### Between the Shadow and Soul

**by AvinaNox**

**Summary**

“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.” - Pablo Neruda

It was enough of a shock to realize that the life she thought she had wasn't reality at all - but that was only the beginning for Halia Potter. Will she ever truly adjust to this new, twisted world of hers that operates on half-truths? And perhaps more importantly, who is the real hero in all of this? Progressively dark AU; femHPxTMR.

**Notes**

Greetings! Welcome to Between the Shadow and the Soul. Just a few things to note:

1. As stated in the summary, this story is an AU work. Not all of the characters will be playing their canon roles in the story and I've shifted around timelines quite a bit to make...
everything work. If this gets confusing at all, feel free to PM me and I'll be happy to clarify as best as I can without giving away any spoilers. :) 

2. Please review! Both encouragement and constructive criticism are much-appreciated. If you are a fellow fanfic writer, you know how meaningful and important it is to receive feedback on your work.

3. Anything you recognize belongs to our dear JKR!

Thank you for reading!
Chapter 1

August, 1996

Sirius stands at Halia's side, squeezing her hand as her parents are slowly lowered into their resting place at Godric's Hollow.

"I'm sorry, Halia," he tells her and pulls her into a hug. "Lily and J –" his voice strains painfully, "– your parents loved you very much."

The ceremony official keeps glancing in her direction with a concerned expression, surely pondering why she hasn't shed a single tear that afternoon. But even if he asked, she wouldn't have an answer.

After the service, nearly every stranger in attendance pauses to tell her that her parents were honorable, brilliant, and incredibly kind. Of course, there are a few faces she recognizes from the brief lapses in their travels during the holidays: Remus, the entire Weasley clan, and several of her parents' coworkers from the Ministry. They too express their deepest sympathies for her loss and it is these condolences that she believes the most, because she can see the aching in their warm, familiar eyes.

But all these attempts at comforting her feel somehow irrelevant, as though they are meant for another person. And why do all the memories she and her parents shared feel so oddly foreign? Is this what losing the people you love most is supposed to feel like? Is this the mind's way of coping?

It is in this precise moment that she meets Albus Dumbledore for the first time.

September, 1996

"Guess it's just you and me now, Moony," Sirius sighs sadly while pouring a glass of Firewhiskey for both of them. A month and a half has passed since the funeral, but his wounds feel fresh as ever.

"After Peter, things were never the same," Remus gazes into the brick fireplace of Sirius' dark, wood-paneled sitting room.

"But with Peter it was different. This wasn't supposed to happen – not to Lily and James."

Remus turns to gape at him with a horrified expression.

Sirius winces defensively. "I just meant...come, Moony, you know what I meant. Peter was off. He had been threatening to do it for months. We sort of expected it, didn't we?"

Remus' expression softens and he places a hand on his now-oldest friend's shoulder. "Everyone has a time, Sirius. This was James' and Lily's. And as much as it hurts to think about it, attempting to rationalize it all will only make the pain worse. Besides, you have Halia to think of now."

Sirius nods and looks down at his drink solemnly. How will he possibly find a way to fill the hole that James and Lily left in their daughter's life?

Then again, that isn't really what they are asking of him at all, is it? By appointing Sirius as Halia's
legal guardian in their will, they were simply asking him to provide her with a good, stable life. It is simultaneously a request that he cannot refuse and his last opportunity to do right by his closest friends.

To Sirius, it means one thing, and one thing only: he will not fuck this up.

He and Remus have just finished their second round when Dumbledore arrives at his front door.

"Good afternoon Sirius. Remus," Albus bows his head slightly at both of them.

But Sirius does not invite him inside. Instead, he glances up at the staircase nervously toward Halia's room, where she has resolutely locked herself away for the last month, except for the occasional meal. She is so unlike the girl he had come to know over the years – the one who was always curious and could never sit still for longer than twenty minutes.

"She's still hurting, Albus – so much. Maybe going to Hogwarts isn't the best thing for her right now."

Dumbledore nods slowly once more, as if he had anticipated Sirius' reservations. "May I come in, Sirius?"

The younger wizard stands aside and allows the elder to enter the small London flat, leading him into the sitting room where the neat pile of flaming logs in the fireplace has begun to collapse in on itself.

Sirius crosses his arms and begins to pace as Albus and Remus take a seat on the lone piece of furniture in the room: a couch given to Sirius by James' parents when he was disowned from his own family all those years ago.

"I was thinking that I might teach her myself," Sirius tells them in a tone he hopes is convincingly confident. "Just like James and Lily did."

Dumbledore exchanges a look at Remus, who shrugs, and then peers at Sirius over the top of his glasses. "That is not what James and Lily wanted for her, Sirius. They wanted her to be at Hogwarts with her peers – it's stated quite clearly in their will."

He stayed up the whole night prior, crafting his argument against this very point, but now that he's staring the undeniable in the face, everything he planned to say is now moot. In a matter of seconds, he has lost.

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There was once a time that being seated under such close scrutiny of Dumbledore would make his insides squirm - a time before he mastered Occlumency. But that time seems so distantly behind him now as he lounges comfortably in the chair opposite him in the Headmaster's office.

"Did you have an enjoyable summer, Tom?"

"Yes. Quite nice." He doesn't bother to reciprocate the question; through all his interactions with Albus, he has made it abundantly clear that small talk is an unwelcome pleasantry.

Not that it stops the old fool from trying anyway, if only (most likely) to annoy him.

"A student arrived today–"

"Two hundred students arrived today," Tom smirks and crosses his arms over his chest, leaning back
in his chair.

Dumbledore gave him one of those irritatingly patient, all-knowing smiles and Tom regrets his quip immediately.

"Go on," he waves his hand and sighs boredly.

Dumbledore looks rather pleased with himself for a moment before donning a more serious expression. "This student, Halia Potter, will be transferring into the sixth year class at Hogwarts this year."

"Transferring? From where?" Throughout his seven years as a student and five as a professor, Tom knows of only one transfer student: a boy that had been denied from every other magical institution in Europe because his MAGIQ score bordered on that of a squib. Tom always thought his alma mater was far too accepting of inferior minds, but that instance proved it once and for all.

"She was home-taught by her late parents, James and Lily Potter."

Brilliant – another doltish reject. But he'll bite, as long as it means getting this interaction over with as soon as possible. "Why do their names sound familiar?"

"They attended Hogwarts a few years before you, and were Magical Ambassadors for the Ministry. They were very well-respected. Shortly after returning from Ethiopia in the beginning of August, James, Lily, and Halia were admitted to St. Mungo's with stubborn cases of _Alcelonia Gallus_. Tragically, James and Lily's cases were far more severe than Halia's and they were never able to recover."

Tom nods. Right - he read about it in the incredibly vague _Daily Prophet_ obituary that made him doubt Lily and James Potter were just a run-of-the-mill pair of Magical Ambassadors.

"I brought Halia to Hogwarts this morning so we could review her O.W.L. scores and ensure that her placement in the sixth-year class was appropriate. I also suggested that she complete her sorting at that time rather than waiting until the first-year ceremony this evening so she might avoid unwanted attention – she agreed."

"Alright." Where _exactly_ is he going with this?

"You'll be pleased to know that she was sorted into the House of Slytherin."

No, not pleased. Not anything. Why would he care at all? And what does Dumbledore want him to say?

"Good for her?"

Albus sits back in his chair and folds his hands in his lap. "I was hoping, Tom, that you might help her adjust to her new life at Hogwarts. Myself and the rest of the staff will of course do our best to provide her with whatever support she needs, but I thought it would be nice if you could connect on a more personal level with her. She will need someone she feels she can trust and confide in."

"But Sir – surely this should be Severus' responsibility, given his position as Head of Slytherin House." Tom is quite bitter about this of course, but it's not as though he can waltz around touting his heritage – not after his rather impulsive time as a sixth-year, anyway. It turns out that opening the Chamber of Secrets and accidentally-on-purpose killing a mudblood girl with the mighty creature that lives inside is frowned upon, even if the girl is unpopular and highly annoying.
"I am not asking Severus, Tom. I am asking you." Dumbledore's eyes seem to twinkle when he says this, probably because of Tom's growing impatience. Dumbledore may act like a bloody saint to everyone else, but beneath it all the old man is clearly a sadist – at least when it comes to him.

"Well, may I at least ask why?" Tom can't even think of anyone less suitable for this job than himself: his ability to maintain a complete lack of personal connection to his students (apart from those he believes could one day reach a level of influence) is truly a great point of pride for him.

"Her O.W.L. scores were slightly above average for her year in nearly every subject…But Defense Against the Dark Arts is where she excelled particularly; she was one question away from a perfect score."

Tom blinks. "She missed a perfect O.W.L. score by one?"

But that was impossible. In his fifth year O.W.L., he missed it by two.

Dumbledore beams. "Quite an astounding young lady, wouldn't you agree? She's been at Hogwarts for all of five hours and has already broken a record held by one of our most impressive faculty members."

He sniffs. "I suppose I should have a word or two with Perkins in the Ministry Examinations Office about the relaxation of O.W.L. standards."

Dumbledore ignores him. "She's a very troubled young girl, Tom. I believe that of all our staff, you are best equipped to help her, particularly given her distinction and apparent interest in Defense Against the Dark Arts."

It's quite simple to read between the lines here: You are an orphan, ergo you can automatically relate most to the troubled orphan girl.

Is Dumbledore honestly stupid enough to believe this is actually the case? Probably not. In reality, he's just a lazy old man and his shirking of responsibilities to the rest of the staff is nothing new.

On the bright side, Tom will surely find a way to spin this into a favor later, which could prove quite useful in the coming months. After all, if the draft of the Ministry educational reform proposal waiting patiently in his office is any indication, there will soon be significant changes at Hogwarts and he'll be damned if Dumbledore tries to stand in his way one more bloody time.

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Halia swore earlier that morning that she would make use of her fresh start at Hogwarts by leaving some of her grief behind in favor of a more upbeat attitude. But now, this newfound morale is getting crushed quite efficiently by her attempts to navigate the labyrinth of the Hogwarts dungeons.

Seriously? She can wind her way through foreign cities alone for hours without getting lost, but can't handle a bloody dungeon? This is what she gets for staying in one place for too long after years of constantly changing scenery. Sirius did the best he could to make her feel at home, but all she wanted the past month was to escape. To keep moving.

And now she is here – for months. In Slytherin, no less.

What would her parents say? They were so proud of the fact that they were Gryffindors and had even brought her here to see a few Quidditch matches between their Ministry assignments. Her father was so starry-eyed in nostalgia as he rattled off all the various plays in jargon she tried desperately to keep up with while her mum spent the entire match socializing with their fellow alumni.
It doesn't help that everyone Halia knows who has graduated from Hogwarts was in Gryffindor as well. Her stomach churns anxiously at the thought of telling Sirius.

"You're a shoe-in for Gryffindor," he told her just before she left with Professor Dumbledore that morning. "But you'll be fine anywhere so long as it's not Slytherin." It was clear when he stuck out his tongue that he meant it in his typical, light-hearted way…but still.

She even tried begging the Sorting Hat to place her elsewhere—anywhere else. But after at least three minutes of unintelligible musings, it announced resolutely that Slytherin was the best place for her to be.

Bullshit.

She would make the best of it, though, and the very least she could do is figure out why the Sorting Hat decided to put her here.

But where is here, exactly? The tour that the Headmaster gave her that morning while showing her to her dormitory lasted all of five minutes and, judging from the fact that she is passing the stone bust of some bearded philosopher for the third time, it was rather insufficient.

Relief hits as a door opens further down the corridor and a tall man with jet black hair steps out of the shadows.

"Erm, excuse me?" Halia jogs down the hall to catch up with him. "Would you mind telling me how to reach the Great Hall?"

The man turns, greeting her with a startlingly scornful look on his angular face. He stares at her through his dark eyes for a few moments with such a disdainful expression that it almost compels her to apologize. For what? No idea, but the compulsion is so strong that it's almost palpable.

"You must be Miss Potter." His voice is deep and monotone at first, but it warps into what could only be described as disgust when he says her last name.

"…Yes?"

His right eyebrow quirks up slightly. "Is that a confirmation? Or are you asking me to tell you?" The flat tone of his voice is flooded with condescension.

"Yes. I mean, no." Her face flushes in embarrassment as her speech quickens nervously, "Yes, I am Halia Potter and no, I am not asking you. My apologies, Sir, it's been a long day." She offers him a weak smile. Perhaps they would relate over the travails of everyday life and continue this conversation in a far friendlier tone.

But judging from the way his thin lips remain pressed together in a slight frown, this will not be the case.

The unpleasant man suddenly turns on his heel and treads away from her without another word. She would be relieved if it wasn't for the fact that the Welcoming Feast would begin any minute now…

She rocks back and forth indecisively on her feet before giving in and following after him. "Are you on your way to the Great Hall as well?"

"Obviously."

Halia's eyes are trained directly forward as she struggles to keep up with his quick pace, memorizing
every detail of the corridors to make her next escape from the dungeons far easier. She doesn't even need to glance up at him to know he's rolling his eyes at her; it's quite evident from the patronizing way he draws out the word.

Maybe she's overreacting. After all, reading people was never her strong suit and there are endless explanations for his rudeness: perhaps he's just socially awkward or just received some particularly awful news.

So she tries again.

"Are you a professor? What do you teach?"

"Potions."

"Oh! You're Professor – Snape, yeah? Head of Slytherin? Professor Dumbledore mentioned you."

She manages to sound upbeat, but her insides sink simultaneously. Of every name on the substantial list that the Headmaster had recited to her that morning, why did he have to be her Head of House?

This time, the prick doesn't even bother to respond to her.

Halia wouldn't mind the rudeness quite so much if there was a legitimate reason behind it. But what could she possibly have done in the first seconds of their encounter to offend him so profoundly?

And does he actually think she's just going to stand there and take this?

"Well, let me just say that I'm really excited that I was sorted to Slytherin – it was definitely my first pick." Her voice drips sarcasm. It's a decidedly small step toward regaining her pride, but a rather satisfying one nonetheless.

Professor Snape gives her a derisive snort and the remainder of their trip is spent in silence.

When they arrive, all of her fellow students are settling in at their respective tables while a stern-looking witch lines up the first years in the front of the room. They're all so small with such wide, bright eyes as they stand before the Sorting Hat. She tosses the dirty old thing a bitter glare before heading over to the Slytherin table.

In the crowd, she spots the flame-haired Weasley lot at the Gryffindor table, and shoots them a grin and a wave. Ron is too busy chatting up a somewhat familiar bushy-haired girl to notice, but Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny all greet her happily in return. Their expressions become confused and then horrified when they realize that she is not walking toward them, but toward the opposite end of the Hall – a reaction that does little for her confidence.

She takes a deep breath and picks a seat towards the middle Slytherin table. Fortunately, as a round of introductions begins, it is quite apparent that her Slytherin peers are far more charming than Professor Hooked-Nose.

An attractive, platinum-haired boy with a Prefect badge pinned to his robes is the first to introduce himself, extending his hand as he sits down across from her. "Draco Malfoy. My father– he's Chairman of the Hogwarts Board of Directors, surely you've heard of him– mentioned that there would be a transfer student for the first time in years…" He scans her up and down, and not particularly discreetly. "Apparently he left out a few details. And you are...?"

"Halia," she grins flirtily, shaking his hand. "Halia Potter."

He leans in closer without releasing his grip on her hand, a small smirk on his lips. "Welcome to
Hogwarts, Halia. Slytherin is honored to have you."

A girl with shoulder-length, mousy brown hair and a sour expression sitting directly to his right clears her throat and glares at him.

Draco releases Halia's hand and leans away. "Ah, and this is my –...This is Pansy…Pansy Parkinson."

"Nice to meet you," Halia beams at the girl, noticing that she is also wearing a Prefect badge.

"Pleasure." But it's clear that it isn't, given the way her sour expression remains firmly planted on her birdlike face.

"And this is Crabbe and Goyle." Draco waves his hands dismissively toward two rather pudgy boys sitting on the other side of Pansy. They both respond with a small nod in her direction without quite meeting her eyes.

Soon after, she meets grim-faced Theodore Nott, makeup-caked Tracey Davis, Milly Bullstrode (who, somewhat ironically, bears some resemblance to a bulldog), the very reserved Daphne Greengrass, and a long-lashed boy named Blaise Zabini. She learns that each of them, along with Draco, Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle, are in the sixth-year class as well. It could certainly be far worse; with the possible exception of Pansy, they seem moderately pleasant and most certainly harmless. Perhaps her earlier worries had been unwarranted after all.

Blaise jumps into conversation with her immediately, conceitedly informing her that he finalized his third modeling contract before boarding the Hogwarts Express that morning. Halia tries desperately not to laugh, particularly when she sees Draco roll his eyes in such obvious envy, and she is just about to crack when the Sorting Hat saves her with its song.

The Great Hall is buzzing with infectious excitement when it finishes and the Sorting Ceremony begins; in fact, Halia soon finds herself so caught up in it all that she begins clapping enthusiastically with each new addition to Slytherin.

Dumbledore stands when the Sorting concludes. "Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you."

Halia raises an eyebrow and looks around at her House-mates. "Bit of a nutter, isn't he?" He had seemed at least normal, if not incredibly wise, when she met him for the first time at her parents' funeral and for the second that morning when he came to escort her to Hogwarts. He was quite old, though, and it didn't seem like that much of a stretch to assume he had some mild form of dementia. Poor man.

Halia is staring at him in pity when his bright blue eyes suddenly shine her way, as though he can tell exactly what she was thinking. She tears her eyes away from his and across the table at Draco, flushing slightly in embarrassment. Thankfully, no one around her seems to notice.

Draco snorts while scooping a mound of mashed potatoes onto his dinner plate. "You wouldn't believe some of the things he brings up in meetings with my father – did I mention my father's the Chairman of the Hogwarts Board of Directors? Anyway, in my opinion, the old man is completely unfit to be Headmaster."

Halia raises her glass of pumpkin juice to her lips to hide her smirk, doubting very much that Draco's opinion was actually his and not just his father's. "Who would you pick, then? If Dumbledore wasn't Headmaster?"
Draco looks rather surprised at her question, but then turns to survey the staff table. "Snape, perhaps?"

Well, Professor Hooked-Nose would really have to work on his communication skills if that was the case.

"Something funny, Potter?" Pansy sneers.

"Snape just seems…rather unlikely, is all."

A strange look crosses Draco's face as though she somehow offended him, but then he leans toward her with his elbows on the table, smirk on his lips, and fascinated gleam in his pale eyes. "Well then. Who would you choose, Halia?"

She shrugs and cuts into her perfectly golden-brown Cornish game hen. "No idea. He and Dumbledore are the only staff I've met so far."

"Well," Blaise gestures to the left side of the staff table, "there's Trelawney, Professor of Divination —"

"Bloody useless subject, that is," Tracey rolls her eyes.

" — Sinistra, who teaches Astronomy; Flitwick…he's Head of Ravenclaw and teaches Charms…Burbage —"

"Professor of Muggle Studies," Draco sneers. "The only subject more useless than Divination or Care of Magical Creatures."

Halia sighs internally. Apparently, the blood-purist mentality of Slytherins really did exist and wasn't as much of a misguided rumor as she hoped. What would they say if they knew that she was a half-blood?

Probably little. Although the surnames of her new acquaintances were associated with the pureblood elite, there had to be other half-blooded or even muggle-born students in Slytherin. It was mathematically illogical to assume otherwise.

Blaise continues his naming of staff members, interrupting her thoughts. " — Sprout, Professor of Herbology and Head of Hufflepuff; Dumbledore and Snape of course; Riddle —"

"Oh, I'd definitely vote him for Headmaster." Pansy exchanges a smirk with Milly.

It's easy to see why. Riddle looks surprisingly young compared to the rest of the staff and provides a substantial contrast to Professor Snape, with whom he is engaged in some sort of discussion. Where Snape's face is sharp edges in all the wrong places, Riddle's has them in all the right ones. Then again, she supposes anyone sat next to Snape would seem like a ten, or at least a mid-eight.

But then again, perhaps she's biased from her earlier encounter with Professor Hooked-Nose.

"What does he teach?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. He's a strict grader but also a Slytherin alumni, so we usually end up with decent marks at the end of the term," Blaise nudges her with his elbow. "Try not to worry too much if you get a 'Troll' on your first paper."

Clearly, Blaise isn't aware of the fact that her O.W.L. score in the subject broke the prior Hogwarts
record. But the last thing she wants is to become the new Slytherin House tutor, so she keeps her mouth shut.

After dinner, Halia migrates with the rest of the Slytherins back to the dungeons and makes her way up to her dormitory, which she learns she will be sharing with Daphne, Tracey, Milly, and (regrettably) Pansy.

When she kneels to dig her pyjamas out of her modest trunk of belongings, Daphne leans against her bedpost. "I just wanted to say…I'm sure you don't want to talk about it, but I'm sorry about your parents. My mum saw them around the Ministry sometimes. She said they seemed nice."

"They were brilliant," Halia nods. What else was she supposed to say? Was this going to become a pattern? Hopefully not – the thought of receiving any sort of pity from her peers is a dreadfully uncomfortable one.

Daphne opens her mouth to speak again, but Pansy suddenly bursts through the door of the dormitory and storms right up to Halia.

"Stay away from my Draco, Potter. He's mine." Her arms are crossed over her chest and leers toward Halia threateningly, her thin, mousy hair falling in front of her face.

She smirks. "Does he know that?"

Shit. She said that aloud and not just in her head, didn't she?

Pansy looks furious, but before she can spit out a single word, Halia shrugs. "Don't worry, Pansy, I have no interest in Draco. He's not at all my type and last spring I began seeing the French Minister's son …"

"No bloody way –you're dating Pierre LeBlanc?" Tracey's eyes widen and Pansy's frown deepens.

Halia smiles dreamily and removes her hairbrush from her trunk, running it through her hair.

"Something along those lines. It's complicated." A lie, but it's becoming clear quite quickly that whoever's beau is fittest runs the show here. And even though they weren't technically dating, she and Pierre had snogged. Well, once, while drunkenly playing Spin the Wand with a few other teenage children of international politicians' that she became acquainted with throughout her travels.

"That is, like, so amazing." Tracey giggles. "Is he a good snog?"

"Oh, yes. Very." Another lie.

The glare that Pansy gives her before trudging off to get ready for bed is astonishingly satisfying and she falls into the deepest sleep she's had in months.

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"Enter."

The Minister's large leather chair is turned to face the arching, floor-to-ceiling window that offers a remarkable view of the snow-capped Southern Bavarian Alps. All that can be seen of the man himself is the top of his grey-blonde head, which tilts slight to the side as he speaks. "Any word of the trade deal with Egypt? Or will our embargo on flying carpets continue into the holiday season?"

"I have heard only whisperings, Minister, none of which have produced useful leads."
"That is for me to decide, Dolohov. Not you." The chair spins, an ephemeral look of disapproval deepening the wrinkles of the Minister's usually jovial features.

Antonin folds his hands in front of him and looks down at the floor in appropriate shame. "My sincerest apologies, Sir."

The Minister nods, his face brightening. "I want you to prepare a list of every flying carpet incident that has occurred in the last twenty years – work with *Hier und Jetzt* to put a story together. And get Whitehorn from Nimbus a meeting with Krämer from Development Permits. If Britain has refused to sell him a site to build his second factory, we shall make it known that his business is welcome on German soil."

"Of course, Minister Grindelwald. But do you believe that Egypt will fail to meet our demands? We are one of their largest buyers, after all – we're *bound* to win."

The Minister's booming laugh echoes off the cavernous castle walls. "The way we win, Dolohov, is by making their decision irrelevant." Then he crosses the room, clapping Antonin on the shoulder. "That is all for now. If you'll excuse me, I must be off to check in on my dear wife."

Antonin bows his head respectfully. "How is our Lady recovering, Sir?"

"Spectacularly. Almost too spectacularly to believe, actually." A muscle twitches in his jaw. "If little else in the way of flattery may be said of her, my Ariana is certainly tenacious."

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It watches through stone, cold and ancient, and the misty haze, fleeting and impalpable. It watches as a girl and a man– presumably her father based on the likeness of their jet-black hair and thin faces– sprint up the top of the rocky platform. They double over, panting until their breathing steadies, and then proceed to argue about who won the impromptu race.

"*I think Halia was first,*" declares the third member of the party to reach the cliff, a woman with dark red hair that whips around her heart-shaped face in the wind.

Halia. That name – a name that seems so familiar, but so foreign at the same time.

The man sticks his tongue out playfully at the woman and she smiles, crinkles forming at the corners of her bright green eyes, which match identically to the girl's. Halia's.

The red-haired woman glances around curiously. "Do you think this is the place, James?"

He holds up the map and scratches his head, which makes his unruly black hair stand up on end. "I thought so...Nothing seems out of the ordinary, though."

As he speaks, Halia moves closer to the stone wall, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion and left palm extended. "Can you feel that?"

It can certainly feel *her* – the heat radiating off her skin providing such a welcome contrast to its perpetual frigidity.

"Feel what, sweetheart?" Her mother asks, approaching her.

"That...I dunno...that *buzzing* feeling."

The mother and father share a concerned look before glancing back toward their daughter.
"You know what? I'm starved," James announces suddenly. "How about you, Hals?"

Halia remains transfixed, staring at the stone wall for a moment, before dropping her palm to her side and turning away.

It patiently watches as they eat, silently chanting her name.

_Halia. Ha-li-a._

Why is it so familiar?

_HALIA!

The girl drops her sandwich mid-bite and scrambles to her feet.

"Sweetheart?" The red-haired woman grabs her hand and looks up at her in concern. "Are you alright?"

"How can you _not_ feel that?" Halia tugs herself out of the woman's grip and makes her way to the stone wall once more, her palm extended toward precisely the same spot as minutes before.

"Come away from there, Hals." Her father stands, drawing his wand, and his wife follows suit.

"I can't," she whispers. Her green eyes are wide in a mixture of confusion, fear, and curiosity.

Without warning, she presses her palm to the stone façade. Her skin is hot — _boiling_ hot. A viciously sweet sort of burn. And in an instant, the world convulses and everything dissolves into three flashes of light, the first of which is the exact color of her eyes. Then there is white-hot, endless brightness, and finally, the deepest, blackest darkness. Home.

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The cold morning air stings her lungs as she jogs around the lake, the mist rising off it so similar to the mountain mist in her dream. She slept quite soundly despite it; after all, dreams of her parents had become a regular occurrence ever since that terrible day she woke up in a bed at St. Mungo's and looked over at the leather chair beside her bed to see Sirius staring at her with bloodshot eyes. It was all a blur as he explained what happened:


It all makes just as little sense as it did then. How had they, two of the strongest people in her world (and quite possibly _the_ world), perish from a mere virus while she lived on?

She picks up her pace, shifting away from the Black Lake and towards the Quidditch pitch where a few Gryffindors are already practicing.

"Oi! If you keep brooding like that, I'm going to start believing you actually belong in bloody Slytherin."

Halia glances up and one of the Weasley twins is hovering in front of her with a wide grin on his freckled face.

"Ha-ha." She mock-glares at him and tips her chin in the direction of the Quidditch pitch. "Bit early in the year to be practicing, isn't it? Scared we're going to beat Gryffindor?"
"Never," he scoffs with a smirk. "Ron's decided to try out for Keeper and asked us to help…"

She fights the urge to laugh as Ron spots her talking to his brother and waves, before promptly colliding with the goal hoop.

"We clearly have some work to do." He runs a hand through his fiery short hair. "Anyway, happy first day of Hogwarts! I bet it'll be bloody torture for you to sit in a classroom all day –"

She was hoping for the best, but he definitely had a point. Sitting still for prolonged periods had never been her forte, nor a common occurrence while traveling with her parents.

"– but you know, if you get too bored, I'd be happy to help keep things interesting."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Oh, the Weasley twins and their endless hoard of pranking supplies and party favors…Thanks to the latter, she had quite a few close calls with her parents while visiting London over the holidays.

"By the way, Fred and I are having a little get-together this Saturday. Stop by, unless of course you've gone to the dark side already."

She rolls her eyes. "Shut up."

The twin revealed to be George winks at her. "The password's Mimbulus Mimbletonia. See you 'round, Potter."

By the time Halia makes it back to the dungeons, takes a shower, and gathers her supplies for History of Magic, and winds her way through the corridors to arrive in classroom 4F, she is over fifteen minutes late.

Perfect. This is sure to make a great first impression. First Snape, now Professor– she glances at her schedule– Binns. Zero for two.

But amazingly, Professor Binns doesn't seem to notice her tardiness; as she slides into the only seat remaining in the very front of the classroom, his droning voice fails to pause even once. Her classmates, however, do take notice and she can hear Pansy's snicker a few rows back.

Halia does her best to ignore it and focuses her attention on the lecture instead, attempting to emulate the furious note-taking and rapt attention of the studious Ravenclaws around her. But George was right earlier; sitting in a classroom was torture for her. She sets down her quill and drums her fingertips against the table, chancing a look at the clock in the back of the room. Surely it's been at least forty-five minutes…

Nope. A measly ten.

Thankfully, after what feels like eternity, the class does end and she's off to Potions. It comes as a substantial relief when Snape pairs her with Daphne for the term rather than Pansy or the air-headed Tracey (whose presence in N.E.W.T.-level Potions is a complete mystery). Even better, the Potions Master largely ignores her and makes no comment as he examines her Calming Draught. It's not a compliment, but at least it's not the scathing criticism that some of the Hufflepuffs receive either.

After Potions, she eats a quick lunch with Theodore, Milly, Draco, and Pansy. Draco is in the middle of bragging about the new Nimbus line of broomsticks his father will be purchasing for the Slytherin Quidditch team when Halia looks pointedly at her watch and says, "Oh, wow. Look at the time… Shouldn't we be off to Defense Against the Dark Arts?"
It's sad, really; that even the prospect sitting through another lecture sounds decidedly more pleasant than hearing Draco say the words "my father" in his self-important tone one more bloody time.

He nods and rises from the table with her. "I'll walk you – the classroom is rather tricky to find and we know from History of Magic this morning how directionally challenged you happen to be. Let me take your books for you –"

She hands them over with tight smile. So much for escaping him. But then her smile turns genuine when she sees Draco turn and pass off her books to a certain mousey-haired girl who is already carrying his. "Here Pansy."

-xx-

After Tom's rather exhausting day of two first-year classes (much of which were spent on the proper way to hold a wand, Merlin help him) and fourth-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, it is a relief to see his small group of N.E.W.T.-level sixth-years settling into his classroom. These students were the very first first-years that he taught, allowing him to introduce the study of dark magic from day one as opposed to back-peddling the unsavory preconceived notions from Professor Merrythought's prior teachings. For this reason, they are arguably his favorite.

Of course, it helps that around half of them are Slytherins – the House which proved to be most adept at following his instruction in the dark arts portion of the class.

Sadly, though, much of the job's initial glamour faded over the first few years of his teaching career, a sentiment that has far more to do with the shift in school leadership than any sort of boredom with the subject matter itself. When Dippet was Headmaster, actualizing one of his greater visions for Hogwarts– such as establishing a whole new course for Dark Arts, his most beloved and pitifully neglected branch of magic– seemed quite possible. But Dippet's retirement and the appointment of Dumbledore to the vacancy had effectively stopped Tom's progress.

"Good afternoon." He stands to greet the class at exactly 1:30 p.m. "As you are well-aware, you will be completing your N.E.W.T.s at the end of your seventh year. Unlike many of your other courses, however, N.E.W.T. preparation will not be the primary focus of this class. The branches of magic and concepts we will cover far exceed the Ministry curriculum requirements; as such, you will have no issue passing your N.E.W.T.s. if you prove capable in keeping up with the pace of the course."

Sure, he rebels by taking a few liberties here and there, stretching the bounds of the class content; but at this point, it all feels like more of a tedious exercise than anything else. He has even timed each his lessons so they last precisely one hour and thirty minutes, not one second over or under. For the last couple of years, it was these little victories that got him by while he dreamt up a new plan and positioned himself in the good favor of the powers that would allow him to realize it. Soon. So soon, now – just a few more months of waiting.

"Questions? No? Then we shall begin." He snaps his fingers and a piece of chalk begins scrawling out the lesson's notes on the board while he waves his wand and begins moving the classroom's various cabinets and collectibles out of the way to make room for the practical portion of their lesson. "You may have noticed that most your summer readings pertained to curses that result in severely debilitating effects on its victim such as deafness, blindness, and hypersensitivity to pain. These consequences are often permanent unless the assistance of an exceptionally-skilled Healer is immediately sought. Can anyone tell me how long this window of time is, on average?"

"Anyone?" The class is silent, save for the loud squeak as someone shifts uncomfortably in their chair. "Miss Granger?" He sighs internally for reinforcing her pest-like zeal, but it's clear that he has little choice in the matter until the rest of the class gets back into the swing of things.
When he glances up, however, she is not perched on the edge of her seat, arm perfectly straight in the air. "Erm actually, Halia was first Sir." There is a twinge of despair in the muggle-born's voice, as though the admission that someone has bested her causes her physical pain. The corner of his mouth twitches upward, but he manages to subdue a smirk.

His eyes fall onto the student he had all but forgotten about over the past day, a girl with jet-black hair and a smooth complexion. But what is most striking is the way her hand is half-lazily held in the air with a sense of bored arrogance. He crosses his arms and leans back against his desk, any trace of a smirk long-gone. "Ah, yes, our newest addition to the class. Miss Potter, then?"

"I believe the window of time is estimated to be between six and eight minutes, depending on the ability of the caster."

"That is correct." Of course it was; she had broken his O.W.L. record, after all. "Well, it is correct in some circumstances, I should say. For example if the curse is preceded by a Hex-Focusing Charm –"

" – the window would shirk to around thirty seconds. Of course. But the likelihood of conjuring a successful Hex-Focusing Charm in a duel is practically nil."

For a moment, it sounds as though the entire class has stopped breathing. And for good reason – nobody dares to interrupt him.

He's boiling internally at the nerve of her, but Dumbledore's request rings in his ears and he manages to respond in nonchalance – he'd make an example of her instead. "A valid point, but I did not specify that the question was in a dueling context. But let's try again, Potter. What is the first indication that one is near the protective boundary of magically concealed area?"

"A slight shift in air density."

That arrogant tone of hers is really beginning to get under his skin, and now he's bloody determined to find the weak spot in her knowledge. "A slight shift in air density – Sir," he corrects her. "Which hexes can be combined to produce an effect reminiscent of a mild Imperius?"

Once again, she babbles off the answer without a moment's hesitation. How in the…That was easily a N.E.W.T.-level question for anyone who hadn't taken his course previously.

"Swot," Parkinson coughs into her hand not at all discreetly.

"And the number of Lethifold species that have been discovered to date?"

"I believe it's twenty-three, Professor."

Finally.

"Incorrect; there are only twenty-one, the most recent of which was discovered in Brunei in 1932." He smirks smugly. "Like the rest of the class, you clearly –"

She arches an eyebrow at him. "Actually, Sir, that was before the Ministry of Divine Health's classification system changed."

His fingers grip the chalk so tightly that his knuckles begin to turn white and his stomach drops in dread. She's fucking right.

Maintaining his façade of nonchalance becomes substantially more difficult all of a sudden.
"The classification system is subjective. Twenty-one is the number accepted far more widely." He shrugs, and narrows his eyes coldly at her. "Still, how could I have forgotten? Your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. score was quite extraordinary, so I have heard. Not to worry – as I mentioned earlier, the Ministry standards drastically fail to match the breadth of content covered in my course, especially when it comes to the practical applications of theory. So, while a few of your classmates may foolishly believe they are in the presence of brilliance, you can rest assured that you still have a substantial amount to learn."

And he could rest assured that there was no way that a student knew more about his course than he did – clearly, she was cheating and he would damn well figure out how.

Then she leans back in her chair and gives him a smirk, muttering almost imperceptibly, "Well, Professor Riddle, that is certainly a relief to hear."

This act alone basically confirms that the girl must be an idiot. Clearly, she has no idea who she's dealing with. So, he'll let it go for now and instead put her up against Nott, the best duelist in the class, during the practical portion of the lesson. That will teach her.

But his plan backfires, and her success at disarming Nott when he attempts to curse her makes her look even more like a bloody prodigy. It's suddenly quite clear that Dumbledore's request to make the girl feel welcome at Hogwarts must be some sick version of a joke. The goddamn sadist.

After class concludes and the sixth-years file out, he glances up at the clock and scowls; thanks to his irritating exchange with Potter, class had gone over. By a bloody twenty-three seconds, no less – icing on the fucking cake.
Chapter 2

October, 1996

A few weeks ago, when Griphook announced that James had left him a rather sizable fortune, all Remus could do was stare down at his hands in shame. Sirius was also at the meeting as Halia's representative and had tried to make him feel better about it, but there was no way Remus could accept the gesture. The thought of taking a knot of Halia's inheritance made his stomach churn and James had gone out of his way more than enough times to help him stay on his feet. This time was too much – a painful wakeup call. So, despite his long streak of unemployment since graduating from Hogwarts, Remus was determined to find a job.

He's been working at Borgin and Burke's for a little over two weeks, now. It's alright. A bit dodgy (well, maybe more than a bit), but he's used to dodgy; his condition doesn't exactly encourage a typical lifestyle.

"Try not to bite anyone – it's bad for business, you know," snickers Borgin as he shrugs on his cloak.

Remus laughs politely, just like he did the first twenty or so times the saggy-faced owner made the joke, and then glares at the back of Borgin's head as he steps out into the downpour.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Black," he nods and forces a tight smile at the sallow-complexioned witch, who is somewhat of a regular customer. "Is there something in particular I can help you find?"

Usually people avert their eyes when they see the scars from on his face, but she doesn't bat an eye. That is perhaps the one and only positive of Borgin and Burke's clientele – they're used to the inelegant sort.

"Yes, actually." She pushes her nest of curly black hair out of her eyes and leans against the counter, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I happen to be in need of a fresh Peruvian Vipertooth egg and I also just happened to hear that one was recently sold to Burke."

He shakes his head. "You are mistaken, Ms. Black. The sale of dragon eggs is highly illegal – you won't find one here."

He didn't doubt that Borgin and Burke were involved in the trade when he was out of the shop, but
there was no way that he would allow them to get his hands dirty with it. Not that they would ever trust him with such high-staked dealings anyway.

"Are you sure?" She pouts in disappointment before her mouth splits into a smile and she bites her thick bottom lip. "Won't you at least look around? I assure you that I'll make it worth your while."

During his prior encounters with Bellatrix Black, she had been many things. Condescending? Sure. Demanding and downright rude? Certainly. But flirty...?

Not with him. Not ever.

"So," he straightens his spine and folds his arms at his chest, "the Auror Department must be getting rather desperate, then."

"What are you talking about?" A loud laugh escapes her throat. It's clearly forced – such a stark contrast from her usual wild cackle.

"You are not Bellatrix Black. I assure you." He leans on the counter toward her, mocking her flirty tone.

Alright, alright. You caught me," she sighs, blowing the thick hair out of her face once more. "Look, you seem like a decent fellow. I'm new in the Department and I have some enormous shoes to fill, so I really want to solve this one. Is there anything you know that could help me out? Anonymously, of course."

I'm afraid that I won't be much help to you. I'm fairly new to this position as well." He peers at her more closely. "But I must compliment your Polyjuice Potion – I can hardly tell you're not her."

"It's not a Polyjuice, actually." She holds up a finger. In the time it takes to blink, her face transfigures and she's suddenly sporting shoulder-length, candy floss-pink hair and a far healthier skin tone. A far prettier face, too. "Nymphadora Tonks." She smiles radiantly, extending her hand to him. "Second generation Auror and estranged niece of Bellatrix Black at your service, Mister –"

"Lupin." He manages to coordinate his mouth and a quick handshake, though it has become exponentially harder to formulate any sort of coherent thought in the last thirty seconds or so.

Thirty seconds, and he's hooked.

-POTter!- His lip curls downward into a scowl as he looms over her table. "What are you doing?"

It's astounding, really; not even five minutes of class have gone by and yet she has already found a way to exasperate him.

She blinks up at him once. "Salting the cauldron."

Severus just stares at her for a moment. He hates the tone of her voice, the insufferable arrogance of it. She's far worse than Granger. "And why exactly are you doing that?"

She shrugs nonchalantly and continues her work. "To brew a Wit-Sharpening Potion, the pH of the cauldron must be slightly basic, right? That's what my mum always said."

The blood drains from his face and he averts his glare from her dark green eyes. "That is correct. But if you would have bothered to ask, you would know that I already prepared the cauldrons before
class. That will be three nights of detention for wasting class time, Potter."

"But nobody else in the class bothered to ask-"

"Make that a week's detention. You will begin on Monday."

She deserves far worse for the way that this simple exchange affects him throughout the rest of the evening, during which not a single thought is left unscathed from the haunting torture of those green eyes.

-xx-

It is well after dinner by the time Halia finally drags herself to Riddle's office after putting it off for as long as possible. She's been in a rubbish mood all week and there is absolutely no chance that this encounter is going to make it any better.

The first strike was the letter from Sirius that brought news of the distribution of her parents' estate. She was now quite wealthy by most definitions: her Gringotts vault was filled with generations of Potter gold and she would be granted the family home in Godric's Hollow soon as she came of age. Was all this supposed to bring solace? Because it didn't. All she wanted was to have her parents back so she could leave Hogwarts and pick up their old life where they left it.

And then of course was another encounter with the miserable Professor Hooked-Nose, who doled out her first detention sentence without pause.

She takes a deep breath, summoning all her wits, and knocks on the door to Riddle's office.

After that first day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Halia made a conscious effort to keep a low profile. She only answered that first question about debilitating curses because she thought it was obvious enough for the rest of the class to know. And clearly, she should have stopped herself there, but Riddle's attempts to save face by discrediting her answers only fueled her desire to irritate him. The rest just sort of…happened. But when she saw the pitiful 'Acceptable' mark written at the top of her first Defense Against the Dark Arts exam earlier that week, another confrontation was inevitable.

Sure, it's partially a pride thing. She also doesn't have much of a choice - her grades are at the lower end in many of her other classes and the last thing she wants is to be kicked out and cause Sirius even more stress. While her O.W.L. scores were above average, it's proving near-impossible for her to focus in such a restrictive, classroom-based format. Plus, ever since she came to Hogwarts, a bizarre, foggy feeling keeps ebbing on and off in the back of her mind, making concentrating on her studies even more difficult. Right now, she needs a somewhat impressive mark in something and Defense Against the Dark Arts seems to be the most promising of her courses in this regard.

Well, if she can convince Professor Riddle to stop being such a prat, at least.

"Enter."

Having avoided his after-class hours like the plague until now, this is the first time she has seen his office. Bookshelves that extend from the floor to the ceiling line every almost inch of wall space and the room is lit dimly overhead by an intricate candelabra. Near his desk is a slowly rotating metal globe that sits on a carved wooden pedestal, sparks of electricity dancing across the various countries every few seconds. The room is meticulously neat and the polar opposite of Headmaster Dumbledore's office, with its many knickknacks and endless clutter.

She slowly approaches Riddle's desk, where he sits writing furiously in red ink across some poor student's paper, and clears her throat. "Do you have a moment, Professor? I was hoping to discuss
my exam."

He doesn't even bother glancing up from the stack of essays. "My marks included clear comments, Miss Potter – you will find the correct answers in the course text. I might also suggest that you complete the assigned readings in preparation for our next exam."

"That's actually why I'm here, Sir. About the course text…"

"Hm?" he mumbles distractedly.

"Well, it's wrong."

_That_ certainly gets his attention.

"I beg your pardon?"

She stands up a bit straighter, ready to hold her ground on this in the almost inevitable case it turns into a debate. "The textbook is wrong."

Riddle stares at her blankly for a few seconds and she worries he's about to go off when he promptly smirks and says in a smooth voice, "Please, have a seat Miss Potter."

-Potter slides her way into the chair across from his desk almost cautiously, as though his failure to snap at her is a trap. And it is tempting to snap at her because of his pride, but he stops himself when Dumbledore's request rings in his ears once more, just like it consistently has after that first day of class. It's not the _what_ of the request that irks him so much, but _why_.

Initially, he had chalked Potter's initial success in his class up to an amateur interest in the dark arts on the part of her parents, which they must have incorporated into her homeschooling. But Tom already had his doubts about her parents' backgrounds at the Ministry and in thinking through Dumbledore's request, he grew nearly certain that the girl's knowledge must be a clue in this direction.

But what has kept him from exploring this further for the past several weeks is the dread that he would be playing exactly into what Dumbledore wants - that he is just being used to puzzle out the girl's past. Surely the all-knowing Dumbledore has some inkling of the girl's strange overabundance of knowledge…as well as Tom's instincts to exploit it. This way, the old man would have no need to get his hands dirty. And if the late Potters are as tied to secrecy as he expects, hesitation on Dumbledore's part makes perfect sense.

Still, this opportunity is one he simply cannot pass up.

"Well?" he cocks an eyebrow at her, as he seems to have stunned her momentarily speechless. "Show me."

Potter quickly regains her composure, shuffles through her bag to retrieve her copy of _Demystifying the Dark Arts_, and flips to a page in the middle. "Okay…Right here, for instance – the ancient Egyptian wizards never used juniper extract to treat their wands and strengthen their casting power. They used nightshade juice."

"Interesting," he nods once, turning her claim over a few times in his head. "Where did you learn this? Did your parents teach you?"
"No. I've been to Egypt a few times and seen the technique in use. Some bloke with a bad memory probably just recorded the wrong plant somewhere along the line and the mistake found its way in book after book before finally showing up here. If you think about it, juniper extract doesn't even make sense to use, anyway."

