in any case. But one day, you will be betrayed. With the extent of power and influence you have at your fingertips, the multitude of people who will find their way through your life, it is inevitable. Or, perhaps, they will not be betraying you of their own free will at all. Perhaps they will be potioned, or cursed, their minds not their own. Regardless, you must prepared, or risk your own naïveté getting you killed.'

Keeping her own reluctance off her voice, Susan said, 'You know, they have a point.'

Mel jumped, turning her a wide-eyed look of shock. After a still second, 'What? Aren't you supposed to be a bloody Hufflepuff?'

'Well, yeah. And if everyone else were a Hufflepuff too, maybe I would think differently. But not everyone is a Hufflepuff, you see. Just because I wouldn't stab someone in the back doesn't mean other people won't.'

And Mel just stared at her. Susan could almost see the scales shifting behind her eyes, her measure of Susan and who knew what else slightly rebalancing.

'So, come on then. Quicker you take me out the sooner this unpleasant lesson of theirs is done with.' Susan no longer held any illusions she'd be winning; it was a bit silly that she'd had any in the first place, in retrospect. She let her lips twitch into a smirk. 'Unless you think I can't handle it, anyway. Apparently, I'm a delicate little flower who just can't take a couple hexes, even with an expert in Healing and the Dark Arts in the room. I didn't know this about myself.'

Mel rolled her eyes at that. But Susan caught the upward twitch at the corner of her lips.

And she didn't waste any time.
Before Susan could blink, three yellow-orange spellglows were rocketing toward her. She wasn't entirely sure what they were — blasting curses? — but she was sure that whatever it was it wasn't good. She managed to lean out of the way of one of them, the spell passing within an inch of her hip setting her hair to tingling, but she had to stop the other two with a shield. The thing shattered on impact, shards of blue-white light glimmering in the air, Susan's wand arm stinging badly enough from the whiplash she groaned out a curse, stumbling a bit. She was just about to start casting a stunner, when another spellglow was—

Susan stared at the crescent of blue-purple light streaming across the air toward her canted at an angle to match her off arm. Was... Was that a cutting curse? But, but it was visible! Just how much power had Mel put in that thing? At least it was easy enough to avoid, since it had been aimed at her arm, that wasn't too much of a—

A roar of flames snatched Susan's attention, blue and white fire stretching high over her head, stalled for just a moment before it started advancing toward her, curling over her like a wave about to break. It was too far across to move out of the way, Susan forced an incantation through gritted teeth, her wand hand stinging as magic streamed, a pale orange hemisphere popping into existence around her. The fires crashed against it, a storm of blue and white and yellow light, a sound like a cow being beaten to death with a gong, the air shuddering and keening around her, but the shield held, long enough for the flames to dissipate. Ignoring the ringing in her ear, Susan raised her wand again, peering through the smoke toward—

She blinked. Mel was gone.

Before she even felt it coming, it hit her in the center of her upper back. Susan failed to keep a cry of surprise and pain from bursting past her lips as she was taken off her feet, pitching forward to crash chest-first against the ground. She was still moving too much forward, she tucked her head to the side, rolling over her shoulders to flop onto her back. She winced at the fresh bruises on her back and chest, the scrapes across her shoulders. Okay, that one had hurt.

She didn't bother moving, or raising her wand. She didn't have it anymore — whatever hex she'd been hit with had torn the thing from her hand even as it'd knocked her from her feet.

Before she could even think about getting up again, she heard Mel's voice. Louder than she usually spoke, an obvious colouring of anger. 'What is the point of this? She's not nearly good enough, I can beat her way too easily. It's not worth it.'

Susan winced. Okay, that one had hurt.

'It's not about easy or difficult. You—'

'I get what you're trying to do, I do, but this isn't the way to do it. This is just...'

Susan frowned at the sound of Mel trailing off at that, forced herself to sit up — she managed not to groan at the throbbing along her back and hips — look over her shoulder. Mel wasn't facing Dora and Snape, instead staring at her, biting her lip, her eyes bright. Susan wasn't entirely sure how to read that.

After a few seconds of staring, Mel twitched, turned back to Snape. 'There's no point to doing this. She's... She can't keep up, Professor. Making me curse her, it's just cruel. To both of us. There's no point.'

A short silence, barely a blink. 'I believe you're right.' Had Snape just... Huh, that must have hurt. 'Perhaps we should simply move on.'
Susan wasn't entirely sure how she felt about just how relieved Mel looked. Seemed kind of...vaguely humiliating. It didn't help that she was a bit herself — she didn't much feel like being magically smacked around by her girlfriend, thanks.

Apparently, the next thing they were doing didn't involve Susan at all, really. In fact, Dora did tell her she could leave now if she wanted. Which she didn't think she would be doing. Mel was still shooting her the occasional glance, an odd feel about her Susan couldn't quite read. If she had to guess, feeling a bit guilty about hurting her — despite it being a practice duel she'd agreed to and it not being that badly at all anyway. Honestly, she was more annoyed about just how... What was the word? She didn't know, she wasn't used to...

Well, she guessed she wasn't used to dating people who could easily beat the shite out of her whenever they wanted. Susan was usually the better duellist. Of course, Mel had already been not quite her usual type, but... It was just weird. She wasn't certain how she felt about it.

The point being, she thought just leaving would be bad. Mel was feeling all guilty, and walking out would probably make her think Susan was angry with her, which would then make her feel worse. And, really, it wasn't like she had anything else to do today, so it wasn't a big deal. Apparently it wouldn't be much longer, she could just watch.

Even though she was pretty sure whatever was about to happen would only make Susan feel even more...whatever was going on.

Anyway, Snape was talking. 'Miss Tonks and I have both noticed something about the way you usually fight. You have a power advantage over most everyone you have ever met. Perhaps without even realising it, you have gotten into the habit of relying upon it. You expect your curses to break shields, you expect your dispels to undo any conjuring, you expect your elemental works to not be easily countered. This is not necessarily inadvisable in most cases — you are exceptionally powerful, and there is no reason to not use such an advantage when it suits you. However, should you live long enough or range far enough, you will inevitably meet someone more powerful than you.'

Her voice light and casual, Dora said, 'Like, say, a certain Dark Lord.'

Mel gave Snape a really weird look at that. Susan wasn't exactly sure what that was about, but she was certain whatever it was she was thinking the look reflected wasn't what she ended up saying. 'So, who exactly are you getting me to fight, then?'

'The only student here at Hogwarts whom your natural advantages will never be able to overwhelm.' Snape lifted a hand, flicked a couple fingers over at the door.

The isolation enchantments built into the Room flickered, the door creaked open, and a figure walked in. He was a dark-skinned boy about their age, tall and fit, wearing some of the odder clothes Susan had ever seen. For one thing, he was definitely male, but he was definitely wearing a skirt — dozens of individual bands of cloth about as wide across as her hand, layered two or three deep and stretching down to his knees, dyed deep reds and purples and shining with silver stitching. Above the waist there was only a thin vest in the same colours, arms bare. Somehow attached to one of his ears — probably a charm of some kind, since the ends didn't go through his ears, apparently not pierced — were three feathers, long and gracefully curving, made of such vibrant blacks and purples they almost seemed to glow. Not that Susan was entirely sure exactly how something was supposed to glow black.

He looked strange enough it took Susan embarrassingly long to recognise Blaise Zabini.

By the look of confusion on Mel's face, and the tone of shock on her voice, she was just as thrown as
Susan was. 'Blaise?'

He might be dressed extremely out of character, but the teasing little smirk, the little wiggle of his fingers in the air, was a hundred per cent Blaise. 'Hey, little Honeyflower.'

Mel's face went red shockingly quickly. Susan knew Blaise had started calling her that recently, drawn from an intentional mistranslation of her name. (The second half was obviously from ánþos, but the first half was supposed to be méλīs — Blaise had apparently decided to read it méλi.) Mel, of course, found it completely humiliating. She gathered herself after an awkward second. 'Are you wearing a skirt?'

Blaise pouted at her, plucked at the thing with the fingers of one hand. 'İkonğe. Why, don't you like it?'

'I like it,' Susan said, forcing her lips into a smirk. 'Very pretty, suits you.'

'I can't help the feeling I'm being mocked somehow.'

'Probably because you are.'

Blaise continued pouting.

With his normal casual smoothness, as though that nonsense hadn't just happened, Snape said, 'Mister Zabini here will be trouncing you in a duel shortly.' Mel's gradually calming flush flared again, but she said nothing. 'I am uncertain exactly how thorough your education in the abilities and cultures of nonhuman magical beings has been thus far. You know what Mister Zabini is, yes?'

Mel seemed slightly annoyed, for some reason, but nodded. 'Lilin.'

'What do you know of lilin?'

After a short hesitation, Mel shrugged. 'Not a lot, honestly. I know they're related to veela. Like veela, they have a kind of, er, influence over humans, if they choose to, and have the ability to summon and control fire. Except, it's dark magic for lilin, apparently. I know their kind are ruled by an empress, and their civilisation is very, very old. That's really it.'

Snape had a faint displeased expression on his face, as though disappointed Mel's little rant hadn't gone on longer. But he didn't directly say anything about it. 'Lilin and veela are, for all intents and purposes, two varieties of the same species.'

'What, really?'

It was Blaise who answered, nodding absently. 'Yup. The kid is whichever the mother is. Though you can tell if someone's parents are mixed — Mum is Sunkissed, actually.'

'Er, Sunkissed?'

'Like any other people,' Snape said, 'they have their own names for themselves. The lilin call themselves Nightsong, the veela Daysong. Apparently, it sounds somewhat less ridiculous in their language.' Blaise pouted again. 'A lilin with a veela father is a lilin, but is said to be Sunkissed, a veela with a lilin father Moonblessed — there are slight differences in their appearance and magic, it is not relevant for the present moment.'

'And it doesn't carry to their children, either. Mum is Sunkissed, but my father is Nightsong, so I'm not.'
'Yes, yes,' Snape said, somewhat impatiently, waving a dismissive hand in Blaise's general direction. 'Their civilisation is, in fact, as old as old gets — their oldest inscriptions and complex artifacts predate ours by nearly three millennia, and speculation persists that early Mediterranean and West Asian peoples were, to a degree, uplifted by Nightsong neighbours. And they are ruled by an empress, yes, the Twilit Throne in their capital, which I believe is somewhere in the Near East, held by a single dynasty for the entirety of their recorded history. Clan Değsut, they're called.

'The Empress is currently a lilin, but she need not be. A few times, one war or disaster or another has reduced the numbers of the Değsut so severely the title had to be passed through one of their men — they're exclusively matrilineal in normal situations. That hasn't happened in some time, however, so the clan is currently very large, divided into several different branches.