She does have a point about juniper (in fact, he himself has thought the same on more than one occasion)...and a quick scan of her memories reveals that she isn't lying.

He leans forward slightly in his chair. "What else?"

She rattles off a few more tidbits and reveals that she also learned these in her travels. Bloody Salazar, why hadn't he become a Magical Ambassador? But it's now more obvious than ever that 'Magical Ambassador' is just a cover-up for whatever classified role her parents were actually involved in.

"The last error I found is about the curse-breaking protocol for items meant for human consumption…"

He enters her memories once more to double check, though based on her previous accuracy it is unlikely that he needs to...

Well, that's certainly odd – there isn't even a memory to double-check.

Tom abruptly stands and moves to his office window, his mind spinning. He was a Master Legilimens and she showed no signs of using Occlumency, which either means that she is even better at it than he is (unlikely) or that there is something very bizarre going on with her memories.

And then he remembers: getting sucked into learning more about her because of his zeal for anything extraordinary is exactly what Dumbledore wants. But at the same time, how is he supposed to just leave it alone? He scowls at the conflict.

"Professor Riddle?" Her voice interrupts his thoughts. "The reason I brought this up was, well…I was hoping you might reconsider my exam marks."

"I will."

He glances up at to see her looking back at him in confusion. "Really?"

"Yes. But I will require more substantiation than merely your word; if you can provide sufficient proof for your claims, then I will revise your grade." He's proven she isn't lying, but he obviously can't reveal that he just went paging through her memories as easily as flipping pages in a book.

"Thank you, Sir." She grins and then stands to leave, collecting her book from his desk. "Well, I'll leave you to it then. Have a nice weekend, Professor."

He takes a few long strides to beat her to the door and holds it open for her. "You are fortunate that your parents took you to so many fascinating places in your youth."

"I am," she nods rather modestly.

Perhaps she's not as insufferably arrogant as he originally thought.

This sparks another question in his mind: did her knowledge extend into her other studies as well?

He lingers in the doorway, half-blocking her from leaving. Until now, he's never noticed how tall
she is compared to the other girls her age, the top of her head in line with the tip of his nose. "Are you enjoying your other classes?"

She picks at her nail. "They're alright. I love Astronomy and Ancient Runes...I thought I'd love Potions, too – it was my mum's favorite subject. But not so much, it turns out."

He tilts his head to the side slightly. "Why not?"

She sighs. "Professor Snape doesn't seem to like me very much, for whatever reason. He gave me a week of detention for being right about something...In fact, I was sort of expecting you to do the same." She looks at him almost suspiciously.

"Why? Clearly I have underestimated your knowledge and for that, I should and do apologize." He smirks and looks directly into her eyes. They're almost embarrassingly expressive, he thinks; she's rubbish at hiding her thoughts and emotions which makes her such easy prey for what he wants from her.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot, Miss Potter. And perhaps I could convince Headmaster Dumbledore to allow you to spend your detention with me, if you would like. Perhaps you could assist me in re-evaluating the course text."

She's looking up at him in utter confusion again. "Okay...I guess."

"Excellent." His smirk deepens. "I will arrange it with Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape. Have an enjoyable weekend, Miss Potter."

When he speaks to Dumbledore later to inform him of this change, he all but confirms Tom's earlier suspicious: "I am very pleased to see that you are taking my request so seriously, Tom. I was actually going to ask if you wouldn't mind supervising Miss Potter's detention, as Severus' talents have been requested at St. Mungo's to investigate a series of particularly challenging poisoning cases."

But he'll play along with Dumbledore's game for now, because if her parents were as embedded in Ministry secrets as he suspects, it will be more than worth the risk to explore further. All it would take is cracking open her secrets before Dumbledore gets wise about it.

And, thinking back to his school years, during which he spent hours upon hours paging through *Secrets of the Darkest Art* and a multitude of the other darkest texts that Hogwarts had to offer, it's not as though gaining taboo knowledge right under Dumbledore's nose is particularly new for him.

-xx-

"You've redecorated," Lucius glances around the foyer in approval. It's stately enough, with the chandelier overhead and rare portraits lining the walls, but it still pales in comparison to the grandeur of his own manor. Lucius wouldn't have it any other way.

"Mindy adores the decorator that Narcissa referred her to. A bit pricier than I was anticipating, but as they say: happy wife, happy life."

Lucius smirks. "Quite right."

"Could I get you a drink or anything? Would you like to sit down?" Fudge is even more skittish than usual this evening.

"I won't be staying. I just came to deliver the message that Snape and Slughorn are now involved."
Fudge pulls a cigar out of the chest pocket of his robe and lights it. "Good. As long as Dumbledore trusts them, Doge will. Have you heard anything from Fletcher?"

"Not yet." He bows his head slightly. "But I assure you, Minister, I will take care of it if and when the rumors begin."

"Through Obliviation, yes?" Fudge gives him a pointed look.

"Of course, Minister." Lucius rubs the skull tip of his cane with his thumb. "On another subject, I found the news that Nimbus plans to relocate to Germany rather…troubling. To say the least."

Fudge looks away and takes a long drag from his cigar before tapping it against the floating ash tray beside him. "It is something the Bureau of Magical Businesses is carefully navigating. You know that I cannot tell you much more than that, Lucius."

"I completely understand, Minister." But he has yet to lose money through his investments and he's certainly not willing to start now. So, after a long pause he adds, "You know, the other night I was thinking about this little scheme of yours. It was very wise of you to involve me over someone less trustworthy. After all, such a precarious situation lends itself to blackmail quite easily."

Fudge is so flustered that the small amount of concentration he's using to levitate the ashtray breaks and it shatters against the floor, spewing ash across the Persian floor-runner. "Let's have a drink, Lucius," he says wearily.

-Halia watches while Fred crumbles a few Alihotsy leaves into the small pot sitting in the center of the dormitory and adds a spring of lavender before lighting it. The earthy scent of the smoke soon fills the room and she relishes the calming sensation that comes with it.

She has spent quite a bit of time here in the last couple of weeks; it just so happens that the bizarre sort-of-headache-but-not-she's experiencing as of late disappears whenever she indulges in the substances that Fred and George maintain a steady supply of.

"Looking forward to your detention next week?" George grins, reaching across her to refill the clay mug she's drinking Firewhiskey from.

"It could be worse," she shrugs. "I'll be serving it with Riddle, actually."

"And that's better?" Lee knits his eyebrows together before his face splits into laughter. "Oh, I see… you fancy him, don't you? Welcome to the masses, Halia."

"No I don't." She tosses back her Firewhiskey and looks up to see Fred and George mirroring Lee's amused look at her. "I don't really know what to make of him, actually."

That much is certainly true. Her encounter with him had gone miraculously better than she could have ever anticipated. In fact, Professor Riddle was nothing but charm after acting a range of slightly hostile to coolly dismissive toward her since the term started.

"Fred? George?" The door suddenly opens, flooding the room with light. "Have either of you seen – Merlin!" Hermione waves her hand frantically in front of her face and casts a Bubble-Head Charm on herself.

"Care to join us, Hermione?" Lee waggles his eyebrows at her and snickers.
"I think I'll pass, thank you." She looks around at all of them in disapproval, her eyes lingering just a bit longer on Halia. "Have any of you seen Ron?"

"Nope! Ask Lavender – she was looking for him earlier," Fred taps his wand against the cauldron and its contents swirl, renewing the haze around them that was beginning to dissipate.

"Oh, was she?" Hermione's voice is suddenly higher and she doesn't sound particularly happy about this news.

For a moment, Halia wonders why, but then her mind decides that it's finished thinking for a while. The light from the common room disappears as Hermione leaves, shutting the door behind her, and Halia leans back to rest her head on George's shoulder. Thankfully, they all seem to have forgotten that they were in the middle of teasing her about Professor Riddle before Hermione barged in.

She leaves a couple of hours later to avoid getting caught out past curfew, after buying some Thought-Numbing Powder off Fred in case she has trouble falling asleep. But courtesy of the lingering effects of the Alihotsy, she doesn't.

The next morning, she awakens to find that all of her dormmates have already gone. The clock on her bedside table reads eleven am, which isn't nearly as late as she expects given how long it takes Pansy and Tracey to primp themselves every day.

Oh, right – the first Hogsmeade visit of the year was today.

She throws the bedspread off herself and slips on her father's old Gryffindor Quidditch sweater. Getting out of the castle for even a few hours sounds like pure bliss, but there aren't very many mornings that she gets to spend time alone in her dormitory, either. She may as well take full advantage of it while she has the chance.

She picks up her wand and points it at her trunk. "Accio Nevermind by Nirvana."

She and her parents saw them live a few years ago. In his constant attempts to be a 'cool dad', her father insisted that they stop in Seattle before heading north to attend to business in Vancouver.

"They're a muggle sensation," he told them. "Come on, we have to go." Her mum, who was always far more conscientious of their work schedule, begrudgingly agreed after about an hour of his pestering.

Ironically, he hated the concert. "It's really more of Sirius' thing," he muttered to her mum while scratching his head. Halia hadn't known what to think of it at the time; for her, observing the other muggles in attendance was more interesting than anything. In fact, she had completely forgotten that they ever went to the concert until the week before she came to Hogwarts, when she found the record they bought Sirius sitting amongst a dusty collection in his living room.

She's jumping on her bed and headbanging to her air guitar solo of Smells Like Teen Spirit when a figure leaning against her closed door with crossed arms catches her eye.

Halia yelps in surprise and tugs her sweater down so the hem reaches her thighs. "What the hell, Draco?"

Draco has a smirk plastered on his face as his eyes trail down her bare legs. "By all means, don't stop on account of me."

Her heart rate begins to slow back down to a normal pace and she hops off the bed, snapping her fingers to turn off the record.
"Nirvana," he reads coolly, still smirking as he walks over to her and examines the record cover. "They're good…Never heard of them."

"They're American." It's not a lie and she's not about to tell him that they're muggles. "What are you doing here? I thought boys weren't allowed in the girls' dormitories."

"Perks of being a Prefect," he shrugs. "Are you coming to Hogsmeade?"

"Probably." She stretches and his eyes rake over her again.

"Montague said that you were out past curfew…again. Keep it up, Potter, and I'll be forced to report you." His smirk becomes particularly smarmy all of a sudden.

Her head begins to throb again and going through the day feeling like this doesn't sound all that appealing. So she hops off her bed, unlocks her bedside table, and retrieves the baggie she bought off Fred the night before.

Draco's eyebrow raises in half-surprise, half-amusement as she strolls over to him and dangles it in front of his face.

"Even if I share?"

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Severus had anticipated spending just a couple of evenings at St. Mungo's, but here he is, nearly a week later with little to show in the way of progress. And though it had been initially rather offensive that the Healers also requested the assistance of Slughorn, he now understands why: absolutely nothing about these poisonings is intuitive.

He scans over his notes once again, searching for anything that may produce a valuable lead. This is what they know so far:

1. The potion that was used is both exceptionally and needlessly complicated. The main constituent is armadillo bile, but there are well over fifty ingredients in total.

2. Any early symptoms of poisoning are unknown; all afflicted patients were comatose upon their admission to St. Mungo's and family members reported nothing out of the ordinary prior to their falling unconscious.

3. Each patient has also exhibited a rapid decline in neurological function within forty-eight hours, leading to death in five out of the six cases. The only surviving patient was admitted fifty-four hours ago.

4. The patients have nothing in common, except for the fact that they were perfectly healthy before the incident. There are two pureblood, two half-blood, and two muggle-born patients.

That's it.

Slughorn stirs a few drops of milk into his tea and chuckles. "Merlin's beard…You should give it a rest, Severus, at least for a few minutes. You'll drive yourself mad if you think about it for too long."

He grunts noncommittally, but closes his notebook and rubs his eyes as a sudden wave of exhaustion hits him. Perhaps Slughorn did have a point.

"So, how is Hogwarts treating you? Keeping standards as high as I left them, I trust?" Severus
debates informing him that he, with a few suggestions from Riddle, has in fact raised the standards of the Potions curriculum at Hogwarts from the outdated version that Slughorn was teaching.

But before he can answer (which is likely for the best), Slughorn continues, "I never thought I would miss it when I went into retirement, but I must admit that there is a sense of satisfaction that comes with mentoring such young, curious minds that is difficult to replace. And some were so brilliant, too: Tom Riddle– you know him of course– Lily Potter…" his voice trails off.

Severus' stomach drops. He was so hoping to make it through the case without broaching this particular topic, but he should have known better. Lily had been, without question, Slughorn's favorite student in their year.

"I'm still in complete disbelief about James and her." Horace announces sadly after a few moments of silence, throughout all of which Severus had held his breath hoping that the conversation would somehow shift in a new direction. "Their daughter is at Hogwarts now, isn't she? Halia? The poor girl…I met her once, when she was just a little thing. Seemed exceptionally bright, even then – just like her mother."

He can't help snorting dismissively. "She's nothing particularly noteworthy."

Slughorn ignores him. "I'd love to meet with her. Perhaps Albus would permit me to visit the castle for tea sometime."

How foolish he was, to think involvement in this case meant getting away from bloody *Halia Potter*. Things were already bad enough knowing that a child of Lily and her wanker husband was somewhere in the world. But now that she's his *student*, things are entirely different. And why did she have to have Lily's eyes? He loathes her for it.

"I know you and Lily were quite close. I was surprised not to see you at the funeral."

Slughorn has now resolutely leapt over any remaining line he had yet to cross.

"You're mistaken – we weren't," he clips shortly before tossing a few sickles on the table to pay for his tea. "Now if you'll excuse me, I am going to get back to work." With that, he walks briskly from the room and doesn't look back.

He keeps pacing through the corridors until he reaches the lift and presses a button at random. There is a ding and the doors slide open to reveal that he has arrived at the Foley-Cross Obliviation ward. Nothing has ever sounded so appealing.

The worst part of all this is that it happened just over a week before he planned to apologize to her for the awful things he said to her in his idiotic youth. Well, at least that's what he told himself. He had been meaning to apologize to her for years after finally coming to terms with the fact that she wasn't going to leave James and deciding that an attempt at rekindling their friendship was better than nothing.

Not to mention how random it all was. Lily had been a Magical Ambassador for the Ministry for ages and it wasn't considered to be a particularly dangerous job. If it was, surely they wouldn't have brought their precious daughter with them. But just like that, in some random, freak accident that never should have happened, she was gone. It's so random, that it can't be.

Almost as random as the poisoning cases, in fact…

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Bellatrix checks her lipstick in her compact mirror and smooths down her dress. It's dark green—his favorite color—and shows off her breasts (which are even more prominent than usual thanks to her recent splurge on a series of high-quality engorgement charms) quite nicely. She's been buzzing with excitement since she received his letter—even Cissy noticed today during afternoon tea.

"Would you like another martini, Miss Black?" the bartender asks her.

She glares at him pointedly. "Yes. But make it a real martini and don't skimp on the vodka this time."

Usually they meet in Hogsmeade, but with the students out and about for Halloween weekend, he suggested the Leaky Cauldron. He's always been incredibly private about this sort of thing.

At precisely midnight, she feels his long fingers slide along her lower back and the hairs of her arm stand on end. Her heart begins to race from the combination of his musky cologne and silky voice.

"Are you ready?"

No talking, then, just straight to business? Works just as bloody well for her.

"Yes," she smirks devilishly at him over her shoulder. "Could I at least finish my drink first?"

"Bring it with." By the time she turns around, he's already halfway up the stairs.

Merlin—he really did need it. She laughs in excitement despite herself and hurries after him, her vodka martini following in mid-air.

Once in their temporary suite, she tears her clothes off and waits impatiently on the bed, watching him undress. He's incredibly methodical about it, folding each item as he goes. Sometimes it just seems like another form of torture. She just has to lie there, admiring the slim muscles of his tall frame, and do nothing about it.

Because there's no touching—unless he commands it, of course. That's the first rule...the first of many.

So she rests there, awaiting her Master's command...

Waiting...waiting...

"Get on your knees," he finally tells her.

"Yes, Master." She practically leaps off the bed, happy to oblige, and kneels before him. He closes his eyes and she feels him begin to harden in her mouth.

He doesn't care when she gags on him, doesn't pause for even a second. He just takes what he wants, with no questions asked, and she loves him for it.

He suddenly groans and it catches her off guard completely. She looks up at him, feeling more confident than usual because of his enthusiastic reaction. "Stressful week?" She guesses, though it could also just be that he has a lot on his mind and is distracted.

He doesn't answer, and she's not surprised. They've been friends (more or less) for years, and he has never opened up to her once—never shown just one crack in his cold, reserved nature. That's what she loves most about him, she thinks. When she's with him, everything is simple: she gives him what he wants. What he needs.
Not that he'll ever admit that he needs her, of course, which is all part of their game. But he does. He's attractive and charming enough to have anyone he wants, yet he continues to choose her. That has to mean something.

He violently pulls her mouth back onto his cock. Her knees burn from cheap, scratchy carpet as she tries everything she can to make him groan again, but he refuses to indulge her. It's her own fucking stupid fault for her rashness. But his rare sound of pleasure still rings through her core and she can't help sliding a finger down between her folds at the memory…

His fingers twist into her hair and she gasps as he yanks her head away from him. "Did I fucking say you could touch yourself? You whore." His tone is venom and it gets her off even more.

He moves to the bed, propping himself up against the headboard, and glares at her coldly. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

She moans as she slides onto him and begins moving with her usual rhythm. Every so often, he commands her to go faster, and when he's satisfied with their pace he says, "Now, let's see if you've been practicing, Bellatrix." There's a threatening edge to his already-dangerous tone and it's clear that she had better deliver. Or else.

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes!

This is her favorite part and he knows it.

She leans down so that her breasts are level with his face and whispers in his ear, "Crucio."

Every muscle in his body tenses and she counts in her head:

One…

Two…

Three…

She lifts the curse and he grabs onto her ass, forcing her down over his cock even harder than before. "More," he breathes.

"Crucio," she hisses the Unforgivable again.

One…

Two…

Three…

Four…

Five…

He flips her around so she's on her back and his hands are pressed against the wall above her. "More!"

"Crucio!"

One…
She sees a spark of fire in his obsidian eyes that makes her laugh wildly in pleasure and she holds the curse even longer:

Six…

Seven…

Eight…

He grits his teeth, bucking his hips violently against hers. The last time she held the curse this long, he passed out…

Nine…

Ten…

He finishes inside her and collapses on the bed, panting and eyes closed.

He doesn't offer to get her off and she doesn't care. She loves when he plays the part of a selfish prick – it makes the rare times he does decide to indulge her all the more gratifying.

But he's so gorgeous when he's lying next to her like this… And oh, what she wouldn't give for him to stay. Just this once: that's all she wants. But he won't.

That's against the rules, too.

It's better this way, anyway. Their game will be broken as soon as one of them crosses the line somehow and that could mean the end of all of this. And this, she wouldn't trade for anything.

He stands and she rolls over on the bed, propping her chin on her hand to watch him dress. "Next time, could we torture a muggle beforehand?"

She swears she can see him smirk as he slips his long legs into his trousers and begins tucking in his shirt. "We'll see."

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Chapter End Notes

Sooooo there's a glimpse of Tom's dark side... ;)

*Note: In this fic, Bellatrix was in the same year as Tom at Hogwarts and is the youngest of the Black sisters rather than the eldest (Andromeda).

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter! Feedback is most appreciated. :D
Tom is more than prepared when Potter reports to his office promptly at eight on Monday evening for her first detention. "Good evening, Miss Potter. Please make yourself comfortable," he gestures to the small square table near his wall of books. "Would you like a cup of tea before we begin?"

"That would be great, thanks." Judging from the skepticism in her eyes, she remains rather leery of his charms and courtesy given their unfortunate first interaction. But that would soon change.

"How do you take it?"

"Just plain." He fixes the same for himself and places both cups on the table before sliding into the chair nearest her. "Thank you," she smiles tightly.

He returns it with what he hopes to be a disarming grin and gestures to the thick, leather-bound book resting on the table between them. "Show and tell?"

"Sure," she slides it toward him. "I received this by owl over the weekend from my friend Neema in Cairo – you'll find the bit about nightshade juice on page four hundred and twenty-two. I'm still requesting the other references for my exam marks, but they should be here by the end of the week."

He turns it over in his hands, running his fingers across the hieroglyphics.

*The Eye of Duat*

His eyes widen in awe and sets it gingerly back down on the table. It's the first edition, published sometime around 2550 B.C. if his memory serves him correctly (which it does, of course), and one of the oldest records of Egyptian dark and light magic ever discovered. "Do you have any idea how rare this is, Miss Potter?"

"Not really – I'm not much of a book person." She shrugs. "Apparently, the tenth edition was checked out from the capitol's main library, so Neema just sent me the copy in her father's collection instead."

"He must have quite the collection," is all Tom can think to say before taking a sip of his tea.

Potter smirks. "I should think so – he's the President of the Egyptian Magical Parliament, after all."

Tom promptly chokes on his tea. Her parents were supposedly Magical Ambassadors, but still – she's unbelievably cavalier about the weight of her knowledge and apparent connections.
Potter is distracted and doesn't notice, however. He follows her gaze to the curled up form of Nagini, moonlight glistening off her gorgeous green scales as she sleeps on his office window seat. "You have a pet snake? What's his name?"

"Her name," he corrects her crisply, still reeling from the fact that she knows the Egyptian President and is friendly with his daughter, "is Nagini."

"What kind --" She takes a step closer and Nagini's head rises, likely irritable that she has been woken up. "Merlin, that is a lot of snake."

"That is rather impolite, Miss Potter." A light smile plays on his lips. "She can be very self-conscious, especially as it gets colder and she sleeps more."

In fact, his precious girl has been complaining about her weight all week. He keeps telling her he'll cast a warmth charm on her so she can go slither around the grounds a few times for exercise, but no – it's apparently too far from the safety of his office and living quarters for her comfort. But in reality, the truth of it all is rather simple: she's lazy, and enormously clingy.

"Sorry. She really is beautiful." She takes a few steps closer to Nagini and extends a hand. "May I?"

"Do you think that wise, given that you disturbed her nap only to offend her?" Tom raises an amused eyebrow.

"I'll take that as a no," Potter rolls her eyes slightly and turns back toward him. "Anyway, Neema asked that I send the book back in a couple of weeks. But you can hold onto it until then, if you want – I'm not going to use if for anything else."

This offer leaves him both exhilarated and slightly appalled – did she really see no benefit in further exploring such an ancient script? Ignorant child. But that did mean more ancient scripts for him, though. "I would greatly appreciate it, Miss Potter."

"No problem," she returns to her seat and takes a sip of tea.

"Shall we begin reviewing the course text?"

She nods, and they do. Her insights are intriguing, but admittedly he is rather relieved for the sake of his pride that she only points out one or two discrepancies per chapter. Most importantly, however, she seems far more comfortable around him by the end of the hour.

"I hope you were not too offended, Nagini," Tom smirks and makes another cup of tea for himself after he dismisses Potter for the evening.

"Who does she think she is?" Nagini hisses in annoyance. "You should have let me bite her. Just a nip – that would have taught her a lesson."

"Now, now Nagini...you will need to get used to her visiting on occasion."

What a curious girl, this Halia Potter. He's rather envious of her, to be honest – but oh, what a delight it will be to tear down the walls of her mind and learn each and every one of her secrets. It sounds almost as exhilarating as experiencing it all first-hand.

"Why? Are you going to mate with her?"

Tom chokes on his tea for the second time that evening. Sometimes Nagini seems so human to him, and yet at other times she is incredibly animal. "Absolutely not."
"Hey Potter!" Pansy's high-pitched voice screeches upon her arrival in Transfigurations on Wednesday morning. "Looks like your boyfriend Pierre got bored of you." Pansy tosses the most recent copy of Witch Weekly on her desk, which features a picture of Pierre LeBlanc and Gemma Watkins snogging on a park bench in the Luxembourg Gardens.

The eyes of the other Slytherin girls sitting around them are instantly on her and Pansy crosses her arms with a smug grin.

*Shit, shit, shit.* Why did she lie about Pierre? Her fake relationship with him was basically her only source of kudos from them and if the truth was found out it would most certainly mean social isolation for the rest of her time at Hogwarts.

*Just calm down and bullshit your way out of this.*

Halia shrugs coolly. "We agreed that it was best to end our relationship – I tried to tell him in the beginning that long-distance relationships never work, but he just insisted on giving it a go."

"Yeah right," Pansy rolls her eyes.

"It's true." She's careful not to sound too defensive. "I didn't want to be tied down anymore, especially after realizing that the boys here are far more interesting than I anticipated." With that, she gives a pointed look a few rows over where Draco and Blaise are sitting.

Conveniently, Blaise gives her a little wave and Pansy looks furious.

"Miss Parkinson; Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall's stern voice greets them. "If you are through gossiping, I would appreciate beginning today's lesson."

"Sorry Professor, we're finished," Halia smiles triumphantly at Pansy.

Potter: 3, Parkinson: 0.

As McGonagall begins lecturing, Halia's mind wanders to the first two days of detention with Professor Riddle, which went...inexplicably well. He has been nothing but charming and seems incredibly pleased to get his hands on all the books that she's requested from across the world. The way his otherwise quite stoic face lights up when she shows him is so different the reaction she anticipated given their rather unsavory first impressions of each other. Then again, it's somewhat unfair to be so critical of him; after all, she too had a substantially instigating role to play in that first impression. Plus, he *did* apologize and *was* going out of his way to re-grade her exam.

She rather likes talking to him, actually. He's engaging, and clearly a wealth of knowledge judging from the way he weaves a breadth of magical subjects into their discussions. While she has mastered a great deal of what is taught in his subject, his intelligence is far more well-rounded and he could probably teach any of the other classes at Hogwarts just as effortlessly. He is *definitely* nice to look at, too.

Maybe Lee was right – maybe she *is* joining the masses.

There is something odd, though. For one of the questions she missed on her exam, she is 99.9% certain that her claim about curse-breaking for objects meant for human consumption is correct, but a reference is nowhere to be found. In fact, she can't even seem to remember where she learned it in the first place. On top of that, her headaches have gotten worse and her dreams increasingly odd over the last few days. Her sleeping mind has been filled with vague conversations, a dark corridor lined
with illuminated snow globes, and blurry faces that seem so familiar yet unplaceable.

And so, during the two hour break between Ancient Runes—her last course on Wednesdays—and detention with Professor Riddle, she decides against some of her better judgment to pay a visit to the Hogwarts Divinations professor.

"Hello Professor Trelawney," she greets the eccentric witch, who is so covered in jewelry that she might inadvertently blind someone via reflection if she stepped into a patch of sunlight—though judging from her pallor, this does not happen often. "Do you have a moment? I was hoping you might be able to give me advice about a few strange dreams I've been having."

Her eyes widen in a sort of freakish excitement and she stands aside, opening the office door wide. "Of course—come in, my dear. Let me fix some tea so we can examine your leaves."

Fucking hell, couldn't they just skip the fluffy, hoo-ha drivel for once?

"Actually, I was hoping I might just tell you about my dreams and you could offer a few suggestions for what they might mean."

Trelawney gives her a look of profound disapproval. "The field of Divination is far more complex than that, Miss Potter. One cannot simply expect the Sight to serve them based on their beck and call."

She rubs her temples while Trelawney brews her tea. Fred and George have been making a killing off her lately; at this rate, a stop to Gringotts over the upcoming holiday break will be quite overdue.

According to Professor Trelawney, her tea leaves indicate that many sleepless nights are in her future. This is not a particularly helpful revelation, but at least Halia knows it's accurate. And nearly a half hour later, when Trelawney finally asks her about the actual content of her dreams, the professor once again offers no momentous insights.

"Given your dark and tragic past, it will take a while," is the excuse Trelawney gives when Halia tells her she must leave in order to report to detention on time. "You must visit far more regularly—say, three times a week to begin?"

Yeah…that is not going to happen.

-xx-

"Why do you think the Sorting Hat put her in Slytherin? She doesn't seem like a Slytherin." Seamus eyes the subject of their conversation over the top of his book.

Hermione shrugs. "Well, it's not like she seems to have a problem with them. She even hangs out with Malfoy and he's the most vile of them all."

Dean wrinkles his eyebrows together in surprise. "Do you think she's a blood supremacist?"

"If she is, why is she in the Gryffindor common room all the time? Wouldn't she just stay with the Slytherin crowd?" argues Seamus.

"Her parents were both Gryffindors – my parents were in their year," Neville volunteers.

Halia Potter is sitting a few tables away from them, oblivious to their conversation and flirting with Zabini while Nott occasionally shoots them annoyed glances. She doesn't even bother pretending to study.
Luna discreetly slides on her pair of Spectrespecs and Hermione sighs, rolling her eyes while Seamus and Dean snicker to each other. "Her head is *infested* with Wrackspurts," Luna suddenly gasps and covers her mouth in shock.

Hermione snorts. "It's probably because all she does is get high with Fred and George."

"No, she has far more Wrackspurts than even they do! Someone ought to tell her to think happier thoughts."

Hermione wonders if she's being rather unfair – after all, the Weasley's seem to trust her and Molly and Arthur were close friends with her parents. But something about Halia Potter just irks her. It's partially because she hangs out with the worst of the Slytherin crowd, but it's also the fact that she has excelled in Defense Against the Dark Arts– arguably the most difficult class in Hogwarts– with presumably no effort whatsoever. She doesn't seem to be putting much effort into *any* of her courses, for that matter, which Hermione simply cannot respect. She acts like she's better than all of this – better than Hogwarts, Hermione's sanctuary of knowledge.

Worst of all, Potter's O.W.L. scores bested hers.

She scowls, and apparently Seamus notices. "Are you alright, Hermione? You've been acting off ever since Ron and Lav—" Dean slugs Seamus in the shoulder and he stops talking abruptly.

"Oh, it's fine Seamus. I'm fine – everything's fine. I'm quite happy for him." She says this a little louder than she intends to and an uncomfortable silence settles at the table around them. "Anyway," she tries to recover by sounding nonchalant, "I need to stop by my dormitory before Arithmancy, so I'll see you all later."

Halia slips on her cloak and jogs across the school lawn toward the Black Lake, where Headmaster Dumbledore is already waiting for her.

"Thank you for joining me outside, Halia," he greets her with a friendly, serene smile. "I find the late
fall air quite refreshing."

"Of course, Headmaster." She has acclimated to the cold thanks to her morning runs, but couldn't help being surprised at Dumbledore's request. Didn't old people generally like to avoid the cold?

He smiles at her again and they begin walking out on the dock that extends into the Black Lake. "How are you finding Hogwarts, Halia?"

"Oh, it's…it's nice." She nods rather forcefully.

"Is something not to your liking?" The smile falls from Dumbledore's face and turns into a slight frown, as though offended at her lack of enthusiasm.

"No – Hogwarts is really quite wonderful, Sir." Somehow, she sounds even less confident this time than the first time he asked.

He gazes at her carefully and there's something about it that makes her uneasy, like during the Welcome Feast when he seemed to know she was thinking about him. It didn't seem like that much of a stretch to assume he might be a Legilimens – most powerful wizards were to some degree, after all.

"I am aware that Professor Snape assigned you to detention."

"Yeah…It was a misunderstanding, of sorts..."

It's actually much simpler than that, of course: Professor Snape is a prick, but she can't say that to the Headmaster, now can she?

"In addition, your performance in many of our courses does not seem to reflect your true capabilities as evidenced by your O.W.L. scores."

She flushes in embarrassment and looks away from his wrinkled face to the still water. "I really do like it here. It's just…difficult to concentrate. I miss traveling, too."

Dumbledore nods and says gently, "And your parents, of course."

"Of course."

"Please know that you can confide in myself or any of the Hogwarts staff members if you are feeling at all troubled or overwhelmed, Halia. I would like very much for you to consider Hogwarts a second home."

If Hogwarts was supposed to be her second home, what was her first? Sirius'? To her, the whole concept was foreign; they never stayed in one place long enough to settle in, only visiting their Godric's Hollow residence during holidays and the rare breaks between assignments.

Speaking of homes – or rather, Houses…

She looks up into Dumbledore's light blue eyes. "Actually, there is something I've been wondering, Sir…Why do you think the Sorting Hat placed me in Slytherin?"

"Why do you think you were placed there, based on what you have observed in your first months here?" He clasps his hands behind his back and looks pensively back at her.

She nudges small a rock in between a crack in the dock so that it falls in the water below. "Honestly, I have no clue."
Dumbledore watches her for a long time and that uneasy feeling creeps up on her again. Finally, he says, "Houses do not always follow blood lines, Halia. In fact, your godfather Sirius was the only Gryffindor in a long line of Slytherins. It is important to remember that you are a different person from your parents with different strengths, while you also retain some of their best qualities – and that is a beautiful thing. There are plenty of honorable, astounding wizards and witches that have graduated from Slytherin, Halia, and I suspect that you will be among the best in recent history."

This doesn't really answer her original question, but at least it's somewhat uplifting.

"Speaking of our impressive Slytherin alumni, there is a former professor by the name of Horace Slughorn who contacted me in hopes of having tea with you. I could arrange it, if you are comfortable with the idea. Your parents were both students of his and he was particularly fond of your mother. He taught…"

"Potions, right? Sorry," She flushes pink again for interrupting him. "It's just…My mum told me stories about him quite often. But yes, I would be happy to have tea with him." Maybe she could even convince him to come out of retirement and replace Professor Hooked-Nose.

"Professor Slughorn is quite a character. I think you'll quite enjoy speaking with him, Halia."

The Headmaster chuckles as they begin to walk back toward the castle. "Do you have an idea of the career path you may be interested in pursuing upon graduation?"

"I have a few things in mind." She doesn't, really; choosing a career has been the last thing on her mind in recent months, but he did just compliment her about her apparent potential so it seems foolish to say "not at all".

The corners of his lips twitch upward and it's clear that he has seen through yet another of her lies. "In that case, I certainly look forward to learning of your decision."

"Thank you for joining us this afternoon, Healer Smethwyck and Potion Masters Slughorn and Snape. What have you to report?" Amelia Bones, the Chief Wizardess of the Wizengamot inquires while folding her hands together.

"Given the nature of the cases and the potion used," Healer Smethwyck looks around the room and hesitates for a moment, "we are inclined to believe that this may, in fact, be an act of terrorism."

Uneasy whispers fill the room. Minister Fudge and Barty Crouch Sr., Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, exchange alarmed glances.

"Do you think the threat is of an internal or external source?" Bones prompts them further. Concern or nervousness of any kind does not faze her sharp, but elegant features.

"While we do not claim to be experts in the realm of foreign affairs, we do believe that the threat is external." Healer Smethwyck licks his lips. "The afflicted patients were connected only by the fact that they traveled to Russia in the past month."

"Perhaps Germany should be considered as well," Elphias Doge suddenly stands. "They have been increasingly aggressive as of late. In addition, evidence of victims travelling to Russia does not directly indicate are responsible. In fact, it could be a frame-up."

The uneasy whispers grow louder.

"If I may," Snape interjects with a raised hand and the Wizengamot falls silent once again. "Based on
our analysis of each ingredient, we deduced that the main component responsible for the sudden onset of coma and subsequent death is Lobalug venom. The antidote that we created to target this ingredient have been effective to this point, which further supports our deduction. Lobalug venom is very loosely regulated in Russia. Furthermore, there were traces of Elixir of Pruvia, of which the main producers are China and Russia."

Doge shakes his head. "Germany has been stockpiling supplies from all over the world for years – surely they have found a way to get their hands on Lobalug venom and Elixir of Pruvia. I'm telling you, it could simply be a scheme to frame Russia. This could be a warning, and it would be tragically unwise not to heed it."

Chief Wizardess Bones holds up a hand to silence him. "Horace? You provided consult for the cases as well – what are your thoughts on this matter?"

He clears his throat, appearing rather uncomfortable about being put on the spot. "I am in agreement with Professor Snape and Healer Smethwyck. There has been no indication of Germany's involvement, but perhaps an investigation by the Auror Office is warranted to further explore all possibilities."

Bones nods astutely and folds her hands together. "We will now hold a vote to authorize the Auror Office to begin an investigation of potential German or Russian terrorism attempts, which will be overseen by Barty Crouch upon approval by Minister Fudge. Thank you for your time, Healer Smethwyck and Potions Masters Slughorn and Snape. Your service to the Ministry is most appreciated."

-xx-

Tom turns the final page of The Eye of Duat, which has proven to be a wealth of knowledge (particularly on the topic of Inferi), and glances up at the clock on his wall. He frowns; Potter is now five minutes late for her final detention and his impatience is growing. Every minute counts, considering that no additional clues of her mysterious past have surfaced over the last several days.

What he could find of her parents in the Hogwarts records was minimal. They were both Gryffindors and her father was a Seeker on the Quidditch team. It's a shame that James Potter, the heir to one of the oldest pureblood families in British wizarding history, married a muggle-born and therefore soiled their daughter's otherwise immaculate bloodline. But even so, Lily Evans appears to have been exceptional in her own right and had won several merit-related awards during her school years in addition to serving Hogwarts as Head Girl alongside James.

Nothing he's found has been particularly helpful, though, and he knows himself well enough to anticipate becoming restless and obsessive until he finds the truth. And yet, the motive Dumbledore's request looms in the back of his mind and caution is as paramount as patience and persistence.

"Sorry," Potter abruptly bursts through his office door. "Professor Dumbledore wanted to meet with me."

"Is that so?" Riddle watches her evenly. "About what, exactly?"

Thankfully, a quick bout of Legilimency reveals that nothing of their conversation pertain to him. "How I'm liking life at Hogwarts, mostly."

"Are you? I imagine that it must be quite difficult to adjust after the extraordinary life that you've lived thus far." From the way her eyes widen slightly, he knows he's right – and he didn't even use
Legilimency this time.

She shrugs and takes a seat across from his desk. "It's not like I have much of a choice."

He smiles gently and says, "I suppose not."

"Have you travelled much?" Potter asks him suddenly while shrugging off her jacket.

"Here and there, typically in the summer between terms."

"Where have you been?"

"Just across Europe, for the most part." Of course, he doesn't mention that these trips have primarily been spent exploring some of the darkest magic on the continent and making horcruxes rather than visiting any of the usual tourist haunts. Although, it's probably safe to assume that everyday points of interest were not on her (or her parents') travel itinerary, either. "Anyway," he hands her back her exam. "I've changed your mark to reflect the evidence you've presented, but I noticed that there are a few questions remaining that you have yet to provide references for. Will you be doing so?"

"I don't know _everything_, Professor," she laughs anxiously.

"I don't expect you to." He watches her through vigilant eyes, curious of this sudden change in her typically arrogant nature. "However, I do recall you presenting an alternative to the question about curse-breaking." The alternative, he remembers from her first visit to his office, that she has no memory of learning.

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat and averts her eyes from his. "I couldn't find a reference for it. So apparently, I was wrong."

"You seemed quite confident, before," he presses.

She glances toward his office window and is quiet for a long time. But he waits. Finally, she sighs and says, "This sounds absolutely mental, but I can't even remember where I learned it in the first place."

Ah, yes – there it is.

"I see." He rests his elbows on the arms of his chair and presses his fingers together. "That is a rather…odd dilemma. Have you experienced this before?"

"No," she shakes her head. "But there are these dreams I keep having –"

Now they're getting somewhere.

"–and I asked Professor Trelawney about it hoping she might be able to provide some direction based on her expertise, but her advice was…insufficient."

He smirks and leans toward her. "What have you been dreaming about? When did this all begin?"

"It began a couple of weeks before I came to Hogwarts, or at least sometime around then. For a while, all my dreams were about my parents, but more recently I've been dreaming in random scenes that don't make any sense. At first I thought it was just a way of coping, but now I'm not so sure…"

Tom peruses her mind to find her memories of said dreams, but oddly enough, there is no trace of them. This really is becoming most curious.
Upon discovering the absence of her memory regarding curse-breaking, it seemed obvious that some amount of Obliviation had been applied following her parents' death as protection and that the charm was breaking down, allowing scattered memories to slip through the cracks of her mind. Perhaps her parents were undercover Aurors that specialized in curse-breaking, as that tends to be a more secretive line of work. But if that was the case, why were even her dreams hidden? Whatever memory alteration had been applied to her was far more powerful than what typical procedure would call for.

Fortunately for him, even the most powerful Obliviation charms could be reversed with enough persistence and technique. What is required to accomplish that, however, could not simply be performed without her knowledge and clueing her in would inevitably exponentiate the risk of Dumbledore finding out about whatever Tom did manage to recover.

Then again, he could always just rummage through her memories for anything useful and then Obliviate her once more.

"I could assist you in making sense of things, Miss Potter, if that is what you desire."

"Really?" Her eyebrow raises in what is apparently minor suspicion and he smirks.

"Yes, I would be happy to. However, I will require some time to determine the best course of action. Questions regarding the mind are best explored with caution, I have found."

"Take your time, Sir…And thank you for offering to help." She still sounds rather unsure about it all, so he leaves it at that for now to avoid revealing his true eagerness on the matter.

Poor, foolish little girl. At the end of the hour, she even thanks him again as he walks her out of his office, this time for hosting her detention.

"It was my pleasure, Miss Potter. I found it to be quite…illuminating."

He smirks after closing the door behind her; it's almost too easy, really.

He pours himself a goblet of Syrah with a wave of his hand and pages through the Daily Prophet for the second time that day. It's a pitiful misrepresentation of current events, but it is what he's forced to rely on for the basics before investigating news of particular interest through other means. The poisoning cases that Severus and Horace investigated at St. Mungo's, for example, is on the front page and the entire article is spun into an assault of optimism about the creation of the antidote. Surely there is more to the story than that.

Minutes later, he finds himself in the Hogwarts dungeons. "Do you have a moment, Severus? I was hoping to speak to you about the St. Mungo's cases."

But the Potions Master waves him away. "I have a considerable amount of grading to catch up on due to my absence over the last two weeks. You might ask Horace – he's coming here to meet with the Potter girl Sunday morning."

Tom bristles in irritation at Severus' dismissal of him, but he gets it. Confidentiality of the Wizengamot proceedings and all that; Severus didn't want to get caught spilling information that he wasn't supposed to, but it was practically expected that Slughorn would. Especially to Tom.

He runs his thumb along the wooden doorknob. "Speaking of Miss Potter…were you aware of the fact that Dumbledore requested I take an interest in her at the beginning of the term?"

He's silent, which of course means 'yes'.

"Why do you think that is, Severus? Why would he ask me and not you – the Head of her House?"

Snape gazes back at him with a cool, impenetrable expression and replies dryly, "Why do you assume that I am even remotely better equipped than you are to make sense of Albus’ requests?"

Fair enough.

-xx-

After a late breakfast in the Great Hall, Halia makes her way back to her dormitory on Saturday morning. Pansy, Tracey, Milly, and Daphne are sitting in a circle on Pansy's bed when she arrives, charm-tying dark green and silver ribbons into their hair in preparation for the first Quidditch match of the season: Slytherin versus Gryffindor.

"Do you want some, Halia?" Milly asks her.

"We don't have any extra, Milly," Pansy snaps. "Besides, Halia might be sitting in the Gryffindor section since she's such good friends with them. Come on, let's do eyeshadow next. I have this gorgeous glittery silver one." Milly and Tracey trail rather pathetically behind Pansy to the lavatory adjoining their dormitory, but Daphne stays.

"You can have some of mine." Daphne cuts them in half with a Severing Charm. "Here – I'll tie them for you."

"Thanks," she grins, quite eager to see Pansy's reaction.

"Hurry up ladies, we're going to be late! Don't forget, we're sitting next to Eddie Peterson from the Falmouth Falcons in the visitor stands." Pansy exits the lavatory a few minutes later and glares at Daphne for a moment before her face twists into a menacing smile and crossing her arms over her chest. "Oh, sorry Daph…I forgot to tell you – my parents only reserved two spots besides mine and I won't be able to take you with us. I guess you can spend the match with your new friend Halia."

"Sorry I got you kicked out of the cool crowd," Halia smirks when she and Daphne walk down to the pitch later that morning.

"It's alright," Daphne manages a smile but it's obvious she's upset.

"Why do you hang out with Pansy, anyway? She's such a twat."

"In case you haven't noticed, there aren't that many options for better friends in our House. Plus, she's sort of in charge."

Halia shrugs. "You could hang out with the Gryffindors with me."

"Easy for you to say – you can get away with pretty much anything since Draco fancies you." Daphne rolls her eyes.

"He does?" Halia does her best to look surprised, but she's most certainly not based on his incessant flirting since the moment she arrived at the castle. The truth about rich, spoiled boys like him, though, is that he's only interested in her is because she's the newest and shiniest toy in the box.

"It's pretty obvious. If anyone else dared to befriend a Gryffindor, we would be shunned until graduation."

"Slytherins and their blood politics…” Halia mutters under her breath.
"I'm not particularly fond of it either," Daphne says. "It seems so…antiquated. There are other Slytherins that would agree with me, you know."

"And yet nobody says anything because they don't want to upset the power balance…I suppose that's how the whole world works, right?" Halia sighs, before grinning at Daphne once more. "Honestly, though, it's a huge relief to hear you say that."

They arrive at the top of the stands in the midst of a chant aimed at the newest addition to the Gryffindor team:

"Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring,

That's why Slytherins all sing –

Weasley is our King!"

"Now, then," Halia pinches Daphne's arm. "Let's forget everything we just talked about and kick some Gryffindor ass."

The Slytherins do win, in the end, but not without playing dirty. Draco just barely catches the snitch because of a bludger hit by Crabbe with such force that it knocks Ginny clean off her broom and into the staff stands. It's far better than the hundred foot drop to the ground it could have been, but Halia is definitely going to get an earful from Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny the next time she finds herself in the Gryffindor common room anyway. Even so, it's difficult not to get caught up in the excitement of being on the winning team and there is a hell of an after-party waiting for them when they get back to the dungeons.