'The Zabinis are one such branch.' Mel jerked, wide eyes flicking to Blaise; apparently she hadn't known that. 'Princess Zabini, residing in an old family home in Florence, is currently fifth in line for the throne. That would make our Lady Mirabella Zabini...' Snape trailed off, frowning just slightly. He turned a raised eyebrow to Blaise.

'Fourteenth.' At Mel's dumbstruck look, Blaise shrugged. 'Yeah, I don't talk about it, it doesn't really matter. The chances of Mum becoming Empress are near enough zero they might as well be, and it's not like I can inherit it anyway. My people don't follow men.'

Susan had known all this, of course. When she'd first met Blaise at some stupid thing hosted by the Selwyns, he'd been introduced to her (snootily, by a Selwyn girl a few years older than her) as a not-so-distant cousin of the Empress in Twilight. She'd been maybe six or seven, she couldn't remember exactly. It was possible, for an embarrassingly long time after that, she'd entertained very embarrassing fantasies about marrying him and moving to Florence, Princess Zabini and all, eventually to their hidden city itself when Blaise was abruptly and inexplicably made Emperor. (Her childish mind had never provided a good explanation for what had happened to everyone in line ahead of him.) Very embarrassing, she preferred to pretend none of that had ever happened.

There were multiple things wrong with the whole thing. Lilin and veela had an almost absurdly matriarchal society — even were he the oldest child of the Empress, Blaise would never rule. Also, lilin didn't marry humans. Befriend them, sure, bed them, constantly, but never marry. Far as she understood, lilin and veela didn't marry at all.

Now, the whole thing did seem a bit silly. There was really no point in marrying into foreign royalty when she was already Lady Bones. Seeing herself as High Enchanter in fifty to eighty years — depending on how long Dumbledore stuck around, whoever came after him — wasn't that much of a stretch of the imagination. Not that she was entirely sure she wanted to be High Enchanter, seemed a bit tedious. But not the point.

'The point is,' Snape was saying, Susan failed to restrain a snort, 'Değsut are always trained to fight, should they ever need to defend themselves. Trained, extensively. Especially the men. And they have been doing it for millennia, so they have gotten quite good at it. Lilin are also more powerful than human mages on the average, and I'm told Mister Zabini himself is of not inconsiderable talent. And they have a great affinity for, and resistance against, fire magics.'

Mel grimaced. 'You're saying I'm going to lose.'

'I would be most impressed if you hold out for even thirty seconds.'

'So, not as bad as Dora.' Not really surprising that, despite how good Mel obviously was, she hadn't the slightest of chances against Nymphadora bloody Tonks. Susan wondered if Mel could last against her for even three seconds.
'No.'

'All right, then.' Mel turned to Blaise. 'You wanna just—'

'Hold up there, hot stuff.' Dora seemingly didn't notice the churlish glare Mel shot her — either that, or she just didn't give a shite. 'Give your most surly master a second to put up some wards first. Unless you want your adorable little girlfriend to be accidentally incinerated.'

Even as Snape got to work, casually drawing colourful runes into the air with a single glowing finger, Susan realised Dora had just implied this duel would be destructive enough it could probably kill bystanders, but that Snape and Dora would be fine. For a moment, she considered being offended by that. She could cast a shield charm. Several different kinds of shield charms in fact, one that even worked against most elemental and dark magics. She wasn't totally helpless.

But she calmed down after a second. With Nymphadora bloody Tonks and Severus fucking Snape both in the room, she really did seem totally helpless by comparison. Relatively speaking.

Relative to Mel too, come to think of it. While the lesson should have sunk in with how she'd managed to effectively fight and eventually defeat Arianna Yaxley of all people, it was becoming quite clear that Mel was far more capable than Susan had realised. Almost absurdly so, for her age.

Susan had known Mel was powerful, of course. It was hard to stand within a few feet of her and not notice. She usually didn't pay attention to it, since it was always there, she was used to it, but she could feel it. That subtle sense of weight that followed her everywhere, that vague feeling that this was an important person she should be paying attention to, that she was interesting, that she was special. The faint scent of a summer storm, just barely there. It was always there — even when she'd been Harry Potter, but rather more noticeably these days — subtle but undeniable, she couldn't not know.

But power and skill were very, very different things. She was starting to understand that Mel might be just as ridiculously capable as she was powerful.

She was starting to understand Mel might just be a bit dangerous.

If she were being honest with herself, Susan wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that. Not that she was scared, exactly. The thought of Mel could be rather intimidating sometimes — only the thought of her, what she was and what she could be, Mel herself was too awkward and too adorable for her presence to be even the slightest bit. She didn't think she minded, not really. Sitting here now, watching Snape put up rather impressive protective spells just so Susan could watch Mel fight a bloody lilin and not accidentally kill her, she felt a little...

She wasn't sure what the word was exactly. But not bad.

It was a bit...strange, though. See, Susan was used to being the competent one in the relationship. If Mel managed to develop confidence proportionate to her abilities — which did seem to be happening, however slowly — she could very well steal Susan's thunder entirely.

Not that she thought she minded, not really. She wasn't sure how she felt about it exactly. But it wasn't bad.

It turned out Susan could barely follow most of the duel. It was just...so fast, and so much. It was reminding her of watching professional duellists, really. Perhaps somewhat sloppier, somewhat rawer, without the hint of conscious showmanship most had. It was a bit absurd.

It had started out simply enough. Once the wards were down, Mel had asked Blaise why he hadn't
gotten his wand out, weren't they starting? Blaise had smirked at her, said something about the adorable human thinking he needed a wand, how precious. That had made Mel visibly annoyed, and she'd lashed out with a few charms — by the look of them, Susan assumed a stunner, a bludgeoner, a banishment, and then another stunner. Blaise had leaned out of the way of the first one, the motion smooth and quick and almost inhumanly graceful, knocked the second out of the air with his bare hand, then took the last two straight in the chest, doing absolutely nothing to stop either of them from landing. Not that it mattered, since the two charms had seemingly had no effect at all.

And then Mel had been firing off a steady stream of spells. Susan recognised some of them — frowning at the blasting and severing curses, a single unlucky hit could easily end Blaise's life in the blink of an eye — but many of them were completely unfamiliar. Most of them did nothing upon hitting the rocky ground, dissipating away, so she could only assume they did extremely unpleasant things to the human body. Considering Blaise had ignored a fair number of them, again just letting them hit him, the "human" part was apparently relevant for some. Blaise had been firing back, an occasional flicker of flames black and blue and purple, but not very much. Susan had thought, for a few seconds, that Mel was doing far better than expected, Blaise was on the defensive, Mel might even win.

Susan certainly would have lost, Mel would have pounded her into dust by this point.

Eventually, Susan had realised Blaise had just been playing around. Under a hail of blasting curses, Blaise had ducked away, spinning on his heel, and with a bone-shaking shiver on the air of old magic making itself known, a flash of dark flames intense enough Susan felt the chill against her skin, Blaise was gone. Instead, where he had just been, there was...

Susan had always known Blaise wasn't truly human. No matter how much he might look like it, act like it much of the time, he wasn't really. Lilin could make themselves appear human, but they were as unlike them as elves, or goblins, or centaurs. She'd always known that, but as a matter of fact. Like something she had been told, something she had read, something she knew to be true because it simply was, not something she had...something she had truly felt. He was just Blaise, to her, that was all.

So when the great bloody bird had spread its wings, drifting up into the air with ethereal ease, Susan could only stare in blank shock.

It was mostly black, a black as solid and featureless as the night sky, points of silvery white here and there glittering against the backdrop like stars, deep purple striping running along the spine and wings. It was bloody huge for a bird, wingspan had to be wider than Susan was tall, wider than Snape was tall, the thickness of its feathers making it seem far larger than should be allowed. The wings were wide and gently tapered, built for a soundless glide, dark, scaly legs ending in hard, white claws as long as her hand. The face was rather flat, with distractingly large eyes, black ringed with a vivid red-orange. The impression was almost owl-like, but not quite, the body too thin and long, the beak not quite fitting. It didn't seem to need to beat its wings nearly as much as it should to stay aloft, drifting along with an ease that had to be magical, the air shimmering slightly around it, as though bent by intense heat.

In that moment, it had been almost impossible for Susan to reconcile this fucking enormous and obviously magical bird with Blaise Zabini, her good if sometimes annoying friend. Something, she didn't know what, some instinctive part of her, rebelled at the idea, that this thing could be the human-looking person she knew. It just felt somehow wrong.

At that point, the duel had changed from completely overwhelming to completely incomprehensible. With each flap of the ridiculous bird's ridiculous wings, the air was filled with smoke and fire,
obscuring a significant portion of the field. Mel had apparently chosen to fight fire with fire, summoning an absolutely ridiculous volume of the same flames she'd wandlessly crippled Yaxley with — and there went the other half of the field. Blue and white clashed with black and purple, again and again and again, everything fire and smoke and a roaring and occasional clanging that would probably deafen her before too long, covering everything, the edge of Snape's wards nearly a solid hemisphere, flames fleeing every few seconds only to come rushing back. Every once in a while, she would catch a glimpse of pale skin or black hair, a flash of dark feathers, but...

She couldn't see a bloody thing.

It ended abruptly. There was a tense second, a shivering hitch in the motion of the flames. Susan could feel...something, she wasn't sure. A pulsing shudder, rather like the really low notes in the music that muggle club she'd snuck into a couple times last summer had been playing far too loudly. But that wasn't quite it — this feeling wasn't physical, not really, something she felt not with her body but with her magic. She wasn't sure what to think about that.

She was far more certain what she thought of, barely audible over the harsh crackling of the flames, Mel crying out in what was obviously pain. Quite a lot of it, sounded like.

Without realising she was doing it, Susan was moving, but Snape's hand came down on her shoulder before she'd taken three steps, fingers hard as stone against her. 'Miss Bones, unless you have some idiotic desire to discover what it would feel like to be burned by lilin fire and calôre vindicat simultaneously, I would suggest you wait for the flames to dissipate.'

'But Mel is—'

'Melantha will be fine. I suspect she has simply pushed herself a little too far. She will need rest, but nothing more.'

Considering it was Professor Snape saying it, Susan found that almost far more reassuring than she really thought she should.

Dora let out a short hum. 'She overchannel, then?'

'I believe so, yes. Has she ever overchannelled with you?'

'Nah,' Dora said, shaking her head a little. 'But I don't think I've ever seen her work that much energy at once. I've been training speed and precision more than power.'

'Reasonable.'

The magical flames were fading away now, far more quickly than they should. And in weird, sweeping patches, like a hand wiping condensation from a window. Before too long, enough had dissipated Susan could make out Mel, laid out on the ground and clutching at her head with both hands. Blaise, looking human again, was kneeling at her side, hands raised in surrender, expression clearly concerned.

Susan was distracted enough simply staring — watching Mel shake and twitch, an agonised moan occasionally slipping by — she almost didn't notice Snape cross the wardline in front of her, Dora at his heels. She jumped into motion, darting after them, stumbling over the uneven ground, now torn and scorched, hot enough she could feel it through her shoes.

'What happened?' Snape said as he approached, sinking to a knee at Mel's other side. At the same time, Susan close enough to see clearly now, Mel cringed, pulling away. Susan frantically thought through that reaction, was she afraid of Snape or something, what was, maybe she should—
Before she could do anything, Snape had his wand in hand. A little flick, casting some charm, and Mel relaxed. Not completely, just some. A second little flick, and Mel relaxed a little more. Still not completely, just some. Snape took Mel's shoulder — Susan was watching, so she noticed how weirdly gentle he was being about it, weird considering it was Snape, she had no idea what to think of that — giving her a little shake. Mel let out a pained moan, but rolled over a bit, pulling her hands somewhat away, revealing her face, flushed and strained, tears bright in her eyes. A quick wave of Snape's hand, and light gathered in the air between them, a soft glow an almost blue-ish silver, gradually coalescing into words. Susan was at a rather odd angle, Snape having put them there for Mel's benefit, but she could still read them fine: *Headache? Sound makes it worse?*

Mel started nodding, but immediately stopped, a harsh breath drawn sharp through her teeth. Apparently, moving made it worse, too. Her voice low and thin, barely above a breath, Mel whispered, 'Yes. Seriously fucking bad...'

The silvery light flickered, the words contorting for a second, reforming into something else: *You've never had a migraine before?*

For a second, Mel just blinked up at Snape, the motion loosening a single bead to trail down the edge of her cheek. 'No?' Even with her voice so soft Susan could barely hear it, the questioning tone was still obvious.

'Kieri.' Right at Snape's side, one of the Hogwarts elves abruptly snapped into existence with a sharp pop. Susan winced at the noise — if Snape's voice had been as bad as it obviously had been that must have hurt like hell — but it didn't seem to bother Mel at all. Oh, right, one of those charms had probably been to deafen her. Ha. Snape flatly delivered a short list of instructions to the elf, and he popped off again. Seemingly content to continuing ignoring the other three people in the room, Snape silently manipulated the silver light into another message, even as he handed Mel a small bottle of a familiar-looking greenish potion pulled from a pocket hidden somewhere in his robes. *Lily and Petunia and your grandmother all got them. Lily only rarely, when she'd strained herself casing something. The words hung there for a moment, waiting for Mel to down the potion and finish reading, before contorting away again. I invented a potion that will help, but I will need to brew it.*

Mel frowned,iggled the newly empty potion bottle in the air.

*That was a general analgesic. It will help a little, but not enough. This is not a problem I frequently deal with, so I did not have any on hand. It only takes a few minutes to brew, however. Snape had barely had the light formed into the last sentence when there was another pop, the elf reappearing and now laden with a cauldron and a little wooden box. In bare seconds, Snape had a magical fire going, the cauldron suspended over the fire with a metal ring and a few rods he'd conjured, stirring away at this potion of his before anyone else could hardly blink.*

Of course, Susan did have a few distracting things going on in her head — Mel was bloody scary, she really hated not being able to help, apparently Snape knew Mel's muggle grandmother? — but it was still rather impressive.

While Snape worked, Dora and Blaise fell into a casual (and flirtatious) conversation, and Mel just lay there, staring unwaveringly upward, and trying to not be too obviously in pain. Susan could tell, it was in how slow and careful her breaths came, the tension visible in her jaw, the cold glare she was giving the distant ceiling. She knew Mel could be a bit... Well, she wasn't certain what the word was, but it was this thing, where she tried to not draw attention to things she was having trouble with. Whatever it was, she preferred to keep it buried as deeply within as she could possibly manage. She didn't seem to want people to know when she was hurting, or uncomfortable, or sad, or even just tired.
It was something she had always done. Susan knew now, of course, that Mel had always had a couple issues, to say the least, but she'd been so good at hiding it she’d had no idea before. When Mel had been Harry, she meant. Everyone had known there was something going on with Harry Potter, but everyone assumed something...not even close to correct. Usually something about him thinking he was just too good for everyone else, didn't have to bother with making friends, or even acquaintances. That everything came ridiculously easy for him, he was mostly just bored at Hogwarts all the time. Except when some disaster came up, some adventure he could entertain himself with for a couple hours, until he went back to the tedium of his classmates and everyday life.

Which was all shite, of course, Susan knew that now. Mel hadn't really talked about the past much at all, seemed to prefer to just not even think about it, but with how she was about things now it was obvious all the assumptions Susan and most people she knew had made about her were dead wrong, down to the last.

Not that she thought she'd gotten Mel entirely figured out. She wasn't confident she ever would. Mel was really weird and confusing sometimes.

She didn't know why Mel felt the need to do this. If she had to guess, she might venture something to do with her previous home life, but she really didn't know. Certainly not details. She didn't know why Mel felt she had to hide.

She wouldn't say this out loud (not that Mel would be able to hear it at the moment), but it was stupid.

Susan slipped around, sank to sitting on the uneven ground at Mel's side. She nearly reached for Mel's hair, but belatedly remembered her moaning at Snape shaking her shoulder. Instead, as slowly and gently as she could manage, she pulled Mel's hand into hers.

Mel glanced at her, just for a second before looking away again, face still tense with repressed agony pinking slightly further, eyes wandering and unsteady. If she had to guess, embarrassed, Mel seemed to be unreasonably embarrassed about being seen in pain. Ashamed of being only human, like being susceptible to something so mundane as a migraine were somehow a mortal failure on her part. Waiting for Snape to finish the potion, Mel didn't look her way even once.

But, the whole time, her fingers were so tight around Susan's it nearly hurt.

Mel stared at the scroll of parchment in her hands, the owl that had delivered it ignored as he flew away, the voices about washing over her as though meaningless noise.

Dumbledore wanted to see her, straight after dinner.

The problem was, Mel wasn't certain she wanted to see Dumbledore. The last meeting they'd had, the last time Mel had actually spoken with Dumbledore, had been way back around the end of October. When Mel had found out — not been told, found out — that she had once had a horcrux, a kinda-sorta copy of Voldemort's soul that would keep him alive as long as it existed, stuck in her head. When Mel had found out — not been told, found out — that Dumbledore had been aware of this and, as part of his plan to get rid of Voldemort for good, had been intending to set Mel up to die. She still wasn't angry with Dumbledore over it. Not really. She did understand. If she had been in his position, she probably would have done the same thing. She would have researched ways to get rid of a horcrux without harming the thing it was attached to first, of course, but she assumed Dumbledore had also done that. When Voldemort was a true threat to all the people of magical Britain, what else was there to do?
That Voldemort was apparently not a true threat to magical Britain was entirely beside the point, and something she preferred not to think about anyway.

She just... She had absolutely no idea how to talk to Dumbledore anymore. Not that she’d been that sure of herself before. It was just incredibly uncomfortable, and she would have no idea what to do with herself. And why was he need to meet her at now of a sudden anyway? She hadn't even heard from him in, what, a month and a half? Had he found a horcrux or something? You'd think he could wait and find her about it at Grimmauld Place — it was the last bloody night before break, they were leaving tomorrow morning. She didn’t—

"What is it?"

Mel jumped at Hermione's voice, turned to find her staring at her, narrowed eyes on the scroll. Actually, a few people were staring at her, which she guessed wasn't too surprising — people didn't often get post during dinner on the last night before break, Jesus. 'Er...' She leaned a bit closer to Hermione, frizzy curls faintly scratching at her cheek. 'Dumbledore wants to see me, tonight.'

It was sort of hard to see from this close — hard to focus, her angle wasn't great, and some of Hermione's hair was in the way — but she still caught the sharp dip of Hermione's brows, her lips tilting slightly. 'Why? I mean, it's the last night of term...'

'You are asking the wrong person.' She had a hard enough time explaining Dumbledore on a normal day, when he wasn't doing anything confusing. Or, especially confusing, anyway.

'Huh.' Hermione frowned in silence for another few seconds, then shrugged. 'I guess you'll just have to find out. I'm sure whatever it is can't be that bad.'

She was probably right about that. Mel couldn't imagine what could have happened that would be bad. The Death Eaters had been eerily silent for months, no change Mel knew of on that front — even with insider information on the Order from Sirius and the Death Eaters from Snape. Maybe he wanted to say something about Malfoy. Draco and his mother (technically not a Malfoy anymore) would be at Grimmauld Place over break, which just sounded...awkward. Granted, the little prick was much less of a prick with her now that he thought she was just some long-lost Black cousin, but that didn't mean the thought of spending winter break with him around was all sunshine and daisies. A Grimmauld Place with Draco sodding Malfoy in it was still a thousand times better than Privet bloody Drive with the fucking Dursleys, so Mel planned to just roll with it.

What felt like far too soon, the end-of-term feast was over, and the crowd started slowly trickling out into the rest of the castle. Mel squeezed herself out the door rather near the front of the pack — she'd been too distracted wondering exactly what this meeting was about to eat that well anyway — and set herself straight for Dumbledore's office. She was aware she'd probably make it there first, but she didn't really care. If she got there first, they'd be able to get into whatever this was right away, so she could get out right away. Though, she had already packed to leave, so she wasn't entirely sure what she was going to do with herself. Could always read a bit out of Mum's journals, or knock out a little more of the absurd volume of readings Snape had assigned her, but...

Maybe she could track down Susan instead. It was the last night of term. Mel had never been to the Hufflepuff common room, but she knew more or less where it was, could probably find it...

Before too long, she was standing in front of the new-familiar gargoyle. The sweet Dumbledore had offhandedly mentioned in his note had the thing springing aside, and Mel was ascending the stairs, her own pace combined with its upward spin bringing her up almost dizzyingly quick. Then she was walking into the new-familiar office, unsurprised to find it empty. Except for all the books, ridiculous
noisy trinkets, and sleepily snuffling phoenix, anyway. She gave Fawkes a quick scratch to the side of the head in passing — his only reaction was a lazy blink of an unfocused eye before just settling in again — then collapsed into her usual chair in front of the now-familiar desk. And she sat back and waited.

It was maybe five minutes later when the door was clicking open behind her. A glance over her shoulder confirmed it was Dumbledore, lips softly smiling and eyes brightly glimmering. She wondered how he always got them to do that. He had to be doing it intentionally — eyes didn't do that on their own, had to be magic of some kind. Seemed sort of a waste, really. On his way to his desk, Dumbledore was saying something, apologising for making her wait, old bones and stairs and all that, but Mel just shrugged it off.