A few drinks in, it occurs to her that it's been far too long since she's properly snogged a boy. She peruses the crowd, trying to decide who the lucky bastard will be…probably whoever will piss off Pansy the most without being Draco, as involving herself with boys who are clearly taken has always been against her rules – even if there is an overabundance of sexual tension between them. Maybe Blaise? He's nice-looking.

Halia crosses the room and squeezes in between Tracey and him at the liquor table, batting her eyelashes at him and placing her hand on his arm. "Nice match, Blaise."

"Well, I always play to impress." Blaise seems to pick up on her hints immediately and leans in close enough that she can smell the sweetness of alcohol on his breath. "It was your first Hogwarts Quidditch match as a Slytherin, after all…"

Draco, who just happens to be lingering nearby, rolls his eyes. "I think you're forgetting that I was the one who actually won the match, Blaise."

"Well, what a team player," Halia smirks and turns to refill her drink, while Draco rather blatantly shoves Blaise aside and takes his place, now standing inches just away from her. She can practically feel the tension buzzing between her body and his.

"If you want, you could take a ride on my broom sometime," he tells her, running his hands through his platinum-blonde hair, which is still damp from his post-match shower. "It's the newest Nimbus model – the two thousand and five."

How many girls have swooned when he offered this same once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to them?
"I'm not really into flying," she tells him. "But thanks anyway."

"You would be if you rode mine--" he flashes her a filthy grin "--trust me."

There it is, the obvious innuendo that seems to be a prerequisite for any of their conversations.

Unable to help herself, she tilts her mouth up to his ear and summons the sultriest voice she can, "You couldn't handle it if I did, Draco…trust me." She hears him swallow and Pansy comes and snatches him away fractions of a second later.

Halia ends up going to bed with lips un kissed but still tingling from top-shelf Firewhiskey.

By the time her tea date with Slughorn rolls around the following morning, she's still quite hungover. Party ing with snobbish children of very wealthy people is nothing new for her, but her Slytherin classmates are a different breed entirely. Or maybe she's just out of practice.

One of the kitchen elves sets down their tea while another slides a plate of fresh-baked pastries on their table. "Thank you, Minnie," Slughorn smiles warmly at the house elf and then turns to Halia. "The kitchen elves are one of the luxuries of Hogwarts I miss the most – if you couldn't tell." He pats his swollen stomach and she just smiles, quite sure that anything she says in this particular moment will come off as dreadfully offensive. "Anyway, we met once when you were very young, Halia, and again briefly at your parents' funeral. But I suppose you wouldn't(0,11),(993,994) remember me…"

"Of course I do, Professor Slughorn," she tells him, not because it's true but because he seems like the kind of person that would actually take being remembered as a point of great pride. And she has judged him correctly, based on the warm satisfaction in his eyes.

But then it fades to make way for sympathy. "I am terribly sorry for your loss, Halia. Your parents were absolutely brilliant and the Ministry was lucky to have them. I feel lucky just to have known them…to have taught them."

She had predicted this was the direction the conversation would inevitably go and curses herself for walking into it anyway. Didn't anyone understand that she was tired of constantly being reminded of them? People telling her they're sorry for her doesn't change anything, doesn't bring them back. It's so selfish, anyway...nobody actually understood her loss - they just wanted to feel like they did. They just wanted to feel good about themselves for comforting her.

"I'll never forget…one day I returned to my office to find a bowl of water on my desk with a single flower petal floating on top…" He tears up and stares down at his tea while continuing his story about how he wound up with his pet fish, Francis, and Halia feels like a complete bitch for the thoughts she had just moments before. "…it was the most beautiful, unexpected gift. There wasn't a shred of darkness in Lily, your mother. And then, I walked downstairs one mid-July afternoon and Francis was just…he was just gone."

Well, that settles that: she's a fucking awful person. Wait, no – she's just grumpy and hungover. Yeah, let's go with that.

Silence looms while two pairs of water-clouded eyes recover.

"Retirement getting a bit dull for you, Horace?" Halia glances up to see Riddle strolling into the kitchen, completely oblivious to the nature of their conversation. She's thankful, though, as it seems impossible to think they could have bounced back without such a distraction. "You've been busy lately, so I have heard."
"Tom, my boy!" Slughorn seems to snap back to normal before she does and beams at Riddle, rising from the table to greet him. "We were just on the topic of some of my best students…"

It's rather strange to think of Riddle as a student, though it can't have been that long ago based on his appearance; and admittedly, his age has been a rather frequent point of curiosity for her over the last week.

"You are far too kind," he smiles charmingly as they shake hands. "I apologize for intruding, but I had to make sure you weren't planning to leave Hogwarts without at least saying hello."

"I wouldn't dream of it! Will you be in your office in a half hour or so?"

"I will," he nods, then smirks. "And don't fill up on cake, now – I have some crystallized pineapple sitting around somewhere and I seem to recall your particular fondness of it."

He gives a slight smile to Halia before he leaves and Slughorn returns to the table in a far better mood than how he left it. "My apologies Halia. Merlin's beard, it seems like just yesterday that he was a first year."

"When did he graduate?" she asks, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Let's see…he graduated the year I retired and joined the staff the next term, which was a little over five years ago, now. Yes, my boy Tom has always been a bit of a prodigy. Snape was hired at the same time as well, but only after spending a decade in potions research."

So Riddle was twenty-three? Holy fucking Merlin; she thought he looked young, but never would have guessed that. He just seems older. She would have guessed early thirties, minimum, based simply upon the assumption that Hogwarts wouldn't hire anyone that didn't have substantial experience in their chosen field.

Slughorn chuckles, apparently picking up on some of her disbelief. "As I said, Halia - a prodigy. Of course, Severus is brilliant as well...Come to think of it, he was in the same year as your parents and was actually quite close with your mother at one point…"

Well, this conversation is certainly taking some interesting turns.

"Was he really?" she picks up a scone and nibbles on the corner. "That is…absolutely fascinating."

-xx-
Happy holidays to everyone! Thanks so much to those of you that have taken the time to leave comments - you make my day! :D

-xx-

**December 25, 1996**

"Such a good influence," Halia smirks across the kitchen table at Sirius as he tips at least three shots of Firewhiskey into his cocoa.

"It's a holiday," he shrugs, the upward twitch of his mouth just barely visible behind his thick beard. "Excited for dinner at the Weasley's tonight? I wait all year for Molly's yule roast – she never disappoints."

"Actually, I haven't been feeling very well today…" She pokes at her eggs with her fork and the yolk begins to seep from the perforations. "I was thinking I might stay behind this year."

His eyes flood with concern and almost instantly she's regretting this. "There wasn't any Pepperup in the medicine cabinet?"

"It's expired." At this, Sirius looks rather embarrassed so she adds, "It doesn't feel like the type of thing a Pepperup Potion would help anyway."

"Do you think you ought to stop by St. Mungo's?"

"I'll be fine," she laughs while her stomach twists at the mere thought of revisiting that awful place. "I'm just exhausted is all."

He nods hesitantly and sips his cocoa. "I'm sorry you aren't feeling well, Hals – everyone will miss you."

Ironically, the last few days she has spent at Sirius' flat are the best she's felt in weeks. Last night marked the first dreamless night she can remember and her headaches have been so minor that her holiday supply of illicits she bought off Fred and George have hardly been touched.

The guilt of lying to Sirius weighs on her, but it has to be done if she doesn't want to risk her newly stable emotional state. The holidays were some of the most vividly memorable and happiest times she had with her parents. What would a Weasley Christmas dinner be without her mum gossiping with Molly in the kitchen over a bottle of wine or her father's impromptu Christmas carol performances with Sirius? Wouldn't attempting to stick to the same routine despite knowing it would _never_ be the same make it all the more painful?

She's seen enough of Sirius' coping attempts to know the answer and that he wouldn't understand, even if she did bring it up. Perhaps after tonight he would, but until then she would do what it took to take care of herself and break tradition in the name of moving forward.
And her plans for the evening are certainly something she never would have done on Christmas when her parents were alive.

"Are you absolutely sure you don't want to go?" Sirius asks her again that evening while she lounges in the sitting room next to the heat of the fire, wrapped snugly with a throw. She must keep up appearances, after all.

"I don't want to pass along whatever I have. Plus, I have some schoolwork to catch up on."

He sighs, but smiles. "All work and no play – just like your mum."

Another pang of guilt hits her; clearly, Dumbledore has yet to tell him about her detentions and deteriorating marks.

"Is there anything I can get you?" he asks while pulling on his cloak.

"No – nothing's open right now anyway. I'll be fine, Sirius." He still looks hesitant to leave, though, so she props open her Ancient Runes textbook and pretends to read while shooing him away with a hand. "Stop fussing over me and just go have fun! Tell everyone I said hello."

"Alright. Feel better…"

She doesn't trust herself to look up at him again, but mercifully, she soon hears the crack of Apparition. At that, tosses the covers off of herself and dashes upstairs to dig through her trunk for the little burgundy velvet number she bought in France last fall.

A full face of makeup and a hair-straightening charm later, she hardly recognizes her reflection. Maybe that isn't the worst thing in the world given where she's headed.

She slips on a pair of heels and is just about to leave when she hears the light tapping of an owl's beak on her window.

"Hm..." She examines the package after tipping the handsome hawk-owl with a treat and sending him back into the night. The brown wrapping paper is labeled with her name, but the sender's identity is nowhere to be found.

She tears the paper open and a small envelope catches her eye, inside of which is a note that reads:

*Happy Christmas, Halia. Use it well.*

To add to the mystery, it's unsigned and the scrunched cursive handwriting is unrecognizable. She runs her hand across the fabric the note rests upon and it's smoother than silk – almost fluid-like.

What is it? A blanket?

She holds it up.

Not a blanket – a cloak. A rather old, tattered one at that. How odd…who would send her such a thing? Could it be from some friend of her parents? And what was the note supposed to mean?

*Use it well.*

She stands in front of her mirror and slips it around her shoulders, her jaw falling open as the majority of her body disappears. "Holy fuck."
Draco tosses back another glass of scotch while pretending to listen to Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott's argument over the current Quidditch rankings. Normally, he would dominate the conversation and take advantage of the opportunity to brag about the box seats his family already has reserved for the World Cup the following summer. But try as he may, he can't seem to focus as a foreign feeling prickles in his veins.

But his prior (albeit rare) experiences with this same feeling are sufficient to know that he, the heir to one of the wealthiest and most reputable bloodlines in Europe, is nervous. And at the mercy of a rather unorthodox, though intoxicating, half-blood no less.

She had RSVP'd in response to his invitation for the 78th Annual Malfoy Christmas Gala, but would she actually show? If he had learned anything about Halia Potter in these last few months at Hogwarts, it was that she was almost entirely unpredictable. For all he knew, she would skip the party altogether and act like it had never happened at all as soon as they returned to Hogwarts simply as a means of toying with him.

But as much as he was dying for another opportunity to get into her knickers, it would also be a bit of a relief if she decided not to show given the reaction Aunt Bella had upon seeing her name on the guest list a few evenings prior.

"What is Halia Potter doing on here?" Bella had hissed while poring over the list of respondents. She was in a particularly ill mood at the time, probably because Riddle had yet to reply. His father raised an eyebrow at Bella as she proceeded to wrinkle her nose in disgust. "She's my wretched cousin Sirius' goddaughter. Her dead father was a filthy blood traitor, too, with his revolting mudblood wife…"

Then, her head suddenly snapped in Draco's direction. "You invited her, didn't you? Have you no fucking loyalty, Nephew?"

It took a great deal of energy to maintain his cool composure in the face of his aunt's condescension; she always treated him like an idiotic little child despite the fact she wasn't even that much older. "I'm sorry, Father, I was unaware that she is an enemy of the Black family," he lied, refusing to so much as glance in Bella's direction. "I should have thought to ask first."

"You think?" her sneering laugh reverberated off the ceiling and curved walls of the study. "Of course you should ha—"

"Nonsense, Draco," his father interrupted, to Draco's relief and immense surprise. "I am quite pleased you invited her…After all, the fact that she is Sirius' goddaughter does not mean she has to be an enemy of ours." A small smirk appeared on his father's regal face as he plucked the guest list from Bella's hands. "Your Aunt Bella may not agree, but it's not her party, now is it?"

At this point, she huffed off while muttering swears under her breath. It was a surprising and satisfying victory for Draco, but he knew his aunt well enough to anticipate that she would make it her evening's mission to create problems if Halia decided to show up.

And show up she most certainly does.

"– have you seen Portugal's lineup? They're bound to win against Australia, especially with Dashbury out on injury. Do you know when they're going to let him play again, Draco?...Hello, mate." Draco vaguely hears Zabini speaking, but his attention is all but lost to the girl with jet-black hair standing in the arched entryway of the ballroom and greeting his mother.

"Excuse me…" He rises from the table and straightens his tie while craning his neck for a better
view. She's almost as tall as he is with the shoes she has on and he can't help but trailing his eyes
down her long legs that her dress showcases perfectly. It's a little on the scandalous side for a proper
pureblood soiree such as this, but he's certainly not complaining.

His father is suddenly at his side with a hand on his shoulder. "She's very pretty, Draco. In fact, I
think you would do well to befriend her."

Draco takes his time sizing her up again. "Gladly." At this point, he's so entranced by her that he
could care less about whatever motive is surely behind his father's encouragement.

He begins weaving his way through the crowd toward her, but is abruptly stopped in his tracks as
Pansy snatches him by the arm. "I cannot believe you invited her!"

"Why?" he eyes her coolly in challenge. "Almost everyone else from Slytherin was invited."

"She's – she's…"

"Go ahead, Pansy, tell me: why exactly don't you like her?" Of course, she will never admit the
simple truth that she's jealous.

Pansy crosses her arms and sticks her bottom lip in a pout. "She's just awful. And so annoying."

He knows he should just walk away and let her bitchiness sizzle off, but he feels bolder than usual
after receiving his father's blessing about Halia. "Actually Pansy, she's brilliant. Perhaps you should
take a few notes."

"You've been such a prick lately." Her amber-colored eyes glare back at him. "Even more than
usual, I should say."

He places his hands in his pockets, shrugs, and looks coldly down his nose at her. "Well, if you don't
like it, you are more than welcome to leave."

She looks at him as though he's slapped her and lets out a high-pitched laugh of disbelief. "You
know what? I will!"

He watches her storm away from him and can't help feeling like a bit of an asshole. As annoying as
Pansy can be at times, she is one of his oldest and most loyal friends. But what is he supposed to do?
He's been fixated on Halia since the moment they met.

It's partially because of her infuriating attitude of indifference toward him. While it's all too easy to
get under the skin of any other girl in their year, hers seemed nearly impenetrable beyond their trivial
flirtations. It flies in the face of what Draco had always taken for granted: that he always got what he
wanted. And of course, this only makes him want her more. But it's not just that – everything about
her is refreshingly different.

Different, and very, very fuckable.

"I'm glad you came," he kisses the back of Halia's hand when he finally reaches her. "You look
stunning."

"You clean up pretty nicely yourself." She grins devilishly in a way that makes his mind wander to a
variety of places that it shouldn't. "It's been a while since I've been to something this posh."

"We do our best," he smirks arrogantly as his ego swells. "I'll have to give you a tour later."
Of my bedroom, at the very least.

He leads her to the table where his friends are sitting, eager to show off his newest guest. But then Blaise offers her the seat next to him and immediately begins chatting her up.

To exhibit his displeasure, Draco makes sure his chair squeals as he pulls it out from the table and sits directly across from them. He's just about to open his mouth to interject when Blaise looks up at him expectantly. "Aren't you going to be a decent host and fetch her a drink, Draco?"

"That would be lovely," Halia bats her eyelashes at him and he scowls, sulking off to find the nearest of the champagne-bearing trays levitating around the event.

"You know, Halia, you could easily get into modeling if you wanted to," Draco hears Blaise telling her when he returns.

Oh bollocks, not that line – Blaise's not-so-secret weapon.

"I'd be happy to introduce you to my mum…" Blaise continues with a wink. "One look at you and she'd set you up with the best photographer in Paris."

"Weren't you going to go find Tracey, Zabini?" Draco doesn't bother masking the annoyance in his voice.

"No - she and Milly left with Pansy."

He narrows his eyes. "Well, I think you should double-check. You promised her a dance and she'll be so disappointed if she thinks you forgot."

Blaise tilts his chin up in challenge and Draco's glare hardens even further. Is Blaise actually stupid enough to defy him? Hopefully not, because a potential means of revenge fails to come to mind at the moment in light of his preoccupation with visualizing Halia in various stages of undress.

"Have it your way." Blaise smirks and rises from the table while gesturing to Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle. "Let's go boys. Sorry in advance for leaving you alone with him, Halia."

"Very discreet," she scoffs as he passes her the flute of bubbling liquid and sinks into the newly vacated seat beside her.

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, were you really falling for that 'you could be a model' shit? He uses that on everyone, you know."

"How often does it work?" she smirks.

"You'd be surprised," he tells her, though in reality Blaise's success rate is probably somewhere around 99.9%. "But I admit, he definitely had a point…" He glances up and down the svelte frame of the .1% yet again.

Unsurprisingly, she notices. "So…you and Pansy have been together for how long, now?"

He forces himself to look away from her and out toward the middle of the ballroom, where a sea of couples twirl to the sounds of the string quartet that his parents hired for the evening. His father is just at the edge, schmoozing with Barty Crouch, and he finds his mother near a corner on the opposite side of the room, running her hand down Amycus Carrow's arm. They've been fucking for weeks, now: just another in her long line of flings. Not that he can blame her, of course; his father was not the easiest person to live with.
"Together is a rather loose term."

Halia snorts and sips more of her champagne. "Not really."

"Three years, on and off. Off again, as of tonight." He sneaks a glance at her to gauge her reaction in hopes that it's a positive one, but her face remains almost entirely blank with the exception of a raised eyebrow.

"Trouble in paradise?"

"I think you know quite well that you're the trouble," he smirks. "In the best way possible, of course."

"Are you Halia Potter?" Draco nearly groans when he sees the hunchbacked and almost impossibly ancient Cornelia Rosier lingering nearby. Of course they would be interrupted as soon as he began hitting his stride and building momentum.

"I am," Halia smiles pleasantly and stands to greet her. "Have we met?"

"You disgraceful little wench," Cornelia hisses as a few droplets of spit fly toward Halia's face. "How dare you show your face here!"

He might have laughed at Halia's look of utter shock if he wasn't already dying in mortification.

"Pardon?"

"I said: how dare you! Family of Sirius Black, traitor to one of the oldest pureblood families in Britain, is not welcome here."

Bella. – that fucking bitch. Draco scours the room for her and there she is, standing in plain sight and raising a glass to him while hardly disguising her laugh. She's going to pay for this one.

"And let's not forget your father, one of the worst blood traitors of them all…marrying a filthy mud--"

"Excuse me, Cornelia – we were in the middle of talking. And last time I checked, you were only invited because the staff at your 'temporary' new home told Mother that the best Christmas gift they could receive was not having to listen to your drivel for the evening."

That certainly shuts up the old hag. He gives her a smug look as she opens and closes her mouth a few times in shock before turning and shuffling away (though not without one last disapproving glare at both of them).

When he finally braves a look at Halia, her green eyes seem darker than usual. "Sorry."

And truly, he does feel bad that it happened. His father was right, after all: there was no need for her to follow the blood-traitor path; it would be such a waste if she did. He's even been hoping that he could convince her to ditch the Weasley's and her other pathetic Gryffindor friends. But how is he supposed to do that with people like Bella and Cornelia getting in the way, killing the delicious tension he's been so artfully cultivating?

Okay, maybe 'artfully' is a strong word, even for his arrogant self.

"It's fine." She shrugs, but doesn't quite meet his eyes.

He nudges her lightly with his elbow. "How about that tour?"
"Alright." It's nice to see her smile, even if he knows it's forced.

"Just wait here for a second – there's something I have to do before we go."

She nods and he briskly makes his way to the kitchens, where he fetches two unopened bottles of champagne. He's eager to get back to her (and even more eager to see where this leads), but when he spots Riddle and Bella talking, a simple yet brilliant method of revenge strikes him.

"The guest room in the west wing is empty…and fairly soundproof" he winks and sacrifices one of the bottles, pressing it into Riddle's hands. "Bella can show you the way. Cheers, mate!"

Unfortunately for Bella, Draco knows a hell of a lot more about their 'friendship' than Riddle would possibly be comfortable with. He turns away just as Riddle's blank, slightly puzzled expression turns into horrified shock and ultimately fury with a harsh glare in Bella's direction.

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"Oh ARIANA!"

He could be anywhere in the castle, but his amplifying charm is so powerful that dust trickles down from her ceiling. She clenches her eyes shut and pulls her blankets over her.

Why? Why did it have to be today? Couldn't she just lie here in solace and live in the past for a few hours, dreaming of happier days before her father went to Azkaban or her mother's death or Gellert?

When he first brought her here, locking her away in this dull, windowless room that has since become her refuge, she fought back. Her defiance ranged from attacking him initially to refusing the fulfillment of his requests. But then came the countless "treatments" to sap her of her magical strength, leaving her power of Sight unscathed as he of course intended to use it.

With her reclusive lifestyle came the lies Gellert spun about her lack of appearance in the public realm. The entire country fancies her an insane old hag, and Gellert a saint for putting up with her all these years.

But she isn't mad. In fact, she wishes she was – all of this might be easier if that were the case. He broke her, and now, all she wants is quiet. Despite her wildest dreams, no one is coming for her now – not even Albus.

The lock shifts in the door and Gellert's voice, still booming even without the aid of an amplifying charm, fills the room. "It's a Christmas miracle, Ariana! Have you any idea how long I've waited for this? Why, I'm so positively tickled that I sent Professor Schultz home to spend the holidays with his family."

She keeps her eyes closed, refusing to look at him. "Professor Schultz no longer has a family - his wife divorced him shortly after he came to work for you."

He scoffs and she feels his weight settle in at the edge of her bed. "Do you have any idea how many people work for me, Ariana? Forgive me if I cannot keep track of all their trivial details," she can hear the smirking in his voice, "And you shouldn't say the word 'divorce' so hopefully."

His fingers brush her cheek and her cool blue eyes snap open with a glare. "What do you require, so that we may get this over with?" She throws the blankets off of herself and sits up.

"As you wish," Gellert looms toward her, dangling a pendant in front of her face. "Remember this?"
She swallows and flinches when he drops it into her palm. Of course she remembers.

"Professor Schultz has discovered what this is, Ariana: a horcrux. Have you heard of that before?" She shakes her head and he pauses, stroking the pendant. "It is intended for life extension and constructed with the fragment of a soul broken by a truly horrendous act…"

"This coming from the authority on horrendous acts himself," she quips.

He moves closer to her, his wrinkled, but boyish face inches from hers. "You know, I'm very hopeful that it's your brother's."

Could it be? Would Albus truly stoop to such levels? Then again, if he didn't perhaps she wouldn't be here in the first place.

"Ah, I must calm down – I'm almost giddy at the thought. Regardless, you will tell me who it belongs to, Ariana…And don't bother trying to lie. You know quite well I can always tell when you're lying, my dear wife. I know things have been a bit...tenuous between us lately –"

Well, that's certainly one way of putting it – if by 'lately' he meant the last thirty years or so.

"– but here's your chance to turn it all around!" He pats her bony face in mocking affection a grin stretching from cheek to cheek, crinkling the skin around his eyes. The urge to spit in his manic face is overwhelming.

He moves to leave and she gingerly turns the dark object over in his hands. The sheer power emanating from it is just as strong as the day he first retrieved it, but now that they have discovered its true nature, its vibrations have shifted from docile to an angry hiss. He has asked her to use her powers of the Sight for terrible, evil deeds, but nothing has made her as apprehensive as this task.

Her voice shakes slightly as she tells him, "This will take time, Gellert."

He doesn't look back at her, his voice tainted sadistically with amusement. "Well, I would do my best to hurry if I were you, Ariana. I am most impatient to get to the bottom of this."

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"Well, what do you think? Are you impressed?" Draco smirks.

To be fair, the Malfoy manor would be incredibly impressive to just about anyone else – it had expansive gardens, cavernous rooms, tasteful decoration, and ornate details in every direction to please the eye. She just happens to have been to some particularly impressive places; spoiled, some might call it. Plus, they are now in his bedroom sitting on his bed, and it seems foolish to encourage him too much.

Halia shrugs. "It's nice."

In the course of a second, Draco's smirk falters and then recovers once more. "We haven't even gotten to the best part yet."

He takes her hand, leading her out on the balcony. And then with a wave of his wand, a narrow, nearly transparent staircase appears against the side of the house that extends at least fifty feet upward to the tallest stone spire of the manor. He mutters a few words that she can't quite catch and a hidden door swings open at the top.

"Well, what do you say?" He arches an eyebrow in challenge, tilting his chin in the direction of the staircase.
Luckily heights have never been a significant fear for her. "Sure. Hold my shoes?" She slides him off her feet and hands them to him.

He laughs, shaking his head slightly from side to side. "Aren't afraid of many things, are you Halia Potter?"

She's having second thoughts when she moves from his balcony and can see the ground beneath her feet beyond the dully illuminated step, but feels the obligation not to disappoint after Draco's praise of her bravery. After a deep breath, she sprints up the staircase before she can even think about glancing down again.

She doesn't disappoint, but apparently neither does Draco. The bigger-on-the-inside secret room of the spire reminds her of a 1920s speakeasy, with its chaise lounge, a full bar, and curtains draped loftily from the ceiling. But the best part of all is the floor, which she instantly recognizes as the dark green center of the ballroom's stained glass ceiling. They can see everything, and the light coming up from below casts shades of green-tinged light on each of them. "It's beautiful," she marvels.

"Not even my mother or the house elves know about this place. It's my father's private study…of sorts." The way he says this makes her wonder what actually goes on up here.

Draco fetches two glasses from behind the bar, pops the bottle of champagne he's been carrying, and hands her a generous pour. Then he settles in next to her, joining in her survey of the ballroom. Halia recognizes many of them, such as Minister Fudge, Professor Riddle, that old hag that had been so rude to her earlier, and several Ministry officials – none of which are particularly surprising to be in attendance.

Until she spots Professor Snape speaking with Lucius Malfoy, at least. "Your father knows Snape?"

"Of course he does – my father knows everyone."

Wrong question, apparently.

"Did they go to school together?"

He nods and shifts so their legs are touching. "My mother was in the same year as Snape and my father was three ahead."

Halia's mind is turning again, remembering what Slughorn told her about her mum and Snape being friends at some point. Given Professor Hooked-Nose generally unpleasant demeanor, she found it rather difficult to believe and the lack of details that Slughorn gave her made it even more so. But here it is, itching curiously at the back of her mind again.

She's debating how to probe the topic further when he rather abruptly says, "You know, you could do far better than the Weasley's, Potter."

There's far too much on her mind to bother deciphering what he means by this, so instead she quips, "What's wrong, Draco? Jealous?"

He leans in close and snakes his arm around her waist while looking directly into her eyes. "If you look at those ginger fucks the same way you look at me when you get high, quite."

She laughs and takes a sip of champagne, but only to hide the mortifying fact that he actually managed to catch her off-guard. Even worse, the way he's staring at her mouth combined with the admittedly rather romantic dim lighting is making her wonder how kissing him might be. Would he be all ego and no skill, like so many boys of his pedigree? Perhaps she should just take the plunge
and finally find out; the prospect of snogging him has come to mind quite a bit over the past couple of months, after all. The only thing standing in her way is the looming question of Pansy and if she and Draco are actually through And if the answer is so unclear, would whatever theoretically happened next really be Halia's fault?

"I've never brought Pansy up here, you know." His finger traces swirls on the back of her hand. "Only you."

Oh fuck, who is she kidding? She's totally going to snog him. But just as she's leaning in, it occurs to her that she may be able to get even more out of him than a good snog. "I was wondering, Draco, if you might do me a favor."

He comes even closer still, his breath sweet and warm from intoxication. "I'm listening."

"I heard that my mum and Snape were close at one point…Do you think your parents would know anything about that?"

Draco looks puzzled for a moment, but she can see him piecing it together. "Do you reckon something happened between them and that's why he loathes you?"

"Maybe. I suppose I'm just curious is all…"

"I could ask my father…I'm sure he would know. But Halia," His eyes never leave hers as he loosens his tie. "What's in it for me?"

Of course, this is precisely what she expects him to say. She smirks and stretches across him to place her empty glass on the table next to the lounge. "I'm sure you could dream up some way for me to repay you."

Before she can take another breath, his mouth is on hers. Their kiss is frantic and charged and almost greedily curious. She gets lost in it for a little while, refusing to acknowledge the lingering concern that she might regret it later. After all, 'later' seems so far away at the moment.

But it comes, just as Draco slips his hands under the hem of her dress.

"I should go."

He looks at her coolly, though she can practically see him deflate. Well, with the exception of a certain part of his anatomy that presses against her thigh. "Are you sure?"

_Not really, no._ But despite her lack of prudishness, she refuses to be a quick lay for Draco; it wouldn't do to reinforce his ego.

"Yes." She nudges him off of her and begins fixing her tousled hair. "I have to get back to the flat before Sirius does."

"Your loss," he smirks.

They arrive in the foyer a few minutes later and he orders a nearby house elf to fetch her coat.

"Thank you for coming, Halia. I suppose I'll see you back at school." After a lingering glance that almost convinces her he's going to kiss her again, he turns away a saunters confidently back to the ballroom.

His friends are going to hear all about their little fling, that much is sure. She sighs, but can't help
smiling to herself while stepping out into the chilly night air.

"Halia?"

She turns to see a man leaning against the manor's stone façade smoking a cigarette and instantly recognizes him as Regulus Black. Her parents worked with him on occasion at the Ministry and she remembers the tenseness of her parents whenever they met, which was little surprise given Sirius' estrangement from the Blacks.

"Well, isn't this a surprise." Regulus steps toward her into the light of the brass lanterns levitating in the arching stone entryway. He looks so much like Sirius that it's uncanny; the only differences are that he has less wrinkles, a slightly pointier nose, and stubble instead of a shaggy beard. He flicks his cigarette out of his hand. "I've been looking for you."

Before she even has the chance to process this, he abruptly grabs her arm and the world simultaneously collapses and turns upside-down. Then comes the queasiness, which strikes her as the spinning begins to slow. There goes her excitement to begin apparition lessons with the other sixth years in February.

Halia forces herself to open her eyes. She's standing in a forest so dense that only a few stars manage to cast their light through the branches above. Regulus is standing a few feet in front of her, hands in his pockets. He doesn't move when she reaches for her wand in panic and points it at him.

"I hope you don't mind that we talk here instead – it's far more private."

Her forehead begins to sear, probably another side effect of apparition. So that's what he wanted…to talk? "Talk about what, exactly?"

"No sense in beating around the bush I suppose," he rubs the back of his neck. "There's something you should know about your parents, Halia…I've been meaning to tell you for some time now."

"Alright…" She lowers her wand, but continues eyeing him suspiciously. "What is it?"

Regulus lights another cigarette and crosses his arms. "I can't tell you much more than this, but there was more to your parents' death than what the Daily Prophet reported. I don't think it was as coincidental as you've been led to believe."

"What are you talking about?"

Is this supposed to be some sort of joke? On the few occasions that Sirius mentioned the Blacks, he described them as a rather sadistic lot – but isn't this a little much?

"I assume they never told you my role at the Ministry?"

She shakes her head.

"I didn't think so. I work in the Department of Mysteries as an Unspeakable, Halia. And so did they."

"What?"

"I didn't interact with them that often - they were pretty high in the ranks. 'Magical ambassador' was just the cover given to them by the Department."

All she can do is stare at him.
"I get it – you think I'm a loon."

"You can say that again," she mutters as he smirks and takes a long drag from his cigarette.

"Take it as you will - it's all true..." he shrugs. "I have no way of proving it, but why would I tell you if it wasn't?"

He did have a point. But her parents…Unspeakables? She traveled with them, surely she would have known…

Regulus steps forward and places a hand on her shoulder "I just thought you should know."

They apparate again. When she opens her eyes once more, Regulus is gone and she's standing alone in front Sirius' flat.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading, everyone! And double thanks to those of you that have taken the time to comment so far. ;)

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January, 1997

"Good afternoon, and welcome back to Hogwarts," Tom greets the sixth years as they file into his classroom on Monday morning. "We will begin class straight away, so please turn in your assigned essays as you settle in." There are no grumblings or irritated sighs at this announcement; at this point, they know better.

Draco adds his parchment scroll to the pile and catches his eye with the shadow of a smirk before swaggering back to his seat. Tom grits his teeth, turning away to add the day's notes to the chalkboard – oh, what he wouldn't give to curse that smug look right off of Malfoy's face…

Apparently, maintaining at least a semblance of professionalism was too much to ask. He should have known this would happen sooner or later, despite Bella's swearing that she hadn't told a soul about their more intimate side.

Regardless of this irritation, though, his night at the Malfoy's had been far from a total loss. He's never been much of a drinking man or one to particularly enjoy social functions, but he would never dream of missing the opportunity to finagle secrets out of powerful people while they find themselves suddenly loose-lipped.

One highlight was learning much more about the looming investigation of Russia and Germany through another conversation with Slughorn. It's quite a ludicrous matter altogether - of course the Ministry didn't take issue with throwing caution to the wind while simultaneously throwing money at the problem. And besides that, it's sure to lead to significant consequences. If Germany was accused, public opinion of the Germany Ministry's apparently radical (though quite logical, in Tom's opinion) operations would become even more skewed. Alternatively, if the investigation pointed to Russia, the consequences would be largely economic, jeopardizing some of the most lucrative trade deals in the country. It's a lose-lose either way, and there have been no new poisonings for weeks – it wouldn't have been that difficult for the Ministry to simply smooth things over with the victims' families and sweep the whole thing under the rug.

Things would be different when he made his inevitable move into politics; he would make sure of it.

And this may be sooner than he originally anticipated, judging by his conversation with Lucius about his education reform proposal at the party. Not only did Malfoy promise to pledge his name as a sponsor, he went a step further and added it to the agenda of the next Hogwarts Board of Governors meeting.

Of course, this meant Tom couldn't stay angry with Bella for long. The last thing he wanted to do was risk his alliance with Lucius, as a collection of signatures of the Board's majority would allow
him to present his reform to the Ministry without Dumbledore's approval. Tom had played things especially safe over the last couple of years in anticipation of requiring such approval from the Headmaster, but always had his doubts about obtaining it – the contents outlined in his reform were rather controversial, after all. It was indisputable that sponsorship by the Hogwarts Board would simplify matters.

All in all? Not bad, for a holiday.

"Happy new year, Professor." Potter places her essay on top of the growing pile and smiles. There is a sense of expectancy in her gaze and a quick skim of her thoughts reveals that she's hopeful he will soon revisit his offer to help her.

She won't be disappointed; a good portion of his holiday was devoted to constructing his plan for her. He came up with several potentially promising methods, beginning with full-fledged legilimency if she agreed to it. Surely he could access substantially more of her mind if there was no concern of detection and he could use his powers in their entirety. And she would agree, of that he was quite sure – the desperation in her dark green eyes when he first offered his assistance was unmistakable.

He tosses her back a charming smile of his own. "Happy new year, Miss Potter. May I have a word with you after class?" 

"Yes, of course," she answers quickly before getting shoved aside by Pansy Parkinson.

There is little wonder why. Although he would never stoop so far as to concern himself with the emotional, hormone-driven lives of his students, he had been subjected to Bella's thirteen minute and forty-two second rant (yes, he counted) about Draco's disgraceful invitation of Halia Potter to the Malfoy party and his subsequent argument with Parkinson. It's rather curious that Potter even accepted Draco's invitation in the first place…But regardless, it was apparently quite the scandal – of which Tom cared little so long as Bella stayed out of the way of his plans.

The last few sixth years trickle in and Tom begins class promptly on the hour. "Today we will be continuing our exploration of various magical barriers used to protect inanimate objects or places and the strategies one might employ to dismantle them. After the assigned readings and essay you completed over the holiday, I assume you are now confident enough with the theory to continue onto application. Are there any questions before we begin?"

When he is met with silence, he waves his wand to begin distributing one of the metal lockboxes waiting next to his desk to each student. "All of these are protected by the same set of enchantments. You may use up to ten spells to dismantle them, though I will grant an automatic 'O' on the essay of anyone that can accomplish this in five." He smirks at the incredibly hopeful looks that appear on the faces of some, knowing full well that very few of them would even come close to performing this near-impossible task.

As predicted, the majority of the class exceeds their allotted ten spells and at the top of the class are Nott and Granger with seven and Potter with six. He isn't sure whether to be disappointed that she missed by the mark by only one or relieved that she didn't blindside him by somehow breaking the enchantments with fewer than five spells.

He leads the class through a few more exercises, instructing them to craft their own magical protective barriers and then trading with another student for another round of spell-breaking. Soon, though, the hour meets its end and Potter makes a beeline for him while her classmates pack up their books and notes.

Here goes nothing.
"You wanted to speak to me, Professor Riddle?"

She's been anxiously awaiting this all class, hoping to hear that he was still willing to help her. The dreams came back in full force during her first night back at Hogwarts and she's been obsessing over them even more after what Regulus told her.

"Yes." He nods, his voice just above a whisper, and she watches his dark eyes flicker to the few stragglers still leaving class. "I was wondering if you have managed to find any clarity in your dreams, or if you were able to remember anything you seem to have lost?"

She shakes her head. "Not at all."

"I see. If you are still interested in my assistance, I have a few potential solutions in mind."


"It's no trouble at all," Professor Riddle smiles warmly at her, his demeanor so different than the passive-aggressive attitude she witnessed on her first day of his class.

But then she hears the door close on the other side of the room as the last sixth years finally leave and Riddle turns serious once more. He moves to take a seat at his desk an folds his hands together, while gazing calmly at her. "If we are to proceed, Miss Potter, there is something I should make perfectly clear…It may be difficult, if not impossible, to help you elucidate your strange dreams and missing memories without permitting me at least some entry to your mind. You will be able to control what I do and do not see to some degree, though this varies with whichever methodology we choose to employ, of course. Is this something you would find uncomfortable?"

Well, yes. But it would be worth it, wouldn't it? What if her dreams were trying to tell her more about what her parents did, or maybe even what happened to them?

She picks at her nail. "I suppose I could get used to the idea."

"If you're not sure, feel free to take your time to –"

"I'm sure."

"When would you like to begin? This weekend?"

As soon as possible?

"Whatever is convenient for you…" she tells him instead, hesitant to push her luck.

"Saturday afternoon, then – around three? Let's meet in my office."

"Three is perfect. Thank you, Sir."

He smiles once again and she finds herself thinking there's little wonder why half the school is mad for him. Oh, how jealous Tracey and Pansy would be if they knew she was spending part of her weekend with him. But of course, she can't breathe a word of this to anyone – it would be incredibly stupid to risk the only chance at help she's got.

She feels this way even before the next three nights, all of which leave her so restless that she falls asleep in four of her Thursday classes. And during the two she manages to stay awake, her thoughts are torturously preoccupied with attempting to pick out the sliver of truth that she's sure each dream
must contain. Some continue to be quite random, but the majority are of her parents' death and each
time she's there watching it happen rather than lying in a bed at St. Mungo's unconscious.

Was Regulus right? Was there more to their death? And did she know more about it than her own
memories let on? These questions are driving her mad and Saturday afternoon cannot come quickly
enough.

She catches a glimpse of her reflection in a suit of armor on the way back from dinner on Thursday
evening and nearly recoils in disgust at the dark circles under her eyes and dullness of her skin. She
could really use a few of the concoctions Fred and George kept on hand, but they've largely been
ignoring her since the rumor of her attendance at the Malfoy's Christmas party went around. Sure,
she could have made an effort to apologize or explain why she went, but how could they possibly
understand?

It's rather ironic, anyway; from the way her father, Sirius, and now Fred and George treated anyone
even remotely friendly with pureblood Slytherins, they seem like the judgmental ones. Pansy and
Draco were the only Slytherins that seemed to have anything to say about her spending time with
Gryffindors, but that was almost to be expected: Draco's jealous and Pansy's just a bitch.

Speaking of Draco, there he is – lounging on her bed when she returns to her otherwise empty
dormitory. He's eating an apple which makes him look like even more of a prick than usual, but her
heart rate still quickens. It felt like things had gone entirely back to normal during their first days back
at Hogwarts, flirting and bantering as though their kiss had never happened. It was both a relief and,
admittedly, rather disappointing. After all, she's in desperate need for a distraction.

"Of course – just make yourself at home," she rolls her eyes and shoves his feet off of her nightstand.

He smirks and props himself up on his elbow, while patting a spot of dark gray bedspread next to
him. "Do you have a second?"

She has more than a second, by the looks of it; Milly, Tracey, and Daphne headed off to Frog Choir
after dinner and Pansy was nowhere to be seen. "What's up?" she jumps onto her bed and it creaks a
bit under the weight of them both.

"I spoke with my father about Snape and your mother before coming back to school and I may have
some answers for you..." He leans close and she's assaulted by a strong whiff of cologne. "If you're
still planning to repay me, that is."

"Are you going to tell me or not?"

He raises an eyebrow in challenge. "Are you going to snub me like you did at my party?"

"I didn't snub –" She sighs. "Aren't you worried about Pansy?" Halia hated the girl, but heard her
crying in the middle of the night enough over the last week to pity her a little and wasn't sure the
distraction of Draco was worth Pansy's wrath that was sure to follow.

"She has rounds until curfew." Draco tosses his apple core toward the rubbish bin across the room
and grins at her when he makes it, but then his expression hardens in a seemingly annoyed manner.
"Are you really going to make this about her? She and I are over, I told you that."

"If you're sure..."

"I am." He reaches up to gently stroke her cheek, his voice like velvet when he says, "Now shut up
and kiss me, Potter."
Well, if he doesn't care about Pansy why should she? And what's the worst that Pansy's going to do when she finds out? Plus, yet another headache is pounding at the back of her mind again and all she wants is to get lost in something else for a while.

Her lips brush his and he takes it upon himself to claim more from there, tangling his fingers in her hair and slipping his tongue into her mouth. She lets him to have his way for a little while and doesn't protest when he gets a bit handsy, but only because it allows her to catch him completely off-guard when she decides to roll on top of him, nibbling his ear and grinding her hips on his. She smirks when she hears him gasp against her neck.

"So..." she mutters, "What was it you were going to tell me?"

He groans, arching his hips desperately up to her, Halia bites the inside of her cheek to hide the heated pleasure it sends coursing through her. "I'll tell you later."

"Now," she breathes and smirks in challenge as she shifts to trace his length through his trousers. "Or nothing."

"For fuck's sake, Potter," he groans again and rubs his slightly damp forehead in defeat. "You were right, your mother and Snape were friends at one point – they grew up next to each other."

Well, that explains something, as it seemed incredibly unlikely that they were close because of Snape's charming personality. But her mum was surrounded by muggles growing up, so of course she would be drawn to the first person she found with similar powers.

"What happened between them, then?"

"My father didn't really know...his best guess was that things changed when they came to Hogwarts. Snape was sorted into Slytherin and your mom was, well, you know..."

She narrows her eyes. "A mudblood?"

Draco returns her gaze coolly. "Don't act like you don't know how the world works – you're too clever for that." Then his expression softens and his fingers drift gently to the skin on her thighs just above her skirt's hem. "And don't be offended...even my father admitted she was brilliant."

It really does mean something coming from him, considering the brand of radical pureblood supremacy families like the Malfoy's had gained a reputation for. However, she would have been far more convinced if Draco wasn't simultaneously doing everything he could to get into her knickers.

Regardless, everything he just told her about Snape was far from a revelation and it all seemed even more inconsequential after her conversation with Regulus. She had bigger things to worry about than a professor who seemed to loathe her, that much was sure.

"Thank you," Halia tells Draco anyway and looks into his eyes, which dilated in a way that seems so familiar. Like those perfectly round snow globes she's caught glimpses of in a few dreams. Thousands of snow globes – maybe millions – in orderly row after row. It seems so real; she can almost remember walking down the long corridor past them. Everything in the dream seems taller, too, as though she's a little girl again...

Suddenly, her dormitory or Draco are nowhere to be found. She's surrounded by rows of snow globes, which upon closer examination she realizes are actually filled with swirling, silvery smoke.

When did Mum and Dad say they were going to be back again?
She entertains herself with the visible puffs of air her breath makes in the frigid chamber and rocks back and forth on her feet. Mum said she could look, just not touch. But her parents said that *all* the time and sometimes nothing bad happened when she broke the rules. And they're so pretty…maybe she could just play with one for a bit before they came back…

"Halia," Mum says sharply, rounding the corner just as Halia reaches up. "Don't. It doesn't belong to you."

"I want one…My birthday's coming up soon, you know…"

Dad's face comes into view and he laughs, scooping her up and tossing her over his shoulder. "Sorry, sweetheart. You can't just ask for one – it doesn't work that way."

"Why not?" she pouts.

"They're prophecies –"

Prophecies – the *Hall* of Prophecy…in the Department of Mysteries.

She feels something wet against her lips and her eyes snap open to see Draco beneath her. Her mind spins and she's almost positive she's going to be sick. Merlin, how old was she when that happened? Five or so?

It felt so real – it *had* to be. That, or she's going completely mental.

"I'm sorry – I just…I'm *not* snubbing you, but I have to go," she scrambles off of him and begins to straighten her clothes.

Draco looks horrified. "You can't be serious." He glares at her, but then raises an eyebrow in interest when she exchanges her knickers for a clean pair and tosses him the slightly damp ones.