And then he was sinking into his own padded, throne-like chair, the motion slow and hesitant, a soft sigh and a loosening of tension in his face betraying relief. Which was slightly odd, when Mel thought about it. By magical standards, Dumbledore really wasn't that old. Toward the latter end of his life, yes, but not old enough he should be expected to be all...decrepit. And supposedly Dumbledore could still move around perfectly fine when he really needed to, but day to day he seemed to have a surprising amount of trouble. Had he injured himself somehow? Some mild degenerative disease Mel didn't know about? Or was this too part of the genial, slightly senile old man act he always affected?

Not that it particularly mattered, she guessed. It was just strange.

After a moment of silently smiling at her over his folded fingers, dragged out discomfitingly long, Dumbledore finally spoke. 'I am sure you are curious exactly why I called you here, today of all days.'

Mel nodded. 'Something to do with winter break, maybe?'

'Yes, in fact,' Dumbledore said. With an appearance of that pleased expression of his, too intense of a reaction to something so easily guessed it couldn't be anything but mildly insulting. Mel managed to not roll her eyes. 'Nothing too burdensome, I assure you. The Order will be arranging your transportation and security, so do try your best to put such weighty concerns out of mind for the holiday.'

For some reason, Mel found herself frowning. She couldn't precisely explain why. Something about this just felt...off, somehow. She meant, there was really no reason she should be needing this assurance at all. She was just going to Grimmauld Place. Sirius had loosened the wards somewhat to allow family and guests with less hassle — he was no longer hosting the Order there, actually, possibly because he had — but it was more than safe enough. And transportation, what transportation? She would hardly consider Sirius (and Narcissa, ugh) picking her (and Draco, blech) up at the platform something the Order needs to "arrange" at all.

No, Mel was getting an uncomfortable feeling something else was going on here. And she didn't like it.

But she brushed the nagging thought off as thoroughly as she could. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand. I figured Sirius was just going to meet me at the platform, bring me home.' The idea of having a home to go back to was extremely new, and still rather overwhelming if she thought about it too long. So she mostly didn't.

'You will be spending most of the holiday with Lord Black in London, yes.' Dumbledore sounded a little weird saying that, almost annoyed. Not to mention he'd called Sirius Lord Black, very weird. Were they...not happy with each other at the moment? Huh. Sirius must have been leaving things out
in their mirror talks.

Not that Mel was entirely innocent on that count herself. She still hadn't told him what she'd found out in Mum's journals, and she wasn't planning on it any time soon.

Dumbledore was saying, 'However, I thought it best for you to also make a visit to the rest of your family over break. A few days around Christmas would be best, I believe — most mages do not observe the occasion anyway, so you likely wouldn't be missing anything while you're gone. We will need to arrange precise details, and—'

'Wait a second.' Dumbledore cut off, slowly blinking at her in polite surprise. But Mel wasn't much in the mood for polite. She had a nasty, nasty suspicion he meant... 'What the hell are you talking about?'

His fluffy brows ticked into the slightest of frowns, just for a second, before smoothing out again. With a soft sort of chiding on his voice, imploring, Dumbledore said, 'You should take the time to visit your aunt, uncle, and cousin over the break, Melantha. You may no longer live with them, but...

There were some words after that, but Mel didn't hear any more. She had rather a lot of aunts and uncles and cousins now, enough she honestly had forgotten most of their names, or had never even learned them in the first place. But she somehow knew which ones he was talking about. 'No.' Mel's voice came out hard and cold, enough it surprised herself. She hadn't thought she was quite that angry yet...

The expression taking over Dumbledore's face now was definitely getting her there, though. Lips curling and brow dropping, eyes sparkling with a faint sadness, that was disappointment. Disappointment in her, for not wanting to go back to the Dursleys.

Well, he could just shove his disappointment up his arse. She wasn't going.

After a short moment of suffering his light disapproval, Dumbledore finally spoke. 'Melantha, I truly think you should—'

'No. No, Professor, I am not going back there. Ever.'

The disapproval only getting sharper, only making Mel more annoyed, Dumbledore said, 'Come now, Melantha, I'm sure your aunt and uncle would love to—'

'—never have to see me ever again. Believe me, Professor, the feeling is very much mutual.'

Dumbledore blinked, his expression slackening, just for a second. Mel might not have caught it a year ago — Andi's crash course in not putting her foot in it and spending so much more time with Slytherins had to be good for something — but it was there. If she had to guess, Dumbledore was surprised by the assertion that the Dursleys would prefer to never see her again.

Which only went to show he had never actually spoken with the miserable sacks of shite in his entire life.

It was only for a moment, though, the odd expression swiftly vanishing behind another facade of grandfatherly disapproval. 'Now, Melantha, I am sure you are, what is the phrase? Blowing things out of proportion? Families do fight, I have thoroughly learned this from experience, I assure you, but whatever rifts form are rarely so final as they may seem when we are young. Whatever terms you separated on this summer need—'

'We didn't separate on bad terms.' Dumbledore cut off at the interruption, his head tilting slightly,
eyebrow raised, obviously waiting for her to explain. She took a deep breath, trying to force the jittering sprung to life in her head to settle the fuck down. Yes, she still would rather not talk about anything Dursley-related. But she could get through a brief conversation in very general terms, really. 'Actually, I guess you could say we did, but there was nothing special about it. We've never had good terms. The Dursleys always treated me like something unpleasant they would rather didn't exist but they were forced to bear. I really can't imagine that changing. And no, I have absolutely no desire to subject myself to that again for even a couple days.

'And, in case you forgot, you can't make me.' She heard the satisfaction on her own voice, couldn't help smiling to herself a little. 'Sirius is my legal guardian now. Two sentences to him, and I bet you ten galleons he comes to you a week later with some kind of legal threat.' Mel had no idea what the Wizengamot could do about this sort of thing, but they probably had some kind of injunction available. She didn't know wizarding law well enough to say exactly what, not important. 'I don't want to go, and you can't make me go, so I will not be going.'

Dumbledore stared at her, silent for long moments, steady blue eye incessantly twinkling with some train of thought unvoiced. For an instant, Mel thought she felt a faint pressure against her mind, but it was gone practically before she'd noticed, she might have imagined it. And then he was talking, but Mel was barely paying attention. The first few words told her all she needed to know. He was blabbing about family, and forgiveness. Nearly a minute in, Mel caught a bit about how he was worried for her, he was unaware she had fallen this far, he'd have to speak with Snape about what he was teaching her.

Being reminded of Snape gave her a thought. Still sitting in Dumbledore's office, she was suddenly somewhere else, remembering Snape talking to her a couple weeks ago even as she ignored Dumbledore's ignorant blathering.

'The thing you must understand about Dumbledore,' Snape had said, finger idly playing at the rim of his mostly-empty glass of rum, 'is that he believes that he is always correct when it comes to his evaluation of people and events. I don't intend to claim he is frequently wrong, far from it — as far as certain personalities are concerned. Dumbledore is, in fact, singularly adept at piecing together their history and motivations after very little observation. He does have a talent for reading people, something I am told he developed from a very young age. Even by his Hogwarts years, to a somewhat lesser extent, only improving with experience.

'However, you will note the caveat: when it comes to certain personalities. Dumbledore is extremely perceptive, but the conclusions he comes to from that evidence he gathers only applies in certain situations.

'Our esteemed High Enchanter has fallen into a trap that many Gryffindors do.' The sneer of disdain had been sharp on Snape's face, but he hadn't been looking in Mel's direction at the time, she'd known it hadn't been meant for her. 'They believe things, you see. It will not be the same person to person, what they value or what they call it, but the pattern is obvious. Virtually every Gryffindor I have ever met holds some principles to be universal. Call it justice, or honour, or goodness, or some other patently indefinable term. They have some beliefs that supercede everything else, that are always true all the time. Should they witness something that contradicts these beliefs, they will reason around it, placing the blame for failing to meet their expectations on the person or persons involved. Because, surely, their understanding of reality and human nature can not possibly be wrong, their beliefs are infallible.

'Dumbledore is no different. He believes things, and he interprets what he sees through these beliefs, with such arrogant surety it would take what should be a humiliating degree of cognitive dissonance for him to finally deign to adjust his understanding. Take my former master, as an example.
Dumbledore believes that committing acts he sees as "evil", or even simply the use of dark magic, leaves its mark. "Scars on the soul", he calls it. While lesser offenses cause lesser injury, and can be overcome, the greater sins cause more terrible damage. At the extreme, the loss of all ability to reason, becoming nothing more than a raving monster that must be put down. A tragedy, but necessary, and at some level a mercy.

'Dumbledore sees the Dark Lord, and he knows no sane man could possibly do the things he does. That he has murdered too many times, that he has performed far too many black magics, that it has destroyed any semblance of humanity that might once have been. He sees Thomas Gaunt, as he was in public during those last decades, as some false persona. Impressive, perhaps, that someone so far gone, who should be so volatile and unpredictable, can put on such an effective facade of civility. But then, he would say, Tom was always like that, wasn't he? He always had been erudite, and articulate, and seductive, oh yes. This was just more of the same. Unusual, even exceptional, but nothing new.

'He doesn't realise the contradiction. He says no one can do what the Dark Lord has done and remain a rational human being. But then he speaks with someone he knows to be the same person, an individual showing every sign of being rational, and reasonable. A bit hard, yes, but sane? Certainly. The obvious conclusion that something in his own understanding of the man, of his experiences, is at fault, that it is Dumbledore himself who is mistaken, that never occurs to him. No, the evidence contradicting his deeply-ingrained beliefs is instead dismissed. All awhile Dumbledore lectures others for merely doing what is easy.

'My former master knows that he could convince Dumbledore of the truth. Of what he really is, and what he really wants. But the effort involved would be monumental. Someone like Dumbledore, you have to force them to see the truth for what it is. You have to shove their face in incontrovertible proof, and hold them under through all their increasingly asinine protestations, until they finally surrender their precious beliefs to cold, uncomforting reality. Quite simply, he doesn't consider Dumbledore worth the time and effort that process would take. And, judging by my personal experience with the man, I don't blame him.'

And Mel was having a very strange thought. See, she knew how she could...shove Dumbledore's face in incontrovertible proof. It would be unpleasant, she certainly wasn't comfortable with the idea. She wasn't entirely certain she wanted Dumbledore to know. That she wanted anyone to know — even just talking to Ellie was still terribly uncomfortable, and they'd never gone quite this far. But...

But it was clear Dumbledore would never understand otherwise. He saw that she didn't care for her "family", and he assumed it was because she was scarring her soul. That she was going dark, that she was "falling", that was the only explanation. Because the truth was just so much more unlikely, apparently. Which really made her wonder. There was no way in hell Mel was the first abused child he'd stumbled across — in fact, Mel knew she wasn't, she could think of six more off the top of her head. Did he consider them all to be guilty of some sort of moral failing if they didn't, what, selflessly love the people who made their lives a living hell for no good reason? That sounded like blaming the victim to her. Which really didn't seem very Dumbledore of him, but...

Fuck it. 'You have that pensieve around, right?'

Dumbledore blinked at the interruption. After a short pause, a brief flash of annoyance crossed his wrinkled face. Finally realising she hadn't been paying attention, she'd guess. 'Of course.'

Mel nodded. A flick of her wrist brought her wand into her hand. She conjured a featureless lump of wood, then transfigured it into a sizeable metal bowl. She had only managed the meanest basics of
conjuration so far, but conjured materials were far easier to transfigure than ordinary things, so it didn't matter so much. It was also a bit of a cheat, since a transfigured conjured object would last out the transfiguration, even if the conjuration would have faded much sooner — her conjuration was still shite, wouldn't have lasted a minute, but the transfigured bowl should hold a couple days. Maybe even longer, what with conjured objects having lower magical resistance and morphic inertia and all that.

Yes, she was stalling. She really didn't want to be doing this. Copying memories out for use in a pensieve was...unpleasant.

Not that the magic itself was that bad. If she hadn't started on mind magic months ago she wouldn't have managed it nearly so quickly, but it was far from easy. But it wasn't that overly difficult, nor was it exactly painful. No, what was making her wary right now was that pulling a memory involved, essentially, living it again. In fast forward and with most sensations and emotions significantly muted, but still.

So, the entire process was less than fun. Under Dumbledore's almost astounded-looking gaze, Mel put her wand to her forehead, sectioned off the memory she wanted to copy with a handy little occlumency trick Snape had taught her, then dragged a copy away, the moment flicking past her eyes in a blur of colour and sound and motion and pain. She cringed each time, tapping the tendril of silver-blue gas into the bowl, taking only a short moment to gather herself before plunging in again.

And again. And again. And again.

Finally, she didn't think she could do any more. Well, that wasn't precisely accurate — it wasn't like the magic itself was exhausting or anything. No, she could feel the hard tightness in her chest, and knew she wouldn't be able to do this much longer without having a breakdown in the middle of Dumbledore's ridiculous mess of an office. So, she'd just cut off here.

She pushed herself to standing, only slightly unsteady on her feet after spending so long sifting through her own mind. Meeting Dumbledore's eyes, looking somewhat more unsteady than usual — surprise? confusion? — Mel nodded toward the bowl. 'I'm not going back, no matter what you say. If you really need to know why, there's your answer right there.'

Without a goodbye, without even waiting for a dismissal, Mel turned on her heel and left the office, immediately turning toward the lower levels. She figured the chances were pretty good she'd be able to at least find the entrance to the Hufflepuff dorms, where she knew Susan should be. She would rather not think about the memories she'd just copied, or exactly how Dumbledore would respond to them, and Susan was very good these days at getting her to not think about things.

She didn't know how to actually get into the dorm, of course, but they were bloody Hufflepuffs.

Severus raised a single threatening eyebrow at the intruder so heedlessly barging its way into his private potions lab. A small effort expended, true, but an entirely pointless one — as a rule, *patrōnū* didn't respond to threats. Neither did Dumbledore, so it truly didn't matter whether this message were given remotely or in person, when it came down to it.

He could never help a faint sense of scorn whenever he saw this cursed thing. Because of course Dumbledore had a phoenix *patrōnus*. If there were anyone in the country who managed to make of himself a more infuriating self-righteous bastard than Dumbledore it was that damn bird that followed him around everywhere. Most of the rest of the staff always gave him funny looks when he expressed his hatred of the castle's resident flying magical turkey. Not because it was a "symbol of the Light" or whatever such nonsense — that was doubtless what Dumbledore thought, but the rest
of the staff were a bit less inclined to make moral judgements over something so innocuous as whether he liked his boss's pet. No, most of the staff just thought it made himself mildly insane, like a homeless muggle suffering from schizophrenia, standing on a street corner and loudly railing about the grand conspiracy existing solely to make his life miserable, which also happens to be composed entirely of rodents.

The rest of the staff thought Fawkes was just an animal. An intelligent one, yes, and one with considerable magical abilities, but an animal all the same. They were all bloody idiots. Phoenixes have demonstrated on innumerable occasions they are far more intelligent than humans give them credit for, enough to perhaps be considered beings.

And that wasn't getting into Fawkes specifically. Severus couldn't count how many times the bloody thing had appeared, in a startlingly loud rush of flame, right at a critical moment in some experiment or another. He couldn't count the potions that had been ruined, the enchantments that had blown up in his face. And every time, the thing would just twitter, the alien sound obviously some sort of avian laughter, and then vanish again. Staring at Severus the next time he was in the Headmaster's office, black eyes twinkling with mocking laughter, far too amused by how powerless Severus was to retaliate.

Severus had had dreams of murdering Dumbledore, then cutting off a length of his beard to strangle that damn phoenix of his with. Which wouldn't work, of course — the thing would just disappear in a flash of flames, and even if he did kill it it would just come back —but it was an entertaining thought nonetheless.

He was so distracted by his own hatred of all things phoenix he'd almost missed the message entirely. 'If you are available, come up to my office.' Dumbledore's voice, yes, but sounding oddly... Severus struggled to find a word to encapsulate the feeling fully. Unsettled? Shaken? Whatever the precise word for it, something was obviously wrong. Which was a bit unsettling all by itself: even when things had been at their worst, Dumbledore never actually showed worry, or horror, or even the slightest trace of nervousness. The old man was, seemingly, unflappable.

While Severus would admit to some curiosity, over whatever had finally managed to unsettle the great Albus bloody Dumbledore, he would rather not have to talk to the old bugger. Any conversation with Dumbledore inevitably left Severus either frustrated or depressed, it never failed. But he didn't really have a choice in the matter. It might have been phrased as something that could be interpreted as a request, but it wasn't. The only thing Dumbledore considered "unavailable" was any time he was pulled away on business for the Dark Lord. Severus could claim he had been, but then he'd have to report exactly what he'd been up to. Which he could invent entirely, and believably, but then he'd have to leave the castle, since the wards would register that he'd never left, and he'd have to remember exactly what he'd said, so he could later keep his story straight.

Honestly, that sounded like far too much work. The current situation was complicated enough without Severus piling on invented errands for Dark Lords. And what the hell would he do outside of the castle anyway? All of his work was here. He'd end up idle and bored the whole time...

Unless he chose to drop in on Narcissa, anyway, but that would necessitate talking to the mutt, which he would also rather avoid.

To Dumbledore's office it was, then. With a heavy sigh, he turned back to his half-brewed potion. It should be able to take a stasis charm, yes — he cast one with a thought and a wave of his hand, then turned to leave the room. He paused just outside the door, double-checking his privacy and sealing wards had closed correctly, then started the long walk up the castle.

More than once, Severus had wondered to himself whether whoever had designed the wards to
prevent point-to-point apparation weren't completely insane. Either that or a masochist. The place was bloody huge, unnecessarily so, it took fucking forever to get anywhere. A few times, he'd taken to shadow-walking places when it suited him, but that raised its own host of problems. And by "host of problems" he meant Dumbledore finding out about it and lecturing him. Again. Having to walk so far just to get to Dumbledore's office for an unscheduled evening meeting was less annoying than being the target of yet another self-righteous rant about the "reckless" use of "corrupting forces". If only marginally.

When Severus finally did make it up to Dumbledore's chaotic eyesore of an office, he found himself more confused than anything. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, infuriating prankster in avian form perched on his shoulder, a wrinkled hand shakily rubbing at his forehead hiding any expression. Something distressing must have happened, Severus could see that instantly — Dumbledore looked visibly shaken, and that bird wouldn't otherwise be laid all over him, letting out low cooing likely meant to be comforting.

Not that Severus particularly cared. Despite what Dumbledore would likely claim, despite his repeated and rather pathetic entreaties Severus either pretended not to notice or directly mocked him for, the old goat was not his friend. He wasn't sure it was physically possible to care less than he did about Dumbledore's emotional state. So, his voice consciously blank, Severus prompted, 'You called for me, Headmaster?'

Dumbledore didn't answer verbally. Instead, with a slightly shaky hand, he pointed at the pensieve, pulled from its usually place to sit on his desk. The invitation was clear.

Severus hesitated for a short moment. It was possible, after all, to hide a curse in what appeared to be a memory prepared for viewing, only activated once the target's mind made contact with it in a pensieve. That was, however, extremely unlikely. Dumbledore was not quite the expert in mind magic Severus was, but he was certainly skilled enough to pick up such a thing. Perhaps not dispel it, but detect it? Easy enough. His uncharacteristic disquiet must be an emotional reaction to whatever he had seen in the pensieve, not a curse.

He couldn't help a faint twinge of curiosity. He couldn't imagine what could have so effected the great Albus Dumbledore. He would have to see it himself, if only to know. Making up his mind, he slid forward, sank into a chair across from the old man. A single finger touching the surface had his mind leaving his body, pulled into the embrace of the enchantments set into the ceramic.

Severus knew, before the first memory had even fully formed around him, that whatever this was had been copied voluntarily — forcefully excising a memory through legilimency, seducing cooperation through potion or charm, cajoling the bearer into surrendering that which they had resisted sharing, all left a mark on the magics a sufficiently knowledgeable user could feel out. By the same token, Severus knew instantly that whoever had copied the memories was a novice. There was a slight sense of instability about his surroundings, the strains of mind and magic shuddering just noticeably. Stable enough to function, of course, and little to no detail would have been lost, but the signs were there. Which means Dumbledore had not copied them from someone's mind himself, it had been offered by someone who had a less than perfect grasp of the magic involved. Copied from their own head, in fact — a person's mind left slight traces on the magic flowing from it, the two matched.

Severus thought it a curious combination of impressions. He wasn't sure what to think of them, what conclusions if any should be drawn, but he made note of them all the same.

And then the first memory formed. When Severus had seen enough to piece together what it was — which didn't take long — all thoughts about the texture of the magic around him immediately
evaporated.

He was outside. It was a brilliant summer day, the sun almost painfully intense against his skin, the air hot and thick. He didn't recognise the specific locale, but he picked up enough cues to know generally where he was: muggle home, somewhere in the homogenous, soulless tedium that was suburbia. The backyard of a muggle home, specifically, the grass a vibrant green, seeming almost unnaturally level, a couple trees here and there bringing insufficient shade, a row of low hedges. And gardens, filled mostly with various flowers, planted in neat little rows, not a centimetre out of place, not a hint of weed or pest. In most of the gardens, anyway — roughly three-quarters showed signs of recent weeding, the freshly revealed earth still drying, the last quarter bearing slight pricks of green out of the designated rows, clearly unwanted.