"'Til next time?"

"Cheeky." He looks fairly satisfied– at least for the time being– as he smirks and tucks the lacy cloth into the front pocket of his trousers.

She briskly makes her way out of the dungeons and up the Grand Staircase, desperately trying to wrap her head around what she just saw. All of the classmates that greet her on the way are ignored; she pauses for no one until she reaches Office 2C.

"Miss Potter?" The tall frame of Professor Riddle appears shortly after she knocks on his door. He eyes her curiously, probably something to do with the fact that she looks like a frenzied mess. "Can I help you with something?"

A troubling thought occurs to her. If she would be opening up her memories to him, he would see her conversation with Regulus as well as the dream or vision or *whatever* the hell it was she just experienced. While she didn't know much about the Department of Mysteries, it seemed reasonable to suspect that they wouldn't take kindly to the idea of her speculating about her parents with someone else. Would she get in trouble? Would she get Professor Riddle in trouble, if she accidentally gave him information he wasn't supposed to have?

Then again, what else was she supposed to do? Sit back and let herself go mad?

Her mouth feels very dry all of a sudden. "Yes. Sorry to disturb you. I…I suppose I was just wondering – can we begin earlier than Saturday?"
Merlin, could she look any more like a blubbering twat?

He crosses his arms and leans against his doorframe. "When did you have in mind?"

"Now, if you're free?"

His gaze is unreadable and lasts long enough to make her feel rather self-conscious, but finally, he stands aside and gestures her inside with an arm.

-xx-

"Good evening, wizardkind! You're listening to Witching Hour. Today on our program, we'll be reviewing the best Willpower Potions on the market that will help you keep your New Year's resolutions…"

Static fills his ears and he rubs his eyes, reading the first of the cue cards that Rodney, Wizarding Wireless Network's assistant director, placed on his desk for this evening's radiocast. "…erm, and later we'll bring you a brand new song by The Weird Sisters."

Glenda glares at him, though her voice remains perfectly smooth and sweet. "Finally, we will have an exclusive interview from Hippocrates Smethwyck, the Healer-in-Charge at St. Mungo's investigation of the mysterious poisoning cases. Stay tuned, folks. We're your dedicated hosts Glenda Chittock –"

"- and Sirius Black–"

"– and we thank you for spending this Witching Hour with us today. Before we begin, here's a word from our sponsors…"

Their microphones mute and Glenda snaps her head in his direction, her bluebell eyes narrowing once more. "What in the hell was that?"

"Hm?" Sirius takes a sip from his mug.

"You missed your cue." She eyes the mug. "If that's vodka again, I swear to gods–"

"It's not," he snorts. "Calm down, Chitty."

He's not lying; today, his drink of choice is gin.

She sighs and rearranges the golden curls of her hair for what had to be the fortieth time that in the last half hour. "You need to pull yourself together, Black. I heard a rumor that there will be cuts at the station soon. It would be such a shame if the good people of London lost their favorite –" she scrunches her eyebrows together. "Wait, what is it exactly that you do again?"

While chewing a mouthful of Pumpkin Pasty, he says, "Why don't you just focus on trying not to embarrass yourself by flirting with our guest this time."

"I would never do that. Unlike you, I'm a professional."

Ironic, then, that she feels the need to apply another coat of lipstick just before the ad break ends – he's fairly sure that their radio audience wouldn't care whether or not she's sporting a face caked with makeup.

At this point, it's unlikely that Glenda will ever grow to realize her hypocrisy. She's just like all of the other self-righteous purebloods he knows. In fact, she reminds him quite a bit of his cousin Narcissa.
Narcissa – who apparently welcomed his goddaughter into the Malfoy home on Christmas. He could hardly believe it and still hadn't a clue how he would possibly broach the subject with Halia. After all, what authority did he really have over her? He couldn't ban her from spending her time with scum like the Malfoy's. Even if he did, it's not as though she would abide by it – she was almost of age, after all. The only people he would trust to know the best course of action were gone.

Knowing she lied to him stung with offense, but if he knew anything at all about teenagers, it was clear he couldn't allow himself to be at odds with her. He vowed that he would be there for her and that applied now more than ever; he wasn't about to lose the only living reminder of his closest friends out of something as stupid as pride.

Glenda prods him violently with her elbow and Sirius snaps back to the present, scrambling to find his next cue card in the pile. "Well, you know what they say Glenda – you know a potion's made by E.M.L. from the smell."

His blonde cohost gapes at him in disbelief and he glances at the number in the top left corner of the card. Wrong one – shit.

On the other side of the glass, Rodney flicks his wand and Sirius' cards shuffle back in order while Glenda collapses her head on the table in dramatic exasperation: a true diva.

"I must ask, Miss Potter: why the sudden urgency to begin?" Tom places a cup of plain tea on the table near her.
"Things have been getting worse over the past couple of days."

Clearly. A quick scan of her face is all it takes to tell she's exhausted.
"In what way? More dreams?"

She nods. "I had one just before coming here. Well, sort of. I wasn't sleeping…it was sort of a vision, I guess you could say. It felt so real – like I was there."

"What was it about?"

She averts her gaze and picks at her nails. "It was related to something someone told me about my parents."

Couldn't be any more vague if she tried, could she?

"Miss Potter…If you'd like me to help you, I'm going to need a bit more to go from."

"I know," she sighs.

"Would it possibly be easier to show me, rather than tell me? I was thinking that Legilimency might be a good starting poi—"

"You're a Legilimens?" she interrupts, looking up at him in awe. "I mean, not that you couldn't be – obviously you're a really good wizard. It's just…I thought it took years to master."

"It does, in most cases." He smirks despite himself.

Her eyebrow quirks up and she shoots back a smirk of her own, the weariness of her face brightening a little. "You fancy yourself quite exceptional, then?"
It catches him a bit off-guard, but the smartass comment doesn't bother him as much as he expects it to. "You may form your own opinion, Miss Potter – I trust that you will have no problem doing so, given that you seem to know a thing or two about being exceptional yourself."

The sprawling redness on her cheeks just barely visible over her teacup as she takes a sip. It's not untrue and he's happy to flatter her if it means getting closer to her secrets.

"At any rate, Legilimency in its full power may be able to detect incongruities in your thoughts that you might not even notice. Are you willing to try it?"

She nods hesitantly. "I suppose."

"Physical contact often strengthens the effects, so if I may…" he rolls up the sleeves of his shirt to his forearms and gestures to her temples. She nods once again in understanding and moves to sit on the edge of her chair. "If at any point we encounter something that you do not wish me to see, simply imagine a door closing in front of it."

"Alright." She looks rather terrified.

He smiles in an attempt to be comforting and brings his fingers to rest on the side of her face. "Close your eyes. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Legimens," he whispers and shuts his eyes as well.

Potter shivers slightly when he enters her mind, but seems to acclimate to the sensation faster than he anticipated. With her thoughts floating about in his mind's eye, it's incredibly tempting to flip through every single one of them; he doesn't have the chance to flex his full Legilimency powers every day, after all. Yet he somehow manages to restrain himself…it would be unwise to allow his eagerness to go unchecked and shatter any façade of trust he managed to build with her.

"Now then," he prompts her before he has the chance to get carried away, "Who told you what about your parents? And when did this happen?"

The Malfoy party comes spinning into view and everything's a blur for a bit. He sees her speaking to Blaise Zabini, then Draco, then Cornelia Rosier, and finally Draco again. He feels a rush of her embarrassment at the sight of her snogging Malfoy in some unknown room of the manor. But before he can even begin to gather his thoughts, they're lost when her mind skips again and she's standing in a dark forest with none other than Regulus Black.

Tom's blood courses in excitement and he can hardly focus on a word that Regulus tells her, but he somehow succeeds in catching the gist.

There's no way he could have possibly guessed this, probably because the thought of Unspeakables working in the field is just as unprecedented as the idea that some are couples with children.

It exceeds even his wildest imagination, but it does make sense. He's met magical ambassadors, after all, and typically their work wouldn't expose them to the vast variety of magic that Halia Potter has exhibited knowledge of.

He exits her mind before she has the chance to sense his elation. "Do you believe that what Regulus Black told you is true?"

"Well, you heard him. What reason does he have to lie? And my vision – the one I had today, was
from when I was a little girl and my parents took me to the Department for a meeting or something. I walked around the Hall of Prophecy waiting for them."

At that, he has to bite back a laugh. There she was, sitting in his office as plain as day, describing a stroll through the bloody Hall of Prophecy. What good deed had he ever done to deserve this? Until now, he had all but given up on gaining any information whatsoever from the Department of Mysteries. It is called the Department of Mysteries for a reason, after all.

Regulus, who happened to be one of Tom's old mates from Hogwarts, had once told him over a few beers that one couldn't simply torture information out of Unspeakables as the Department directly controls which bits of information their employees are allowed to share. Regulus also told him that, upon joining the Department, all Unspeakables undergo some sort of an operation that would grant them a special sort of memory-space that exists separately from the main repository. This protected sensitive information from being detected by Legilimency or any other means of memory retrieval, as well as Obliviation. It's not just Mind Magic – it's magic that alters the consciousness, the soul. The sort of magic that only something as powerful as the Department of Mysteries could create.

Perhaps Halia Potter has a memory-space, too, and that's why he can't access some of her dreams and memories – maybe it was a condition of the Department if James and Lily Potter intended to travel with their daughter.

But that doesn't explain why she cannot access her memories. What if the Department sealed it? For her protection, or for the protection of whatever information it contained? Or, perhaps Regulus was right – perhaps her parents' death wasn't as simple as it looked and she knew more about it that she was supposed to.

Regardless, it's clear from her scattered dreams and memories that the walls of her memory-space are threatening to break down. It could happen, anyway, for any number of reasons. Maybe she's holding on to those memories of her parents so closely that they're being pulled through. Maybe the Department of Mysteries just botched the charm.

If he is correct, all he has to do is keep her close an wait for the rest of the memory charm to fail. And perhaps he could find a few ways to speed up the process…

Somehow he maintains his composure sufficiently to tell her, "If your parents truly worked for the Department of Mysteries, there is a considerable possibility that someone tampered with your memories upon the death of your parents in order to protect you and any sensitive information you might have gained in your travels."

She looks a bit pale all of a sudden. "Do you really think that's what happened?"

"Possibly. It does appear that you are showing symptoms of memory charm breakdown. But if this is the case and it is a Department of Mysteries-level charm, Legilimency will be worthless in regaining your memories. It is quite likely that we would need to resort to lesser known, and quite possibly riskier forms of magic."

"Dark magic, you mean?"

"Yes, Miss Potter... Dark magic." He folds his hands in his lap and gazes calmly at her. "So you must ask yourself: what lengths are you willing to go to know the truth?"

"I'd do anything," she breathes without a moment's hesitation.

"Then I suspect we will be seeing much more of each other." This is going so unbelievably well that
he can't resist flashing her a small smile. "While we're on the topic, I should mention that you will find my opinion regarding the Dark Arts far more open-minded than those of other professors. It could create quite a stir if they learned of the methods we may have to employ. You have put your trust in me, Miss Potter – is it fair to assume that in return I may place my trust in you?"

Inexplicably, his request doesn't even seem to faze her as she grins back at him. "Of course."

*Tom Riddle, you lucky bastard.*

-xx-
March, 1997

The first day of spring arrives on a sunny Saturday, which is a pleasant change from the snow and sleet Halia spent all winter jogging through. The grounds are certainly beginning to look the part, with its budding trees and dew-covered grass that grows taller and bouncier beneath her feet each day.

She particularly missed her father in the fall, when Quidditch practices first began, but everything about spring was her mother's.

Despite feeling rather optimistic because of this shift in the seasons, it has yet to dull the contempt she's built up against the Department of Mysteries for robbing something so precious from her. Sure, it was probably just standard procedure, but that doesn't make it fair. And though her dreams have become a bit clearer, anything meaningful remains frustratingly out of reach despite the many methods she and Professor Riddle have explored during their weekly meetings.

Well, as far as she can tell, anyway. One significant issue with memory recovery is that it is nearly impossible to differentiate between what she's always known and what she's just remembering. It's becoming harder and harder to stay grounded, especially with the headaches, dreams, and racing thoughts occurring more frequently.

But maybe it's a good thing that she feels as though she's going mad half of the time – maybe it means she's getting closer to the truth.

Of course, with the increase in her symptoms came an all-time high in her drug use to deal with them. It also seemed like a better alternative than contacting St. Mungo's for a prescriptive potion that could alarm the Department of Mysteries or, even worse, Sirius.

Blaise is now her main supplier, since Fred and George remained rather cold toward her even after she mustered up the courage to apologize for missing Christmas with their family. In fact, between her falling out with the twins, being ignored by all of the Slytherin girls because of Pansy's jealousy (with the fortunate exception of Daphne), and avoiding Draco after he made it clear he expected to get a snog from her on the regular, Halia doesn't have much of a social life at all.

But that's fine – and nothing particularly new. She's accustomed to moving around and leaving acquaintances behind her rather than lifelong friendships (as far as she can recall, at least) and has enough on her mind that thoughts of loneliness can rarely get close enough to scratch the surface anyway.
The end of her morning run consists of an all-out sprint down the creaky dock of the Black Lake and she doubles over, gasping for breath, just as her foot reaches the last plank. An odd feeling of being watched prickles in the back of her head while she recovers and stretches her legs, but the misty grounds and mostly-darkened windows of the immense castle are completely empty when she twists around to look.

Great: not only is she turning into a nutter, she's turning into a paranoid nutter. It's clear that something's got to give – soon – as much as she enjoys spending Saturday evenings with Professor Perfect.

She skips breakfast and takes a quick lavender-infused bath in the luxurious, marble-covered bathroom designated for Prefects. Draco had given her the password during one of their snogging sessions a few weeks ago, probably in hopes that he could sneak into the girls' side and catch a glimpse of her at some point. But he hasn't, thanks to the Invisibility Cloak she received on Christmas.

Her dormmates are out when she returns to the dungeons and while it's tempting to do fuck all for a couple of hours until Apparition lessons, putting off her ever-growing pile of class assignments until after her meeting with Professor Riddle that evening would be a mistake. She's never quite sure how whatever method they attempt will affect her; last Sunday, for instance, she spent the majority of the morning getting sick in the far less aesthetically-pleasing bathroom attached to her dormitory. Of course, she doesn't dare breathe a word of this to Riddle in fear of giving him a reason to call it all off.

And so, she embarks on a feeble attempt to complete her Transfigurations homework regarding Animagi, managing to write one paragraph before deciding she's earned a break to rest her ever-tired eyes.

The next thing she knows, she's twitching violently as Daphne nudges her shoulder to rouse her. "Halia! You're going to be late to Apparition lessons."

She tilts her neck from side to side to try and relieve the sudden tightness and grimaces at the oval of drool staining dead-center on her Transfigurations text. According to her watch, she's been out for over two hours. "So are you."

"I know. I lost track of time in the library." Daphne crosses her arms and eyes her with an expression lingering somewhere between concern and pity. "You were talking in your sleep again."

Halia wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. "Anything interesting?"

Hopefully not too interesting – she doesn't want to put one of the few classmates that will actually speak to her in danger in case the Department of Mysteries catches on to the fact that she's regaining her memories.

"Not really. You were just babbling about some curse or something – may as well have been another day in Defense Against the Dark Arts." They exit the dormitory and begin strolling through the quiet common room.

She winces. "Am I really that bad?"

At least Professor Riddle didn't seem to mind anymore.

"If you could see Granger's face every time you beat her to answering a question, you'd know," Daphne laughs. "But I don't care, as long as you stop doing whatever it is that's encouraging Snape
to mark off random points on our potions."

"Fair enough." It's easier said than done, but she's earned enough detentions from Professor Prick by now to know that the only way she'll get by in his class is by being as invisible as possible.

Their pace slows as they approach the Great Hall. "Just to warn you…Pierre LeBlanc was in Witch Weekly again and gave a quote about his now-fiancé, saying they were dating for a year and half before he proposed." Daphne glances at her in amusement. "I'm assuming that means the two of you were never actually together."

"Nope." Honestly, she doesn't even have enough energy to fake a bit of shame anymore.

"Well, be prepared for the fact that she'll never let you forget it. She hates you, you know…she thinks that you're the reason she and Draco broke up."

"She can hate me all she wants," Halia shrugs. "Though I suppose that makes you public enemy number two."

"So what? She's awful. Last week, she told Astoria that her new haircut makes her look like Crabbe."

"Remember the Three D's, people!" Wilkie Twycross, their designated Apparition teacher from the Ministry, is telling the other sixth years while she and Daphne skirt around the edge of the crowd and sit near the back. "Destination! Determination! Deliberation!" He claps once with each word, as though this is somehow motivating.

It's not. They're in week five of lessons and Halia has yet to learn anything beyond this irritatingly vague phrase.

Given his instructional style, there's little wonder why the splinching rate is so high among wizards and witches her age. Not that the Ministry does much about it…like last year, when George lost his ear while taking his test. St. Mungo's was able to grow him a new one, but still. She's lucky that her seventeenth birthday won't come until July and that she can put off her test until then.

She grins and Daphne and mutters, "I can't believe we made it in late without getting det--"

"Detention, Potter," the low, monotone voice of Professor Snape drones from the shadowy corner behind them.

Damn it.

-xx-

"Level 9, Department of Mysteries," the smooth, inhumanly calm voice of the lift announces.

Regulus steps off and through the grayish-blue illuminated archway that marks the entrance to the Department.

Alright.

His office should be two left turns, one right, and another two lefts. Or is it two rights? He's worked here for nearly six years, and it's still fucking impossible to find his way around because of the regularly shifting corridors. One time he spent over three hours searching until Bode, the Head of the Department, decided to tell him that his office had been temporarily removed from the Department because he wouldn't be needing it for his next assignment.
Two lefts. One right. Two –

Wait a second, why is that door propped open?

He reaches out to close it and feels the rolled-up sleeve of his cloak tugging down toward his wrist. Before he can even think about retreating, the door swings wide open and he's sucked in by the massive force of a collapsing star.

*Shit.* Not again.

In a motion so fast that it could only be explained as a survival mechanism, he manages to draw his wand from his billowing robes and aims it at the door that is already so far away he can hardly make out its rectangular outline against the fading stars.

*Sufflamino!*

Regulus slows to a halt just as he feels the small dark hairs on his knuckles beginning to singe in the heat and is suspended just long enough to take a deep breath of relief before the spell counters the force of the star and begins pulling him back toward the door. He crashes against the wall of the dark corridor and flicks his wand to slam the door behind him before spending a few precious moments resting in a slightly sweaty heap on the floor.

When the miraculous fact that he's still alive finally seems to sink in again, he storms down another six corridors into the Department lounge, where four of his fellow Unspeakables are leisurely enjoying a cup of coffee, courtesy of their office plant which grew at least a hundred varieties of both tea leaves and coffee beans. Sadly enough, creating this demented-looking shrub was how their last intern spent his entire summer in the Department.

That's right, Britain: your tax dollars hard at work.

"Which one of you incompetent wankers keeps leaving the door to the Space Chamber open?!" Regulus barks at them. "It's a great fucking way to get the WOS people on our asses again." Not that it matters, of course; the Department failed its last hundred and seventy two Wizarding Occupational Safety audits.

"Sorry Reg – couldn't tell you," Rookwood grins.

Yeah. *That* one never gets old.

When he finally arrives at his office, there is a manila folder waiting for him with the day's orders.

Please, Merlin, *please* don't let it be another one…

*Target Name: Justus Brown*

*Immediate Relatives: Claire (wife), Lavender (daughter)*

*Occupation: Magizoologist*

*Employer …*

Sigh.

There are lots of things nobody tells you before you sign your soul to the Department of Mysteries. For instance, you could be exploring the complexities of time and space one day and become an assassin to fulfill the Minister's selfish motives on the next.
But hey, at the very least St. Mungo's has a cure for the poison now. He definitely owes Snape and Slughorn for that one.

He lights a cigarette, and then another. He spins in his chair for an hour or two. He tries to eat lunch, but loses his appetite after a couple bites. He contemplates going home to wait until nightfall, but he doesn't. It seems like a poor idea to blur the lines between his work life and real life.

Much later, when the clock reads one minute past eight, he lights his last cigarette. Like every other night, he flicks his wand to switch on the radio.

"– thank you for listening in with WWN's Witching Hour. This is Sirius Black with the Floo Network traffic report…"

Yes, there are many things nobody tells you before you sign your soul to the Department of Mysteries. You will have the opportunity to witness the unimaginable and taste knowledge in its truest form, but in return you'll adopt a life built entirely on lies. An existence in the shadows.

Of all his sacrifices, Sirius is likely the most noteworthy. The first page of his Department contract outlined that he maintain good relations with the Black's and from the moment he signed, it was clear that things with his brother would never be the same.

But would he choose differently if given the chance? Maybe the sentimental side of him likes to think so. The truth of the matter is far simpler:

Never.

-xx-

After three knocks with no answer, Halia lets herself into Professor Riddle's office and sees him sitting on the floor, leaning up against a bookshelf with his long legs sprawled out and crossed at the ankle. He's hovering over a steaming brass cauldron with such concentration that he apparently didn't notice her entry.

She crosses the room, tossing her bag and black Hogwarts robe in the chair opposite his desk, and joins him on the floor. "What are we trying today?" she asks, peering into the cauldron which is filled with a simmering indigo liquid that smells a bit like rotten fish.

The professor's intent gaze on the potion never falters as he holds up a finger to quiet her. He sits impossibly still for at least another minute, during which Halia fidgets with a dry patch of skin on her palm. She's just about to open her mouth again when he tips in a small vial of a sand-like substance, tapping the glass with a long finger until every last grain is added.

Finally, his dark eyes snap up to hers. "My apologies, Miss Potter – this potion requires precise timing in order to brew properly. It is known as the Elixir of Evincement. Have you heard of it?"

"Nope."

Actually, she has (though from where she is irritatingly unsure), but she likes when he explains things. He's a natural teacher and she can see his passion whenever he tells her about some obscure potion, spell, or other means of manipulating magic; it's obvious that he sees such a beauty in it. She likes watching his eyes brighten and hearing his speech quicken as he gets caught up in it all and abandons the rather reserved, stoic side of him she sees every day in class.

Merlin help her, he's fit. And there's nothing wrong with looking, right? Well, so long as he stays true to his word and doesn't scan her thoughts without her permission, anyway…
He's about three-fourths of the way through his whirlwind explanation when a sharp knock at the door brings it to an abrupt end. He scowls slightly (unsurprising, given that he hates being interrupted) and stands, brushing off the dust from his trousers.

When he answers the door, he opens it just far enough so that his body blocks the source of their interruption from seeing into the office. She isn't sure which he feels more compelled to hide: the rather Dark and potentially illegal potion they're brewing, or the fact that he's helping her.

"Good evening, Poppy." Despite Professor Riddle's apparent annoyance, his voice is as deep and silky as always. "Can I help you with something?"

"Evening, Tom. I was hoping you would be willing to help in the Infirmary for a few minutes. Kirke from Gryffindor was hit with a stubborn Babbling Curse and he's disturbing the other patients..."

Halia's never heard his first name before.

Tom. Tom Riddle.

She mentally adds that to the list of things she knows about him: he has a giant pet snake named Nagini, he's one of the youngest yet most qualified professors at Hogwarts, he has a particular penchant for the Dark Arts, he enjoys traveling on his summer holiday, and he takes his tea the same way that she does: plain, and slightly over-steeped.

Until now, this list has remained entirely stagnant since her first couple of visits to his office.

"Of course," he tells the Hogwarts matron. "I'll be down shortly."

Madam Pomfrey leaves and he glances down to where Halia is still sitting on the floor with a small sigh. "You'll have to wait here and watch the potion... Thankfully, the difficult part is over. Just make sure to stir it occasionally so it doesn't boil over. I won't be long."

It feels strange to be alone in his office and she can hardly believe that he didn't make her wait in the adjoining Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom since the potion doesn't seem to be doing much of anything, anyway. But she's not complaining.

Her legs begin to tingle with the threat of falling asleep and she stands to stretch, strolling over to the long, towering bookcases which are packed from floor to ceiling with texts covering just about any form of magic one could think of.

She runs her fingers over a few of the titles and thinks of several weeks ago, when she had made a joke about how many lifetimes it would take him to read all of them cover to cover. Of course, this was entirely lost on him and he informed her that what she saw in his office didn't even make up half of his collection; the rest, apparently, he kept at his home.

Obviously, he needs a new hobby.

Halia takes another glimpse at the cauldron to ensure that it is still simmering peacefully and then continues her trip around his office. Books, books, and more books. There is little decoration to speak of and the furnishings such as his desk are simple, yet tasteful.

Ah – his desk!

A smile plays on her lips as she impulsively crosses the room and plops down in his leather chair, spinning around a few times. When it comes to a stop, she's directly facing his desk which features several compartments, each of which are outfitted with a lock.
It occurs to her several times that this is a terrible idea, but she feels like a child who just found their stash of presents the week before Christmas. "You won't tell on me, will you?" She smirks at Nagini, who is curled up on the window seat watching her closely.

Halia tries a few different unlocking charms— including some less common ones— on each of the drawers, but to no avail. Nagini hisses at her as she tries the last spell she can think of; miraculously, one of the locks clicks open.

The majority of the drawer consists of files of ungraded student assignments divided by year in magically consolidating folders, but on the very bottom is an eighth, unmarked file. Halia digs it out and flips it open, immediately recognizing Professor Riddle's tidy cursive on what appears to be a title page:

A Proposal for the Evaluation and Revision of Educational Standards at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable.

When Tom opens the door to his office, Potter is lounging comfortably in his chair with her feet propped up on his desk and the bright blue potion he spent over an hour brewing has boiled over onto the rug.

For fuck's sake – he wasn't even gone fifteen minutes.

He grits his teeth and crosses the room silently. His anger quickly becomes clouded with panic, however, when he gets close enough to see that she's reading his unfinished education proposal, apparently engrossed enough in it that she didn't even hear him come in. He circles behind the chair and leans down, snatching it abruptly out of her hands, and she yelps, nearly falling out of the chair.

"Fucking hell, you scared the shit out of me!" She clutches her chest.

"Well pardon me, Miss Potter," he snarls, livid enough that a few curses to punish her flitter across his mind.

She glances up at him, paling slightly at his menacing expression. "I…I was just…"

"What, pray tell, is wrong with you? Did you never learn to respect someone's privacy?" He scowls at her. How did she even manage to unlock his desk in the first place?

"I'm really sorry, I don't know what I was thinking." She jumps out of his chair, her face beet red.

"Not to mention you've completely ruined the potion that I spent most of the evening brewing." He narrows his eyes even further. He should have guessed that, despite her remarkable knowledge, she wouldn't be any more mature than the other dunderheads in her year.

Her mouth forms a shocked 'o' as she glances over to the capsized cauldron. "I was watching it. For the majority of the time it wasn't even doing anything…"

"So you took that as an invitation to help yourself to my personal files, then? Did you see that as a fitting way to repay me for helping you?"

"No. I…I'm sorry." He's never seen her this flustered before, which might be entertaining if he wasn't so furious. "And I'll clean this up right away."
She performs a few cleaning spells while he takes a seat at his desk and shuffles through the pages of his reform, which she's scrambled all out of order. When she's finished, she lingers in front of his desk rather awkwardly.

"You can go now," he tells her coldly. Thanks to her, they'll clearly have to chalk tonight up as a complete waste of time.

"Right. I'm sorry. This won't happen again..." She twists her fingers together anxiously. "Are you... are you still going to help me?"

In his anger, it sounds incredibly satisfying to say 'no' and crush her spirits entirely. But he can't, of course, not with what he now knows about her past. The promise of discovering more about the Department of Mysteries is too valuable to sacrifice, even if playing the part of savior is so goddamn exhausting.

"Though I am still willing to help you, there is obviously little we will accomplish this evening as the method I planned is now compromised."

No Legilimency is required to sense her relief. "I understand...thank you." She turns to leave, but then stops and looks at him, tipping her chin in the direction of the papers. "It's really quite good. Well, from what I could read anyway. Are you presenting it to the Ministry?"

It comes as a bit of a surprise that she has the nerve to bring it up again in addition to the fact that she actually seems interested. "I will present it to the Hogwarts Board of Governors in April, and then the Ministry if all goes well."

"That's brilliant," she gives him a small smile. "Could I hear more of it sometime?"

What is this, some attempt to get back in good favor with him? "I think it is best that we continue to use our weekly meetings wisely," he answers shortly.

"Well, what about tonight, then? I was at the bit where you were discussing the subjects that should undergo a curriculum review...have you thought about adding the Ministry-implemented courses to the list? Apparition with Twycross has been awful."

He hadn't thought of that, to be honest, and her persistence to discuss it catches him off-guard, dulling his temper slightly. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt for her to take a look at it...if she was really this interested.

"You may read it, if you wish," he extends his arm to hand it over, but then she eyes it with disappointment.

"You aren't going to present it to me? Don't you want to practice for the Board meeting?"

Does she have any idea how exasperating she can be?

And quite...unusual, too. He doesn't have the first clue what girls her age think of--probably some mind-numbing blend of boys and the contents of the gossip columns in Witch Weekly if he had to guess--but it's apparent enough that she's not normal. Not totally unlike himself, she's somewhat of an anomaly.

Perhaps she had a point -- it wasn't that bad of an idea for him to read it aloud to someone other than himself before the meeting. It's only a few weeks away, after all. And he certainly doesn't need to worry about her babbling about it to any of her little friends, given how terrified she clearly is to cross him and lose her best chance at regaining her memories.
"Where shall we begin?" He gestures for her to take a seat and she claps her hands together excitedly.

"From the beginning? Pretend I'm on the Hogwarts Board and haven't read any of it."

…Definitely unusual.

"Alright..." he sets the draft aside and clears his throat. "As you are aware, Hogwarts' average O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores have been relatively stable over the past decade or so. This appears positive on the surface, but according to a recent study by the International Confederation of Wizards, the difficulty of the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams have failed to keep pace with their international equivalents. Thus, the standards of Hogwarts are increasingly falling behind those of similarly prestigious wizarding institutions. Immediate action on the part of Hogwarts as well as the Ministry of Magic is warranted to ensure the reputation of the school is upheld."

He pauses and contrary to what he expects based on the short attention span she's displayed in his class, she still appears to be listening. Not only that: she's sitting, quite literally, on the edge of her seat.

"And what actions do you propose to accomplish this, Professor Riddle?" she prompts.

"The highest priority would be to establish a collaborative committee of Ministry officials and Hogwarts staff that will conduct an internal audit of the quality of Hogwarts' courses. Then they will construct a plan to rectify each shortfall, based upon Ministry research and practices of comparable wizarding institutions. This might include alterations in course staff or curriculum as well as general Hogwarts policy changes."

She nods and continues gazing at him intently. Slowly, the uncomfortable tension between them from earlier melts away as he begins to get caught up in his own words.

"Finally, the committee should consider establishing new courses for the areas of magical instruction in which Hogwarts lacks. For example, a Dark Arts curriculum would allow our students to keep pace with institutions such as Durmstrang and Uagadou, both of which send far more graduates into technical fields like curse-breaking."

"Would you, hypothetically, be teaching Dark Arts then?"

He smirks slightly. "I do believe that I possess the appropriate qualifications to design an effective Dark Arts curriculum."

She smooths down her skirt and folds her hands in her lap. "My apologies, Professor, but I have not had the opportunity to read your proposal in its entirety – would you mind presenting those details now, as well as the specifics of what you might include in a Dark Arts course?"

Surprisingly enough, she seems to be taking this little simulation of theirs quite seriously. He launches further into the details, expecting her attention to wane. But it doesn't seem to (if anything, she's gazing up at him in near-awe), so he keeps going. Perhaps she's a bit more mature than he gave her credit for after all.

At some point, he stands and begins pacing around the room with his hands clasped behind his back, almost forgetting that she was there. It occurs to him then that he has never actually told anyone else about the intricacies of his plans for a Dark Arts course at Hogwarts. But there's little wonder why: the list of individuals who could actually appreciate the subject as much as he did is depressingly short. In fact, Potter– with her inexplicable amount of worldly knowledge– seems most likely to
When he finally finishes, she leans forward and folds her hands together on his desk. "Thank you for your insights, Professor Riddle. Shall we take a vote? All those in favor of enacting this proposal...?" She raises her hand and then looks around her, as though counting the hands at a table of imaginary Board of Governors members. Then her gaze meets his once more and she grins. "Well, look at that – it's unanimous."

For some reason, he finds himself smiling back at her. "Thank you for telling me – it is brilliant," she tells him, abruptly abandoning her Board member persona. "But I think you could make a few improvements..."

He wasn't expecting this but maybe he should have, knowing how much of an insufferable smartass she could be at times.

"...For instance, if you added aspects of Aurology or Alchemy to your potential Dark Arts curriculum, it might be an easier sell as those studies are much more widely accepted here."

Well, she does have a point. "Perhaps," he says noncommittally, while making a mental note to add in Aurology and Alchemy among other subjects with Dark Arts overlap.

"Do you think that you'll be able to establish the class next year if the proposal is approved by the Ministry?"

"It is possible, but unlikely." That would require having the entire staff on his side, which seemed unrealistic given the current headmaster and political climate.

"I see," Potter frowns slightly in apparent disappointment. "I'd love to take it, if I could...From what I can remember seeing with my parents, there are lots of aspects of magic that Hogwarts doesn't teach. I mean, I get that they don't want the same reputation as Durmstrang, but it's sort of unfortunate that we're stuck in classes like History of Magic when that time could be spent learning something useful."

He couldn't have said it better himself and for a moment, all he can do is stare at her in disbelief. His job would be so much easier if everyone else thought the way they did.

"I can certainly appreciate your frustrations, Miss Potter. Many of the same thoughts occurred to me during my years as a student. Hopefully, this will provide a solution for future Hogwarts' students," he gestures to his proposal, "But in your case, I should advise you that there is a wealth of knowledge at Hogwarts, so long as you know where to look."

She crosses her arms and raises a suspicious eyebrow. "You're talking about books again, aren't you?"

"You have something against books?" he smirks at her in amusement.

She shrugs. "Experience is always going to beat out learning theory."

It's not that he disagrees, but how pretentious – as though her fanciful childhood of wandering about with Unspeakables for parents is the norm.

"I suppose not everyone is capable of the dedication textbook learning requires in order to be successful," he sneers.
She doesn’t skip a beat before firing back, "Well, as you know, books are also wrong at times."

"Say what you will," he shrugs, "But I wouldn't be here without them."

Her green eyes gleam, and she sits back in her chair. "Oh, I see – I thought it was because you’re so exceptional. The fact that you just read a lot makes far more sense."

Hundreds of retorts swirl on the tip of his tongue to wipe that content smirk off her face, but none of them feel sufficient.

A battle of wits does not often end in his defeat, and this is more than enough to leave his mind stunned silent momentarily.

Unusual. That's one way of putting it, though perhaps 'remarkable' is more suitable. In a growing number of ways, she rather reminds him of his younger self.

"Well, as you seem to be so opposed to learning from the experience of others, I can only hope that you find our meetings somewhat enriching," he finds himself telling her. "If there is something else you'd like to explore, even if it is unrelated to regaining your memories, feel free to bring it up – perhaps we could make an effort to fit in a lesson or two on another subject."

Her eyes widen in surprise for a second, but then she smiles. "I'd like that. And it might be nice to have a break from the memory stuff now and then…it can be pretty intense."

He knows this from the regular Legilimency he performs on her – not that he would let it stop him from pushing her further in the name of progress. In fact, he swore that he wouldn't allow anything to get in the way of unraveling her secrets.

But teaching her other aspects of magic (hopefully Dark Arts-related) was different, because it fulfilled another purpose by allowing him to impart some of his more advanced knowledge. It is why he became a professor, after all, and perhaps teaching Potter would provide an opportunity of trial and error he could use to tailor his future curriculum.

"Sorry." The raven-haired girl suddenly yawns and stretches, which prompts him to check the time.

Fucking hell– nearly midnight? How did that happen?

"I should be the one to apologize, Miss Potter, as I seem to have completely lost track of time. I'll write you a note excusing you from curfew."

Apparently they're all apologies; as she slips on her cloak, she says, "I'm sorry again for earlier."

Surprisingly enough, he had all but forgotten his earlier anger until now. "I trust that it won't happen again," he tells her while walking her out of his office.

"It won't." She smiles, her fingers drumming on the doorknob. "Anyway…goodnight, Sir."

"Sleep well, Miss Potter."

Hopefully well enough that she'll have another dream about the Department of Mysteries to discuss with him next time they meet, anyway.

After she leaves, he marks a few notes on his proposal and returns it to his desk drawer. "Lock," he commands in Parseltongue. This reminds him: how did Potter get into his desk in the first place? She must know a particularly strong unlocking charm if it could get around the requirement for
Parseltongue he set up.

Unless…

Tom glances up at Nagini, who had been watching them quietly all evening. "Did you open this for her?"

"You seemed to enjoy that almost as much as she did. Humans are such bizarre creatures."

Apparently, that's a yes.

"I have no idea what you're talking about – traitor."

He tosses her a glare, but finds himself smirk involuntarily as he turns his back to her and starts up the stairs to his living quarters. To say that he enjoyed the evening seemed a bit strong, but it certainly wasn't the worst he's had either. There were a few pleasant surprises in regard to Potter's interest in politics and capabilities in sarcastic banter – that's all.

Alright, maybe it was a little enjoyable.

-xx-

Tom is not accustomed to dreaming while he sleeps, but that night he does. Only, he's fairly sure this is not his dream…

He's standing in the corner of a room which contains two desk spaces, one of which is meticulously organized and the other is overflowing with unfiled papers and variety of knickknacks. He recognizes some of these as objects tightly regulated by the Ministry, but many of them he's never seen before.

This is his first clue that he is not in his own dream: when he reaches out to pick up a small copper piece holding what appears to be a human eye, his fingers pass cleanly through it as though he is a ghost.

Then the doorknob turns and in walks none other than Halia Potter along with a man and woman who must be her parents based on her obvious resemblance to each of them. He recognizes Halia's features in the woman's soft face and striking green eyes as well as the man's dark hair and tall, slim build. Tom watches them curiously as they settle in, slipping off their cloaks as the man who he assumes to be James Potter laughs with Halia over the end of a story involving a poffle of Puffskeins.

It slowly clicks into place that this isn't his dream at all: it's one of Potter's memories.

Before he can even ask himself how in the hell this is happening, his eyes snap in the direction of a gold-plated time-turner that Lily Potter holds up while sending a fiery glare at her husband. "I thought I asked you to return this to Croaker before we left for Greece."

"I will, I will," James waves her off; it's fairly obvious where their daughter inherited her general lack of responsibility from.

"So…where are we going next?" Halia lounges at the messier of the two desks quite similarly to the way Tom found her lounging at his earlier that very evening.

Her father flips open the folder he's carrying and Tom cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of the sheet. It's entirely blank (perhaps because Halia had no memory of its contents in the first place) except for the date at the top: May 3, 1997 – just under three months before her parents' death.
"Looks like we're here until the end of June, love. There's no destination for our next assignment yet."

"Good – I'm ready to be home for a while! We can finally get to work planting the garden," Lily Potter grins and pinches Halia's arm.

"Yard work – hooray," the teenager sighs and crosses her arms.

Tom smirks; he can't particularly blame her for finding travel with her Unspeakable parents more exciting than gardening.

James seems to ignore them both as his eyes continue scanning the file, the muscles of his face tightening. He glances up a few moments later and picks up the time-turner, tossing it to Halia. "Will you return this to the Time Room? I need to talk to Mum for a bit."

The Time Room? _That_ sounds intriguing.

"Alright," Halia hops out of the chair and drapes it around her neck.

Tom strolls behind her down the disappointingly bare corridors of identical doors while she hums quietly to herself and trails her fingers along the stone wall.

_How is this happening?_ Just earlier today he had been discouraged at their lack of progress in unearthing her memories over the last two months. And yet, this sudden and apparently random development went beyond anything he ever had the optimism to hope for. But it couldn't be _random_ – clearly, the methods he tried with her were far more effective than he originally thought. Maybe this was a side effect of delving so far into her mind.

Regardless, he's not complaining.

They round a few corners before she stops abruptly at a door on the left; it's obvious she knows her way around quite well, which comes as a bit of a surprise given how frequently she gets lost around Hogwarts.

She knocks three times and calls: "Professor Croaker?" When nobody responds, lets herself in.

Tom hears the unsynchronized ticking even before he follows her inside. Every free inch of wall space is covered by clocks and the shimmering light from an oversized bell jar casts brilliant patterns of light around the room. Upon closer inspection, it appears to contain a small bird oscillating between birth and old age as rhythmically as the ticking clocks around them.

_Fascinating._

He has to remind himself to breathe and just barely manages to tear his eyes away to find Halia once more. In a u-shape around the perimeter, there are glass cases lined with blue velvet like one might find in a jewelry store. Inside are three neat rows of time-turners and he watches her delicately return the borrowed one, completing the collection.

She doesn't even take another glance around before heading to the door because apparently, this was just another day for her. Part of him loathes her for her naivety, for failing to appreciate the extraordinary wonders that surrounded her on a daily basis. But perhaps their daily occurrence was the problem: she was spoiled by grandeur in overabundance. He, on the other hand, could spend hours– if not days or weeks– just in this one room.

But clearly, that wasn't going to happen. Just as Halia reaches the door, his vision grows splotchy
and when he opens his eyes again he's back in his living quarters at Hogwarts.

He sits straight up in bed and instantly reaches for his wand "Lumos."

Nagini hisses in irritation at the light, but he quickly slips into his office and begins rummaging for a spare piece of parchment and quill. Details from the dream are already slipping away and he frantically jots down everything he can remember, as well as a quick sketch of the Time Room. When he's finished, he sits back and gazes at it all in satisfaction, hoping desperately to any higher power in existence that this is only a taste of what is yet to come.

-xx-

"Well, Ariana, please tell me you have good news for me: do you know who the horcrux belongs to?"

"Yes," she answers coolly, gazing out her room's single window though her eyes seem incapable of focusing on anything in particular.

He lingers so close that his breath prickles along the back of her ear. "Was I right? Is it your dear brother's?"

"If it was, you never would have obtained it in the first place," she quips automatically. "His magic will always be more powerful than yours."

"Is that so?" His booming laugh fills the chamber. "Then tell me, Ariana: if he is so almighty, then why hasn't he made even one attempt to come for you? If it would be so simple for him?"

She bites the inside of her cheek to prevent the tears that have gathered at the corners of her eyes from dripping out. She should have known better than to provoke him – again.

"Now, I have been exceptionally patient; I gave you two whole months to tell me who this belongs to. And yet, you act as though I've been sitting here torturing you the entire time. Honestly, I'm a bit offended. So you know what happens now."

Yes, of course she does.

"Look at me, Ariana."

She clenches her jaw and slowly turns to face him, just in time to see his mouth form the word, "Crucio."

For what feels like hours but probably amounts to only a few seconds, her body feels as though it is being both electrocuted and burned alive. She crumples to the floor, her gaze level with his polished black shoes.

He lifts the curse and she struggles to catch her breath, but doesn't dare move in fear that he'll see it as a challenge and decide to punish her with another bout of the Cruciatus.

"Enough games. Tell me." He swings the locket back and forth on its chain. Perhaps there is a silver lining to this after all: she will no longer be stuck in a room with this vile, depraved entity. "Who does it belong to?"

"Tom Riddle," she manages to choke out.

"Hm." Gellert cocks his head to the side and strokes the left side of his blonde moustache. "The
name doesn't sound familiar – do you have any idea who he is?"

"He is a teacher at Hogwarts." she answers honestly, resting her cheek against the filth-covered stone. There was no point in getting punished for hiding something he would so easily find out anyway.

She used to be able to withstand five Cruciatus curses in a row, but that was many years ago. She's become so frail, so easily breakable – despite everything she has endured, it's by far the most loathsome thing Gellert has done to her.

"Well, Ariana, this calls for celebration!" He turns his heel and starts away from her. "Brush yourself off and dress for dinner."

"There's something else, Gellert."

-xx-

Chapter End Notes

Things are picking up, folks! And trust me, this is only the beginning. ;D

With the addition of Regulus this chapter, I've introduced all of the POVs (probably) that I'll be using throughout the story. Which are your favorites so far?
Chapter 7

Thanks a million to those who have left comments so far! We're gonna amp up the action this chapter - hope you're ready for it. :D

April, 1997

Back in business. After class – you, me, and Tracey?

They're in the middle of Charms when she receives Zabini's note. And with that ever-present dull ache in the back of her head, nothing sounds better than spending the rest of the afternoon in a synthetic haze. She was forced to try to detox for two weeks after Blaise's idiotic supplier got caught and sent to Azkaban, making the promise of such simple relief wickedly enticing.

But her detox also coincided exactly with a marked increase in the speed she was recovering her memories, so the choice is really between having a sound mental state and learning more about the life she never knew she had.

When Professor Vector turns her attention away from the class to adjust the projector, Halia scribbles a note back to Blaise:

I'm good – you two lovebirds have fun.

Mental instability it is.

For the rest of the day, she does her best to pour her attention into her Arithmancy, Charms, and Transfiguration lectures and skips dinner to write Sirius a quick reply for the letter she received from him over the weekend. It's just past dusk when she makes the trek out to the owlery and the back of her neck pricks as though someone is watching her for the majority of it.

This is far from the first time she's had this feeling lately, so either she is inarguably a complete loon or someone is actually following her. She isn't sure which is worse.

Apparently, it's the latter because Draco Malfoy is waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs when she comes down from the owlery. "You've been avoiding me, Potter." He crosses his arms when their eyes meet and leans against the wall.

It's a statement. Not a question. Though to be fair, she has been avoiding him so there's really no point in denying it anyway.

"I've been busy - don't take it so personally," she rolls her eyes and moves to walk past him, but he grabs her wrist, gazing at her coldly.

"Well, you seem to have more than enough time to get high with Blaise every other night."
Not anymore, of course, and even if she still was there was no need for him to be jealous of it. Blaise has been dating Tracey on the low for weeks and they made Halia swear to secrecy when she walked in on them snogging so Tracey wouldn't get shunned by Pansy for dating her ex's best friend. Halia has stayed true to her word, but it baffles her that Tracey would care so much about the opinion or feelings of such a pitiful, cruel person.

But if Draco's ignorance gave her leverage, she's not about to tell him all of this. "Jealous, or something?"

"You wish," he snorts. "Actually, I have another theory as to why you've been avoiding me."

Well, this has got to be rich. "Oh yeah?" she smirks slightly. "What's that?"

"It's quite obvious, really. You're far too proud to be considered a rebound or anything like that… Believe me, I get it. I know how Pansy is about starting rumors," he smirks. "But I know you want me, Halia. Nobody has to know, if it's your reputation you're worried about."

What an arrogant little prick. He's hot and all…but seriously? He fancies himself some sort of sex god, which is half the reason she's been avoiding him in the first place. Messing around with him was fun for a while, until he began assuming she would want to snog him on his beck and call.

"Yeah…trust me, that is not the case," she sneers.

"Oh, please." He spins her around so her back is against the wall and places his arms on either side of her. "Why wouldn't you want me? Give me one decent reason."

She raises an eyebrow. "You're fairly sure of yourself for someone I haven't snogged in weeks."

He ignores her, leaning in close to say, "You've been driving me mad – aren't you satisfied? All your attempts to tease me in class..." A shiver ricochets down her spine as his breath prickles against her ear lobe. "Don't think I haven't noticed the way you wear your skirt just a little higher when I'm around."

Is he actually delusional enough to believe that's true?

"I give in, Potter," he presses his lips to her collarbone and his hands slide around her waist before dipping over her ass. "You win. I can't resist any longer."

"Draco –"

He moves even closer to her, his hardness pressing against her thigh. "I only regret that I didn't take more of an initiative sooner."

So that's what this was, then? Him taking initiative?

"Draco," she pushes his hand away when he tries to sneak it under her skirt. "Stop."

"Nobody's watching." She sees the reflection of the pink and orange dusk in his gray-blue eyes as he smirks at her. "You don't have to worry."

He kisses her on the mouth then, his hands roughly untucking her blouse. She struggles to free herself from his grasp, but he succeeds in slipping a hand under her bra. "Come on, Hals," he groans when she turns her face away from his.

"Don't ever call me that." Only her father called her 'Hals'. 
He ignores her and grinds his hips against hers.

Of all the times to forget her wand in her dormitory…Clearly a spell isn't going to save her, so when his mouth finds its way onto hers again, she bites down on his lower lip. Hard.

"What the fuck?" He withdraws for a fraction of a second, just long enough for his tongue to swipe across the blood before slaming her back against the wall with enough force to knock the breath out of her. "I'll call you whatever the fuck I want," he sneers as she coughs. "Don't you realize how lucky you are that I want you? Do you have any idea how many other girls would kill to be in your position right now? You think you're so much better than everyone else, Hals."

When she hears him unzip his trousers, she says coldly, "You really should stop before you do something you regret, Draco."

"Shut up, Potter." He twists his fingers through her long hair and yanks down. She refuses to satisfy him by making a noise out of pain, but her mouth falls open and he takes the opportunity to shove his tongue down her throat.

Well, she did warn him. With all the force she can muster, she gives him a swift knee to the bollocks: a timeless, effective defense.

"Fuck!" he screams, doubling over as she lunges for his wand.

"Phallus minimus!"

Halia catches her breath as he looks down at his shrunken manhood and then back up at her with shocked, terrified eyes.

She continues to point his wand directly at his member as she cocks her head to the side and smirks, "Huh. I'm not sure the spell worked – I don't see much of a difference, to be honest."

"You're going to pay for this, Potter," he snarls. "Just wait until my father hears about--"

"Yeah?" she snorts. "What's he going to do about it?"

"He's on the Board of Governors. He'll have you expelled. And who do you think they'll believe – you, the girl with the fucked up past that's probably just looking for attention, or me, the Prefect and star Quidditch player of Slytherin?"

"Well," says a voice behind her. "That all changes with witnesses, Malfoy. And all I saw was a bloody wanker trying an engorgement charm on his knob only to have it backfire. How about you, George?"

The other fire-haired twin strokes his chin thoughtfully. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Halia smirks at both of them and then back at Draco, his face bright red in fury. "Don't worry too much if there's nothing Madam Pomfrey can do to help." She tosses his wand at his feet. "Like I said, you can hardly tell a difference."

"Did that feel as satisfying as it was to watch?" Fred asks her when they round the corner.

"You have no idea," Halia grins. And it was satisfying, but that didn't cancel out how disturbing the whole encounter had been. She knew Draco was a prick, but had never expected him to try anything like that – it made her sick. Not even Pansy deserved someone like him.
George tugs on her elbow. "You're okay…right?"

"I am, yeah."

She suddenly feels like crying, not because of anything Malfoy did to her but because she had been idiotic enough to ditch the twins for him. And despite that, here they were, backing her up as though their falling out had never happened.

Fucking hell, she's not used to being this emotionally unstable.

Fred nods. "Good. You know, we've been developing a few new products: some trick wands, self-propelling custard pies...Maybe you could test some of them out?"

"On Malfoy, preferably," adds George.

She grins. "That sounds brilliant."

Of course, despite the Weasley's as her witnesses, the entire school had heard Draco's spin on the tale by the following Monday, which painted her as the psychotic ex-lover that lashed out when he confessed he wanted Pansy back.

She didn't care about those who were stupid enough to believe it; at least she could rest assured that another git wouldn't try her the same way Draco had. Plus, there was probably a half-truth in his version of events with the 'psychotic' bit anyway. Amazingly enough, despite all the cruelty from her Halia dealt with the moment they met, the fact that Pansy believed Draco and took him up on his offer to rekindle things is the worst bit.

Halia finds herself watching the couple in Potions on Friday, holding hands and whispering back and forth as if nothing had ever come between them. "Do you think I ought to tell Pansy?" she asks Daphne quietly while chopping the head off a Scarab beetle.

"Do you think she'll listen to you, even if you do?"

Halia shrugs and Daph gives her a doubtful look, saying "You can tell her, but she's going to be in complete denial. If she doesn't realize he's a prick by now, it's not really your fault."

Halia drops it for now, as this is exactly what she expected Daphne to say. It's very like her to avoid the sort of uncomfortable social situations that Halia would jump into face first without pause. The fact that Halia called out Pansy on day one after Daphne spent years fuming quietly about her was one of the main reasons they became friends in the first place, after all. But that's fine – just knowing Daphne's on her side is good enough.

Plus the Weasley twins.

Plus Professor Riddle, whose reaction to the whole thing was…unpredictable, to say the least.

She hadn't expected him to bring it up at all and when he did, she thought he might be asking on behalf of Dumbledore, or perhaps Draco's father who she assumed he was friendly with after seeing them speaking at the Malfoy Christmas party. Mortified, but not wanting to risk expulsion, she told him the truth while leaving out a few of the more embarrassing details.

"And then," she told him with as much pride as she could possibly hope to muster while feeling her cheeks turn pink, "I shrunk his knob."

He just stared at her for a few seconds, but then replied as evenly as always, "Well, I would wager a
guess that Mr. Malfoy won't be trying that again."

And she swore she saw the corner of his mouth twitch upward as though trying not to laugh.

She had expected him to scold her about controlling her anger or perhaps advise her that she should generally try to avoid pissing off the son of a powerful benefactor of the school. But he doesn't – instead, he bites back a laugh and then proceeds to tell her that if she would like to take it up with the Headmaster, she should.

She's positively enchanted.

-xx-

For at least the fiftieth time that morning, Grindelwald paces back and forth between each end of the dining room table while one of the kitchen elves scurries behind him with a silver tray of assorted breakfast options. He picks off a few things every so often, first a piece of sausage, then a slice of toast, and eats them while receiving his daily briefing.

Minister Grindelwald has been particularly restless these last few weeks, which is rarely a good sign; he's already unpredictable enough on a regular basis.

"Any update on the status of the Nurmengard expansion?"

"It's nearly ready," Dolohov nods. "It should be fully operational by mid-June at the latest."

"Excellent. That will align perfectly with our timeline for Russia…Have you heard from Fudge, by the way?"

Dolohov stirs a few drops of milk into his coffee and takes a long sip. "He hasn't been answering our letters, though Lucius remains optimistic that he can keep things under control for the time being."

"I do wish that filled me with more confidence…" The Minister sighs. "Perhaps I should have a word or two with Cornelius myself. I think I could get him to see reason, don't you?"

"I'm sure."

This is precisely what Dolohov wanted from the beginning, before Malfoy had to come along and stick his money in places it didn't belong – as usual.

As though the Minister is reading his thoughts (which probably is the case), he walks slowly around the table and places his strong hands on Dolohov's shoulders. "You have served me more loyally and patiently than I could have imagined…Please know that I have not forgotten why you are here."

"I know you haven't."

Grindelwald smiles calmly and takes a seat beside him. "I have been meaning to ask: you graduated with someone by the name of Tom Riddle, isn't that right?"

"I did."

Well, that was…random. Did Riddle pop onto Grindelwald's radar because of his studies in the Dark Arts? Would the Minister try to recruit him for their plans to infiltrate Russia?

The Minister rests his chin on his hand and looks at him curiously. "What was he like? Was he good in school? Top of the class, all that?"
"I should say so….He was Head Boy and managed to set half a dozen school records. He was hired on to teach just after we graduated – the youngest ever professor at Hogwarts."

Of course, that was only one side to the enigma of Tom Riddle: a rare, dangerous blend of charisma, intelligence, good looks, and ruthlessness. To Dolohov, who had always been average at best in these ways, Tom had been nothing short of an idol.

At first, his brilliance and popularity with the girls inspired incredible envy among others and earned him a fair bit of bullying. That didn't last long, however, as those foolish enough to cross him learned quite quickly he was no force to be reckoned with. In their older years, Tom led the pack consisting of Regulus, Bellatrix, and the Lestrange brothers which essentially ruled Slytherin House. He was the most twisted of them all, though the faculty never suspected anything dishonest of him.

"May I ask why you're interested, Sir?"

"He sounds like an interesting person - I like all sorts of interesting people. You know that, Dolohov." The Minister shrugs, a suspiciously mischievous look twinkling in his light blue eyes. "Anyway, I think he would very much like to hear from you. It's been a few years, yes?"

"It has," he answers hesitantly.

"Then I suppose you'll be returning to your homeland sooner than you may have anticipated."

No, this cannot be good.

-xx-

"Let me go, you fucking freaks –" The muggle that Bella's been torturing for the last hour, a businessman judging by his flashy watch and slicked-back blonde hair, has apparently regained consciousness and is struggling against his restraints once again.

"Shut up, you filth!" Bella screams, throwing a suffocation curse his way. "Can't you see we're having a moment?!

Hands down, she's most attractive to him when she's fucking crazy.

She sighs. "Anyway, as I was saying…tonight was nice, especially at dinner. I could almost call it a date." She runs a finger down his tie and gazes at him from under her heavy eyelids. "Are you turning soft on me, Riddle?"

The longing behind her words is not lost on him. At twenty-four, she's a bit old for an unmarried pureblood woman. But domestics held no appeal for him; he saw it only as a distraction, a drain on his precious time and energy. This arrangement with Bellatrix began out of necessity more than anything else in their last couple of years at Hogwarts.

He saw sex as a challenge in those days, something new to learn and conquer, and he skipped hours of rounds as a Prefect and then Head Boy to spend late nights with her in the Room of Requirement. But as with any other puzzle he bored easily, and things naturally escalated from there. Her sadistic tendencies meshed astonishingly well with his masochistic ones and they soon fell into their current symbiosis.

Why bother changing it? What could she offer him if they were married that she didn't give him already? Sure, it would grant him greater ties to the Black family, but their power was dwindling as it were…
"Do you honestly believe that is the case?" He smirks and caresses her face with his knuckles. "You sound so hopeful... It's funny, because I thought that you found pleasure in the fact that you're nothing but a cheap fuck to me."

"Of course I do," she answers weakly, her full lips forming a slight pout.

Actually, he only took her to dinner beforehand because he knew it would get her hopes up. His ability to manipulate her into hiding her true feelings is why they're so stable, and why he suspects it will be months, if not years, until she leaves. He could keep her hanging in the balance between optimism and futility forever if she let him.

Yes, he has a bit of a sadistic side too.

Tom smirks at her as the muggle gasps for air and then checks the time – it's just past Hogwarts curfew, which means they don't have long. He can't chance missing one of Potter's dreams, after all. In fact, ever since his quick glimpse into the Time Room a few weeks ago, he hasn't stayed out late once in fear of missing another.

"Enough – I want your full attention," Tom announces suddenly and points his wand at the muggle. "Avada Kedavra." The man's head droops instantly and Tom feels a high from the sheer ecstasy of playing god.

He'll never bore of that.

"You're toxic," Bella gasps in pleasure and clutches the front of his shirt, looking up at him in awe. "Take me now."

"My pleasure," he smirks, tossing her onto the bed.

Of course, despite demanding her full attention, she has about half of his at best given his mind's now-constant preoccupation with the Department of Mysteries. He's convinced that one could spend a lifetime there without even scratching the surface of all its secrets. And of course, seeing the Department itself was only a fraction of it: he's visited all sorts of world wonders thanks to this curious little connection between his mind and Potter's dreams.

It's still puzzling, however, that whenever he scans her mind with Legilimency, there is no record of her dreams or the memories they contain – even while she tells him about them. But at this point, he's seen enough of the Department of Mysteries to realize that there are many questions he'll never have the answers to. Complaining seems unjustified as long as he has some way to access Potter's knowledge.

Later, while Bellatrix dresses and reapplies her dark red lipstick, Tom transfigures the dead muggle into an ashtray, tosses it in the corner, and laughs quietly to himself. This probably wasn't what the Minister for Magic had in mind when he launched his pro-transfiguration recycling campaign last week. Oh well.

They check out of the inn, stepping out into the evening drizzle, and Bella lights a cigarette. She bats her long eyelashes up at him and says something that he doesn't quite catch because of an odd feeling of anxiety that suddenly courses through his mind.

And then Nagini's voice appears in a short, cryptic hiss: "Come home."

"– anyway, good luck. Not that you need it, obviously," Bella smiles. Ah – she must be referring to his meeting with the Board of Governors this weekend.
"Now," adds Nagini.

"Right. Well, I will be sure to let you know how it goes – goodnight," he tells her shortly. She'll be miffed that he didn't even stay around long enough for her to finish her cigarette, but his mind is too flooded with paranoid what-ifs about why Nagini would call him back to Hogwarts to possibly care.

-xx-

Mum. Dad. A strange, magically-charged cliff she's drawn to like a magnet. Two flashes of light: one white, one dark green. Then absolute nothingness.

Halia is drenched in sweat as she climbs out of bed, stumbling through the dark to the lavatory to splash her face with cold water.

It's been months since she had this particular dream, long before Regulus told her the truth about her parents and sparked the hunt for her memories with Professor Riddle. Before that, she had been able to brush it off as a nightmare. But what if there was more to it than she originally thought? What if this was how her parents actually died?

And, most terrifying of all: what if it really had been all her fault?

If that were the case, perhaps the Department of Mysteries wasn't trying to hide her memories for their own selfish reasons. Maybe it was a mercy, to free her from knowing the truth and dealing with all the guilt that came along with it.

Her head is spinning and feels lighter and lighter, like her lungs can't grasp onto enough air no matter how many deep breaths she takes. There's no way she can stay here in the dungeons without suffocating, so she grabs her wand, rifles through her trunk for her invisibility cloak, and makes her way into the eerily quiet corridors.

The light-headedness worsens and a wave of nausea washes over her just as she reaches the first floor. What was she thinking, weaning herself off the drugs without a backup plan?

She couldn't do this on her own anymore: everything she knows is beginning to unravel. How is she supposed to trust anything if she can't even trust her own mind?

As much as she's been putting it off, hoping desperately that things wouldn't come to this, she has to go to him this time. Because Professor Riddle will know exactly what to do – he always does.

She knocks swiftly on Office 2C and the door swings open a few seconds later, but the professor is nowhere to be found. Nagini, on the other hand, is slithering down the handrail of the stairs that connect his office to his living quarters.

Did she let her in…? But…how?

Halia clears her throat, her voice shaking slightly. "Is Professor Riddle out? Do you think he'd mind if I waited here for him to get back?"

The snake stares back at her and Halia rubs her eyes. What was she thinking? It's not like the bloody snake was going to respond.

Halia already knows the answer to the question anyway: of course he'd mind if he came back and found her lounging around his office. But she doesn't have anywhere better to go and he'll probably get over it after a few weeks of snarky comments toward her, so she makes herself comfortable in the window seat.
She closes her eyes and shivers when the images of her dream come flooding back. The entire thing was haunting, but the terror in her parents' voices as they tried to coax her back from the rocky façade was the worst. It almost confirms the ultimate fear that festers in the back of her mind:

It was all her fault.

She forces her eyes open again and she glances down to see a steaming cup of tea sitting on a saucer right next to her hand and Nagini curled up on the other end of the window seat near her toes, watching her curiously.

Is she going completely mad, or did Riddle's pet snake just conjure her a fucking cup of tea?

"...Thanks," she rubs her temples again.

Did she slip up and take an illicit before going to bed or something?

Nagini curls the end of her tail around her ankle, as though to comfort her, and Halia smiles before promptly bursting into tears.

What the fuck is wrong with her?

This is the first time she's cried since their death – she didn't even shed a tear at the funeral. Nothing felt real at the time, and for good reason apparently: it wasn't. Reality was so much worse than the version of events the Department of Mysteries spun for her.

A few minutes later, the doorknob jostles and she frantically wipes her eyes, trying to pull herself together to avoid Professor Riddle witnessing her mid-breakdown.

"Miss Potter?" His perplexed gaze drifts over her and then Nagini. "What's going on?"

"Er, hello," she greets him lamely. What a sight she must be with her red, tear-stained face, sleep-tangled hair, oversized Quidditch sweater which was the definition of unflattering, and torn black tights which probably made her look destitute or whorish or a bit of both. He, on the other hand, looks just as fucking suave as usual without a single hair out place.

How mortifying.

"I'm sorry…I just…I didn't know where else to go. I think I need help…well, more help than you've already given me, I guess."

Oh gods, what was she thinking, coming here in the middle of the night?

She expects a stern conversation about respecting boundaries, but when he pulls up a chair to sit near her and finally speaks, his voice is softer than usual and surprisingly calm. "You were right to come to me, Miss Potter. I think we both know that other faculty members may…misunderstand your dilemma."

Right. They might misunderstand, or more likely, think she's completely mental. But at least he's being tactful about it.

"At any rate, I hope I didn't keep you waiting for long," he continues, giving her a rare, impossibly charming smile. "What can I help you with, exactly?"

She takes a deep breath and sighs. "Please don't be angry, but the side effects of regaining my memories have been awful and for months I was taking certain things to…cope, I guess."
"Which things?" His eyes narrow slightly, but he doesn't sound nearly as annoyed as she expects.

"The illegal sort," she says quietly, running her stocking-covered toes over the scales of Nagini's tail. "I stopped a couple of weeks ago when I realized my memories came back faster without them. The problem is that now I feel like I'm going mad half the time." She chuckles under her breath as she takes a sip from the cup of tea she had been convinced Nagini made for her. But there's no way – obviously, she must have made it herself and then forgotten.

"It's getting harder to try and figure out what's real and not…" she continues. "I'm not sure how to stay grounded anymore."

"Well," he says lightly, "I suppose that is where I come in, isn't it?"

She nods slowly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you until now. I thought you would stop helping me if you knew how much it was affecting me."

Irritation flashes in his usually unreadable eyes for a fraction of a second. "Miss Potter, I must stress once again that there is no need to hide anything from me. It only acts as a detriment to yourself and your progress. I could have easily given you something to alleviate your symptoms had you told me earlier. And while we're on the subject…"

She watches as he crosses the room in a few long strides to his small apothecary cabinet and fetches an unmarked bottle of clear liquid. "This should help – it is similar to a Calming Draught, only far more effective and without any noticeable side effects. In fact, you will likely find your focus improving with it."

It's funny – if anyone but Riddle offered to shoot her up with a mystery potion, she would be skeptical at best. But he seemed to know what was best for her more often than she did.

He returns to her side, unscrews the cap, and draws a small stream of liquid up with his wand. "Your arm, please?"

She extends it toward him and her breath catches in her throat when he rests her elbow on his knee, feeling oddly warm and a bit light-headed as his cool fingers trail down her forearm in search of a vein. He leans close to her and presses the tip of his wand to her skin and she recognizes the oaky, leathery smell of his cologne, only this time it's tinged with something floral and saccharine…

"Were you on a date tonight or something?" she mutters.

"There you are," he ignores her and releases her arm. "It will take effect soon and should last several days."

Well, whoever it is: lucky bitch.

-xx-

Was that… jealousy?

Her thoughts and emotions are all over the place at the moment, her mind nearly impossible to read. But the potion he brewed weeks ago in preparation for the moment she finally confessed her drug habit would soon help matters. Once again, she's made it all too easy for him to gain more of her trust while making a lesson out of it.

"Thank you," she gives him a small smile and looks up at him with gratitude in her dark green eyes. "I feel better already."
Nagini lowers her head when Potter says this, apparently in relief. It's baffling that the snake seems to have taken such a shine to the girl, as she generally dislikes any human that isn't him.

"You're welcome," he tells Potter while returning the potion to the cabinet.

She's quiet for a moment, and he watches her fidget with a stray string on the hem of her sweater. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but…why are you helping me, Sir?"

Like her confession over her drug habit, this question is something he has anticipated for quite some time, providing him the opportunity to cultivate a perfectly reasonable answer.

"I've seen your O.W.L. scores, Miss Potter, and it is quite apparent from what you have demonstrated in my class that they capture only the cusp of your true potential. However, you will never reach it until you regain what was taken from you. In what way would I be a responsible educator if I did not assist you while knowing full well that nobody else at Hogwarts has the same level of expertise in these matters?"

She nods, her face brightening at the praise; apparently she buys it. And why wouldn't she? It's true, even if there are a few (or more than a few) of his own selfish motives thrown in there.

"Well, thank you…er, again, I mean."

He gives her a small smile. Time to get to the question burning on his mind: "I am curious, Miss Potter, about your urgency to address your symptoms. Did something happen this evening? Another dream, perhaps?"

"Yeah. I've had this one before, actually, but it's been months and it felt so real this time. And I think…maybe Regulus was right about there being more to my parents' deaths."

For fuck's sake – of all the dreams, why did he have to miss this one?

"How do you mean?"

"I don't think we even went to Ethiopia where they supposedly caught the virus that killed them…we were somewhere else, and I think..." Potter's voice drops to an urgent whisper even though there is definitely nobody eavesdropping on his office and she shifts closer to him, her eyes widening.

"Professor, do you promise that you'll keep this between us?"

The corner of his mouth ticks upward. "Do you really need to ask?"

Without warning, her small, thin hands reach for his and bring them to her face, pressing his fingers against her temples. Normally he would balk at any sort of unwarranted physical contact (particularly if initiated by someone other than himself), but he's too caught off-guard by the fact that using Legilimency to see her dreams is actually working to give it much thought.

Flashes of images begin appearing in the front of his mind and initially, the Potter's are hiking uphill through a thick, misty forest scattered with small boulders. It's quite picturesque and similar to the one he saw during his exploration of the Dark Arts in Austria a few summers ago. There is a rocky mass up ahead and James Potter points up to it, informing Halia and his wife that they're almost at the top.

There's a flash, and James is studying a map while Halia and her mother glance around the platform, taking in the view. Tom's eyes drift up the stone face of the cliff and his heart stops.

But it can't be.
His eyes frantically trace the curved fracture of the stone. It is. It's his mountain, where the locket of Salazar Slytherin rests.

He rips his hands away from her and she gives him a puzzled look. "What?"

He can't breathe, yet somehow manages to say, "Oh. Nothing," before gingerly returning his fingers to the sides of her face.

Now, Halia is holding a hand outstretched toward the face of the cliff, her eyes spookily transfixed on the exact spot his horcrux is hidden. Could she be feeling the protective curses that guard it?

Meanwhile, her parents are attempting to coax her away with slightly terrified looks on their faces. But yet they stay at the cliff even after Halia’s trance is broken and begin unpacking their lunch, as though this was just another day on the job for them – which of course, it was.

Did the Department of Mysteries send them here to investigate his horcrux? Did that mean they knew about the others?

Halia gets about halfway through her lunch when fear floods her consciousness. She scrambles to her feet and, once again, she's staring right at the place in the rock that shields his soul-piece.

He can hear it now in the back of her head: calling her name, taunting her closer. Her parents are calling her too, but she is too mesmerized by the ethereal voice of the horcrux to hear them. Tom holds his breath as she moves closer and closer to the line in the platform that, if crossed, will trigger the protective curses and enchantments he so painstakingly designed.

Then she steps over it and despite all logic and faith in his own magical abilities, absolutely nothing happens.

She's so close, now, her hand just inches from the surface while the whispery, strained voice of the horcrux continues to call her. It grows louder in her mind, drowning out James and Lily Potter's yelling, and for a fraction of a second all of her confusion, terror, and wonder falls away.

It is in this precise moment that her palm presses firmly against the stone.

A bright white flash of light; then dark green, the exact color of her eyes or a perfect Killing Curse. A shockwave of fiery current beneath her skin that singes his fingertips.

Tom gasps noiselessly and tears his hands away from her face, struggling to maintain even a semblance of composure as her eyes blink open.

"Don't you see, Professor?" Potter says, her tone and gaze hauntingly blank. "It was my fault…I killed them."

No – he did.

-xx-

Chapter End Notes

Reviews pls? :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to everyone who has commented - you're the BEST. Seriously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

-xx-

After showing him the most recent alleged new memory— one that she desperately hoped wasn't a memory at all— and confessing her belief that she was responsible for her parents' deaths, Riddle just stares at her for several long seconds with a slightly curious expression. Meanwhile, Halia wishes she could try Legilimency on him for a change to see what he really thought about all this.

But besides the fact that she wouldn't have the first idea how to do it, she knows him well enough by now to assume there is absolutely no way in hell he would be down for that anyway. At least she could trust that he wouldn't tell anyone else about this.

Still, she can't help but squirm under his quiet scrutiny and take it upon herself to break the silence: "What am I supposed to do if that was real? Turn myself in?"

Finally, he speaks. "You should not think of that when so much remains unclear. Regardless, I suspect that the Department of Mysteries is already well-aware of whatever truly happened that day," he tells her evenly, his tone so vacant of shock or any other form of emotion that it's almost impressive given what she just showed him.

And yet, this is just about the most reassuring thing she could logically hope to hear.

"We can certainly speak more about this on Saturday during our normal appointment, if you would like, and I will do my best to help you bring clarity to the matter. I hope you don't mind, but it is rather late…" he nods toward the tall clock in the corner of his office, which happens to chime one in the morning at that very moment.

"Of course," she forces a small smile. It almost feels as though he's trying to force her to leave, but it is the middle of the night so she can't particularly blame him.

"The potion I administered earlier should help you fall back asleep," Riddle tells her while walking her out.

Unfortunately, it's not the falling asleep she's worried about so much as the memories that are waiting for her when she does. Then again, she must admit that her mind does feel much more stable and calm than it did before the potion.

She thanks him and turns to leave, almost forgetting that he wasn't the only one who helped her that evening. Just as he's closing the door, she adds over her shoulder, "And thanks for the tea, Nagini."

-xx-

In this particular moment, Tom isn't sure whether to laugh or slap himself out of this apparent nightmare. Because on top of his most recent (and by far most terrifying) glimpse into Potter's mind...
which left his fingertips tingling in the spots that were pressed against her temples, he could have sworn she just spoke Parseltongue.

But surely that was impossible.

"A curious girl, indeed..." Nagini hisses from across the room. "She spoke to me earlier, too."

Oh. Right. So he had heard Potter correctly and it wasn't merely a hallucination.

What in Salazar's name is happening?

For the second time that evening, Tom is stunned into silence. So he does the only thing that seems reasonable: conjuring and rapidly downing a glass of Firewhiskey.

"You didn't know?" He can hear the smugness in Nagini's hiss, as though she senses the chaos unfurling within his mind. "Just before I called you back, she asked if you would mind her waiting for you."

"Did you speak back to her?"

More importantly, did Potter know that she was speaking in Parseltongue? Was this another random skill of hers that she picked up in her travels and was just coming back to her now, like her curiously complex knowledge of certain Dark Arts?

Or did it have more to do with whatever apparently happened between her and his horcrux...?

"Of course not," his companion replies sassily. "I made her tea and waited for my Master to return."

He rolls his eyes. Nagini inherited a portion of his magical ability when she became his horcrux, though she only bothered to use it for pointless tasks (the majority of which simply facilitated her laziness) rather than making anything meaningful of his gift.

"I wished for her to speak again. How nice it was, to hear another voice after all this time--"

What was that supposed to mean?

"–May I speak to her when she returns?"

"No." Maybe never – but certainly not until he gets to the bottom of whatever the hell is going on.

It is going to be a very long night, that much is sure.

"I have to go," he announces abruptly as Nagini begins to protest, his throat still ebbing from the burn of Firewhiskey.

He departs from Hogwarts using unaided flight, a skill he taught himself years ago in preparation for his trips to explore the Dark Arts across Europe. After all, he had always been rather paranoid that the Ministry tracked Apparition and broom flight patterns in the same manner they did for Floo travel. He usually quite enjoys the feeling of freedom that flying provides, but tonight is another story entirely, his mind wound tightly with question after question following his encounter with Potter.

The Austrian cliff is almost unrecognizable when he arrives, with a massive indentation where his horcrux rested and rubble scattered all around. He doesn't even have to look to know his soul-piece is long gone. Even though he predicted this would be the case if her memory was indeed true, a new wave of panic strikes him.
He runs his hands along the indentation, feeling the lingering traces of the Dark magic that once protected the locket. The magic in this spot was the most powerful, as it once comprised the central curses he so intricately designed. In fact, they represented some of the most advanced Dark magic he had ever performed.

But something is off. While his trace remains, it feels warped and unfamiliar, suggesting that the curses had been tampered with at some point.

By who, Halia Potter? Could it have something to do with the fact that she was able to pass through the outer protections without triggering them?

He continues his investigation, stepping about fifteen feet away from the face of the rock to the radius where his outer curses should have prevented her from coming closer, and closes his eyes. He can sense the traces of them, too, but they do not seem to be altered in the same way the central curses were. They are, however, fainter – as though they had been triggered and removed before the central curses were.

That certainly explained why Halia had strolled through the outer protections: they were gone before the Potter's even arrived.

Unfortunately, this poses more questions than it answers. Had the entire thing been a trap or some sort of elaborate setup to off the Potter's? If they could get close enough to trigger the central curses (very possible, given the removal of the outer protections that would normally serve as harsh warnings), they were surely powerful enough to kill them all.

Though not Halia, apparently.

Why did his horcrux call to her, specifically? What happened between her and his horcrux that allowed her to survive? Did it have something to do with his strange ability to catch glimpses of her dreams?

Tom moves to sit on the edge of the cliff, his long legs dangling over the edge like Halia's did in her memory, and tries to ignore the throbbing that has begun just behind his forehead. He's going to drive himself mad with much more of this, but he can't stop his mind from churning over hundreds of questions and conjecture after conjecture.

What if all of this orchestrated by the Department of Mysteries itself? Then again, if the Department wanted them all dead, why wouldn't they have just killed Halia when they found that she survived instead of attempting to conceal her memories? Surely they thought there was at least some chance that she might someday recover them.

And how could it possibly be coincidence that Halia found him and requested his help?

Well, it wasn't coincidence, exactly. It was Dumbledore who asked him to get close to Halia in the first place…

Fucking hell – Dumbledore.

What if he knew everything and sent Potter to him to…what? See what would happen? What if he had the horcrux?

He groans and rubs his eyes. It's becoming more impossible by the second to form a coherent thought with the gripping fear that his other horcruxes were compromised by the Department or quite possibly worse, Dumbledore. Of course, checking on them would be far easier if they weren't spread across the continent as markers of his forays into the Dark.
Still, he would not be able to rest until knowing they are safe, meaning that this long, chaotic night will be even longer. At least his diary is safe in the Chamber of Secrets back at Hogwarts. That saves him a trip.

First he sets off to retrieve the Ravenclaw Diadem which rests in Greece, where he studied alchemy, and then the Cup of Hufflepuff, which would be found along the trail of rural French villages he visited to collect grimoires in black market pop-up shops. He's far past exhausted by the time he reaches the Gaunt ring in Northern Ireland, where he once embarked on a failed search for distant members of his lineage. It is a momentous relief to find his other horcruxes were all in the same places he left them, with their protective enchantments healthy and intact.

Just in case the Department of Mysteries or Dumbledore were truly looking into his activities, he brings his horcruxes back to Hogwarts. They would be far better off with him than in a marginally secure vault at Gringotts until he thought of a solution, after all. And in the meantime, it would be rather pleasant to have them near again; his magic already feels stronger and his thoughts aren't quite as frantic as earlier.

Nagini watches him curiously, but silently, as he tucks them away in his living quarters just as the light of early morning begins to stream through the window. It's clear that she recognizes them—perhaps she can even feel them, too, in a similar way that he does.

Though his mind is calmer, the prospect of sleep seems both irrelevant and unattainable at this point, so he re-enters his office to try and get some work done. There is a bit of last-minute planning to do for his class of fourth-year Ravenclaw and Gryffindors that morning, but more importantly, he needs to finalize his proposal for his upcoming presentation to the Board on Sunday. As if he didn't have enough on his mind already.

He settles in, preparing a sizable pot of coffee while forcing down a few bites of a biscuit, and glances out the window in his office which affords a perfect view of the Black Lake. And jogging around it, in a blur of dark hair and pale skin, is none other than Halia Potter.

He should expect it, of course; he happened to notice that this was part of her morning routine months ago. But he shivers at the sight of her anyway, as everything that happened last night comes rushing back yet again.

No matter how many times he turns it over in his mind, nothing is adding up quite right. Though the thought of her upcoming visit just one night away makes his insides squirm, the truth of the matter is that she is his only real shot at investigating what happened. In the meantime, all he can do is hope that he won't be playing right into the trap of Dumbledore or the Department of Mysteries.

Bellatrix used to adore these weekly lunches at her sister's manor, where they spent the afternoon gossiping freely and drowning their boredom with vintage wines from the Malfoy cellar with Lucius away for the day's business. But things took a turn a few weeks ago after their mother, Druella, apparently grew concerned enough about Bella's personal life to ask Narcissa to take an interest.

It was only a matter of time until she heard that dreadful question in her sister's regally pristine accent:

"So…Have you spoken with Tom?"

This time is the worst so far, given the events of the night prior. How foolish she had been, to think he was spoiling her with dinner and a bit of muggle-torture foreplay. To believe it had meant
something – anything. Because of course, then came his cold words and an even colder goodbye.

"It wasn't a good time," Bella says casually while scooping a dab of pâté with her knife and spreads it on a cracker. "He has a lot on his mind, with the Governors meeting on Sunday."

She says this just as much for her own reassurance as she does to convince Narcissa to leave it be.

"He has no reason to worry." Narcissa waves a hand "Lucius is fully in support and says that the others will hardly put up a fight, if they do anything but follow him blindly. As they usually do." Then her gray-blue eyes narrow slightly, in an infuriating expression reminiscent of pity. "You will have to speak to him soon, Bella. Mother is becoming a bit restless about it all."

Right. As if Mother wasn't restless enough already.

"Are you so sure that you are uninterested in Rodolphus?" Narcissa brings her crystal wineglass to her painted lips. "He's quite handsome and the Lestrange fortune is more than enough to support the two of you."

"I'm sure," Bella answers shortly, without giving it much thought at all.

She and Rodolphus had been somewhat friendly in school – in fact, she knew he always fancied her, but he would never dare make a move on the one girl Tom showed an interest in. She felt so special back then, as one of the few in their year who were privy to Tom's incredible feats of magic. And, more importantly, the only girl he was ever considered close to. The other bitches hated her and she loved every second of it.

She feels special now, too, of course. He kept choosing her, kept coming back. But would it ever be for more? Perhaps he wanted to care for her but was completely clueless how.

As though to read her mind, Narcissa sighs and says, "I will admit that I understand what you see in Tom. But you deserve a proper courtship, Bella – Rodolphus would give you that. Will Tom? I'm not so sure."

Cissy was most annoying when she sounded like this, like their mother rather than her older sister.

"Perhaps I am the one who doesn't want to get married. Did you and Mother ever think of that?" Bellatrix snaps in irritation.

Narcissa laughs. "Why, of course you want to! Not only is it the proper way, but to be so intimate with someone…to have children…"

Her insides burn in jealousy, because her sister is right. She does want that – so badly. But not with Rodolphus.

"Right. Because marriage has worked out so well for you, dear Cissy," she snarls angrily.

Lucius Malfoy was far from the perfect husband, after all. Bellatrix didn't know all the details, but it was obvious from the secrecy that followed him that many of his dealings were of the illicit variety. And then, of course, were the affairs. Bella watched all of it wear on her sister, saw her growing stoic and colder over the years. Then something changed and Cissy began contributing her fair share to their collective tally of clandestine flings. Ironically, Bella and Tom actually had a healthier relationship than Narcissa and Lucius' by this standard.

Poor Draco, the true victim of his parents' misgivings. She might feel sorry for him if he wasn't such a spoiled little prat.
"No marriage is perfect." Narcissa purses her lips for a moment, though never once loses her cool composure. She's a shining example of the pureblood daughters her mother always wanted, especially after Andromeda's betrayal.

"At times, I think men feel the need to maintain control," Narcissa continues. "Or at the very least a façade of it. Perhaps this is Tom's burden as well. But you need to give a sense of urgency to the situation, Bella. Force his hand, in whatever way that you can."

Oh, how desperately she hopes for this to be the case – almost as desperately as she hopes he eldest sister will never bring this up again.

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When Saturday evening rolls around and Tom finds Halia Potter in his office once again, he is more than prepared with a plan and renewed composure.

"How are you feeling?" he asks her, ignoring the way Nagini is lingering near the small table where Potter sits. The snake has been pestering all day, pleading him to let her say something to the girl and test her abilities as a Parselmouth. But this is not the time for that.

"Better," Potter answers while shrugging off her cloak. "The potion from the other night definitely helped. But I suppose I'm still a bit stressed about it all…I just want to know what really happened, even if it's for the worse."

Well, he can certainly relate.

"There is an experiment I would like to try today that might help – if you're feeling up to it of course?"

"Sure," she shrugs and ties up her unruly hair, ready to throw caution to the wind as ever.

Really, he couldn't ask for a better test subject. He may be playing with fire with this particular plan of his, but he simply cannot resist the temptation to satisfy his curiosity: after her strange encounter with one of his horcruxes, what would happen when her mind met another? If all went as well as he hoped, perhaps it would provide some answers.

He smiles and places his diary in front of her along with an inkwell and quill, watching carefully as she immediately picks up the horcrux and turns it over in her hands to examine it, tracing the engraving of his initials with her fingertips.

"I am sure that you have heard writing can be a therapeutic exercise. But this is a very special journal, Miss Potter. It has the ability to connect to the depths of your mind and perhaps even draw out memories you have regained but are not consciously aware of yet. However, to accomplish this, I will need to put you in a state of hypnosis."

"Alright," she answers without hesitation and picks up the quill, turning the cover of his diary over to the first blank page. "What do I need to do?"

The corner of his mouth ticks upward. "It is a typical procedure: simply close your eyes and listen to my instructions. Are you ready?"

Actually, the method he's using is far riskier and more complicated than hypnosis, but there is no need for her to know that.

Her eyelids fall closed. "Ready."
"Then we shall begin by emptying your consciousness. Allow all of your thoughts, no matter how pressing, to fade and dwindle away into darkness. Imagine only darkness."

Tom draws his wand and noiselessly mouths a set of enchantments, many of which are his own inventions, to begin dulling her awareness of the present.

"Everything is fading away, including you. See yourself and everything you know to be true fading into the darkness. Let it all fall away." He flicks his wrist to increase the strength of the enchantments and adds, "You may begin to feel rather tired at this point...Embrace it."

Like clockwork, she rests her head on her arm.

"Very good. Now, I want you to think of that day again – that day at the cliff. The very last time you saw your parents. Think of every detail, Miss Potter, as objectively as possible, and write down everything you see."

The quill begins scratching against the page and he steps toward her – here comes the tricky part.

He raises his wand again, flicking it thrice and then moving his hand in a circle just above the top of her head. A shimmering, dark gray cloud appears and begins to swirl around her in the trail he just traced with his wand and he mutters another string of enchantments. Light in a wild array of colors, from shimmering gold to cerulean and rosy pink to maroon and dark Slytherin green, appears and weaves in and out of the cloud.

And just like that, he managed to draw her entire consciousness from her body, forcing her to plunge deep into the dusty, unconscious facets of her mind. He snaps his fingers to flip the hourglass on his desk over.

Ten minutes – that's all he has. It would be exceedingly dangerous to leave her in such a state for any longer than that, as it could result in driving her permanently mad if not flat out killing her.

He walks in slow, patient circles around her while listening telepathically to her voice, filling his mind with her written words:

"Last July, the Department sent us to Austria to investigate a strange force in the mountains just south of the German border."

A strange force – not a particular object such as his horcrux? Perhaps the Department of Mysteries didn't know about his horcrux at all – the Potter's certainly didn't.

She continues her recount of the memory; so far, all of the details match completely to what he observed two nights prior. Maybe this was all a waste of time and she truly didn't know anything else about what happened.

Her wrist suddenly bumps into the inkwell, sending it flying off the table, and Tom manages to catch it mid-air with magic before it hits the floor. He returns it next to her, glancing down at the dark trail her quill left streaking across the page, which is just beginning to fade.

She resumes writing, and her voice fills his mind once again:

"I see that you received my message."

He cocks his head to the side and glances down once more, his eyes widening when he notices that the words are not written in her sloppy, inelegant excuse for penmanship. Instead, they are written in his own neat cursive. A chill travels down his spine as they begin to fade and she writes over them.
"It took you long enough to call upon me."

Who exactly was he speaking to? His horcrux concealed in the diary? Or the memory of his horcrux in Halia's mind? Or...something else entirely?

"What message are you referring to?" he asks aloud.

"A bit slow to figure it out, aren't you? I understand that splitting our soul is taxing, but I didn't expect our mental capacities to suffer so greatly."

Well, diary or her memory, it's definitely him. Either way, it feels incredibly odd to be speaking to a version of himself using her voice.

"I have been trying to reach you from the back of her mind for weeks to reveal my presence."

Clearly it isn't the horcrux in his diary that he is speaking with – from the back of her mind? What did that mean?

"Only recently did I grow strong enough to show you that memory, the one that matters more than any of the others..."

Of course, there could only be one memory his horcrux is referring to: the Potter's trip to Austria.

"- the day our soul split again. It was agonizing, even more so than the first time. Or times, I suppose."

Splitting – again?

But that would mean...

His mouth runs dry and he freezes his place, his gaze locked in horror on Potter's quasi-sleeping form.

No. It couldn't be.

But Potter's knowledge of Dark Arts without memories attached to them; his ability to catch a glimpse of her dreams; the fact that she survived his horcrux's attack at the cliff while her parents perished; her strange, apparently new ability to speak Parseltongue...

"She's my horcrux."

"Our horcrux. Curious, I know."

Curious. That's one way to think about it. He's just relieved that he took the time to make horcruxes in the first place because if things continue the same way they have over the past couple of days, he's well on track for a heart attack. Besides that, the only thing happening in his mind at the moment is a cacophony of alarm bells.

"I have been calling to you with the hope we might exploit her secrets, which are concealed so curiously in the part of her mind that is connected to her soul."

"The Department of Mysteries memory-space."

"Indeed. I'm relieved that we are on the same page about some things. When our soul bonded to hers, I chose to latch onto that space, fracturing its walls."
That certainly explained why he could gain access to her memories…and why the charm the Department had placed to lock them was failing. It also meant that regaining her memories had nothing to do with any of the methods they tried during their weekly appointments – it was because the time she was spending in such close proximity to him was allowing his horcrux to get stronger, increasing its hold on her soul.

His soul. Bonded to hers. Something about that was just incomprehensible.

"This stroke of brilliance has already paid off quite well, I might add. It certainly gives me something to do while I'm trapped here. The memories are far more interesting than her thoughts… teenagers and their hormones –"

The light swirling above Potter flickers and he glances at the dwindling sand in the hourglass. He is quickly running out of time, but there are so many questions burning in his mind.

"What really happened that day?" he asks urgently. "Why did you call her?"

"I didn't."

"I heard you calling to her in the memory."

"I never called her – in fact, it was her soul that attached itself to ours."

"But why? How?"

"You don't think I've wondered the same? And anyway, does it matter?"

Yes. But he doesn't have the time or patience to argue with himself over it. "I need to wake her soon," he says as the light of her consciousness flickers again – this time for longer.

The words in his mind quicken, and the fact that they're spoken in her voice is now more chilling than ever.