Just at the border was a small child. Five or six, Severus would guess, easily identifiable even from behind by the tangled mass of black curls blanketing most of the head and neck. That answered the question of whose memory this was easily enough — Melantha fit his observation of the donor's skill level as well. His angle wasn't perfect, but the child seemed to be wearing ratty, threadbare clothing, a handful of sizes too large. She was in the process of weeding the long gardens. Judging by the patina of dirt caking her skin, fissures carved here and there by rivers of sweat in various states of dryness, she'd been at it for quite a while.

Presently, the door into the house was sliding open. A boy walked out, around the same age, this one very blond and very fat. And he wasn't exaggerating, or just being pointlessly cruel to children that didn't even know he was here. If he were this boy's Healer, he would be sternly talking to his parents about what was and was not an appropriate diet for a child. Or, rather, testing for some metabolic deficiency — Severus found it hard to imagine a child that young could reach quite that extreme of obesity just by overeating alone, he would expect some underlying issue. There were several conditions that could cause this, most more or less curable with a single potion. Or a prescription, since these were muggles here. He was nearly certain muggle doctors could treat that sort of thing.

Not that it mattered, just a curiosity. Severus cast the thought off, watched the rotund child waddle his way into the yard, idly slurping at ice cream in hand. Between licks, the boy managed to say, "Lo, freak."

Severus saw the younger Melantha's shoulders tense and hands freeze, for just an instant, before she again started picking at the nearly pristine garden.

The boy smirked, apparently not disappointed by the lack of response. 'Rather hot out here, innit?' He then slurped his ice cream, especially noisily.

Melantha tensed again. But again, she returned to weeding.

The lack of response this time, apparently, was disappointing. With a snarl of something Severus didn't make out, the boy walked up behind Melantha, lifted his knee, and planted his foot hard between her shoulders. With a high cry of surprise, Melantha pitched forward, hands flailing, face plunging into greenery. Chuckling to himself, with a last taunt about the freak making a mess of things, the fat boy was waddling away. Seemingly pleased, if the stupid grin on his face counted for anything.

Slowly, muttering to herself, Melantha pushed herself back up to kneeling. And she paused, looking at something in her lap. Severus walked around a bit, so he could see over her shoulder. She'd cut her hand, on a spade by the look of it, a not inconsiderable volume of blood welling from the ragged wound, already trailing along her wrist, dripping down to the grass. Melantha frowned, poking at the cut. For a long moment, she hesitated, biting at her lip, clearly thinking to herself.
In the end, she went right back to weeding, slowed somewhat, wincing at any pressure put on her wounded hand.

It had been barely thirty seconds, and Severus was already livid. The cut itself wasn't that bad, but she was playing around in the dirt! That could easily get infected, and that could get very bad, very fast. And why wasn't she wearing gloves in the first place? Stupid girl, was the garden worth her life? She was lucky he wasn't really here, because he...

Well, honestly, he'd probably just clean her up, heal the cut then send her away. But there would be one hell of a scolding involved.

The sun was starting to sink rather close to the western horizon when Melantha finally finished up. It wasn't long for Severus, but he could tell it was much longer for her — his surroundings had gone slightly blurred, sliding along what was probably a couple hours. In a couple seconds she had the couple tools she was using put away, the gathered bundle of weeds set to compost, and then she was walking toward a sliding glass door. She stopped just outside, carefully wiped a couple of her fingers off on the cleanest part of her shirt she could find, then gently knocked at the frame.

Severus's lips twitched into an involuntary sneer when he recognised the woman who answered the timid little knock as Petunia. He'd hated that girl from practically the moment they'd first met, and the feeling had been quite mutual. Though he did find himself a bit professionally curious. While Petunia had always avoided any mention of it, Lily had told him she had Marfan's — they had more than once debated whether or not Petunia's condition had interfered with the development of her magic in utero, resulting in her not having magic while Lily did. Whether her condition had worsened for some reason or simply because he was far more thoroughly educated, it was plainly visible just looking at her. The slightly disproportionate length of her arms, face, and neck, even relative to her above-average height, the unusual prominence of her joints. Looking at her more closely, Severus decided it was possible it was simply more noticeable because she was rather more thin than he remembered — almost unhealthily thin, in fact. With how overly meticulous she'd clearly been with her nails, hair, and makeup he found himself idly wondering if there wasn't something going on there.

Any distant curiosity was abruptly blasted away when, seeing how much of a mess Melantha had become, as well as the slightly-mangled state of the plants the fat boy had pushed her into, a grimace of fury overtook Petunia's face, and she reached for the house lying curled up at the side of the door, and started spraying Melantha down right then and there, screaming in completely irrational rage.

Severus was too shocked to have too much of a reaction. He just stared, mind curiously blank. It didn't take long for the anger to spark to life, weak still, clawing harshly at the back of his thoughts. It was Melantha's reaction that had done it. She'd immediately let out a yelp of surprise, but then promptly silenced herself. And she stood there, under the hard spray of likely cold water, barely reacting save for an occasional flinch when the focus of the spray moved somewhere new. Head bowed, hands clenched into fists shaking at her sides.

That was easy enough to read. This had happened before. Exactly this, or something very much like this. It had happened often enough, and forcefully enough, that Melantha no longer felt the need to defend herself. She accepted it as normal.

That, the implications of that, was what had sparked the fires of Severus's fury..

The memory continued on, blurring past a few minutes here and there, as Melantha cleaned up, changed and showered. After she was mostly done, she took a wary glance toward the door. Then she had the faucet on again, and was drinking out of the tap, cupping her fingers again and again to get as much as she could in the short time she was apparently allotted. This was very strange, and it
was giving Severus a bad feeling...

...which was only confirmed a moment later. There was a hard knock at the door, Melantha jumped and undid the latch. And Petunia’s horrid whale of a husband was standing in the doorway. Severus had met the nauseating excuse for a human being on exactly two occasions, and he appeared to have only worsened since. Though Severus did think he had a half-answer to a question that’d occurred to him some minutes ago — whatever metabolic condition the boy had, Dursley appeared to have it as well. Severus didn’t remember him being quite this large, but he had been significantly overweight even then, so it was possibly significant.

Yelling something incoherent about ungrateful wretches or some such drivel, the ponderous brute of a muggle stepped into the room. When he moved to grab Melantha, Severus had to restrain himself from going for his wand, his fingers twitching. And then he was dragging her out by the hair — Melantha obediently moved, face twisting in pain but not making a sound — down the hall and around a corner, stopping at a door only long enough to open it, through her carelessly inside, then slam the door closed. With a last shout about doing what she was told and not ruining anything or, so help him, she would be out of his house faster than she could spit, Dursley was locking the door, and thudding away.

Severus glared at the retreating muggle’s back, the fury he was trying to ignore stoked ever higher. How long had Melantha been out there? Hours at least, and that on a hot summer day. That was why she had drank from the tap, he realised: she’d known she wouldn’t be permitted to get a drink properly, she needed to be sneaky about it. By the smells and sounds from the kitchen — Severus could see it from here, but the details were indistinct, as Melantha herself hadn’t been able to see it, filling in the blanks subconsciously, with the sloppiness common in childhood memories — she was being locked out of dinner, and likely wouldn’t be being fed, either.

Were they trying to kill her? Setting her to toil for hours under the summer sun, then locking her up with neither water nor food? It would be far too easy for Melantha to become severely dehydrated. Or more likely, since she had gotten at least some water when they hadn’t been looking, a potentially lethal electrolyte imbalance. Hyponatremia and hypokalemia were not pleasant, and could strike quickly enough and severely enough she could easily die in that...

Was that a bloody cupboard? Severus crept closer to the door, willed himself to pass through it, to find himself in what was definitely a bloody cupboard. The space was cramped, the tiny, ratty old bed barely fitting in the allotted space, leaving hardly any room for fraying and torn clothes, a couple broken toys here and there, a box of crayons and a couple old notebooks. And it was dark, dark enough the colours were washed out, the too-near corners impenetrable murk.

Melantha was lying on the bed on her back, eyes unsteadily fixed on the ceiling. She stayed there for long seconds, unmoving. Then she started, curled over to reach for her crayons. She leaned against the back wall, box at her side, and started flipping through the notebook, apparently searching for an empty page to occupy herself with.

Somewhere in the middle, Severus happened to catch a glance of a page that was absolutely littered with green and red and black, little dark-throated lilies drawn again and again and again, in every bit of space the page offered.

Severus felt that unpleasant, nauseating sensation of pity start twisting at his gut.

Then the darkness was shot through with silver light, and he found himself in another memory. A separate occasion, but Severus quickly found the common theme. Melantha, underfed and underclothed and overworked, would do something totally innocuous, and would then be punished for it to a degree so disproportionate it would almost be funny. Every time would see her back in that
bloody cupboard. Sometimes she would stare blankly up at nothing, sometimes she would idly poke at one recent injury or another, sometimes she would try to find something in the tiny little room to occupy herself with. Sometimes, in the earlier memories — they didn't seem to be in anything like chronological order — she would curl against the wall, legs hugged to her chest, breaths coming in thin, harsh gasps as she desperately forced herself to not cry.

And with each memory, building and building and building until Severus thought the force of it would crack his ribs and split his skin apart, he grew more and more enraged.

Anger, he'd found, seemed to come in two flavours. There was the hot, passionate rage that put him in mind of his father, or most of the Death Eaters he'd had the enviable pleasure of knowing. An anger taken to harsh screaming and cursing, the overwhelming energy of it pushing people to act, to hurt whatever was angering them by any means available. It was an unthinking rage, simple and animal.

It didn't take long until the unending stream of abuse and neglect he was forced to witness dragged him deep into this hot sort of rage. The projected memory warped slightly around him, lines curving and colours tainting red and black, but he barely noticed that. If someone were in a position to witness this, he thought he would feel faintly embarrassed — afterward, once he'd calmed enough to feel such things. Without entirely realising he was doing it, he found himself cursing and threatening, in particularly offensive moments firing off Unforgiveables and worse at the subhuman wretches he and the phantom Melantha were stuck with. Completely ineffectual, of course, they weren't truly there — neither was he, for that matter — but he simply couldn't help himself. He'd lost far too much control over himself, he realised that, but he couldn't...

It couldn't be helped. No matter how much of a heartless bastard he might one day become, he knew he would always have a weakness when it came to child abuse. It came too close to home, he would never be rid of it.

But his rage didn't stay hot, it didn't stay unreasoning. It was in a particularly enraging memory, Dursley giving a young Melantha what was certainly a concussion over an impressive episode of accidental magic that he suddenly went cold. And each memory thereafter, the same themes over and over again, the fire at his heart froze, falling colder and colder, darker and darker.