"The knowledge you can gain from her about the Department of Mysteries and magic itself is incredible. I've been here for months and have not even begun to scratch the surface. But as a small fraction of a whole I can only do so much. I will protect her secrets from meddling fools with some of the Soul Magic I've picked up from her memories of the Department."

There is no need for clarification as to who his horcrux was referring to: Albus Dumbledore, obviously.

"But you must get closer to her to strengthen our bond to her soul."

His mouth feels quite dry once again, but he manages to say "Very well," just as the last grain of sand drops from the top of the hourglass to the bottom.

Tom raises his wand and begins to quickly dismantle his enchantments, watching as the brilliant, multi-colored light is absorbed into her flesh. She stirs, dropping the quill, and the dark cloud above her disappears.

He is still sitting across from her when she blinks her eyes open. "Merlin, how long was I out?"

"Just over ten minutes," he answers casually.

"Really?" she stretches her neck from side to side and he reaches over the table to pull the diary away from her. "It felt like hours. What happened?"
Other than a conversation with the horcrux that is bonded to your soul, which by the way happens to be mine? Oh, you know, not much.

She eyes the diary in his hands. "Did I write about anything useful?"

"No," he barely manages to choke out.

Her thin face falls in disappointment and for a fraction of a second, he is struck with a rare, yet terrible emotion he can't quite place in the pit of his stomach. While the fact that her soul bonded to his horcrux may have saved her life, there was no way she would ever learn the truth behind her parents' deaths despite how desperately she wanted to.

He could never allow that to happen.

And not only that – he would be a fool not capitalize on the opportunity that his horcrux presented. Perhaps if he strengthened her bond with his horcrux enough, he could even peruse her memories at will with Legilimency and he would have no need to rely on her dreams.

"I'm sorry," he finds himself saying for some strange reason.

"It's alright," she sighs and rests her chin on her palm. "I guess we'll just have to try another way."

He nods and silence falls between them as she leans over to run her hands along Nagini's back. Did Nagini feel the same pull toward Halia that she did to his other soul-pieces? Was this why she seemed to take such an instant liking to the girl?

If that was the case, why didn't he feel the same pull toward her that he did to his other horcruxes? Perhaps he would, once the bond grew stronger. He could speculate all he wanted, but there was no telling what exactly would happen.

"What would you think about meeting another day each week?" he asks her impulsively, his grading and other teaching responsibilities occurring to him only as an afterthought. "Would you be able to keep up with your coursework?"

She looks up at him and smiles softly. "I'm sure I could figure something out."

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"I apologize for the delay," Cornelius Fudge laughs nervously as soon as he appears at their designated meeting place in rural Suffolk. "The Organization for Giant Welfare recently made a list of demands that required my full attention over the past couple of weeks."

"Well, thank you for taking the time, Cornelius." Grindelwald smirks and snorts a laugh, returning Fudge's handshake aggressively. "And all along I thought it was because you were having second thoughts about our arrangement – which would be entirely foolish of course."

Fudge swallows, his beady little eyes growing wider.

The incompetence of the British Minister for Magic never fails to stun him; how could Fudge possibly be surprised to find that this topic was what their meeting would revolve around?

Grindelwald steps closer, dwarving the other man in both height and repute. "I am losing patience, Cornelius. Do you plan to uphold your end of the bargain?"

"Of course."
"Excellent answer!" he claps the British Minister on the shoulder. "In that case and given the fact that I have waited months for this, I will expect that you to publish the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's report in the Daily Prophet tomorrow morning. If you choose not to, I will leak it for you. I will also take it very, very personally," he narrows his eyes into a menacing glare. "It is better for everyone if this comes from within, but we can play this however you would prefer."

His face turns red and all he can manage to sputter is, "And I'm just supposed to believe that you have a copy?"

"I could recite its entirety if you would like proof. Though I must say, I was particularly impressed by the work that Potions Master Snape put forth – he is no doubt among the best in his field. I was contemplating the possibility of recruiting him to work at Durmstrang, where we manage to pay professors a decent wage. But then, maybe Hogwarts will too after the boom to Britain's economy that will come after Russia's crashes."

Fudge's face turns even redder. "Who gave you a copy?"

Grindelwald snorts. "Isn't it obvious? Lucius, of course. He was worried you might have second thoughts, and well, you know how much of a greedy bastard he can be."

Fudge presses his lips together into a fine line as though to crush his irritation between them, and says after a few long seconds: "I know of your plans with Russia."

Of course he does – Grindelwald planted some of his best men in the British Ministry to control precisely which information that Fudge received from beyond his borders.

"Then you know that I came here with another goal in mind: will you join us?"

Fudge shakes his head while lighting a cigarette. "Britain is in no state for war at the present."

"Even with the exorbitant funds you will make when the Russian economy collapses?" Grindelwald smirks.

Fudge blows a puff of smoke into the air. "Politically speaking."

Grindelwald sighs and plucks the cigarette from Fudge's mouth, stomping it out in the grass. He did try to play nice, but his patience is quickly wearing thin.

"This is bigger than you, Cornelius. When the report is published tomorrow morning – and it will be, by either your hand or mine – Russia will perceive this as a threat. For years, they have been manufacturing potions that violate the International Confederation of Wizard Peacetime Accords. Potions that are quite similar to the ones you will be framing them of poisoning your citizens with, in fact."

Fudge just stands there, slightly slack-jawed. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

"Of course. Many countries knew this and simply chose to look the other way in favor of making under-the-table investments. But that will end when the allegations of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are printed tomorrow morning, and Russia will blame you for that," he says, poking Fudge in the middle of his rather flabby chest. "And Britain will be dragged into this war whether you like it or not."

"You bastard," Fudge hisses and curses under his breath.

Grindelwald ignores him and waves his hand as though to dismiss all of the weaker man's concerns.
"Trust me, Cornelius, it will be well worth it. Their resources are astounding… and their research of magic is among the most advanced in the world. I will share everything with your country. And if you fail to join me, you will drive Britain into the ground. Make no mistake – I do not wish to see that happen. What I truly hope that we achieve through all this is to finally form a true alliance in the public eye."

"Well as you know, public perception toward Germany isn't the best at the moment. Especially with the Nimbus facility moving abroad," Fudge snaps and lights another cigarette.

"Didn't I tell you? We blocked their permit just last week – it appears that Britain has one last chance to maintain their broomstick economy." Grindelwald says pointedly. "See? It is as though we are already allies."

Fudge sighs in defeat. "The best I can do is bring it to the Wizengamot."

What a foolish, pitiful man; he truly could not have asked for an easier leader to manipulate.

"Of course. I shall eagerly await your country's response," Grindelwald flashes him a smug, satisfied grin just before Apparating away into the night.

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Chapter End Notes

Some answers... and more questions!

Next chapter: friends from faraway places, an unexpected alliance, Nagini banter, and much more.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

*coughs* I'm back! Life happens sometimes...you know how it is. :P Anyway, sorry for the wait. Here's a longer chapter to make up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-xx-

May, 1997

He's standing outside the front door of Borgin and Burke's in the damp, littered alley, smoking a cigarette when he spots her. This time she's sporting waves of turquoise-blue and purple, which makes her look like some sort of enchanting creature of the sea – his siren.

Well, not his, unfortunately. Not at all. It's just a fantasy that could and would never be.

The fact that she's the daughter of Ted and Andromeda Tonks– both of whom were only a couple of years ahead of him Hogwarts – failed to register until she walked out of the shop for the first time months ago, leaving him breathless and slightly slack-jawed. But she's way too young for him, only two or three years older than Halia at most. Ted would probably kill him if he knew the thoughts of her that flitter unwittingly across his mind.

Of course, that didn't stop his attempts to continue seeing her by offering up the whisperings of Knockturn Alley. It's all harmless enough and at least he's giving her something to bring back to the Auror office – even if the majority of it happened to be from his own imagination.

He smiles faintly as she greets him cheerily and tosses his cigarette aside, beckoning her into the shop.

His eyes follow her as she wanders around the shop to inspect the items that have arrived since her last visit. As if unable to help herself, she picks up a pair of antlers and holds them up to the top of her head, examining her reflection in a nearby mirror before transfiguring a pair of her own.

Every time she does this, he can't help smiling to himself. Not because it is a stunning feat of magic, but because she shows him over and again that transformation can be something of elegance and beauty rather than necessity, pain, and horror.

Her eyes meet his and he automatically darts his gaze away.

"So…what's new?" she asks casually, graciously ignoring his most recent display of awkwardness.

He opens his mouth, but the story he crafted for the week gets stuck in his throat when the actual news that has been brewing over the last couple of weeks slips back into his mind.

First came the report from the Department for Magical Law Enforcement report that declared the slew of poisoning cases over the last few months an act of terrorism from Russia. Things were divisive enough already, with the accused country vehemently denying the allegations while the families of the victims rallied for justice…And then were the records of Snape, Slughorn, and
Smethwyck's testimony to the Wizengamot and an investigation from the German Ministry that implied the Russian government was supporting their economy with production and distribution system of illegal potions.

Remus hadn't thought much of it until that morning, when he overheard Borgin and Mundungus Fletcher discussing the possibility of revenge in the form of invasion and that the Wizengamot would congregate soon to make a decision.

At that point, it all became very, very real.

"There's talk of war, for one." Her face darkens, but he continues anyway, because this question has plagued his mind all morning: "And... if that were the case, you'd have to go, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," she shrugs and picks at the edge of her nail. "But nobody really knows what's going to happen yet."

Even if she's telling the truth, it does little in the way of reassurance. He busies himself by organizing the day's receipts to keep himself from saying something he might regret – something about caring too much about her or that she could very easily switch into a non-life-threatening career.

She rests her elbow on the glass counter, leaning toward him. "But before it's too late, I guess you should take me out to dinner."

He blinks at her a couple of times. Surely he hadn't heard her correctly... though the slightly mischievous smile on her lips suggests otherwise.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," he somehow manages to say. Not only out of concern for how Ted and Andromeda might react, but because of her ignorance to his condition. She really doesn't have a clue about what she's getting herself into, after all.

"Really? Is that why you've been asking me to drop by the store for months to give me false information?"

He opens his mouth and closes it again. Was he really that transparent?

She turns away, flashing him one last smile as she says over her shoulder, "Nothing fancy – let's say the Leaky Cauldron? How's Friday at seven p.m.?"

Well, apparently he didn't have much choice in the matter... not that he was that opposed to it to begin with.

"Alright," he says to himself, as she strolls out of the shop before he has the chance to respond.

-xx-

"Where should we go first?" Daphne asks as they stroll through the tall, wrought-iron gates at the edge of Hogwarts' grounds.

Halia picks two daisies and puts one behind her ear and the other behind Daphne's before linking arms with her. "Honeydukes, of course."

This is by far the most crowded she's ever seen the small village, probably because it's a bright Sunday afternoon and this visit marks one of the last opportunities for her fellow students to properly relax before exam season hits.
Of course, this means fighting their way through droves of teenagers just to get in the front door of the sweetshop. But it's well-worth it, especially for the dozens of candy samples on levitating trays that greet them throughout the store.

Daphne picks out some licorice snaps, sugared butterfly wings, and pear drops while Halia nibbles on a square of dark chocolate and makes her way toward the tiered display of cauldron cakes.

"I toured the factory in Pakistan once," Halia tells her when they meet up again in the checkout queue.

"Really? I bet it smelled lovely. My dad took Astoria and I to the Bertie Bott's production facility when we were little and they happened to be making the vomit-flavored ones that day…"

Halia wrinkles her nose. "That's rotten luck…not to mention poor marketing on their part to offer tours on the days they make the most awful flavors."

"I know," Daph laughs and then shivers, "I haven't had the stomach to chance trying them since."

They soon reach the front of the line and Halia pays for her sweets with a couple of sickles. "Mind if we stop in at Flourish and Blotts?" Daphne asks her once they fight their way through the store's crowd and exit back onto the main street.

"Not at all," Halia shrugs, earning her a suspicious look from Daphne and probably for good reason – normally, she would put up a bit of a fight and suggest exploring the village instead. But that was before she overheard a gaggle of third years gossiping about seeing Professor Riddle at Flourish and Blotts' Hogsmeade location during their last visit. Now, spending part of their afternoon inside a bookstore seems far less objectionable.

Unfortunately, it appears that the mysterious and most glimpse-worthy professor at Hogwarts is nowhere to be found, so she ends up following Daphne around the store impatiently for a little over a half hour. Afterward, they make their way to The Three Broomsticks, which is just as packed (if not more so) than Honeydukes.

Halia cranes her neck to find a table and spots Pansy smirking at them from the corner of the room near the window, where she sits next to Draco at the table under permanent claim by the most popular sixth and seventh-year Slytherins.

Apparently Daphne notices because she suggests, "Maybe we should just skip the Butterbeer today?"

But Halia's not about to let the fact that the majority of their house views her as some sort of pariah get in the way of a perfectly pleasant afternoon which marks the first time she's really felt like herself in months, so she ignores Daphne and starts toward the booth on the other side of the bar where George Weasley is sitting alone.

"Are you sure about this?" Daphne mutters while following her hesitantly.

Halia smiles reassuringly and pinches her elbow. "It'll be fine, Daph."

Daphne makes a little noise in her throat as though she's somewhat doubtful of this, but they reach George before she has the chance to protest further.

"Mind if we join?" Halia asks.

"Course not," George grins and gestures to the empty seats on the other side of the booth.
They settle in while Halia tosses a satisfied glance in Pansy's direction, who promptly turns and whispers something to Milly. "Where are Fred and Lee?"

"Fred's getting another round and Lee's off having a snog with Katie Bell, the lucky git," he smirks.

"I thought I heard my name – were you telling George that I'm by far the better looking twin?" the other Weasley appears with two frosted mugs of Butterbeer and slides into the booth, winking at Daphne and her.

"Far from it," George snorts. "What took so long?"

"Had to wait for Malfoy to order another." Fred smirks and glances back at Halia's companion, as if only just registering she was there. "It's Daphne, right?"

"Yes," she answers quietly and looks down at her hands.

How can a girl as pretty as Daph feel so shy around boys? It's a question that never fails to baffle Halia.

Fred opens his mouth to say something, but George interrupts: "You tried it?"

"I know, I know," Fred smirks, holding up his hands as if to subdue applause. "I got the best of the brains and looks. Poor Georgie."

"Tried what?" Halia leans forward in interest.

"It's a funny little powder that turns a very delicious golden liquid into a not-so-delicious golden liquid," George informs them with the same proud smile he gets every time he talks about one of their new inventions. "Well, at least we hope so. This is our first time testing it."

"That's brilliant," Halia laughs.

"It'll take a few minutes to take effect, though," Fred glances over toward Malfoy's table and then back again. "So in the meantime, where are your drinks, ladies?"

Halia sighs, eyeing the formidable crowd around the bar. "Haven't had the chance to get them yet – we just got here."

"Well, have these then," George says, pushing the Butterbeer toward them. "We're always prepared with alternatives." In unison, the twins hold up flasks which, knowing them, are probably filled with Ogden's Old Firewhiskey.

"Thanks," Halia chirps happily and sips the foam from one of the mugs while Daphne hesitantly echoes her.

They chat about the standings of the Inter-House Cup, which Gryffindor happens to be leading by a fair amount, and the rumor that the Gambol and Japes joke shop in Diagon Alley might be going out of business. The twins are enthusiastically telling them their plans to buy it when they're interrupted by the long-awaited noise of a glass falling to the table across the bar.

While the rest of the bar is oblivious to what exactly happened, the reactions of the two involved parties are nothing short of priceless:

Fred and George clink their flasks together and take a shot.

Draco curses and frantically spits into a napkin.
Pansy dabs at her pastel pink smock with a horrified expression as the liquid pools over it.

Daphne, who looked rather disgusted initially at the twins' idea of a prank, covers her mouth with her hand, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

Blaise shifts in his chair and looks directly at Halia, somehow managing to keep his mouth in a thin, neutral line while the smirk in his eyes tells her everything she needs to know about his sense of loyalty.

Then Draco's looking at Halia and her companions too, and his lip curls into a furious snarl when what must have happened slowly dawns on him.

"Weasley's!" he roars, drawing his wand as he jumps around the table.

"What's wrong, Malfoy?" Fred asks with his usual bravado.

As if on cue, George adds with a taunting smirk, "Feeling a bit pissed, are we?"

They draw their wands just in time to block Malfoy's curse.

"I always knew you Weasley's were a dim lot," Draco sneers, "But honestly…do you have the first clue who you're messing with?"

George laughs. "Apparently, someone dim enough to confuse Butterbeer with —"

Draco fires another curse their way before George can finish and they block it again, but by a far narrower margin. Draco tips his chin to signal the others for backup, and Nott springs to his side while Blaise lazily follows.

"Might want to get down, ladies," Fred mutters out of the side of his mouth and winks again at Daphne, who quickly ducks under the table as a slew of curses and jinxes begin flying across the pub in both directions. Meanwhile, the students sitting at the tables between them scatter to the outer walls to observe and in most cases cheer on the unfolding duel.

"Hold my cauldron cakes?" Halia shoves the paper bag into Daphne's hands before jumping out of the booth and drawing her own wand. After all, three-on-three is a far more balanced playing field.

She exchanges a quick grin with George before training her gaze on Nott, the best duelist of the three. His expression remains cold and unperturbed, but she swears she sees him swallow as her mouth forms the incantation of a blasting curse. Professor Riddle frequently pairs them to duel because they're the best in Defense Against the Dark Arts and while Nott is better than she is at intricacy and technique, Halia almost always outdoes him by sheer force.

"This horseplay is not allowed in my pub!" Madam Rosemerta shouts, waving her arms as an empty glass mug caught in the crossfire narrowly misses her head. "Get out!"

But they ignore her and continue their duel as the crowd of students around them grows larger and louder. "Hit her, Theo!" Pansy screeches, apparently more interested in seeing Halia lose than watching her dear boyfriend.

While Nott is dueling fiercely, Blaise clearly isn't putting his all into the fight. And yet, he manages to hit Fred with a body-bind curse while the twins are teaming up on Draco. The small minority of students actually cheering for Malfoy's side goes wild as Fred falls to the floor, but Halia manages to disarm Nott a few seconds later and their noise is soon dwarfed by the rest of the crowd.
After a celebrating her glory with a quick smirk at Pansy, Halia turns her attention to Blaise. As amazing as it would feel to be the one to defeat Draco, Fred and George certainly earned it this time around. Well Fred, technically, as he was the one who started it. But seeing as he's incapacitated…

As if on cue, she hears Daphne whisper "Rennervate," and can see Fred stirring from the corner of her eye.

"Thanks," he tells Daph and quickly scrambles to his feet. Halia smiles as George disarms Blaise, leaving Fred the opportunity to do the honors and finish off Draco.

"Enough!" a familiar voice commands, one which nobody– not even the twins– would dare to defy.

The Three Broomsticks falls to silence and they drop their wands as Professor Snape glares evenly at them. Clearly they were all in enormous trouble, but at least there was some consolation in the fact that there was no way Snape could possibly be biased enough to ignore Malfoy's involvement this time.

"Come with me, Potter."

Pansy snickers as Halia just stares at him for a moment, completely dumfounded. But shock turns to fury as he gives her an impatient look and turns on his heel.

She storms out of the pub behind him knowing this is the last straw. This time, she's going to give him a piece of her fucking mind that he can't ignore. Maybe she'll even threaten to take it to Dumbledore – who knows?

"Get. Out!" she hears Madam Rosemerta shout angrily at the others just after she slips through the door.

The professor is already halfway up the street, but not in the direction that leads back to Hogwarts. He never once looks back to see if she's following him, so full of insufferable arrogance that it makes her blood boil.

She is so going to make him regret this.

"You do know that Malfoy cursed us first, right?" she snaps after a quick jog to catch up with his long strides.

He ignores her and continues his uphill stroll toward the Shrieking Shack, the lonesome landmark that nobody dares to visit. She doesn't have the first clue why this appears to be their destination, but this particular detail matters little at the moment compared to her aggravation.

"I get that you and Lucius Malfoy are friends and that you loathed my mum for whatever reason, but this is absolutely ridiculous!"

Snape stops in front of the wrought-iron gate and stares up at the decrepit building as though he hadn't heard her. She crosses her arms, glaring at him expectantly for an uncomfortably long silence, and is about to throw in the towel and storm back to the castle when his head slowly pivots toward her. A chill travels down her spine when a smirk appears on his face rather than the typical scowl.

"Was that therapeutic? It certainly seemed like it. However, I would advise you to avoid the topic of your mother with the current Hogwarts Potions Master."

Before she can even open her mouth to ask what in the hell is going on, Professor Snape abruptly sheds his thick, black outer cloak –
Only it's not Severus Snape standing in front of her any longer: it's Regulus Black.

She blinks a couple of times and then groans. "You have got to be kidding me! You did all of that --" she waves madly toward The Three Broomsticks in frustration, "--so we could have another little chat?"

"Hello again to you too, Halia," he greets her calmly while lighting a cigarette. "I'll admit that I could have used a more direct method, but my visit today is serving a dual purpose. A small division of Unspeakables were recently assigned to improve our methods of disguise in the Department and they gave me this to test," he gestures to the cloak draped over its arm as though the mere gesture explains everything.

Apparently he interprets her stunned silence at his nerve for confusion or curiosity, because he continues, "It doesn't create an exact replica like a well-brewed Polyjuice, but it seems to be an effective enough method as long as nobody looks too closely. Here – hold this." He hands her his smoldering cigarette before slipping the cloak back over his shoulders.

She drops it to the ground and stomps it out to spite him while carefully considering the copy of Professor Snape standing in front of her. "I suppose you can tell by the small details. The nose looks a bit more…normal." Then she sighs and gives him another sour look. "You didn't have to give Malfoy the satisfaction of seeing me get in trouble, you know."

Regulus, now looking like himself once again, raises a slight eyebrow at her. "You were the one dueling in a pub in the middle of the day on a student's weekend in Hogsmeade." She rolls her eyes, expecting a lecture about keeping out of trouble when he adds, "If you're going to play badass here, at least be smart about it. Now come with me – I don't have all day."

He strolls up to the front door and opens it with a creak that sounds a bit like a warning to stay as far away as possible. But it's clear that she doesn't have much of a choice in the matter, so she follows him into the dust and cobweb-covered shack and finds him sitting with his back against the wall on a torn, mud-stained rug in the dimly-lit sitting room just past the foyer.

He gestures for her to sit across from him, but she decides to examine the portrait with a large gash down the center that hangs above the fireplace instead. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Of course, the answer is obvious. Why else would Regulus Black visit her other than to tell her more about her parents and their history in the Department of Mysteries? Maybe he's even here to confirm her fear that she was responsible for what happened to them.

So much for her resolve to focus on the present rather than the past…

As much as she's been enjoying her now twice-weekly meetings with Professor Riddle, her constant struggle and obsession to regain her lost memories is exhausting. Inevitably, every attempt at thinking about them always ends with the same gripping fear in her stomach and the prospect of new dreams or the success of the Dark methods she tries with Riddle is terrifying because of what she might learn next. The potion he gives her every couple of weeks continues to help, but the most effective strategy she's found is to keep her thoughts as focused in the present as possible.

All she needs is a break from it all – one just long enough to let her feel normal again for a while. And since her decision to shift her focus, she has felt more like herself than she has in months. Plus, her marks have improved quite a bit.

Why did Regulus have to visit her now?
"I found these in the Department." He slides a thick envelope across the floor and it stops just in front of her feet. "They're your parents' redacted medical records. And behind them are the official versions that you would find if you paid St. Mungo's a visit today."

Instead of reaching for the envelope, she raises a finger and inscribes her initials in the dust resting on the fireplace mantle. "And?"

He gives her a look like she's completely mental and flicks his wand to summon the records back to himself. "Well first off," he begins while pulling out the documents and spreading them in a circle around him, "Your parents were never actually admitted to St. Mungo's to begin with…which means that they weren't being treated for any sort of infection. But you, on the other hand, were admitted to St. Mungo's for the two weeks directly following their official date of death." Regulus gestures to the papers surrounding him as though she should look for herself if she didn't believe him.

What is he playing at, exactly? He must know more about what happened than he's letting on given that he works in the Department of Mysteries – so why is he really visiting her and telling her all this? Is this all some sort of test to see how much she remembers?

But she would be an idiot to let on that the Department's memory charm was failing as Professor Riddle theorized. What if they considered her too much of a risk and erased all of the progress she's made?

"So?" she asks him coolly.

He scoffs. "What do you mean, 'so'?"

"Well, it's quite obvious isn't it? You did tell me that they were Unspeakables, after all – they were probably killed on some mission and the Department covered it up. And I have a feeling that, as a fellow Unspeakable, you know far more about what actually happened than you're telling me."

He would make an excellent gambler, because his expression never shifts for even a fraction of a second. "Even if that were true, there are restrictions on what I can and cannot say."

"That makes trusting you a bit difficult…"

"Do you have many other options to place your trust in?"

Well, there's Professor Riddle – but she's not about to tell Regulus about the fact that he's helping her either.

After a moment of her pause, he gives her a look of triumph, licks his lips, and continues, "I didn't think so. And I do want to help you, Halia…As much as I can within the bounds of my position, anyway."

"Why? Because you and my parents were the best of friends?"

Regulus shrugs. "We knew each other better than you might think. And you," he smirks ever-so-slightly, a phantom expression of Sirius' toothy grin, "You haven't changed a bit."

That spooks her, and not just because she's already a bit spooked from sitting in the Shrieking Shack where the walls seem to crawl around them or from witnessing Professor Snape smirking at her earlier. It's spooky that someone (and potentially an entire department of the Ministry) might actually know her better than she knows herself – that they might know more about her life than she does.

Oblivious to her internal quandaries, Regulus checks his golden pocket watch (which, based on
everything she does know about the Department, cannot possibly be a normal pocket watch) and curses. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have to go. Guess I should have intercepted you when you first came to Hogsmeade rather than waiting for you to wreak havoc." He stuffs the collection of records back into the envelope and rises from the floor, brushing the dirt off his trousers. "See you around, Hals."

With another vacant smirk and the crack of Apparition, he's gone.

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Precisely one week from today, every seat in the Wizengamot chambers will be filled for the first time in nearly a decade. No member will dare to miss this assembly, this chaotic culmination of weeks of Ministry reports, incessant propaganda, and the inevitable conspiracy theories which are closer to the truth than most give them credit for.

Chief Wizardess Amelia Bones will solemnly call the meeting to order and provide a brief, impressively unbiased summary of the recent events. But any order Bones initially achieves will be quickly discarded when she opens the floor for commentary from the others. After all, everyone–even the members known for their reserve and quiet judgment–has a tenacious opinion when it comes to the topic of war.

In the midst of the dark and muddled mess of proceedings that follow, a single Wizengamot member will emerge as the guiding light – the one voice powerful enough to inspire the impressionable and achieve a majority vote.

The problem is that she hasn't a clue who it might be, or even which side they represent.

Ariana sets aside the glass Seeing Orb in frustration as its shadowy images begin to cloud and blur. The Sight has been increasingly uncooperative toward her over the past several weeks, which surely has something to do with that wretched embodiment of Dark magic that Gellert forced her to examine. It would be foolish to believe she could name its owner and escape unscathed.

But her Sight will return, of that she is confident. It must. Because not only is it her link to the outside world, it is the sole reason Gellert bothers to keep her alive.

-xx-

"Well, this is certainly more romantic than I expected." Bellatrix puts her menu down and reaches across the table to the small bouquet of red and white miniature roses and strokes one of the petals.

"Is that a problem?" Rodolphus straightens slightly in his chair and narrows his eyes at her in suspicion.

"Of course not. It's lovely." And it is, really. She just wishes she was enjoying it with someone other than Rodolphus.

She doesn't glance up to meet his gray-blue gaze that nearly always seems somber, but she can feel it sweeping over her face for several long seconds before he finally asks, "Does Tom know, Bella?"

His voice is businesslike, but with a barely perceptible trace of softness.

"Know what?"

"That you and I are here together, presumably on a date?"

Silence falls between them while the waiter returns to the table and fills her goblet with the red wine.
she ordered a few minutes prior. Rodolphus gives her an impatient look, but she takes her time as she swirls it, takes a small sip, and nods at the waiter to relay her satisfaction.

When he leaves, she answers lightly, "Not exactly."

"And you're still seeing each other I take it?"

"Define 'seeing'..." she smirks slightly.

"I'll take that as a yes," he glares at her. "In which case, I can assume you are here simply to keep your mother at bay."

Damn. He's far cleverer than she remembers.

"You could've told me, you know." His expression grows a bit more somber, but if he is truly offended, he hides it well. "And as for Tom...he should probably hear it from you before he hears it from someone else."

Of course, she could only hope that Tom would actually give a damn if she was out with another man...he would, wouldn't he?

"What do you think he would do?" she asks Rodolphus in hopes that he can provide her some level of certainty.

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "I don't know. But I don't really want to find out, either."

Things are largely silent between them for the remainder of dinner with a few attempts at small talk when he asks about Narcissa and Lucius and tells her some details about his job at the Ministry. But it's all a bit torturous and Rodolphus quickly pays the bill before escorting her back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"It was nice seeing you," he tells her as they linger on the sidewalk that leads up to the townhouse. "Even under these circumstances."

Bellatrix looks up at him with a tight smile. "If anyone asks, especially my mother or Narcissa, will you tell them we're seeing each other every week?"

"I will, Bella." He leans in and kisses her on the cheek, his neatly trimmed beard scratching against her delicate skin. "But talk to Tom and...take care of yourself."

-xx-

"Anyway, there's no way that he could possibly be telling me all this just out of the kindness of his heart, right?" Halia sighs, finishing her account of her most recent run-in with Regulus Black during her trip to Hogsmeade last weekend. "Either he or the Department of Mysteries must have something to gain from it."

Yes, that much is quite obvious. But as for their actual intentions, even Tom can only speculate.

She groans, collapses into the chair across from him, and leans forward to rest her head on her arms, her mess of black hair spreading across a good quarter of his desk. He scowls and shifts his inkwell and never-ending stack of papers requiring grades over a few inches.

Whether Tom wanted to or not, he has learned quite a bit about the girl over the course of their
meetings and regular glimpses of her dreams: she's curious, impulsive, argumentative, and almost naively open-minded. That's all fine – in fact, those traits are almost pleasant in some circumstances. Her lack of regard for boundaries, on the other hand, never ceases to irritate him.

And it certainly makes the reality that his horcrux is bonded to her soul even harder to grasp.

"I'm so tired of thinking about it all," says her muffled voice.

For once, he actually feels as though he can relate. He's looked at the troubling issue of their soul-bond forward and backward and from all angles he can think of, but any real solution of how to deal with it eludes him. Despite the potential benefits he might get out of this strange connection of theirs, particularly in learning the Department of Mysteries' secrets, there are a wealth of risks. She could find out about it, for one. Or the Department could – that is, if they didn't know already.

And of course, there is also the possibility that this is all a trap and that he's already completely fucked. So the only rational thing to do, at least until he learns something that persuades him otherwise, is to continue cautiously pursuing his plans. But of course, this resolve does little in the way of stopping his mind from constantly turning.

"Can we talk about something else?" She leans back in her chair and flips the hair out of her face. "Just for tonight?"

"What would you like to talk about?"

Perhaps something Dark Magic-related? Or the unfolding conflict in Russia? Last week, they had an impressively mature conversation about how they predicted the impending Wizengamot decision to fall that he wouldn't mind continuing…

"Well," she says casually while reaching down to stroke Nagini's head. "You know basically everything about me and I know next to nothing about you."

His jaw twitches.

Oh. Right. No boundaries.

"You seem tired," he tries to deflect the conversation, "Perhaps you should return to your dormitory sooner than later."

"I get that you're a really private person, but would it kill you to answer one question about yourself?" She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest. Beside her, Nagini quickly realizes that Potter stopped petting her and rubs her head against the girl's leg like a pathetic housecat until the affection returns.

"Very well," he sighs. "You may ask one question."

"I didn't actually mean only one," she scowls at him and he smirks back at her triumphantly. "But have it your way. That just means I'll have to make it a really good one. Hmm..." She drums her fingers against the chair in thought.

Several seconds pass and his eyes narrow impatiently. "I will not wait all evening, Potter."

"Alright, alright." She glances down at the snake curled at her feet and asks in flawless Parseltongue that chills him to the core, "What do you think, Nagini? What should I ask Professor Riddle?"

He holds his breath for a few seconds and waits for Potter to realize she was speaking the language
of serpents, but it never happens. She just tilts her head back and stares up at the ceiling and obliviously continues to ponder what she would like to ask him.

Tom exhales in relief and glances down at Nagini, who cocks her head to the side and looks up at him expectantly as if to ask, 'Can I respond to her yet?'

He shakes his head slightly and she gives him an unhappy but thankfully wordless hiss.

"I saw your Special Services to the School Award in the Trophy Room a few weeks ago when Professor Snape ran out of things for me to do for him during detention and sent me to help Filch polish everything. How did you earn it?"

Well, she certainly could have chosen to ask worse. After all, there was a clean, simple answer to the question that would be supported by any of the newspaper articles covering the event should she decide to investigate further.

"There was a student raising a dangerous beast in the castle – it even killed a fellow student. I caught him tending to it one evening while I was on rounds and, naturally, he was expelled shortly after."

Potter's bright eyes widen. "Oh, wow. That's too bad…about the student, I mean. Thank Merlin you caught him before someone else was hurt."

Yes, thank Merlin, he rolls his eyes internally. Thank the incessantly meddling Professor Dumbledore, more like.

"What kind of beast was it?" she asks.

At this point, Nagini begins pacing– or slithering, rather– back and forth across his office. Because of course, she is quite well-acquainted with the true beast that lives below the castle. Before Dumbledore became Headmaster, they would chance a visit to the Chamber of Secrets now and again to visit the magnificent Basilisk which she so insolently dubbed 'Brian'.

"An Acromantula – some say it's still living somewhere in the Black Forest."

She tilts her head to the side, as if pondering a trip out to the Black Forest to try and find it. "And here I thought Hogwarts was boring."

He smirks slightly. "Not at all if you know where to look."

Potter gives him an intrigued look and leans forward. "Like where?"

Nagini begins slithering faster with a somewhat pained expression. It's clearly torturing her to keep her mouth shut, but she's just going to have to deal with it for the time being. He intends to keep this 'horcrux bonding to Potter's soul' situation under control as much as he possibly can, and that means being strategic about how he strengthens the bond, and when. Plus, he and Nagini will obviously need to have a little chat about what she can and cannot tell Potter before he allows her to say anything.

"That is your third question, Potter. I was generous with the second." With that, he picks up his quill, dips it in its dark red inkwell, and continues grading essays from the fourth years.

She sighs in defeat and gathers her cloak and stray textbooks. "Have it your way, then – I'll go. Goodnight, Professor."

He doesn't look up, but hears her footsteps trod away and then suddenly stop. "Is Nagini alright?"
she asks.

"Ignore her. She's fine."

That earns him another hiss, but at least the snake manages to keep quiet until Potter closes the door behind her.

"This is torture," she whines.

"Control yourself, Nagini."

She slithers into the chair where Potter was just sitting and hisses angrily at him, "You have no idea what it is like – it must be so easy for you. You get to speak to her for so long, and so often."

"Yes, it's such a privilege," Tom hisses back dryly. It's not so bad most of the time...but still.

"Do you have to be so rude to her? What if she stops coming back?"

"She won't."

"I suppose not – she is the mate of your soul, after all. Your soulmate."

Even though Nagini has no clue about the human connotations of this revoltingly cloying term, it makes his skin crawl every time she uses it.

"Nagini," his jaw tightens in irritation, "Once again, we're not soulmates. Her soul is simply bonded to mine. It's bonded to yours too, in a way."

"What's the difference?"

"You wouldn't understand. But believe me when I say that there is one. She and I are not mates – of any kind."

"Whatever."

He grimaces. Perfect. As if Nagini wasn't sassy enough already, she's picking up on Potter's teenage version too.

-xx-

"Were you planning to go to the Quidditch match this weekend?" Daphne asks her over breakfast.

"Only to annoy Draco and Pansy by cheering for the Gryffindors. Why do you ask?" Halia shovels a large bite of porridge into her mouth, feeling particularly ravenous this morning from her run.

"I was thinking of going," Daphne answers casually.

"Really?"

It's not as though it was bound to be a particularly good match – Gryffindor was leagues ahead of Ravenclaw and would almost certainly win the Quidditch Cup. Plus, Daphne had been lukewarm at best about Halia's insistence of going to all the other matches.

She shrugs and examines the ends on a few golden blonde strands of hair. "It's something to do...something to get our minds off studying for exams for a while."
"True enough," Halia smiles.

Soon after, the morning post arrives and she is somewhat surprised to see a letter drop in front of her, narrowly missing her bowl. After all, Sirius and Remus are the only ones who regularly write her and she just received letters from each of them yesterday wishing her luck on exams. She flips the envelope over, immediately recognizing the Illvermorny seal and the bubbly handwriting inside:

**Hi Halia,**

*How is Hogwarts? Does anyone there actually know how to party or is it just as lame as the rumors? I am so ready for this school year to end. Ava is valedictorian of Horned Serpent and mother and father couldn't be happier – ugh. Anyway, I miss you! NYC misses you too – I can sense it. Will you visit this summer? We'll take over the town, just like old times.*

xxx

*Frances*

She grins and reads the letter again. It's been months since she's heard from Frances Laidley, the younger daughter of the MACUSA President, Gloria Laidley, and her husband Randall. And Ava, of course, was Frances' older sister. The two of them were complete opposites to an almost comical degree; Ava was a prim, dutiful perfectionist while Frances was the unruly, carefree wild child. Halia became quite acquainted with the family through her parents' work, but she and Frances were always the closest. They were kindred spirits, in a way.

"Looks like I'll be visiting New York City this summer," Halia announces to Daphne while folding up Frances' letter. When she doesn't respond, Halia glances up and pokes her arm. "Daph?"

"Hm? Sorry…I was just thinking about something," Daphne says airily, apparently distracted by something on the other side of the Great Hall. "New York City, yeah? I've never been – you'll have to tell me all about it."

Halia follows her gaze where it lands at the Gryffindor table, right in the spot where the Weasley twins are just standing to leave.

Interesting…

"You know," Halia suggests on a whim, "If we *really* wanted to get under Draco and Pansy's skin, we could ask the twins to borrow their Quidditch sweaters and wear them to the match this weekend."

Daph's cheeks turn a bit pink and she seems to get a bit quieter all of a sudden as she pushes her scrambled eggs around her plate with her fork. "That wouldn't be – I don't know, weird?"

Halia smirks. "Not at all…I'll ask them later today. Which do you want: Fred's or George's?"

"I don't know," Daphne glances away and appears to be very preoccupied with her breakfast once again.

Merlin, she is a rubbish liar. And anyway, this wouldn't be so hard to find out. After all, during their recent trip to Hogsmeade, Fred– unlike George– had actually made an effort to talk to Daphne and she had even resuscitated him during their duel with Malfoy, Zabini, and Nott.

"Okay then. I'll take George's. You can have Fred's. Sound alright?"
Alright,” she shrugs, but immediately seems to brighten.

Bingo.

-xx-

They meet at the one place where they are sure they won't be overheard. It has gone by many names over the years and moves locations regularly throughout the seedier parts of London, but the stone gargoyle with slightly lopsided eyes always marks the entrance. Of course, finding the statue and muttering the constantly-changing password is only half the battle. Once inside, a saucy and incredibly vain part-vampire, part-human, part-veela named Adrasteia demands a blood sacrifice to ensure that one isn't simply an Auror in disguise.

He doesn't flinch as she slides the knife across his palm and holds the edge of the blade against the cut to catch a fair sample. Then she brings it to her mouth and runs her tongue along the steel in a motion he can't quite tear his eyes away from.

Adrasteia purses her purplish, dark red lips and considers the taste before flashing him a smile that shows off her polished incisors. "Ah, I knew I recognized you...Your blood is bitter, Tom Riddle, but I suppose I don't mind." She winks at him, presses her wand to his palm to heal the cut, and gestures to a door on the left side of the dimly lit corridor behind her. "They're waiting for you already – room seven."

He thanks her with a smirk and strolls down the corridor.

Each room is equipped with magic similar to that of the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts and allows customers to request whatever they desire – at a price, of course. For Tom, this essentially equated to protections from being overheard and something pleasant to drink. But it was always a tossup as to what amenities Rodolphus, Rabastan, Regulus, and Antonin would deem necessary.

Tom pushes open the door and is met with a comfortable-looking lounge that looks normal on all counts except for the extravagant, ten-foot tall fountain of cascading, foamy beer that sits near the far wall.

"It was Regulus' idea," Rabastan grins before Tom even has the opportunity to ask.

"Of course it was," Tom scoffs and glances around the room and greets Rodolphus, who is filling up a mug in the fountain and Antonin, who lounges on one of the long sofas. But Regulus is nowhere to be found. "Where is he?"

"He'll be along shortly," Rabastan answers, glancing at his watch. "The last I heard, he was finishing up some work at the Ministry."

Tom nods, wondering what exactly that meant even though he would have given it little thought just half a year ago. Now that he's learned so much from Potter about what Unspeakables actually do, every mention of the Department fascinates him on an entirely new level. Plus, the fact that it's Regulus who keeps contacting Potter rather than any of the other Unspeakables is more than enough to encourage Tom to begin watching him a bit more carefully tonight.

But even Regulus wasn't who he was most intrigued to see of his old comrades – especially not with the recent news that the Wizengamot would be sending funds and supplies for Germany's war effort against Russia, marking the first public alliance between Britain and Germany in over forty years. Tom was delighted when he heard, of course. While he didn't agree with everything Gellert Grindelwald stood for, he certainly wouldn't mind if Fudge or the British Wizengamot became more
open-minded to forms of policy that challenged their dogmatic views.

And who better to inform them about what the \textit{Daily Prophet} refused to cover than Antonin Dolohov, who worked for Gellert Grindelwald himself?

Clearly this isn't only on Tom's radar because after a few long swings from his mug, Rodolphus asks, "How does it feel to be back, Dolohov? And how did you manage it? It seems that you have plenty to keep you busy nowadays…"

Of course, Rodolphus doesn't dare to mention the reason Antonin left in the first place. It all began years ago, when his father, Sergei Dolohov, a highly esteemed representative of pureblood society was running for Minister for Magic and polling strongly against Fudge when he was accused of corruption and shipped off to Azkaban following a swift trial. Many thought he was framed, but any voice of protest was quickly distracted by the need to ingratiate their interests into Fudge's centrist agenda, given that he had already seized the Minister-ship. Such is the nature of pureblood bureaucrats.

Sergei's arrest took place in the middle of their sixth year and caused an immediate shift in Antonin's demeanor. Once the most cautious member of their group, his wariness was quickly cast aside in favor of learning as much as he could about the Dark Arts from Tom. Of course, Tom recognized Antonin's sudden interest for what it was: a lust for revenge. So he began speaking to Antonin quite often about how one might obtain a position of power and tailored his lessons to topics that one seeking revenge might find pertinent: namely, the Unforgivable Curses. Tom was already interested to see his protégé's plans for revenge unfold, but even more so when he found out that Antonin quietly left the country to work for Gellert Grindelwald's regime after graduation.

Dolohov opens his mouth to respond just as Regulus waltzes through the door, announcing, "Sorry I'm late – I was distracted by that goddess Adrasteia." He winks at Rabastan and spots the fountain shortly after, his eyes widening, "Wow, they really don't disappoint, do they?"

"Sit down, Black," Tom snaps in irritation at the interruption.

"Good to see you too, mate." He falls into one of the black leather armchairs and lights a cigarette, glancing once more in Tom's direction. "Is Bellatrix coming?"

"She's your cousin – why should I know?" he narrows his eyes in response and Rodolphus chokes on his beer, apparently in amusement.

Things have certainly changed since their Hogwarts years, but no matter – he would happily remind them all of their places if they required it.

"As you were saying, Dolohov?" Tom prompts impatiently.

"Well, things \textit{have} been busy…but I can't say much more than that, to be honest."

"Oh come on, we're friends," Rabastan claps him on the shoulder. "Where is Grindelwald planning to attack first? And when?"

"And what exactly did the Wizengamot agree to send him?" Rodolphus chimes in.

Dolohov laughs nervously. "Right, so just to be clear: I'd like to \textit{avoid} getting offed for treason when I return to work on Monday. But there is some news I can share…Grindelwald heard about the approval of your education proposal by the Board of Governors, Riddle, and that you'll be presenting it to the Wizengamot this summer. He was…very intrigued. He said it sounds promising, especially with the new alliance."
"Is that so?" His mouth ticks up in a small, arrogant smile.

What pleasant news…and that which he so deserves. Ever since Dippet retired and Dumbledore replaced him, Tom has been forced to quietly bide his time and build a reputation for himself while staying within careful boundaries for the first time in his life. It's been incredibly taxing on his patience, but victory is so close he can almost taste it – and even closer now that he's managed to catch the attention of the most powerful leader in Europe at the moment. But of course, it was only a matter of time until something like this happened.

Dolohov nods. "He expressed interest in meeting with you about how Durmstrang and Hogwarts might learn from each other in the case that it's approved – which it will be, of course."

"I don't know…" Regulus runs a hand through his hair and takes a drag from his cigarette. "After the way the Wizengamot proceedings went yesterday, getting it past Dumbledore might prove to be more of a challenge than anticipated."