Cold anger was the other sort, something that put him in mind of the Dark Lord, or Lily at her most deadly. (He realised it was a bit odd, comparing them, but he couldn't help that it fit sometimes.) It was a hard, implacable kind of rage, like icy steel. Intelligent, and patient, and cautious, this sort of anger moved people to carefully plot out the destruction of that which angered them, meticulously, almost clinically. This sort of anger was far more familiar to him in most ways. He seemed to have a never-ending font of it, constantly surging. He'd been almost infamous among the younger Death Eaters for his ability to cast magics fueled by rage, but externally appearing to be calm and collected, casually delivering agony and death with an expression perfectly blank.

Not that many seemed to realise this. Too many seemed to forget the Dark Lord must have taken him into his inner circle for a reason.

And as that familiar, hateful clarity descended upon him, watching Melantha trying not to cry once again in this fucking cupboard, Severus knew exactly what he was going to do. He was not in a position he could punish the Dursleys himself.

But he knew someone who could move far more freely. Someone who had just as much of a weakness where child abuse was concerned as Severus did himself.

The show of memory was not quite done, of course. But Severus wasn't considered a master of mind
magic for nothing. He reached into the tangled threads of the enchantment surrounding him, grabbed as much as he could with the ephemeral tendrils of his own mind, and he **pulled.** Immediately, the illusion about him shivered, twisted. And then it cracked, the darkness pierced by searing white-yellow light, waves of glimmering blue interference washing over him.

As a flare of blinding pain struck, it occurred to Severus he might have overdone it.

After a disorienting moment that was both far longer and more painful than it should have been, Severus found himself back in his own body. He shivered at the tingling agony running along his nerves, but after a moment decided to simply ignore it. He didn't appear to have seriously harmed himself, and he'd had far worse. Without even a glance at Dumbledore, Severus pushed himself to his feet, and started for the door.

Before he'd made it halfway across the room, the air suddenly turned thick and stinging with a wave of energy descending upon his surroundings. He didn't bother trying to pick apart what Dumbledore had done — he'd obviously sealed the room. Severus turned half around, flatly meeting Dumbledore's gaze. His rather shocked gaze, which was curious.

It only took a second of glancing around for Severus to find out why: the pensieve on Dumbledore's desk was split into pieces by a network of jagged cracks, memories already mostly evaporated into steam and oblivion. Huh. Severus must have forced himself out with a bit more power than necessary, accidentally breaking the pensieve. Somehow. He hadn't known that was possible.

Not that he gave a fuck. And he certainly wasn't about to apologise.

Severus considered a moment how to approach the idiocy this conversation was sure to be. It didn't take long before he decided it didn't matter what he did — Dumbledore would direct this conversation in the exact way he wanted, with his usual bullheaded self-importance. 'I don't suppose you would let me leave if I asked.'

'I called you here for a reason, Severus.'

Dumbledore sounded all chiding, which he would have to have far worse memory than he did not to see coming, but it still somehow made Severus even colder than he'd been a moment before. Which was rather impressive, honestly, when he thought about it. 'Yes, what **did** you want from me? I daresay you could interpret the contents of those memories well enough on your own.' Or perhaps not — with Dumbledore's incessant rants on the internal goodness of each precious soul, and love and family and all that nonsense spewing out of his mouth indiscriminately, Severus almost had to wonder if Dumbledore would even recognise abuse when he saw it. Since he seemed oddly ignorant of the reality that such things existed.

'I simply thought... You do have greater talent in the mind arts than me, my boy, I had hoped you might...'

Severus saw what Dumbledore was implying instantly, even if the stammering fool couldn't get the words out. He'd apparently called Severus here to determine whether the memories were true. The implication **there** was obvious: Dumbledore suspected Melantha had somehow falsified them. Which...

Okay, permitting for a moment Melantha would ever do such a thing even if she could, there was **no way in hell** the girl had the skill for it. Lying externally was one thing, but mastering one's own thoughts and feelings and unconscious impulses enough to construct a fictional memory? one detailed enough to properly work with a pensieve? No, no, that was impossible. Severus could do it. Maybe. If the subject matter were far enough removed from any intense emotional cues to lessen the
chance of inappropriate associations interfering with the narrative. Maybe. But something like that? No, it had been too vivid, while at once too sloppy, details noticeably fading outside of Melantha's view. That could be nothing but Melantha's natural memories. There was no one in the world who could fake that, especially not something so intense, so personal. Not anyone Severus knew of, anyway.

Not to mention, as he'd learned recently (to his frequent aggravation), the girl hardly seemed to have a devious bone in her body. She was an unparalleled master at deflecting attention, but that was something else. What could Melantha possibly gain by lying about this? More to the point, what could she gain that Melantha would see to her advantage, and see as worthwhile enough to put in such an effort? No, not only did Melantha not have the skill, but she hadn't the inclination to do such a thing. It didn't fit at all.

Considering exactly what he'd seen in there, the implication Dumbledore was making only forced Severus's heart colder, his thoughts sharper. Cold and sharp enough he momentarily calculated the odds he'd be able to kill Dumbledore right here and now and get away with it.

Virtually zero, of course, as they always were.

After a moment further of watching the man, slumped in his chair looking all too old and weak and defeated, that damn bloody bird snuggled into him, Severus thought he hadn't read that quite right. Perhaps Dumbledore didn't really think this was some conscious scheme of Melantha's. Not really. He was, simply, desperate for any other explanation for the facts before his eyes. Desperate for something, anything, that would let him dismiss what Melantha had shown him.

And, in another flash of clarity, Severus knew why. Not that it made him any less furious.

'No, Dumbledore.' The words left him as a slow whisper, a frigid, dangerous intonation about it that abruptly, and disorientingly, had him thinking of Lily. 'If you want someone to soothe your conscience, you go and find someone else, because I will not help you feel better about yourself. You feel guilty, do you? Well, good. You should.'

That wince crossing Dumbledore's face felt oddly like...betrayal. Which Severus could only wonder at. Had he ever given Dumbledore any reason to think he liked him? Why should it matter to Severus if he were miserable, tormenting himself over the many idiotic mistakes he'd made over his long life? Since when had it become Severus's responsibility to play at morale couch? Honestly... 'I assure you, Severus, I didn't, I had no way of knowing—'

'Horseshite.' Dumbledore blinked, seemed to gather up his wits to make another attempt at self-defence, but Severus kept on before he could. 'You had every way of knowing. Anyone who knew Lily at all could have told you Petunia had turned bitter and petty years ago. Anything to do with Lily or magic in general, she was all hatred and spite. Could any of us have known she would have turned that hatred on Lily's child? No. But it was certainly a possibility.

'Right here, in this room.' Severus's voice had fallen even further, enough he could barely hear it himself, a flicker of magic about Dumbledore rising with the texture of an amplifying charm. He found the thought that Dumbledore had to work to hear him oddly satisfying. 'In this insufferable bloody office of yours, I remember, Dumbledore. You told me he was safe. You told me all that remained of Lily would not fade from this world, not if you could help it, not if we could help it. You promised me he was safe, but you refused to tell me where. And what did I say, Dumbledore? Do you remember?'

Dumbledore didn't turn from his gaze. Of course he didn't, he was fucking Dumbledore. But Severus saw the unshed tears in his eyes, the mournful downturn of his lips, the barely noticeable tremor in
This wasn't quite a direct quote. If Severus remembered correctly, he had put a couple less-than-flattering descriptors before the vapid shrew’s name. But close enough. 'You had no way of knowing? I thought you were above lying to yourself, Dumbledore. You had every way of knowing. And even if you hadn't, I fucking told you—!"

It was supremely disorienting, enough he almost lost himself. The ice wreathing his mind had suddenly shattered away, replaced by a fiery rage he couldn't quite contain. He clamped down immediately, barely a wisp escaped, only enough to churn the air for a moment, lightning stinging at his skin, ozone sharp in the air. He closed his eyes, took a long breath in through his nose, forced calm into himself with every ounce of concentration he could spare. After a few seconds, and he was again only cold.

He opened his eyes again to find Dumbledore staring at him, his eyes wide, still from some feeling Severus couldn't quite read. 'You are lucky Melantha is alive, you know. If she were a muggle child, she'd almost certainly be dead. And you are lucky she is anywhere near as emotionally stable as she is.' Not that that was saying much — Melantha was gradually resolving herself, but from their mind magic lessons he could tell it would be far too easy for Melantha to break. 'Even now, a push one way, you might see her collapse entirely. A push the other... Well, I suppose Britain hasn't had a true Dark Lady since Cromwell. I'd say we're due.'

Finally, Dumbledore was showing an expression he could read. Doubt, mostly, frowning slightly at Severus, his head twitching inches side to side. 'There I believe you're mistaken, Severus. I don't believe Melantha has that in her.'

Severus raised a single dubious eyebrow. 'No? I'm sure you've heard the saying, like mother like daughter?' Dumbledore's left eye twitched, just barely; Severus resisted a smirk. 'Lily saw herself far deeper into the Dark Arts than I know you entirely approve of, Headmaster. And I know you and she never saw eye to eye when it came to, shall we say, the rules of engagement. And Lily was loved, was cared for as a child as well as anyone could expect. You have no idea what Melantha could have become. Lily's talent with that for a childhood?' Severus shrugged.

'I do not believe that,' Dumbledore said, somewhat more sharply than a moment ago. 'It is our choices that make us who we are. Above anything else, whatever—'

'Yes, yes. You are not wrong. The problem, Dumbledore, is that not everyone gets to make the same choices.'

And that was not always a bad thing. Some choices people like himself had to make, they could be painful, they could be horrible. But being who they were sometimes permitted them more options than the more fortunate would contemplate.

Sometimes, just sometimes, there were advantages in being broken.

There was a sharp knock against the door. Not so overly loud as to feel angry — Dudley probably only even heard because he happened to be near the bottom of the stairs when it happened — but not so quiet to sound timid. Casual like, but a strong kind of casual, confident.

Dudley hesitated for a second at the foot of the stairs. He had been making his way to dinner, but that could keep for a minute. Besides, nobody else would be answering the door any time soon — Mum, he could see, was in the kitchen, and he'd heard the fan going in the toilet, so Dad must be there. It shouldn't be anyone too annoying. Who came by at dinnertime on a Saturday anyway? So,
with a shrug, he pulled the door open.

And stared, wide-eyed, at the person waiting on the step.

It was a combination of things that surprised him, really. The first one, the obvious one, she was a woman, and she was pretty. But other impressions shot that out of his thoughts very, very quickly. He noticed almost right away, she almost seemed...too pretty. He wasn't sure how to put words to what he meant. She just seemed a little surreal somehow. Skin too smooth and even, hair too deep and perfect a red, eyes too pure and bright a green. It didn't quite seem right, nobody actually looked like that, he couldn't say exactly how.