Tom narrows his eyes and Regulus continues to explain quickly, "I mean, believe me, I thought the guy was a complete loon and assumed everyone else felt the same. I was shocked when Dippet made him Headmaster and just assumed it was only because they were old friends. But when everyone in the Wizengamot was sharing their piece about why they supported the war or not, it honestly looked like there was a fair chance we would be sending troops of Aurors. As soon as Dumbledore spoke, though, it was obvious that wasn't going to happen. People were shocked – I mean, until now nobody thought he was even remotely political except for casting a Wizengamot vote every so often. But in the end, only two people voted to send Aurors and just barely half voted to send funds as a sign of respect to the families that were poisoned. It was clear he didn't want to get involved at all, but he completely swayed the tone of the discussion and ultimately, the decision – as much as he could have anyway."

And of course, Dumbledore would have even more influence over whether or not his proposal passed given his status as Headmaster. Tom scowls. Apparently he underestimated the power of old fool. He always knew it was unlikely for Dumbledore to approve of his plans, especially those that involved creating a Dark Arts course, and this was the entire reason he presented it to the Hogwarts Board in the first place. But he never anticipated that Dumbledore would be able to completely sway a majority vote on his own…

Tom would find a way around him, though, even if that meant buying votes through sheer force. He's waited far too long for this.

"Wait a minute…How do you know all of this?" Rodolphus asks suspiciously.

"Bode was there and told me about it…Unspeakables know basically everything that happens at the Ministry so long as it has a record," Regulus answers with complete nonchalance.

"I will never understand this whole 'Unspeakable' thing," Rabastan sighs. "You're allowed to reveal confidential Wizengamot proceedings but you can't even give me a hint about where certain Goblin-operated goldmines might be located?"

Regulus shrugs. "It's complicated. But long story short, the Department does try to stay out of politics."

Yeah, right. Lily and James Potter were direct proof that this statement is utter bullshit, but Tom has little choice other than to go along with it.

However, the Potter's are the last thing on his mind at the moment – quite possibly for the first time in
months. Far more important is determining how he will proceed to supersede Dumbledore's inevitable pushback to his proposal.

-xx-

Just two days later, Tom finds himself being summoned to the Headmaster's office to discuss the very topic of his proposal.

"I wish you had brought it directly to me rather than the Board of Governors," Dumbledore says solemnly while gesturing to the pot of tea and spare mug resting on his desk.

Tom shakes his head to decline while attempting to recover from the shock that, for once, Dumbledore didn't bother with the incessant pleasantries and small talk that usually accompanies a visit to his office. "If I did, would you have approved it?"

The elder takes a sip from his cup. "I would feel more comfortable approving it if you removed the section that proposes the inauguration of a Dark Arts course. But I recognize that for you, Tom, some things are not up for debate."

Well, that was...suspiciously understanding.

Dumbledore gives him a small smile as if hearing his thoughts. "There are topics on which we will always disagree, but I was hoping we might reach a mutual understanding. Many things are uncertain given the current political climate, Tom, and I find myself wondering where your loyalty lies given that your proposal advocates certain changes that seem reminiscent of institutions such as Durmstrang."

"Hogwarts has my full loyalty," Tom finds himself answering honestly. "It's always been my home and that has never changed. I only wish to see Hogwarts keep pace with if not exceed the progress of other competing institutions."

Dumbledore studies his face from over the top of his half-moon spectacles while Tom stares coolly back at him. "Then you will have Hogwarts' loyalty in return," he says finally. "And I will advocate your proposal to the Wizengamot."

Tom is momentarily stunned to silence, but at the same time nowhere near stupid enough to believe Dumbledore doesn't expect anything in return.

"On a completely unrelated subject," the Headmaster continues in a lighter tone, "how are things with Miss Potter going? Have made an effort to gain her trust, as I requested at the beginning of the term?"

Ah. So he did expect something from Tom in return: to prove rather than simply voice his loyalty.

"I have gotten acquainted with Miss Potter to some degree."

"And has she entrusted you with anything interesting?"

Well, fuck. Now it's just a guessing game as to what Dumbledore knew about the Potter's and, far more troubling, Tom's connection to their death or the fact that his horcrux is bonded to her soul.

"Anything interesting?" Tom echoes, attempting to buy himself some time.

"Yes."
"Well," Tom wagers, his heart pounding violently against his chest, "Her parents worked for the Department of Mysteries…But I assume you already knew that."

*Thank Salazar for Occlumency.*

Dumbledore's eyes twinkle and he bows his head slightly. "Thank you, Tom. That is all for today."

So that was it, then; apparently he passed the test – for today.

Tom returns to his office, pours himself a glass of wine, and attempts to feel triumphant about the fact that Dumbledore just pledged his support, therefore guaranteeing the success of his proposal in the Wizengamot.

But in reality, it just feels like a trap.

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Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Predictions? I love hearing from you all so please leave a review!

Next chapter we'll check in with Hermione and Sirius and wrap up Halia's first year at Hogwarts- time flies! The pacing for next term will be a bit slower now that the plot is chugging along. :) 

Thanks for reading/bookmarking/subscribing/leaving kudos/commenting, everyone!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-June, 1997-

To my oldest and dearest friend,

I am writing you on the eve of the invasion – our invasion, if you will – in celebration. Is it not refreshing that, after all these years, we are once again working toward a common goal? I may not have gotten the full alliance I so desired, but at least you can no longer hide in the shadows, Albus. What fun we are going to have... And oh, how it must have burned to see members of the International Confederation naming me a hero for exposing Russia's potion black market. But what more can I say? In the end, I am simply a modest public servant of the Greater Good.

As I can be sure you're wondering, I will add that our dear Ariana is doing well despite your inevitable assumptions otherwise. I see no need for extraneous casualties, especially given how useful she has proven to be over the years. No, this is between you and I, Albus. You chose this. But with that said, what's fair is fair and I trust you to remember that I will not hesitate to even the score. Those short months in Godric's Hollow feel like another lifetime at this point and perhaps it is merely the curse of old age, but I find myself increasingly prone to reflection as of late. Do you experience the same? I hope so. I hope you always remember, Albus. I hope it haunts you until the very end.

Until next time,

- G

-xx-

"Evening," Halia strolls into Professor Riddle's office without knocking, which– as always– earns her an immediate look of disapproval. She pretends not to notice and grins widely back at him while crossing the room to where he stands at the fireplace, holding squirming rats by the tail and dropping them down to Nagini. It's obviously routine for the professor, judging by his bored expression and glazed-over eyes. But to Halia, it's always both horrifically gruesome and wondrously mesmerizing to watch Nagini strike and strangle each rodent with a few twists of her muscular body before swallowing them whole.

However, the snake seems to lose complete interest in dinnertime when she sees Halia standing nearby and quickly slithers over, nudging her head against Halia's palm. Granting Nagini's requests for affection has become a common occurrence for her, albeit one she can never quite get used to – never before has she encountered such a friendly reptile which is even more ironic given the standoffish nature of her owner.

Professor Riddle conjures a cage and stuffs the rats inside while muttering something under his breath about Nagini catching her own dinner from now on.

"Oh, don't be so jealous that she likes me more than you," Halia smirks up at Riddle from where she kneels at his pet's side. "It's probably just because you're always brooding."
She swears she sees Nagini wink at her, as if snakes could actually wink.

"I do not…brood," he scowls at her.

Halia snorts. "Yes you do. You were brooding all last week after the Wizengamot sent you that letter about when the hearing date for your proposals would be – and for God knows why, since I thought that's what you were waiting for all this time."

He crosses his arms, the scowl deepening. Meanwhile, the corners of her mouth fight to stay in a straight line; getting under his skin has become a bit of a hobby for her. After all, exasperation is the only emotion she seems to repeatedly evoke in him with any success.

"Hell, you're doing it now." She gives him a pointed look and he pauses, apparently in self-realization because then he slowly unfolds his arms and swaps the scowl for his usual, blank expression.

He licks his thin lips, takes a seat at his desk, and peers rather condescendingly down at her. "Well, it is certainly interesting that you find me to be irritable whenever you happen to be present. What do you suppose that might mean?"

"Are you implying that I'm annoying?" she sniffs dramatically and fights another smile. "How rude."

"Would you find the term 'meddlesome' more polite?"

"Not really, no," she rises and brushes off her black pleated skirt while Nagini hisses at her for the sudden void in attention.

He smirks, first at the snake and then Halia. "How are your exams going?"

"They're alright," she sighs, exhausted at the mere reminder. "Just Arithmancy and History of Magic to go, now." She would be bound to fail the latter if Binns bothered to change the sixth year questions from one year to the next. Then again, so would the majority of her class (save for the Ravenclaws, perhaps) given that they were all banking on precisely the same thing.

He nods and begins fiddling wandlessly with a magical puzzle resting on his desk. It somewhat resembles a muggle Rubik's cube comprised of hundreds of tiny, interlocking gears, each of which could be shifted into a new position. "And your dreams?"

"Nothing particularly interesting," she shrugs, thankful enough that they were no longer about the day her parents died. Something about the intricate movements of his long fingertips as he quickly works through the puzzle leaves her in a slight daze and she doesn't quite catch what he says next – if he even says anything at all.

What else could those fingers do…?


Moments later, the clouds outside shift and allow the pink-orange light of the setting sun to stream through the tall windows of his office at the perfect angle to illuminate his handsome face with a soft glow. Nagini slithers up the side of his chair and drapes herself across his shoulders to soak up the rays just as the last gear of the puzzle clicks into place to form the shape of a bird and he smiles in satisfaction.

Her stomach flips at least three times when he looks up at her from under his long, dark eyelashes. "I expect that it will prove beneficial for you to visit your friend this summer. A change of scenery
could trigger the return of memories that may have remained otherwise hidden," he says.

"I'm looking forward to it," she manages to stay cool and answers with a smile, remembering how thrilled Frances had been when she wrote back with plans to visit in late July.

Though on the other hand, she's not really looking forward to spending two and a half months away from him.

It's a strange thought. After all, she never would have blinked at the prospect of two and a half months away from her friends or even someone she fancied before. Maybe this was simply the consequence of staying in the same place for too long. But then why did she keep coming back for his help even though a rather significant part of her didn't give a damn about regaining her memories anymore? Why did everything about him seem so magnetic?


Stupid bloody hormones.

"Can I try?" she gestures at the puzzle in interest, though it's really more out of necessity to derail her thoughts than anything.

He shrugs and taps it with his wand before tossing it across his desk to her. "I suppose. Though given the level of logic and concentration it requires, I doubt you will be able to solve it before curfew."

Despite being one of the most attractive people she's ever seen, he could be a real asshole at times.

"We'll see," she purses her lips in determination to disprove him and examines the rows of elaborate metal pieces. If he can solve it in under two minutes, she can certainly do it within two hours.

"Make your first move, Potter," he sighs boredly.

This is far more complicated than she anticipated, as it turns out. But the pressure of his impatient eyes on her drives her to take a stab in the dark and flicks her pointer finger, which causes a tiny gear near the center to shift ninety degrees.

"Wrong," he tells her and taps the block with his wand. "Always begin with the outer corners first. And shifting only one at a time is incredibly foolish."

She glares at him. "How am I supposed to achieve any 'level of concentration' if you're sitting here talking to me the whole time?"

"I'm waiting." He even has the nerve to yawn this time, which manages to push her temper over the edge.

Apparently this is payback for the way she antagonized him earlier.

"Forget it." She feels her face turning red in anger as she tosses the puzzle back on his desk.

Riddle clicks his tongue in disapproval, a cruel, victorious glimmer his eyes. "So quick to admit defeat... what a shame."

A retort sizzles on the tip of her tongue and she's just about to snap at him again when Nagini suddenly twists her neck in a blur of motion and Professor Riddle swears under his breath, clutching his ear as a few drops of blood fall onto the crisp white collar of his shirt.
"What in the hell is wrong with you?" he glares at Nagini in both fury and shock as he stands abruptly, dumping her off his shoulders.

She hisses at him and slithers off to the fireplace with her head high, as though she was pleased with herself. As though she did it because Riddle was being an ass.

But there's no way…right?

Halia doesn't know whether to be amused or slightly terrified. "Are you alright?" she finally asks as he mends his bleeding earlobe.

"I'm fine," he snaps.

"Isn't her venom poisonous? Don't you need to treat that or something?" It doesn't look too deep – just a nick, really. But if Halia was in his position, she wouldn't chance it…

Riddle tucks his wand away, the small spots of blood on his collar the only remaining evidence of Nagini's wrath. "I take an antidote daily – she occasionally bites in her sleep." Halia looks away and smiles to herself at how oddly adorable it is to imagine the two of them cuddling on a cold winter night. "Apparently, of all the snakes in the world, I had to choose the half-psychotic one to take in…" he growls under his breath.

"Where did you find her?" she asks, largely expecting him to ignore the question given his apparent hesitation to tell her anything at all about himself that could be construed as personal.

-xx-

For the fourth time that afternoon, Nagini opens her mouth and Tom sends her yet another threatening look.

*Don't you dare.*

She wouldn't. It's been like this for weeks, now. Though judging by the throbbing pain in his ear, she's becoming a bit more spiteful in her impatience.

But he could be spiteful, too, and telling Potter the story of how he found Nagini without giving her the opportunity to chime in would equate to pure torture for the insolent serpent.

"She belonged to a Hippogriff poacher in Albania. I was – it's a long story," he tells Potter, which earns him a raised eyebrow in suspicion. He ignores it and continues anyway: "It was quite clear she was unhappy."

Unhappy being the pleasant term – a more accurate description would be starved, with the scales on her sides and back shaven off and half her fangs ripped out as another source of profit for the shite human she belonged to. She was dying.

"The poacher didn't put up much of a fight when I suggested I bring her back with me."

…Along with the rest of his very illegal inventory.

And to be fair, Nagini's prior owner didn't have much of a choice to put up a fight. When the poacher tried to sell him a vial of her freshly-harvested venom, Tom lost it and dragged him to a nearby alley to torture him with the Cruciatius until he begged for death. But it wasn't until the man nearly blacked out in pain that Tom finally poured the vial of Nagini's venom down his throat.
When it was all finished Tom looked for Nagini and found her lying in the ditch on the other side of the alley, hanging to life by a thread after being struck by a wayward defensive curse from the man. He knew he had to save her.

And so, Nagini became his first living horcrux.

He glances at Nagini, now healthy to the point of overindulgence, and smirks as she continues to petulantly slither back and forth, opening and closing her mouth in sheer distress over her obligatory silence.

"And that was that," he shrugs.

"For Salazar's sake, at least tell it right!"


And all three of them exchange looks of terror, shock, and dread.

-Nx-

"Nagini." Professor Riddle snaps, but not in English. Not in any language she's ever heard before. In Parseltongue.

How can she understand Parseltongue?

Halia's eyes dart from Nagini to Professor Riddle and back to Nagini again. "Did she…Did she actually…What the fuck?"

Now Professor Riddle is staring at her with an impenetrable expression that, if she had to guess, seems to fall somewhere between amusement and curiosity. "Language, Potter."

She ignores him. "Is this some sort of trick spell or something?"

Riddle is the last person she would expect to play a practical joke, but it's the only logical explanation that comes to mind at the moment.

Very slowly, his mouth curls into a smirk. "Not at all, Miss Potter. Perhaps Parseltongue is something you picked up in your travels?" he suggests matter-of-factly.

Halia swallows, her mouth suddenly dry. "How long have you known? That I can – that I'm –"

There's no way. She can't be.

"A Parselmouth? A little over two months, now."

"What?" she manages to squeak out.

"I planned to tell you when your symptoms of memory regain subsided," he tells her with a small, casual as though this explains everything. "Go ahead – try it."

But she doesn't. She just sits in stunned since as Nagini slithers over and rests her head on her knee. "Now we can talk all the time. Aren't you happy?"

How can a snake be so freakishly humanlike?

She recoils slightly out of instinct and Nagini looks away. Halia's stomach drops when she realizes it
was out of hurt. "I'm sorry," she says instantly, baffled by the foreign sounds pouring so naturally from her mouth. "I just...I've never spoken to a snake before."

"Yes you have," Nagini seems to scoff at her. "You have spoken to me at least five times without noticing."

"Oh. Well, alright then," she manages to choke out.

"Like that time you thanked me for the tea, and the other time when –" Nagini begins to list off each instance.

'H Help me,' Halia tries to tell Riddle with her eyes.

He remains silent for a few long seconds, watching them carefully with his fingertips tented together. But finally, he says in an authoritative, though gentle tone, "That's enough Nagini. You can speak more to Miss Potter the next time she visits. Leave us for now – we have human matters to discuss."

"Human matters," the snake hisses unhappily.

"If you choose to argue, there will not be a next time," he threatens.

"Fine," Nagini responds sassily and then looks up at Halia with an awe-like expression. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Nagini."

Halia's head spins again. This is going to take some serious getting used to.

-xx-

They sit in silence after Nagini leaves them. Potter's shock is obvious, but she appears to be handling it well which is just about the only thing keeping him from strangling Nagini at the moment. Perhaps he should have expected it given the number of revelations the girl has dealt with in the past months – what's one more, at this point?

What he couldn't have expected was the strange feeling that crept over him while watching Nagini and her speaking Parseltongue: bizarre and unnerving, but warm. Perhaps it was the sensation of his horcrux's bond to her soul growing stronger given this new level of interaction between Potter and another of his horcruxes.

"So I'm a Parselmouth…" she says slowly, as if trying on the word for size. "And so are you."

"That is an accurate summary."

"It doesn't seem like something I would have picked up from the Department. Being a Parselmouth has certain...connotations." She runs a hand through her dark hair like she always does when she's thinking hard about something.

"I am aware. But if not from the Department of Mysteries, then where?" he tests her.

"I don't know. I'm sure as hell not the Heir of Slytherin."

"Believe me, I know," he snorts a laugh despite himself and regrets it immediately when he sees something click just behind her eyes.

"...Are you?"
"Miss Potter –"

He doesn't want to deny it for the sake of his pride, nor confirm and run the risk of Dumbledore somehow finding out.

"You are." Her green eyes widen. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone..."

The tightness in his chest relaxes slightly, and again when he remembers that his horcrux should also be working to protect his secrets.

"...Lord Slytherin," she adds with a wink.

There are certainly worse things one could be called, he decides.

-xx-

"Is that it?" Ginny peers down at the plain parchment envelope from over her shoulder.

"Yes," Hermione answers, her voice just above a whisper.

She can hardly believe it's finally here. She's waited weeks for this.

"Ron, it's about the Ministry internship!" Ginny calls when her brother appears with 'Lav-Lav' in tow.

The pair are still disgustingly affectionate, but at least they've worn on each other to the point where other people are beginning to matter again. In fact, things are almost beginning to feel normal between Ron and her again and she's even made an effort to be nicer to Lavender – though it would help a lot if the tart returned the favor.

"Good luck, 'Mione," Ron crosses the room and pinches her elbow. "Though we already know you're bound to get it."

"I guess we'll see." Her voice is an anxious squeak and her heart pounds as she scrapes her nail across the seal of the envelope, unable to stand the anticipation any longer.

Dear Miss Granger,

We have reviewed your application materials and based on your excellent academic record, we are pleased to inform you that you have been selected for a Ministry assistantship in the Department of Magical Education.

She reads the line once and then four more times and laughs aloud in joy before continuing on to the rest of the letter.

Please report directly to the Assistant Head of the Department, Dolores Umbridge, on the first of July to receive your orientation. You will find her office on Level 2 –

"I knew it!" Ginny beams and pulls her into a tight hug.

Ron pats her on the shoulder. "Congrats, Hermione, you earned it."

"Congratulations," Lavender begrudgingly chimes in.

"Looks like you'll be staying at the Burrow again this summer after all," Ginny says, probably for the mere sake of getting under Lavender's skin. She and Hermione have bonded quite a bit over their
mutual dislike of 'Won-Won's' girlfriend over the past several months.

"Oh, you are?" Lavender asks, her voice somehow more high-pitched than normal.

"Of course. Hermione does practically every summer... It's going to be so much fun, all of us under one roof! Even Bill and Charlie will be visiting for a week."

"It will be nice to see them again," Hermione smiles, feeling utterly at peace now that she finally has an answer.

"I've never met Bill or Charlie..." Lavender looks pointedly at Ron while Hermione and Ginny share an amused, knowing glance.

-xx-

At precisely 11:55 p.m., Halia and Daphne pull the Invisibility Cloak over them and slip from the Slytherin common room into the musty outer dungeon corridor. Despite their attempts at silence, their footsteps still echo softly off the walls and Halia glances behind them every so often to ensure they aren't being followed as per Fred and George's instructions. The twins said little about what they were planning when they requested that Daphne and her meet them outside the kitchens at midnight, but Halia can only assume it must be some sort of prank – a finale of sorts for their last day at Hogwarts.

She's been waiting so impatiently for term to end– essentially from the moment she first came to Hogwarts– but it still doesn't feel quite possible that her last day is tomorrow and that by some stroke of luck she managed to pass all her exams. Or that tomorrow, she will attend the End-of-Year Feast, pack up her things, and take the Hogwarts Express back to King's Cross where Sirius will meet her. But apparently, the year flies by when you spend the majority of it drugged and the rest fixated on regaining an entirely new set of memories.

They shed the cloak when they arrive at the kitchens and the Weasley's appear shortly after, beckoning them in through the swinging door.

"The elves are asleep – at least for the time being," Fred holds up a vial that reads 'Sleeping Draught', "But it's best if we keep as quiet as possible."

"That means you, Potter," George smirks.

Of course it does, and not just because she's naturally rather loud. Despite Halia's excitement when Daphne began tagging along on the twins' frequent adventures with her, they have made little progress in chipping away at her shyness; on some of the more awkward nights, Daphne didn't say anything at all.

"So what exactly are we doing here?" Halia whispers while glancing around at the strange stillness of the room. She's only been to the kitchens once when she met with Horace Slughorn over a pot of Earl Grey tea, but distinctly remembers the way the house elves happily bustled around without rest.

The twins grin at them, an identical gleam of excitement in their eyes. "After our Self-Propelling Custard Pies were so successful, we thought: why stop there?"

Fred gestures to four large burlap sacks resting against the wall. "And so, we present Self-Flinging Flour, for all your mischievous baking needs. Spice up Christmas dinner –"

"– or an End-of-Term feast by substituting it for normal, boring flour. No additional spells required: it activates shortly after baking and will launch anything that contains it a maximum of twenty feet."
"So...you're going to start a food fight?" Halia snorts. The idea seemed fairly tame, coming from them.

"That's only the beginning – the rest is a surprise," George crosses his arms defensively.

"But we guarantee you won't be disappointed," Fred smirks, mostly in Daphne's direction. "We could use the free advertising now that we've bought out Gambol and Japes."

"Anyway, we don't have all night so let's get started – mind keeping watch while we switch out the stock, ladies?" George takes a blank piece of parchment out of his pocket, places it in Halia's hand, and presses his wand to it. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

'Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP'

Oh my god.

"What is it?" Daphne asks softly as the writing appears.

"The Marauder's Map – we nicked it from Filch's office a couple years ago," Fred tells her proudly. "It shows the location of everyone in Hogwarts."

"The Marauder's – they were geniuses... Took us ages to figure out the passphrase."

Of course, Halia already knows exactly what it is from her dad's recurring tales of his conquests throughout Hogwarts with Sirius, Remus, and Peter. The Map was one of their proudest achievements and had always been something of a legend to her.

He would have been thrilled to know that it ended up in the hands of a pair of Gryffindors who were equally capable of causing chaos.

She doesn't take her eyes off it until Fred and George rejoin them a few minutes later and then she's glued to it once again as they navigate their way up to the Astronomy Tower for a celebratory drink or two.

When they reach the bottom of the stairs that lead to the tower, George tugs on her arm so they fall behind Fred and Daphne. "Go on up," he tells them. "We'll place a Repelling Charm so we won't be disturbed by any late-night wandering professors. Though it looks like we're in the clear as of now," he adds, glancing over her shoulder at the map.

"Sure," Fred chimes in a chipper tone. "We'll see you in a bit."

Daphne, on the other hand, looks rather terrified. Halia gives her a small wave of goodbye in amusement, pleased that George is jumping on board to assist with her matchmaking efforts.

They start up the stairs and George draws his wand to begin placing the charms, glancing over at her as she continues to examine the map. "Neat, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It is."

Should she tell him that it was her father and his friends who created it? George would probably find
"Mischief managed." He presses his wand to it once more and the ink soon begins to disappear. "You see all sorts of things if you watch it long enough," he drops his wand to his side and shifts his amber-colored eyes to her while a playful smirk slides onto his face. "You show up quite often in Professor Riddle's office, Potter. What's that about?"

*Shit. Think of something – fast. And sound confident about it.*

"Oh…he's just…helping me with something."

*So much for that.*

"Oh, I see. So he's 'helping you' with some sort of something that requires you stay past curfew every so often?" George raises an eyebrow, his smirk widening into a Cheshire-cat-sized grin. "That's not suspicious at all…"

She crosses her arms, attempting to maintain her most convincing poker face. "I have no idea what disgusting scenario you've dreamt up, but I can guarantee that's not what's happening."

Unfortunately.

"Mhmm. Right. I'm sure you find the thought 'disgusting'," he prods at her side with his finger. "That explains why your marks are so much higher in DADA than your other courses…"

She swats his hand away and starts up the stairs. "Piss off."

"I'm joking, Halia. I know you're brilliant in the subject – and besides, Riddle doesn't seem like the type to be bribed." George lets out a laugh and follows her. "So it's no strings attached, then – just some Dark sex magic rituals every so often. Got it."

At this point, there are far too many images flying through her mind for her comfort and she whirls around, her face inches from his. "For your information, he's helping me through some shit related to my parents."

It is rather satisfying to watch the smile vanish immediately from his face. "Oh. Seriously?"

"Is the scenario where I'm whoring myself out actually more believable to you?" she glares at him.

"No…You know I was just fucking around, Potter," George runs a hand through his fiery hair. "Riddle just doesn't really seem like the sort who would help people…"

"Why?" she crosses her arms. "Because he's a Slytherin?"

The *Heir* of bloody Slytherin, to be more precise. It's still a bit of a struggle to believe, though not as much as her apparent ability as a Parselmouth is.

"Because he's sort of an ass." George snorts. "You *do* fancy him, don't you?"

"No. And if you suggest it one more time, I'll shrink your knob just like I did to Malfoy."

"Well, we wouldn't want that," George winks and throws his arm around her shoulders, his voice softening as they continue up the stairs. "I'm sorry, Potter. I hope you know that you can always talk to me about that sort of thing…if you want."

No she couldn't – at least not about anything that mattered. The thought of a serious conversation
with George seemed about as foreign and irrelevant as having a conversation about the conveniences of having feet with Nagini.

"Thanks," she tells him anyway.

He gestures down at the Map, still stretched between her two hands. "You can keep that. Fred and I won't have much use for it anymore. But you have to promise me that you'll use it to regularly terrorize Malfoy."

A wave of happiness floods her, though in truth she hadn't even considered the possibility of having to give it back to them. "Oh trust me," she beams. "I will."

As they make it to the last step, she hears Fred asking Daphne, "You'll come to the grand opening of our shop, right?"

Halia impulsively pulls George into the alcove just before the tower balcony, which allows them a perfect vantage point for spying.

Daphne is perched on the balcony, facing the grounds with her legs dangling over the side and her shimmery blonde hair catching the moonlight. Fred stands nearby, rocking back and forth between the balls and heels of his feet and looking hilariously fidgety.

"Maybe," answers Daphne's taciturn voice. "I have a lot to do this summer."

"Like what?" Fred laughs and takes a swig from his flask. "You're supposed to relax over the break."

"Things," she shrugs. "I'm sure Halia will be there."

Halia almost winces at how icy her voice sounds. Clearly, she's going to need to give Daphne a few tutorials in flirting. It's almost torturously awkward and she's not sure how much more of this she can take, so she makes a move to leave the alcove. But George pulls her back and nods toward Fred. He's right next to Daphne, now, leaning back against the balcony with his arms crossed, staring quite blatantly up at her.

"Probably. But if her being there increases the chances of you showing up, I'll make sure of it."

Daphne seems somewhat startled when she glances down at him, but Fred isn't watching her anymore. He winks directly toward Halia and George as he slides just a bit closer to her and holds up the flask. "Do you drink Firewhiskey, Daphne Greengrass?"

Halia feels George's shoulders shake as he chuckles silently to himself.

"Sometimes," Daphne tells Fred, eyeing the flask with slight suspicion before slowly reaching out to take it.

"Come on," George whispers, offering a hand to help her up.

When Daphne sees them approaching, she shoves the flask back into Fred's hand, a strangely guilty expression appearing on her face. She's quiet the rest of the night, even after the twins drop them off in the dungeons. But there is a certain lightness in her step and the way she tells Halia goodnight that indicates mission matchmaker isn't a lost cause.

Halia strips down to her knickers, tossing her clothes in the half-packed trunk that will board the Hogwarts Express with her tomorrow, pulls the covers over her head, and unfolds the Marauder's
Map once more.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to good," she whispers.

But she's not met with the same greeting as earlier. Instead, the front page of the map reads:

'Mr. Prongs would like to remind Halia that her mother would very much frown upon her use of this map.

Mr. Moony wishes to note that midnight strolls around the castle are best accompanied with a bar of Honeydukes' Best Chocolate.

Mr. Wormtail suggests that Halia obey her mother, who can be extremely intimidating when provoked.

Mr. Padfoot requests Halia to ignore Mr. Wormtail and to also insult Professor Snape at her earliest convenience.

Mr. Prongs wishes to add that Halia can use this map whenever she wants, but that she should take care to hide it from her mother.'

Halia's vision blurs. It's just some charm and not actually her father. In her head, she knows that.

But it sounds exactly like the sort of thing he used to say.

-xx-

"I would like to begin by express my utmost gratitude to all of you for your excellent service to Hogwarts this past term, which, I must say, ran impressively smooth," Dumbledore begins as they gather in his office for the final staff meeting of the term.

Yes, how impressive it is that for once, they made it through an entire year without a single student getting killed or maimed. It's not something Tom particularly cares one way or another about (though it wouldn't be the worst thing if there were a few less mudbloods running about), but it is rather telling that this is the school's standard for success. No wonder certain members of the staff thought his ideas to improve Hogwarts rather radical…

"As you all know, we are entering an uncertain time and are likely to see changes at Hogwarts next term, perhaps including more involvement from the Ministry–"

Minerva, one of those certain staff members, gives Tom a pointed look, her mouth pressed in a tight, censorious line. Oh well. She can think whatever she wants about him – it won't change the fact that, quite soon, she'll be forced to adjust to the changes he implements.

"–but I am confident that we will remain united as a staff and persevere the values that Hogwarts has represented for centuries." Now it's Dumbledore's turn to send a long glance his way before clapping his hands together and smiling jollily around the table. "Alas, I find that I am getting ahead of myself! We haven't even selected the Head Girl and Boy for next term yet. Heads of Houses, have you prepared your nominations?"

Minerva, Severus, Filius, and Pomona nod.

"Do proceed, Minerva."

She clears her throat. "I nominate Hermione Granger for Head Girl. Not only does she have a stellar
academic record, but she has also exhibited leadership amongst her peers as a Prefect and was recently placed in the Ministry summer internship program."

Predictable...unfortunately.

"I also nominate Dean Thomas for Head Boy."

Well, that's not going to happen; Tom almost scoffs aloud at the mere suggestion.

Then come the Hufflepuff candidates: Justin Finch-Fletchley, a capable Quidditch player but blandly average in all other respects, and Susan Bones, a meticulous hard-worker with a tendency of being overly compassionate.

And then the Ravenclaws: Padma Patil, who is organized to the point of being pedantic with her color-coded notes and tendency to submit essays with another essay's worth of superfluous citations, and Anthony Goldstein, who is articulate and cooperative but also a bit gullible.

"And you, Severus?" Dumbledore prompts.

"As with the others, I nominate the year's current prefects, Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy."

Something about the idea of Draco Malfoy as Head Boy irks him – probably something to do with the fact that boy is little more than a pompous shite. He would much prefer Theodore Nott, who shows exceptional talent in the Dark Arts. And anyone but Parkinson would have been more suitable – even average-minded Greengrass or Bullstrode. Or Potter.

Now that's an amusing thought.

"Would any staff member like to voice support in regard to the qualifications of any candidate before we vote?"

"Miss Granger is one of the most talented witches Hogwarts has seen in ages," Filius says immediately. "Although not a member of Ravenclaw House, she is the clear choice for Head Girl."

"There is little doubt about that," Septima says and there are several nods around the table.

Tom sighs silently. As much as it pains him to admit given Granger's annoying, know-it-all tendencies, Filius, Minerva, and Aurora are right: she is obviously the most qualified.

With the new Head Girl all but certain, they move on to discuss the picks for Head Boy.

"When I purchased a personal computer this term to expand my research in Muggle Studies, Mr. Finch-Fletchley was generous enough to give some of his time and assist me in locating the Internet," Charity offers.

Muggle Studies. The course name alone was enough to leave a sour taste in the back of his mouth.

"Pardon my confusion, Charity," he drawls lazily. "But are you suggesting that Mr. Finch-Fletchley is a suitable candidate for the Head Boy position, or that he is merely superior at your job?"

A corner of his mouth tips upward at her shell-shocked expression.

Minerva shoots him another daggered look of disapproval and clears her throat. "I was impressed by Goldstein's commitment to helping first year students navigate the castle at the beginning of the term, which resulted in smoother transitions between classes."
"Indeed," nods Bathsheda, "He also exhibits admirable dedication to his coursework."

"The same could be said for Mr. Malfoy, I would argue." Severus straightens in his chair. "In addition, he has demonstrated both leadership and collaboration as the Slytherin Team Seeker."

Aurora lets out a small cough that sounds a bit like a thinly veiled scoff and, as she so frequently does, broaches the subject that the rest of the staff were likely to avoid: "I cannot speak for others, but I find myself hesitant to elect a student who attempted to assault classmate – a particularly vulnerable one at that."

Well vulnerable might not be the best word, as it's apparent that Potter is quite capable of defending herself. But the point still stands and the room immediately falls silent, gazes scattering to avoid eye-contact with the others.

"An event which we cannot be certain occurred beyond the evidence of rumors. All that we do know to be certain is Miss Potter's attack on Mr. Malfoy." Severus says tightly and glances up at Tom across the table, clearly expecting him to voice some form of support for Draco.

Nothing particularly convincing comes to mind. And why should it? The prick shouldn't be offered the most powerful position in the student body just because his father was on the Board and doled out a small fortune to the school every year. Severus undoubtedly felt the same way, but as the Head of Slytherin had far more obligation to appease Lucius than Tom.

But there was still at least some amount of obligation on Tom's part, given his proposal's approval by the Board of Governors – a proposal that would also funded considerably by the Malfoy's yearly contribution…

And now Dumbledore is watching him, too, no doubt expecting him to argue against Draco because of his rapport with Potter: another test.

He feels rather ill all of a sudden and elects to keep his goddamn mouth shut because it seems like the only way to avoid losing.

Aurora speaks up again, effectively shifting the focus off him, "Well morally, Severus, it should not be ignored – whether rumored or proven. Although I can certainly see how Lucius Malfoy's recent investment to replace Hogwarts' classroom set of cauldrons might cloud one's perspective."

Another thick, impermeable silence settles. Aurora clearly missed the memo that Severus' support of Draco would be inevitable and should be pardoned.

"Anyone else?" Dumbledore smiles and claps his hands together again, as if oblivious to the last thirty seconds or so. "No? Then let us vote."

Granger is chosen for Head Girl unanimously, as expected, and Goldstein for Head Boy. Only one vote is cast for Malfoy.

Tom doesn't anticipate the relief that follows, which lasts all the way until the End-of-Term Feast when Severus turns to him and says grimly, "Lucius will expect an explanation."

"Surely," Tom smirks. "And when the time comes, I have full confidence that you will know just the words to tell him."

"How reassuring it must be to represent only your own interests and maintain your dignity..." Severus mutters bitterly.
Well that used to be the case, before Dumbledore decided to jump on the bandwagon to support his proposal. It's proving to be far more of a curse than a blessing, with his paranoia that he's walking right into some sort of trap growing by the day. But at this point, all he can really do is try to stay ahead of Dumbledore's constant tests of loyalty.

Of course, staying ahead of Dumbledore meant continuing his progress with Potter and avoiding any backtracking over the summer, which will undoubtedly prove challenging in absence of their regular encounters and considerable distance when she (rather astonishingly) leaves to visit the MACUSA President's daughter. He's given the dilemma considerable thought, which repeatedly brought him to the same, inevitable solution – albeit one he so dreads.

A rather obscene amount of food begins to appear in mounds across the Great Hall but Tom regards it with disinterest, that uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty and paranoia settling in his stomach yet again, just as it did when the letter from the Wizengamot regarding his hearing date arrived.

But in no way was he *brooding*, as Potter so rudely phrased it.

He spots her near the end of the Slytherin table next to Daphne Greengrass, and when her gaze falls on him she smiles, sending him a small wave. He looks away when Greengrass turns to see who she's waving at.

Despite his initial anger at Nagini's disobedience, there some positives have come from her now-frequent conversations with Potter. His horcrux's bond to her has now strengthened to the point that he feels her presence prickle in the back of his mind every time she arrives outside his office which, if nothing else, is at least convenient for minimizing any potential damage that might come from her insistence on barging into his office unannounced. Previously, there were several close calls that almost saw her witnessing some very Dark, very illegal rituals as part of his research efforts. It's also not nearly as terrifying after his little chat with Nagini about topics that were strictly off-limits: essentially, anything having to do with him including referring to him as 'Marvolo' when Potter was around.

And admittedly, it is rather nice to hear someone else speaking Parseltongue – or at the very least entertaining Nagini so he didn't have to.

After an uneventful dinner comes the announcement that Gryffindor won the House Cup, and the table erupts in boastful cheers while Tom looks on with a slight scowl. Then comes dessert, which proves to be…not uneventful.

It begins just to the left of him when Sybill reaches for a pumpkin tart and it launches violently toward her, landing squarely in the center of her face. She yelps in surprise and there is a moment of pause as it slides down her face and everyone who witnessed tries to determine what exactly happened.

She calmly removes her glasses and wipes them on a napkin while muttering quietly under her breath, "I suppose that dream was a prophecy after all…"

Tom tilts his head to the side and raises an eyebrow at the crackpot woman. "Then what happens next?"

She looks up at him with a blank expression and says simply, "Chaos." Then she picks up her fork and continues eating as though nothing happened.

Prophecy or not, she's right.
All across the Great Hall, chocolate eclairs, pies, jam-filled doughnuts, and a smattering of other baked goods suddenly begin arcing through the air, apparently on their own accord.

He exchanges a half-incredulous, half-annoyed look with Severus and draws his wand to attempt a stunning spell, but is forced to duck as a slice of chocolate cake narrowly misses the top of his head.

It would have been pointless anyway, because now the students are adding to the pandemonium by smashing the desserts that remained stationary onto the faces and clothes of their peers.

At the Gryffindor table, Granger attempts to maintain order with a slightly horrified expression as Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, and Lee Jordan pelt the first and second years with armfuls of snowball-like cream puffs. Neville Longbottom, Hogwarts' resident walking disaster, jumps to avoid the crossfire and ends up tripping over his own feet and lands face-first in a custard pie. Others begin to gang up on nearby Ravenclaws, the majority of which have sought refuge by hiding underneath the table.

Meanwhile, the Hufflepuffs (unsurprisingly) seem to be having a contest of whose clothes collect the most food and a sizable group of Slytherins are casting charms to rain cherries jubilee on the Gryffindors from afar. Just as enthusiastically, Potter grins ear-to-ear as she tips a bowl of strawberry ice cream down the front of Parkinson's blouse. But her mouth drops open in shock as Zabini plops a heaping spoonful of clotted cream on top of her head which streams down her long, black hair.

And then there's Dumbledore, who sits peacefully in the center of the staff table and smiles out at the madness with half a custard pie dripping off his long, silver beard.

Something this juvenile must be the work of the Weasley twins, the menaces. Tom couldn't be more pleased that they're finally graduating.

He jerks to the side to avoid an incoming lemon bar and fights a smirk when it hits Severus instead.

Where are those bloody nuisances, anyway…?

As if on cue, the doors of the Great Hall swing open and the Weasley's swoop in on broomsticks and the ceiling erupts in a rainbow array of sparks. All eyes turn upward to admire the show, a mixture of careening pastries and firecrackers in the shapes of various animals (most prominently, the roaring Gryffindor-esque lions), spelled-out profanities, and a certain part of the male anatomy.

Well, this is a first – and beyond irritating at this point.

Unable to tolerate the chaos any longer, Tom draws his wand and attempts several spells to stun, defuse, or vanish the explosives. He is soon joined by Severus, Minerva, and Septima; however, their effort only seems to succeed in making the blasts louder and more frequent and the students' cheers more fanatical.

After at least another minute, Dumbledore apparently decides that all of this is just now sufficient to warrant intervention and finally rises.

"ENOUGH!" the Headmaster commands with the aid of the Amplifying Charm, so loudly that the walls seem to shake and Tom's ears ring for at least a minute after.

The Great Hall falls silent with the exception of the last of the firecrackers squealing into decay. The Weasley's slowly lower their brooms to the ground where Filch intercepts them, grabbing them by the collars and dragging them toward the exit.

"Sorry for the interruption, Headmaster." One of them yells across the room.
"We just wanted to give our classmates a sneak peek at the sorts of products they can expect to find at our store in Diagon Alley: Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," the other chimes in.

Filch drags them along faster as another round of applause begins rippling through the crowd. "We hope you'll all join us for our Grand Opening this August!"

"Again, that's Weasley's Wizard Wheezes! Number 47 Diagon Alley." They both twist around in Filch's grasp, waving at the droves of students enthusiastically cheering them on.

If he was Headmaster, this sort of thing would never happen; he would run the school just as smoothly as he ran a classroom. But unfortunately, that wasn't reality – at least not yet, anyway. For today, it's just another day at Hogwarts working for this inane fool of a Headmaster.

Is it too late, he wonders briefly, to apply for a position at Durmstrang next term?

He wonders the same again later when he's upstairs packing his things and hears Potter vividly recounting the scene to Nagini.

His first instinct is to join them and interrupt the tale, but he pauses and picks up the diary resting on the edge of the bed. This is it, really: one last chance to change his mind.

As if he actually has a choice in the matter.

"Are you moving offices next term or something?" She nudges one of the many boxes of books scattered around the room with the toe of her shoe, any evidence of her part in the food fight now absent from her exterior.

"No. I'm bringing home what I intend to read over the summer."

"Oh. Alrighty then..." She looks around at the other boxes in disbelief and then up at him. A slow smile spreads across her face.

He narrows his eyes suspiciously. "What?"

"You've, erm... There's something –" The corners of her mouth twitch as though trying to fight back a laugh.

"What?" he repeats, this time with a trace of annoyance.

"It's... Hold on." Without warning, she steps closer and leans forward, plucking something out of his hair. He twitches away automatically, not only because of the unwelcome contact but because of the strange buzzing that seems to be emanating from beneath the skin of her arm.

"Chocolate frosting," she smiles, wiggling her fingers in the air before casting a simple cleaning spell.

He scowls and steps a few of feet away just in case she spots any other leftovers from the chaos. "Your friends' little show was one of the most utterly imbecilic things I have ever had the displeasure of witnessing."

She just laughs. "I'm sure you'll get over it."

"Anyway," He ignores her and strolls over to the glass apothecary cabinet, tossing her two full vials of his version of the Calming Draught he has been supplying her to ease her symptoms of memory regain. "As we discussed, I have prepared two months' worth of your weekly potion."
She nods and tucks them in the pocket of her cloak. "Thanks again."

"I have also been giving thought to how we can communicate sensitive information should we need to, given the regular monitoring of the post..." He takes a deep breath before revealing the diary. "I trust that you remember this?"

She nods again, this time wordlessly.

"I made a few...adjustments, so that you will not be required to enter a hypnotized state to use it." He places it on his desk hesitantly and summons a quill and ink. "Shall we try?"

"Okay." She turns to the first page, picks up the quill and writes: "Lord Slytherin was not amused by Fred and George's glorious exit."

"May I remind you once more that you will address me as either Professor or Sir," he writes back in his mind, even though he didn't particularly mind when she defied him this way.

She holds up the diary as his words scrawl across the page, just under the others that are beginning to fade. "Looks like it works."

"Of course it works," he scoffs before wrenching it out of her hands, his expression hardening, "And it requires a considerable degree of Dark magic to do so. What does this mean for you, Miss Potter?"

She gives him a blank look in return. "I won't tell anyone about it if that's what you're getting at..."

"Precisely. You will ensure that, under no circumstances, this book will not fall into the grasp, sight, or even interest of anyone other than yourself. Is that understood?"

"Obviously. I'm not an idiot."

He steps closer, peering down the tip of his nose at her with his most threatening gaze. "Do not make light of this privilege. Should you choose to abuse it, you will face consequences you cannot even begin to fathom."

In other words: please, please, don't make me regret this.

"I understand," she nods solemnly.

He hesitantly extends it to her and fear floods his veins as soon as it leaves his hands.

"This is extremely valuable to me, Miss Potter," his voice comes out low and quiet and wavers on the verge of cracking. "Do not make light of this privilege. Should you choose to abuse it, you will face consequences you cannot even begin to fathom."

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"I understand," she nods solemnly.

He hesitantly extends it to her and fear floods his veins as soon as it leaves his hands.

"This is extremely valuable to me, Miss Potter," his voice comes out low and quiet and wavers on the verge of cracking. "Do not make light of this privilege. Should you choose to abuse it, you will face consequences you cannot even begin to fathom."

In other words: please, please, don't make me regret this.
irony, of sorts.

It looks as though she's about to say something else when she glances down at her watch and gasps. "Bollocks – I've got to catch the train!" She throws her bag over her shoulder and pats Nagini on the head. "Goodbye Nagini – I'll see you in the fall."