And not just the look of her, but how she was looking at him. Those unnaturally green eyes too sharp, as though cutting into his brain through his own, too intensely bright, as though shining through the holes to see what was inside. It was...unnerving.

Very unnerving, enough he didn't even notice the shimmering red cloak over her shoulders, the long, thin stick she was idly flipping in her fingers. A stick twisting down the length with tiny, fine carvings, looking all too fine and delicate.

Dudley knew exactly what that was.

The door had only gotten halfway to slamming closed before it stopped in place. Without a sound, without the slightest shake, not like it had hit something, but like it had just stopped, like someone had hit the pause button. 'Tsk tsk, tsk.' The door smoothly pushed itself open again, again revealing the woman on the other side, smiling brilliantly up at him. He didn't like it, though, not a bit, there was something wrong with that smile. 'Now, now, Dudley, ' her voice soft and sugary, but somehow with an edge to it that made his skin tingle, 'is that any way to say hello to your dear sweet auntie?'

For a second, Dudley was too confused to be afraid. 'Aunt?' Far as he was aware, he only had the one aunt. Not that he would want to find her on the doorstep either...

The woman pouted, but the expression didn't change her eyes at all, still too heavy, unnaturally glimmering. 'You mean my favourite sister hasn't said a word about me? I'm hurt.' Casually, every movement smooth and easy, the woman stepped through the door, pulling it gently closed around her.

It didn't even occur to Dudley to protest. It did occur to him that Mum only had the one sister, far as he knew, and she was dead. But he just watched her, blinking, as though it weren't quite real, as though he were somewhere else.

And the woman was smiling at him, teeth unnaturally straight and white, but Dudley hardly noticed, couldn't tear away from green flames drawing his gaze. 'Well, now that that awkwardness is over with—' Dudley blinked; awkwardness? '—why don't you show me to Petunia?' The woman's lips canted, tilting into a smirk. 'It has been so long since I've seen my dear sister, I find I'm quite looking forward to it.'

It didn't even occur to Dudley to resist.

The two of them walked into the kitchen, Mum was just a couple words into something about going ahead and sitting down when she turned around. She jumped, near a foot off the ground, eyes going wide and hand to her chest, the stack of plates she'd been holding dropping to shatter to the ground. And she stared at the woman, white-faced and speechless, gaped mouth working silently.

'Ooh, dear me, how clumsy you've gotten in your old age.' The woman gave a little twirl of the stick
in her hand, and the plates reassembled themselves, jumped up into the air to settle themselves on the counter.

Mum jumped again at the magic, but Dudley just stared, blinking. As though it weren't quite real, as though he were somewhere else.

'You can't be here!' Mum's voice came out in a harsh, high hiss, frantic and panicked, her face paling further with each syllable. 'You're dead! They said you were dead!'

'And you were devastated, I'm sure.' The woman's smirk twitched wider. She raised her hand to chest-height, not the one with the wand, and gestured at Mum. So fast, blink and you'll miss it, Mum was yanked off her feet, dashing through the air, coming to rest against the wall. There wasn't a sound as she hit it, as though she hadn't hit it at all, merely stopped, like someone had hit the pause button. The woman turned to Dudley, smiling again. 'Go ahead and have a seat, Dudley. We'll be here a while.'

It didn't even occur to Dudley to protest, moved to take a seat at the kitchen table as though it were the most natural thing in the world, the obvious thing to do. Mum was screaming, though. 'What are you going to do to him?! Don't you dare do anything—! Oh, I knew you freaks would be nothing but—! Dudley! Dudley, run!'

It didn't even occur to Dudley to so much as twitch.

'Oh, shut it.' A flick of the woman's finger, and Mum's screaming was gone, like someone had hit the mute button. Her mouth was still working, eyes bulging and face going red, but Dudley didn't hear a thing. 'Myrðin, you have a pair of lungs on you. And here I thought Severus was exaggerating. That was unpleasant.' The woman shook herself, then the smirk again took over her face. 'It seems we're still missing someone. We can't get started without the whole family here, that just wouldn't be polite. And just where is my brother-in-law.'

Mum's face turned right around, paling again, obviously saying something Dudley couldn't hear.

A laugh twirling at the edge of her voice, the woman said, 'You know what, don't trouble yourself. I can find him.' With nothing but the slightest of popping noises, the woman was gone.

In the short time they were alone, Mum stared at Dudley, her eyes wide and desperate, silenced lips pleading. But it didn't feel quite real, as though he were somewhere else.

With a slightly louder pop, the woman was back, Dad appearing with her, floating just over her shoulder. Voice low, she drawled, 'And I thought your screaming was a pain.' With a long sigh, a twitch of her fingers, Dad snapped against a wall too, just as smoothly and silently. Not the same wall, the one to Dudley's right, Mum's left, the three of them forming a triangle. 'I never did like the screaming. Or the pleading or the crying. So bloody annoying.'

The woman blinked to herself for a second, then her unnatural eyes flicked back up to Petunia. 'You're right and you're wrong, of course. I can be here. Obviously, since I am here, you see how that works? And you're right: Lily Evans is quite dead. But I thought looking like her for the evening would be, shall we say, thematically appropriate. Poetic, in a way. I tried to recreate her from memory best I could.' The woman lifted and spread both hands, opening herself for inspection. 'How did I do?

'Oh, silly me, almost forgot.' One of her hands twitched.

And Mum was screaming. 'Are you insane? What are you— What are you going to do to us? You
won't get away wi—!

Her hand twitched again. 'That wasn't an answer to my question at all. Oh well. But I am a far better guest than you are a host, dear sister — I will answer your questions. First, see, I will get away with it. Even if you were to tell anyone what happened here, what would you tell them? That Lily Evans appeared at your doorstep and tortured your family to death before your very eyes? Somehow, I don't think they'll believe that.' The woman turned a bit, smiled at Dudley again, that too-bright smile. 'What do you think, Dudley? Do you think they'd believe her?'

Dudley blinked. 'No. They wouldn't take her seriously.'

'Yes, I agree. Probably decide your mother had done you two in herself, after a very dramatic psychotic break. Or, if the mages get to it, well, I'm not sure what they'd think. But certainly not that I'm actually Lily Evans. And if I'm not who I look like, how are they supposed to find me when I'm already long gone?

'As to your other questions, who am I? Well, that's hardly relevant. It doesn't really make much of a difference, does it? The knowledge certainly won't be doing you any favours. And, what am I going to do?' And the woman who wasn't Lily smirked at Mum, that too-sharp smirk. 'Needless to say, I have some ideas. I've always had so many ideas, and there are so many that I never did get to try out on my own tormentors. I made a list. We'll see how many we make it through before you bore me.

'Now, where is this cupboard? I'm told there's a cupboard. Dudley, be a dear...'

Chapter End Notes

ánþos, mélās, měli — These words are Greek (ánθος, μέλας, μέλι), meaning "flower", "dark", and "honey" respectively. Melantha is intended to mean "dark flower", but the "mel" got Blaise to decide to call her Honeyflower.

ikonğe (IPA: /i.xɤ̃ɰɛ/ ; /i.kˤɤŋ.ɣɛ/) — Hey, we finally have Nightsong showing up again. And yes, there are still two entirely different pronunciations. Since a couple people asked last time, which one is used depends on the particulars of how it turns up in a sentence. The second one would be considered the "default" pronunciation, the first one triggering in certain contexts — the patient of a verb, most often, but also in certain diminutive or pejorative inflections. The modified pronunciation is given first because, if you were to ask what a word was, they would say it the modified way because grammar.

[Far as she understood, lilin and veela didn’t marry at all] — They don't, in fact. More lilin stuff will come up in a later chapter.

[too intense of a reaction to something so easily guessed it couldn't be anything but mildly insulting] — Am I the only one who finds far too many of Dumbledore’s interactions with Harry in canon unnecessarily condescending? I know I had Mel point this out in previous chapters, sometimes even in reaction to lines pulled directly from HBP, but honestly...

Marfan’s — Has this come up yet? Oh well. Yes, Severus is talking about Marfan’s syndrome, a comparatively common congenital disorder mostly concerning connective tissues. Reading JKR’s descriptions of Petunia when I was somewhat older vaguely
reminded me of the characteristic external signs of Marfan's (which I picked up because I know a couple people who have it), and my brain has since run away with the association.

Yeah, this is super late again, I know. Work is shit, my sleep schedule being all over the place is shit, which makes writing fucking impossible. I will get to writing the next chapter of TLG as soon as I can, and plug away at it as consistently as I can, but I can't make any promises about when my next post will be.

Oh, and I'm not saying who not-Lily was. It will come up in a later chapter anyway, and it should be rather obvious even without being explicitly stated.

Until next time,
~Wings
Hiatus announcement

So. I have the opposite of a Thanksgiving gift for all of you. You're allowed to hate it, but unfortunately you can't return it. Lost the receipt, you see.

I'm sure it hasn't escaped anyone's notice that I haven't updated in...well, a while. Two months now? Whatever. Part of this is because I've been busy with work and a variety of other distractions. It is sort of hard to keep up my ridiculous update schedule — seriously, I was regularly posting chapters above 10k every week, the hell — when, by the time I get home, I'm not really in the mood to do much of anything, much less write. That has accounted for part of the ridiculous delay.

The rest of it, well... I'm afraid I just don't want to write these stories anymore. They're no longer interesting to me, not enough to hold my attention. It doesn't help that my style and opinions about canon and such have changed significantly over the course of writing these — I find myself stuck with decisions I made over a year ago that I no longer find convincing or appropriate, but that it's far too late to change. The last few months, whenever I've sat down to write either fic, I've had far greater trouble than usual getting into the proper voice. After weeks of attempts to force it, I only made it about halfway through the next chapter of The Long Game, and what I have written I don't think is very good, either. I simply don't think I can write these anymore. The proper frame of mind is just too far away.

So, this is me announcing that both The Long Game and To Reach Without are going on indefinite hiatus. I won't rule out the possibility I might get back to them eventually, but I consider such an eventuality unlikely in the extreme.

On the off-chance there's anyone out there interested in continuing/finishing the stories without me, PM me and I'll walk through all my devious plans.

This is not to say I'll be disappearing. Over the last few days, I have done a fair amount of work on Unexpected Complications, and it is very possible I could start posting that and/or one of the winners from the poll — Her Mother's Love and A Crash Course in Enchanting and Interdimensional Mechanics — in the near future. No solid promises on that, though. They should all be shorter than TLG and TRW, so it is more likely I'll be able to finish them. But any fanfic I end up writing will probably be slowed down both by employment and work on original fiction, which I've also started semi-recently. So, there's that.

Thanks for tolerating my nonsense for so long, and sorry about not being able to finish any of it.
~Wings

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!