"We will talk before then," the snake hisses back confidently and Tom narrows his eyes at her. "You can come and visit me whenever you like."

Halia gives her an amused look. "I think you will have to check with Professor Riddle about that." Then she stands, looking up at him for a few seconds, and opens and closes her mouth as if deciding what exactly she wanted to say.

Could she hurry up with the niceties before he changes his mind about the diary? And besides, he does have packing of his own to do, after all.

"Have a nice summer, Professor," she says finally.

"And you, Miss Potter."

-xx-

While Halia begins unpacking her things in his upstairs guest room, Sirius wanders into the kitchen and puts a kettle on. He's thrilled that she's back from Hogwarts, though it's a bittersweet sort of happiness because she's so much like James; it makes her both a delight and painful trigger to have around.

Regardless, he's determined to become the parental figure she needs – or at least try. Everything happened so suddenly last July that he barely had time to wrap his head around any of it before she left for Hogwarts; he wasn't there for her like he should have been and it's torn him to pieces for months. But this is the last stretch of time they will really have together before she's on her own, and he fully intends to make the most of it despite his cluelessness. He owes at least that much to James and Lily. Besides, there is a fairly good chance that this will be his only real opportunity to try out fatherhood.

It could be fun…right?

Halia skips into the kitchen and leans her elbows on the island, glancing up at him with a smirk. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen your flat so clean…New girlfriend you're trying to impress?"

"Not exactly," Sirius chuckles and places a mug of tea in front of her. "And thanks, I'll pretend not to be offended."

Quite the opposite, really – he's quite proud of himself that she noticed. He could be a responsible adult if he tried.

"So…are you hungry?" He swings open the fridge door and balks. Shit. He knew he forgot something.

"No way – I'm still full from dinner."

Thank Merlin. He'll just go grocery shopping tonight after Halia goes up to bed and she'll never know the difference…
"You'll never guess what happened at the feast today," she takes a sip of tea and laughs.

Nostalgia hits him hard in the gut when she tells him about the Weasley's food fight and fireworks show and even harder when she pulls out a piece of parchment and tosses it on the counter in front of him.

"Speaking of Fred and George…Look what they gave me – apparently they nicked it from Filch's office."

Sirius sucks in his breath. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect to see this masterpiece of theirs again, let alone hold it between two hands.

"Oh the adventures your father and I had…" he somehow manages to say.

"I know. He told me all about them."

His vision blurs and he tries to hold it together as her gaze sweeps over him.

She places a hand on his forearm and tells him in a soft voice that reminds him entirely of Lily, "You can have it back – you did create it, after all…"

He sniffs and shakes his head, sliding it toward her. "After you graduate. Until then, there is still mischief to be managed."

"Well, I have accepted orders to make Draco Malfoy's life a living hell and I wouldn't want to disappoint," she smirks.

Wait – what?

"I –" he scratches the back of his neck. "For some reason, I was under the impression that the two of you were…friendly."

She snorts. "Like five months ago, I guess, until I shrunk his knob with a curse."

His laugh fills the kitchen. "Brilliant."

Over the next hour, they chat about everything she left out of their occasional letters – her friendship with Daphne Greengrass, her favorite places to visit past curfew (to which he supplied a few suggestions, perhaps against his better judgment), Professor Snape's unfair treatment of her…

That last bit makes him very, very angry – angry enough to knock down the git's front door and sock him in the center of his ugly face.

Instead, Sirius clenches his fists at his sides and says, "I could have a word or two with Dumbledore about it."

"Don't – please don't," she pleads. "You'll only make it worse."

He crosses his arms in dissatisfaction. "If you're sure…"

"I'm sure. And anyway, it's not all bad. There's this one professor who makes up for it in a way – I spend my detentions with him sometimes."

"Well that's nice I suppose," he relaxes slightly. "Which professor?"

Halia waves a hand in the air. "You wouldn't know him…He's much younger than the others. He
was hired right after graduating Hogwarts – I think he's the most brilliant person I've ever met.

Much younger?

He doesn't like the sound of that very much.

"What's his name? What does he teach?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. His name is Riddle…Tom Riddle."

He doesn't really like the way she said his name, either. Not one bit.

"Anyway," she yawns and stretches, "I'm exhausted. Goodnight Sirius, and thanks for the tea."

He doesn't sleep very well that night and it's not until he is walking downstairs to the kitchen the next morning when it hits him that he never went shopping for the goddamn groceries.

-xx-

Halia lounges in bed, turning the diary over in her hands.

It's been two days since she left Hogwarts and she still hasn't written him. Mostly because there hasn't been anything to write to him about; her dreams over the last couple of nights were just repeats.

She wants to, though. She really wants to. But what would she say? If it wasn't related to her memories, would it irritate him?

Probably...definitely.

She traces the initials on the bottom of the front cover with her fingertips:

T.M.R.

She can't quite put her finger on why, but the book feels significant somehow – beyond the fact that he trusts her enough to place it in her care for the summer.

Maybe she should try it—just once— and then she won't use it again unless she really, really needs to. After all, what if it stopped working after she left Hogwarts? Wouldn't it be better to find out now instead of when she actually needs to tell him something important?

"Lord Slytherin?" she pens before second thoughts have a chance to creep in.

Her heart pounds rapidly and she counts the seconds as she waits. When she reaches five, his reply begins dashing neatly across the page and her stomach flutters.

"Professor or Sir. Those are your choices, Potter. Is there something you need?"

She takes a deep breath. "No. I was just testing the book to make sure it worked at a distance."

"It does."

She can almost envision the eye-roll he must be giving her at the moment.

"Anyway, sorry to bother you. I'm sure you're busy with the hearing coming up."

"Yes."
"I'm looking forward to it."

This time, his reply seems to take a bit longer. "You plan to be there?"

"Of course."

"I see."

She frowns. What was that supposed to mean? Was he glad or not that she planned to go?

"Should I not?" she tests.

"Why do you ask? Are you incapable of deciding for yourself?"

Halia groans aloud in frustration and pens back: "See you in two weeks."

The bastard doesn't even bother replying.

-xx-

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much to those who take the time to comment! You are forever my inspiration. :D
"Miss Granger!"

Hermione's drooping eyelids snap open at the sound of her boss' piercing, alarm-like voice.

"Miss Granger!" Now impatient, the voice seems to grow even more shrill.

She tips back a dose of Pepper-up Potion and washes it down with a few sips of water. The all-nighter she pulled last night was a shock to her system, but at least she was finally working on something interesting after two straight weeks of fetching coffee and sorting mail.

She grabs the armful of papers she spent hours studying and slips into Umbridge's too-pink, atrociously feline-inspired office.

"Ah, I see that you've finally decided to make an appearance." Umbridge sighs and purses her equally too-pink lips.

Everything about the woman– her appearance and mannerisms, the décor of her office– reminds Hermione more of a spoiled little girl having a tea party that never quite ends than a professional in a high-paying Ministry position.

"Sorry, I –" Hermione begins automatically and immediately curses herself for even thinking this inept woman deserved an apology.

"No excuses, Miss Granger. Next time I will not need to call you twice – is that clear?"

"Yes, Madam Umbridge," Hermione forces out.

"Good," Umbridge folds her hands in her lap and looks up at her sweetly. "Now, have you completed your assignment?"

She nods wordlessly and sets the stack of marked parchment on the edge of her desk.

Umbridge narrows her eyes and sweeps her hand in a circle above the pile. "What is all of this?"

"Erm, the proposal…The notes in the margins are cross-references to--"

Umbridge lets out a giggle that sounds a bit like a hiccup, her tone laced in condescension: "Silly girl. Why would I assign you to read this if I intended to do so myself? I have more important matters to attend to as the Assistant Head of the Department of Magical Education…"

"Like what, dusting your hideously gaudy cat figurines?"

"So," Umbridge prompts as she fishes through her purse and retrieves a nail file, "A summary, dear, if you please."
The grating noise that follows essentially describes Hermione's opinion of the woman seated in front of her. She tries desperately to ignore it as she recounts the (rather alarming, in some cases) measures outlined in Professor Riddle's proposal to the Ministry. "The first stage of the proposal is an audit of Hogwarts' entire course and extracurricular offerings. The rationale behind it is based on a study by the International Confederation comparing O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores across –"

"You exhaust me," Umbridge yawns. "Three sentence summary, Granger: go."

Inhale. Hold it.


Exhale.

This is only temporary, after all, and the position would look excellent on her resume. And if she didn't prove herself now, how could the Ministry possibly take her application seriously after graduation?

"The proposal includes an audit, which would be conducted by a committee of Ministry officials and Hogwarts' faculty. The committee would then have the authority to make appropriate changes in Hogwarts. There is also potential for adding a Dark Arts course to the curriculum."

Professor Riddle must have incredible nerve – there's no way that Headmaster Dumbledore would possibly support such drastic interference by the Ministry.

Or maybe she's just biased. The prospect of a Dark Arts course is alarming, but maybe the real reason Hermione doesn't want it to pass is because it means Umbridge will inevitably have a part in how it plays out.

"Most interesting," Umbridge hums as though she didn't hear a word. "When is the hearing?"

Hermione freezes. She was in the process of checking the meeting time earlier, when she began dozing off. "I – hold on." She scurries out of the room to her desk and checks Umbridge schedule before glancing up at the clock at the wall.

Shit.

She grabs her notepad and sticks her head into Umbridge's office, "Ten minutes."

Suddenly, Hermione hopes it passes – the victory for the Department of Magical Education might be the only thing that will keep her boss from wringing her neck later.

-xx-

"Do we have to go?" Draco asks boredly as they gather in front of the sitting room fireplace.

"Of course," his mother and Aunt Bella say in unison.

"This is very important to your father," his mother adds with a stern look while extending an embroidered pouch of Floo powder toward him.

So what? His father has been more or less ignoring him since learning that Goldstein was chosen for Head Boy and showing up to some stupid hearing doesn't seem particularly likely to change that.

"And regardless, I will not have both my son and husband sulking around the manor all summer."
Right – because if we're around all summer, it becomes much more difficult to sneak around with your lovers, doesn't it Mother?

When he still doesn't move, her eyebrow raises almost imperceptibly. "Perhaps you would rather take Pansy to lunch?"

Draco sighs, reaches into the pouch, and steps into the fireplace while Bella titters at his expense.

A small crowd is already gathered outside of Courtroom 6 and Bella spends the next few minutes complaining about how they're bound to get terrible seats.

Then he spots her.

She's leaning against the wall wearing muggle clothes: tight dark jeans that perfectly outline that incredible ass of hers and a simple black and white-striped t-shirt. She's hideously underdressed for Wizengamot proceedings but it's so her that it almost brings a smile to his face. He runs a hand through his hair out of habit after months of flirting with her.

It's too bad, really, that things had to end.

Where did it all go wrong? Why did she just drop him, seemingly out of nowhere? Of course, he didn't help matters by forcing himself onto her – just like going back to Pansy to save face didn't keep Halia Potter off his mind.

Quite the opposite, in fact; and yet, he still hasn't come even close to figuring her out. He's never met someone like her – someone who would tell him 'no'; someone with such a fucked up life that she might actually be able to relate to his. Even his father seemed to find her interesting for some reason and scolded him incessantly after things ended.

He's asked himself over and over again what he did to make Potter lose interest in him and the only answer he could find was the Christmas party, when Bellatrix sent Cornelia Rosier at her. Perhaps it upset her far more than he realized and it kept her from wanting to get too close to him. In that case, it's all Bellatrix's fault that Potter pushed him away to begin with – but of course, Draco's father heard none of that.

As if he didn't feel like enough of a fucking prick already.

So when Bella follows his gaze and hisses, "What is she doing here?", Draco shrugs casually and gives her a cool look:

"You should know. She's your lover's star student…Or did he not bother to tell you about her?"

His mother steps on his foot with the sharp heel of her shoe for this, but he doesn't care; it's well-worth seeing Bella's nostrils flare and face twist into a grimace.

-xx-

For quite possibly the first time ever, Halia is early to something. It probably helps that she's been looking forward to this for two weeks.

With an hour to kill before the hearing, she buys a butter croissant from the coffee stand in the Ministry Atrium and lounges in one of the nearby metal chairs to people-watch. Every so often, she'll see someone she recognizes – Peasegood from the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad; Crouch Sr., the Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation; Scrimgeour, the Head of the Auror Office…
There are a few glances her way as well, some of surprise and confusion and others of unabashed pity. It's only a matter of time, she realizes, until one of them decides to walk up to her and tell her how wonderful her parents were and that they're sorry.

'For what?' she'll want to ask. It's not their fault: it's hers. And the last thing she needs is another fucking reminder of it.

Halia pops the last bite of croissant in her mouth and heads toward the lift, just barely catching one that is already crowded with Ministry employees. She squeezes into the corner next to the buttons designating each level and presses number 10 for the Wizengamot courtrooms.

Unfortunately, the lift takes them up toward Levels 1-7 first rather than down to 10 and she hugs the wall, careful to avoid the gaze of other riders scooting past her – especially after she hears a witch with blonde hair in a tight bun whisper to her companion:

"Is that the Potter girl?"

"I think so," hums the other woman in return. "Such a shame…"

Halia digs her nails into her palms and pretends to study the golden plaque describing the Departments contained on each level. Of course, her eyes are immediately drawn to: 'Level 9 – Department of Mysteries'.

The gossipy women and a handful of others deboard the lift at Level 3, the Department for Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, and the only remaining person besides Halia exits at Level 2. The lift begins to accelerate downward to Level 10, her gaze lingering on the unilluminated button for Level 9.

What would happen if she paid the Department a visit? Could seeing it trigger more of her memories to return?

Or better yet, what if she refused to leave until they answered all her questions and filled the spots in her memory?

She sucks in her breath and presses the button.

"Level 9," the lift voices her arrival. "The Department of Mysteries."

The door dings brightly before sliding open and she cautiously steps out of the lift and through a stone archway into a circular entrance hall covered in gray, white, and dark blue marble tiles. The air is cold and crisp– not slightly musty like the other underground floors of the Ministry are.

Her heart pounds as she walks across the hall to its single door and the echoing metallic clash of the lift closing on the other side makes her jump.

"No turning back now," she mutters under her breath, her fingers trembling as she twists open the doorknob to reveal –

A dusty broom closet?

Her brows together and she closes the door and tries again, wondering if the first time was some sort of mistake.

Nope. Still a dusty broom closet.
She steps inside, peering into the boxes which contain various magical cleaning supplies. A few brooms and a mop lean against the wall and the writing engraved in each of the handles in gold reads: 'Property of the Department of Mysteries'.

What the fuck?

Is this some sort of riddle or secret entrance she's missing?

She begins rummaging around, tapping her wand against the wall for clues, but finds nothing of particular interest in both the broom closet and entrance hall.

"Hello!" she calls in frustration. "Does anybody work in this bloody place anymore?!!"

No answer. So much for her brilliant plan to demand the return of her memories.

Halia sighs and calls the lift once again, taking one last look around the supposed Department of Mysteries before stepping inside.

She arrives at Courtroom 6 with at least another fifteen minutes to go before the hearing. A few people have begun to gather outside and the guard lets the dark purple-robed Wizengamot officials past them and into the courtroom as they arrive, but Professor Riddle remains nowhere to be seen.

For the countless time that morning, she feels a pair of eyes on her and she immediately spots the slicked-back, platinum blonde hair that can only belong to Draco Malfoy on the other side of the crowd.

The tall man with a wispy gray beard blocking her line of sight shifts and…yep – there's the stupid prat's face. Judging by his mother's presence beside him, he must be here because of his father's position on the Hogwarts Board.

His eyes dart away from hers as soon as he notices her looking and she smirks. But Draco wasn't the only one watching her; on his other side is another woman who looks familiar but that Halia can't quite place, glowering right at her with a slight air of disgust. She bears a resemblance to Draco's mother with her pointed chin and aristocratically high cheekbones, but seems a fair bit younger. It doesn't seem unreasonable to assume that she must be Bellatrix Black, Sirius' younger cousin.

Then Halia remembers the Malfoy Christmas party and why Bellatrix Black looks so familiar – she was the woman Halia spotted Professor Riddle talking to throughout the night.

Although they seemed to be nothing more than friends at the time, Halia can't help but wonder otherwise, now that she's gotten a better look at Bellatrix's plump, wine-colored lips and hourglass figure hugged by elegant black robes. Was it her perfume that Halia smelled on him that particularly late night she spent in his office?

Halia's stomach drops harder and deeper than she expects it to at the thought. She shouldn't be that surprised that he had an incredibly beautiful girlfriend, right?

But what exactly did Halia do to earn her death glare, anyway? Could it be that Riddle let something slip about their private meetings which made his girlfriend jealous?

Something about that sounds incredibly satisfying, as unlikely as it may be…

The doors to the courtroom open and the crowd begins to file in, but Halia continues waiting outside – she's not about to go inside without wishing him luck, after all. But it appears that she isn't the only one with the same idea and Bellatrix also continues to linger across the corridor even after Draco and
Mrs. Malfoy follow the crowd inside.

Halia tries to ignore her and turns her attention in the direction of the lift, hoping Riddle would soon arrive. She spots Hermione scurrying behind a woman in a hideous pink cardigan, notepad in hand, and they nod at each other in brief, passing acknowledgement. Halia attempts the same when she next sees Professor Snape striding briskly toward the courtroom, but he completely ignores her and greets the woman on the other side of the corridor instead. It's a bit mortifying, though not unexpected – and at least it confirms Halia's guess that the woman is, indeed, Bellatrix Black.

As soon as Snape passes them, the one-sided stare-down resumes.

Fine. She'll bite, if that's how Bellatrix wants to play this – Halia leans back against the wall, crosses her arms, and quite blatantly sizes up her challenger.

Bellatrix's own scrutinizing glare deepens.

And so, just to throw her off, Halia widens her eyes, smiles, and sends her a little wave as though recognizing a long-lost friend.

It works; Bellatrix's expression shifts from venomous to pure confusion just as Halia looks up to see Professor Riddle round the corner along with Lucius Malfoy and a few other men she assumes to be members of the Board, a folder stuffed with papers tucked under his arm.

Halia doesn't waste her precious seconds of advantage and sends a small smirk in Bella's direction before jogging down the corridor toward him. "Professor!" she catches his eye with a wave.

"Hello, Miss Potter." If he's surprised or even a bit happy she decided to come, it doesn't show – he regards her just as coolly and disinterested as always. But at least he slows his pace when she meets him so they fall behind the Board members, earning a curious glance back from Malfoy that Riddle seems to ignore.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were going to show up – are you nervous?"

"No," he scoffs and gives her a look as though it's the most idiotic question he's ever heard.

Of course, Bellatrix is watching them too, her pretty face scrunched in clear irritation and Halia fights the urge to send her another gloating grin. But her pride is short-lived, as she soon sees Professor Riddle's gaze drifting toward the other woman.

It's pointless to care or to be offended – after all, if Bellatrix really is his girlfriend then she has every right to steal his attention away.

But it just seems so wrong…so incredibly frustrating beyond any level of rational thought. And so, Halia (quite shamelessly) does the only thing she can think of to reclaim his attention.

"Well, unlike you, I ended up arriving an hour early…"

"Early? You?" he snorts a laugh, "That's a first."

"Ha-ha," she grins. "You'll never guess where I spent it."

"Hm?" he mutters, his gaze shifting once more to Bellatrix as she wiggles her fingers at him in greeting.

Without a second thought, Halia places a hand on his forearm and he immediately stops, glancing
down at her hand and then up at her face with an impenetrable expression. She tilts her chin up and
eleans as close to him as she dares, her mouth just a few inches from the tiny remnant of the red mark
Nagini left on the lobe of his ear, and whispers, "The Department of Mysteries."

-xx-

Bellatrix vaguely hears Lucius say something to her, but she's far too focused on the way this little
tramp is clinging to Tom to comprehend whatever the hell it was.

In fact, her entire mind seems to go blank as she watches Tom's eyebrow arch in apparent interest at
what the girl whispers into his ear. Then comes the indignation, ripping through Bella's insides like a
flame that leaves her quivering in disgust.

The fucking whore. She's not even that pretty, either – as tall and thin as a rail and in dire need of a
haircut – but somehow this makes everything worse.

Is Halia Potter the reason she hasn't heard from him in weeks?

"Coming, Bella?" She glances to her right to see Lucius offering her his arm, a slightly amused
expression on his face, and then back toward Tom.

At least they're standing a foot apart now and Bella manages to catch his eye, though his expression
is just as maddeningly blank as usual with no indication of guilt.

"Now isn't the time," Lucius says lightly while linking his arm with hers and tugging her in the
direction of the courtroom.

He's right, as fucking annoying as that is. Sacrificing one's dignity in the heat of the moment is
among the few truly inexcusable offenses one could commit in pureblood society, right up there
alongside being unmarried by one's mid-twenties.

Bella reluctantly falls into step alongside Lucius with her head held high, but can't resist one last
glimpse over her shoulder.

This time, she catches Potter's eye instead of Tom's and the little bitch has the nerve to smirk at her.
Bella can't help but mutter darkly under her breath, "If anything is going on between them, I swear
I'll burn that whore witch alive."

"Oh Bella," Lucius chuckles and pats the back of her hand as though she said something adorable.
"Don't be so crass. But be a dear and inform me when you find out, won't you?"

-xx-

The diary certainly seems to be working.

That's the only thought that comes to mind when Potter's breath brushes his ear, before the words
'Department of Mysteries' even registers.

And then she's halfway through her account before it occurs to him how close she's standing…
before that shocked look on Bellatrix's face at the other end of the corridor begins to make sense.

Where in the hell did Potter get the impression that this was at all acceptable, especially in public?
What exactly is she playing at?

If he didn't know any better, he might suspect that it's just to fuck with him – to throw him off just
because she can.

"I have to go," he snaps and steps away from her abruptly as Bellatrix takes Lucius' arm, "We can discuss this another time, perhaps when I'm not about to give a presentation to the Wizengamot."

Inexplicably enough, she seems more satisfied than deterred as they walk side-by-side toward Courtroom 6. "Sure," she shrugs and adds with a smirk. "I'll write you later. Good luck in there, Professor."

What a headache of a girl; not even Nagini is this effective at exasperating him.

Several pairs of eyes follow them when they enter the chattering courtroom together: Bellatrix, all three members of the Malfoy family, Severus, Granger, and (of course) Dumbledore, who sends him a small nod and knowing smile. The sooner this vote is over the better; his patience for pandering to the old man's agenda is dwindling rapidly.

Tom makes his way to the podium in the center of the circular room and calmly organizes his notes as Chief Wizardess Bones calls the Wizengamot to order.

"Thank you for joining us today, Professor Riddle," she greets him with a tight nod of acknowledgement that reminds him far too much of McGonagall. "Are you prepared to present your argument in favor of proposed Educational Decree Number Twenty-One?"

"I am," he smiles charmingly back at her, all teeth.

Some might shy away from speaking under such scrutiny of the country's powerful elite, but it's moments like this when he feels most at ease. There's always a bit of a high that comes when his thoughts fade and the words begin to flow with effortless charisma – not only is it an exercise of his ultimate talent, but an addicting reminder that he has the power to delude them all into buying this composed, noble guise of his own creation. Teaching at Hogwarts allows him a taste of it every so often, but it's nothing like this. Right now, he feels more alive than ever. Completely fucking unstoppable.

Indeed, by the time his presentation concludes, many around the room– including Minister Fudge himself– are leaning forward in their chairs and nodding in agreement.

"Thank you, Professor," the Chief Wizardess folds her hands together and licks her wrinkled lips. "We will soon open the floor for questions but first, I would like to say that I commend your ambition, as well as the… thoroughness of this proposal. I have also reviewed the letters of testimony from prior Headmaster Armando Dippet and Professor Horace Slughorn regarding your qualifications as well as the statement of support from the Hogwarts Board of Governors – very impressive. However, I could not help but wonder why you chose to omit Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts' current Headmaster and esteemed Wizengamot member."

Here it is, the moment of truth: will his attempts at civility actually pay off or will Dumbledore take the opportunity to completely fuck him over?

The attention of the courtroom drifts upward a few rows as Dumbledore calmly stands. "A misunderstanding of my own accord – Tom courteously requested that I submit my deposition of support and alas, I found the letter in my office just this past weekend, stamped and all. I wish I could provide a more exciting excuse, though I imagine that at least half of those present would recognize the curse of old age and wouldn't be fooled." He smiles peacefully and holds up an envelope and Tom exhales, realizing only as an afterthought that he was holding his breath in the first place.
Elphias Doge's bushy eyebrows furrow together in apparent concern. "I'm surprised at you, Albus, advocating for the establishment of a Dark Arts course at Hogwarts…"

"On the contrary, Elphias – Educational Decree Number Twenty-One outlines only the possibility of establishing a Dark Arts course– establishing any course, really– contingent on the findings of the audit. As per Department of Magical Education and Hogwarts' policies, new courses will only be established at Hogwarts if sufficient evidence is presented to prove them necessary to the current or acting Headmaster, Board of Governors, and Head of the Department of Magical Education."

By saying this, of course, Dumbledore really means: play loyal for another year, Tom, and you'll get your Dark Arts course.

He could endure another year of this if that's what it took…

Right? Maybe. It's worth a shot, anyway.

"I suppose one concern does come to mind, however –"

Don't you dare renege on this now, old man. Tom's gaze narrows almost imperceptibly.

" – Tom is, after all, one of Hogwarts' most impressive faculty and his Defense Against the Dark Arts class is consistently ranked among the best at Hogwarts by our students. It would be truly unfortunate if an undertaking as considerable as a school-wide audit caused that success to wane. One solution would be to add another faculty member to the auditing panel. Deputy Headmistress McGonagall would be more than qualified to assist…"

Nope – not going to happen.

Dumbledore bows his head slightly with a small smile as though hearing Tom's thoughts. "Alternatively, Tom might consider the appointment of a class assistant to take on some of his current grading and lesson planning responsibilities to reduce his workload as well as provide a suitable sixth or seventh year student with an opportunity to gain work experience. What are your thoughts on this matter, Tom?"

Well, how…convenient.

"I have given this some thought, Headmaster…" Tom lies, scanning the opposite side of the room until he spots Potter. She's sitting near the back row of seats and appears to be paying no attention to him at all, her wand drawn and aimed discreetly at the back of Draco Malfoy's head as the poor prat tries desperately to stop an incredibly stubborn nosebleed. "…and I've decided to hire a class assistant for the duration of the audit."

"Excellent news," Dumbledore's eyes twinkle irritatingly at him, "And have you already selected this student?"

"Yes…I requested her presence at today's hearing in case the Wizengamot had any questions regarding her qualifications, though I can attest that she is one of the brightest in my class–" Tom glares at Potter and coughs, which manages to draw her attention back to him just in time for him to gesture calmly in her direction, "– may I introduce Miss Halia Potter."

Her eyes widen in surprise but she jumps to her feet, waving at the Wizengamot rather awkwardly. Merlin help him.

Thankfully, everyone seems distracted enough by the curious murmur that fills the air at the mention...
of her name to ignore the shock written across her face.

"A wise selection," Dumbledore says, looking far too pleased for Tom's comfort.

But clearly not everyone is pleased with his choice – namely Granger, who sighs in obvious envy, and Bellatrix, her gaze cold as stone for whatever reason. She's so erratic that it's rarely, if ever, worth an attempt to decode her emotions.

Bones quiets the chamber once more and the hearing presses on with a few more questions thrown his way from Doge and other members of the Wizengamot, none of which are particularly surprising. When they're finished, she thanks Tom politely and gestures for him to sit before calling Byron Crabbe, the Head of the Department of Magical Education, to the podium to present his opinion of Educational Decree Number Twenty-One. No surprises there, either, which probably has something to do with the fact that he allowed Vincent Crabbe to enroll in his class despite his less-than-stellar O.W.L. score.

"Do you have anything to add as the Assistant to the Head and our designated Ministry representative for the proposed audit, Madam Umbridge?" the Chief Wizardess prompts.

"Assistant Head, not Assistant to the Head," a frumpy woman who must be Granger's internship supervisor corrects in an overly sweet voice. "But I do agree with Mr. Crabbe and I would like to emphasize that this would provide our department with the opportunity to create a far stronger relationship with Hogwarts which is, of course, in the best interest of both parties. After hearing Mr. Riddle's presentation, I am quite confident that we will work excellently together and make incredible strides forward to improve Hogwarts."

Well at least she's on board, but there is also something about this woman that makes him a bit apprehensive. Or maybe it's just because the mere thought of someone else getting involved in the audit, although necessary, irritates him to no end.

After Umbridge's statement comes the Wizengamot vote– finally– and Tom waits impatiently for the final count, drumming his fingers against the wooden armrest of his chair.

"With a majority vote," Bones begins with a diplomatically blank expression, "Educational Decree Number Twenty-One is hereby approved by the Wizengamot. Congratulations, Professor Riddle."

He smirks as the chamber fills with applause and a photographer from the *Daily Prophet* snaps a picture when Chief Wizardess Bones and Minister Fudge come down from the Wizengamot seats to shake his hand.

He's waited so long for this victory that it almost feels surreal.

Moments later, Rita Skeeter joins him and the *Prophet* photographer in the center of the room and asks him what the Decree means for the future of Hogwarts. It's an easy question, one he has a perfect answer to, and he's just about to open his mouth when the woman named Umbridge suddenly appears beside him and says, "It means, dear, that the Ministry will have the authority to improve Hogwarts like never before and our utmost priority is –"

She drones on, but Tom hears none of it.

Who exactly does this woman think she is? Nobody fucking interrupts him.

A few rows above, Dumbledore smiles serenely.

*Is* this a victory? It's becoming harder to tell.
It's just past lunch when Dolohov tells him the news that Tom Riddle's proposal passed in the Wizengamot – not in spite of Dumbledore, but with his full support.

Grindelwald dismisses his most trusted assistant, lights a pipe, and moves to the window to admire the southern alps, a smile creeping across his face. "You, Tom Riddle, are a mystery."

Indeed, it's been a long time since someone has so persistently occupied his thoughts, save for Albus of course. He rather likes the enigma of it all – the building anticipation of games sure to come...

He finds himself rather bored these days, after all. The ‘war’ in Russia is far too easy to be called a war: a chess match won before it even began – far before Fudge's Department of Magical Law Enforcement published their report of the poisoning cases, anyway. That was simply the checkmate, and the Wizengamot's decision to send him financial backing was no more than the cherry on top. Anyone in the Russian government who stood as a threat now rests in Nurmengard, which is becoming the unofficial holding cell for enemies of the International Confederation. And the black market they worked so hard to build now belongs to him – he wasn't about to turn over all the operations to the Confederation, of course…only the least profitable.

It's over. He won. The rest of the world will just need time to catch on and in the meantime, he's not one to argue with the free publicity that comes with waging war.

Everything is falling under his nose, just the way he likes. The same way Tom Riddle will.

Eventually. It seems that this may prove a tad more difficult than originally anticipated with Dumbledore keeping such obviously close tabs on the man.

But Grindelwald welcomes the challenge. And after all, it's never too early to start scheming.

-xx-

He's been on chapter forty-three of *Advanced Summoning Theory: Familiars and Other Suitable Demons* for over twenty minutes, a rather pitiful reading pace. But his thoughts keep drifting, wondering why several hours have passed since the hearing and Potter still hasn't bothered writing him yet, despite her promise to tell him more about her visit to the Department of Mysteries.

Maybe she's out and doesn't have the diary on her. Maybe she'll write later.

Whatever. It's not like he cares in the slightest anyway.

And this feeling of restlessness surely doesn't have anything to do with her; in addition to the bittersweet 'victory' at the hearing earlier, something about staying in this house never fails puts him on edge. Suffocating is the only way to describe the way every crack, crevice, and wallpaper fiber seems to burst with the ghostly hidden memories of the Gaunt lineage. Yet he stays – perhaps out of spite or perhaps in optimism that the sensation of being an intruder will someday wane.

He hears the creak of the staircase as Nagini slithers down from her hunting trip for mice in the attic. She appears in his wood-paneled sitting room a few seconds later, her movements heavy and languid.

"A productive hunt?" He smirks as she hisses a satisfied affirmative, cradles her bloated body between his shoulders and the back of his favorite leather armchair, and nuzzles her head against his neck.
The dull prickling sensation along his neck that follows serves as evidence of the inherent magnetism between horcrux and source soul, an effect which Tom paid little attention until very recently.

But it's impossible to ignore now that Potter seems to be throwing boundaries aside left and right, like the way she touched his arm earlier that day. It's impossible to ignore the way her skin seems to sizzle, radioactive and dangerous. Does she feel it too? Perhaps subconsciously…maybe that's where her apparent disregard for his personal space is coming from.

What he really can't stop wondering is why this effect is so much stronger in Potter than Nagini or any of his other horcruxes. Maybe it's because she's human or because their bond is the newest compared to the others, which could mean that it would fade with time. But that didn't explain how he went from feeling nothing week after week of injecting her arm with his version of the Calming Draught to feeling something as sharp and startling as he did this morning.

If anything it seems to be getting stronger, which should please him because it probably means their bond is getting stronger. Though in reality, he doesn't really know what to think about it except for the fact that it makes him dreadfully uncomfortable.

Nagini shifts her head to his shoulder. "Will she visit tomorrow?"

Fucking hell, not this again…

Of course, there is no need to clarify who she is referring to – hardly an hour has passed since leaving Hogwarts where she hasn't made some mention of Potter. As if he wasn't irritated enough by the girl's constant presence on his mind already.

"No," he rolls his eyes.

"Next weekend?"

His jaw twitches. "No."

"The day after the full moon?"

"No, Nagini," he says calmly because she'll only take his irritation as a mark of victory. Just like Potter would if she was there. "You'll see her again when we return to Hogwarts."

She brushes this off as though it is a suggestion rather than reality. "Too far away. Don't you want to see her?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" he says innocently while turning a page in Advanced Summoning Theory. "I saw her today."

His jab has the desired effect: she hisses in pure indignation, her head rising off his shoulder. "You lie, Marvolo."

"Yes, but never to you Nagini," he smirks.

She hisses again, this time in vicious warning.

"Bite me again," he tells her nonchalantly, "and you will be sleeping in the cold where the foxes wait."

Nagini seems to be weighing the pros and cons when they hear a knock at the door.

"It must be her."

The snake eagerly slithers off his shoulders and into the adjacent foyer.
"I bloody well hope not," he mutters under his breath while marking his place in the book. If so, they are certainly going to have a little discussion about boundaries.

It's not and he can practically feel Nagini's hopes deflating behind him when he swings open the front door.

"Hello," Bellatrix greets him with her usual roguish smile, though there is a strange edginess behind it. A lace-gloved hand holds up a bottle of champagne and presses it into his arms. "I brought you this – you left the Ministry before I could say congratulations earlier."

"Thank you," he answers vacantly while simmering in silence at her nerve to show up at his house uninvited.

And then again when she looks up at him expectantly and asks, "May I come in?"

"I suppose."

He could use the distraction anyway.

Nagini watches them with a critical gaze as Tom leads Bellatrix through the foyer and gestures for her to settle in the sitting room while he fetches two wine flutes from the antique cabinet in the dining room. When he returns, Nagini is curled up on the chair directly across from the emerald-upholstered sofa where Bellatrix rests, staring her down like easy prey.

'Behave yourself,' he tells her in the form of a threatening scowl.

Bellatrix doesn't seem to notice anyway, though she does sound uncharacteristically nervous when she says, "Seems like you've been busy lately."

"Somewhat," Tom opens the bottle of champagne and pours them each a flute, wondering where exactly she is going with this. It wasn't typical for either of them to engage in any real form of conversation during their encounters.

"It's just…" she clinks her flute against his and takes a sip, not quite meeting his eyes. "I haven't heard from you in weeks."

He smirks and places a finger under her chin, forcing her gaze upward as he towers above her petite frame. "Does Miss Black feel neglected?"

She quivers, leaning into his touch while biting her bottom lip. "Maybe a little…"

As sick as it may be, there is something incredibly gratifying about the fact that this beacon of pureblood propriety would eagerly fall to her knees before him in that horrifically expensive dress of hers at a single command.

In fact, the words are on the tip of his tongue when Nagini hisses threateningly right beside him.

Bellatrix shrieks in surprise and jumps away. "Don't you have a cage you can put her in or something?"

"No," The corners of his mouth curl upward in amusement before glancing down pointedly at Nagini and tipping his head in the direction of the stairs. "But she could take a hint."

She doesn't move, so Tom rolls his eyes and grabs the bottle of champagne. "Fine. We'll go."

Bellatrix shrieks again as she dashes past Nagini, who nips at her heels, and races in front of him up
the stairs to the master bedroom. She seems to calm down a bit when Tom locks the bedroom door behind them and even more after downing the rest of her flute and then a second. Meanwhile, Tom lounges on the bed and watches her patiently, wondering when exactly Nagini became so goddamn possessive; she never acted like this before Potter came along.

But that's exactly it, isn't it? For whatever reason, Nagini seems to have it stuck in her head that he and Potter are…mates. No – even worse: soulmates.

It seems rather inappropriate that this is his train of thought while Bellatrix's dress falls to the floor across the room.

"Well?" he prompts her with a smirk while forcing the thoughts from his mind, "Let's see just how desperate you've become since last time."

She doesn't skip a beat, jumping on the bed and straddling his legs while getting to work unclasping his belt.

If he thought his train of thought earlier felt inappropriate, it's nothing compared to the moment Potter's voice appears in his head: "Really would've thrown a wrench in things if I hadn't decided to show up today, hm? Fancy that."

Leave it to her to write him at the most inopportune moment possible.

"Oh, and I accept the job offer by the way, thanks for the heads up," she continues snarkily just as Bellatrix's mouth melts over him.

No, no, no. This cannot happen. Can't it?

Of course not.

But delaying a reply to Potter might break her trust, and he has been waiting for her to write since the hearing…

Well, not waiting. Perhaps expecting…?

"Still, I'm flattered…and a bit surprised that you didn't pick Granger. " Tom pushes Bellatrix off of him as Potter's voice fills his head yet again.

She looks up at him in confusion, her lips pressing into a pout as he zips up his trousers. "Give me a moment…I think I heard Nagini break something downstairs."

"That bloody snake," she crosses her arms and settles in against the pillows to wait.

Tom starts downstairs, rubbing his eyes in disbelief at Potter's timing. Nagini greets him on the landing with a furious look that quickly turns into an inquisitive tilt of her head as she follows him into kitchen, where he swiftly downs a full, much-needed glass of water.

When he finally manages to breath normally, he responds telepathically to the diary, "Why? You are inarguably the top student in my class – you know that."

Potter responds almost instantly, "I know. But it's nice to hear it from you now and then."

He smirks. "Tell me about your visit to the Department of Mysteries."

She does, and his only disappointment is that there isn't more to it. But perhaps that was for the best; Bellatrix was waiting for him, after all, and if given the choice he would listen to Potter talk about the
Department all night.

"Pardon the interruption," he joins her again after about twenty minutes and the assurance that Potter would soon be off to sleep for the night. Now he just needs to hurry this along so he can be sure to catch Potter's dreams.

"It's quite alright," Bella stretches, still lounging in her corset and stockings on his bed. "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about anyway…"

What was that supposed to mean? This better not have to do with any of the constant hints she's been sending the last few months about being anything more than they already were...

"I guess I'm not sure how to say this," she folds her hands over her stomach while staring up at the ceiling.

His posture stiffens. "As candidly as possible would be appreciated."

She sighs and closes her eyes. "My mother set me up on a date with Rodolphus."

Tom is not one to play the fool, so he simply shrugs and tucks his hands in his pockets. "I know."

Her eyes snap open and she sits up in surprise. "Y-you do?"

"Of course."

"And you...aren't angry about that?"

"Why would I be?" he leans back casually against the door, "I was under the impression that our arrangement did not include any expectations of fidelity."

Her face pales as it hits her, surely wondering if it means he's been fucking other women this entire time. He hasn't – but planting the seed wouldn't hurt.

"Was that assumption incorrect?" Tom tilts his head to the side and folds his arms across his chest.

Bellatrix chews her bottom lip. "No – you're right. But it's not just one date…my mother wants me to marry him. She won't stop nagging me about it. She's dying, you know…she wants me to be married before then." Bellatrix glances up at him as though expecting him to care.

He doesn't and makes no effort to pretend.

"And?" Tom prompts her impatiently, though he knows exactly where this is going. He's seen it coming for months, with all of her hints and hopeful glances – he should have anticipated it sooner.

"Well…I don't need to marry Rodolphus if you don't want me to."

"I'm not standing in your way," he scoffs and steps away from the wall, gesturing to the door. Just leave. Now. Don't argue.

For a fraction of a moment, Bellatrix forehead creases and she looks unusually vulnerable. But then, as though something suddenly breaks inside of her, she jumps off the bed and storms over to him with a furious expression written across her delicate features.

"Maybe I want you to stand in the way, Tom," she snaps. "Maybe I want this– whatever the hell it is– to be more. I've waited for over five fucking years…"
"Are you honestly telling me you haven't even thought about it once?" she grasps at the front of his shirt. "Even if my mother wasn't pressuring me into this, I've waited a long time for…"

Fine. They'll play one last game; it's not like she didn't ask for it. She should have left when he gave her the chance.

"For a proposal?" He smiles vacantly and caresses her cheek with his fingertips.

"Yes," she sighs, calming substantially at his mere touch.

"For me to present you my family's ring?" He slides it off his finger and holds it up level to her gaze.

"Yes," she whispers, her eyelashes fluttering.

"For me to fall to one knee—" he does, and gently takes her hand, "—and ask you to marry me?"

Her mouth falls open in surprise. "Yes."

"Is that what you've been waiting for, so patiently and for so very long?"

"Yes," her voice cracks and eyes gloss over.

He looks up at her with an innocent expression. "And during all of that time, did you ever stop to wonder what it is that I want? Or have you always been this selfish and foolishly entitled?"

She gives him an expression as though she's been slapped as he rises and slides his horcrux back onto his finger, fighting a smirk all the while.

"I'm the selfish one?" she snaps, quite clearly on the verge of hysterics. "Every time we're together it's all about what you want."

"Oh, but I thought you liked it that way Bellatrix," Tom leans in close and murmurs in her ear, "I thought you enjoyed being a cheap fuck. What changed?"

She's shaking— in fury or disbelief, he isn't sure— and averts her gaze from him. "You're such a bastard."

Well that's not news.

"Answer me," he smirks and grabs her chin, forcing her to look up at him just as a tear escapes and streams down her face to the tip of his thumb. "What changed?"

"I-I don't know." She swallows, looking positively terrified. "I suppose I realized that I'll need you always…I love you, Tom."

Wrong answer.

His lip curls in rage and disgust and he drops his hand from her, the door swinging open with a snap of his fingers. "Get out."

It's far too late by the time she realizes her mistake, her eyes widening in dread. "Tom, wait—"

I'm sorry. We don't need to marry. Mother will get over it. She'll understand. Please I'm sorry. I love you. Rodolphus will understand.
Things can be just like before. *Please.*

I love you.

The panicked, tear-stained delirium doesn't cease until he raises his wand. "**Imperio.**"

"I asked nicely for you to leave, Bellatrix. Now go."

He can feel her magic struggling against the curse as she pulls her dress back on and starts downstairs; she even manages to break it when she steps out of the house, just long enough to throw him an enraged, accusatory glare and snarl, "There is something going on between you and the Potter girl, isn't there? Your new 'class assistant'?"

Tom laughs coldly before closing the door in her face.

-xx-

*Educational Decree Number Twenty-One Approved by Wizengamot*

The *Prophet's* front page story is concerning enough, but it's really the picture that accompanies it that catches Sirius' attention and makes his mouth curve into a frown.

There he is, shaking hands with the Minister for bloody Magic: the professor he's heard so much about from Halia since the summer began.

'**He's much younger than the others,**' her words ring through his ears again, now that he's faced with proof of how regretfully true this statement is.

And far too good-looking.

"Is something burning?" Halia suddenly appears in the doorway of the kitchen, her nose scrunched. "Shit."

So much for making dinner, his most recent experiment in fatherhood.

He slides open the window above the sink with his wand and begins waving away the smoke billowing from the pot of stew. Meanwhile, Halia strolls over, turns off the burner, and lifts the lid. Sirius curses under his breath when he peers inside at the mess and he glances over to see her trying to hide a smirk.

"Wanna go out for chips?" he sighs and laughs defeatedly.

"Sure," she grins.

They wander a couple of blocks to the small stand that sells newspapers, assorted candy, and arguably the best chips in all of London. Sirius places an order for two and Halia enthusiastically douses hers in malt vinegar before joining him at the metal table and chairs near the stand.

"Sorry your soup didn't turn out," she looks at him sympathetically, "But these are delicious."

"It was a *stew,*" he chuckles. "And it was my own fault, anyway. I was a bit distracted by the article in the *Prophet* about yesterday's education hearing."

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Halia brightens substantially and Sirius immediately regrets bringing it up.
"Well, that's one way to look at it I suppose," Sirius tosses a chip in his mouth. "Seemed to me like a power grab by the Ministry…or this Professor Riddle. Isn't he a little inexperienced to be dictating everything that happens around Hogwarts? I thought that was Dumbledore's job."

"It's not like that," she shakes her head. "I should know – I read the original proposal and was there for the hearing yesterday."

What the hell?

"You…were?"

"Mhm," she hums. "Oh! Speaking of, Tom– I mean, Professor Riddle– asked me to be his class assistant."

Sirius feels the color drain from his face, though Halia doesn't seem to notice. "He what?"

"It's just helping him out with grading here and there so he can focus on the audit," she glances down at her chips and moves them around with her fork, but he can still see her ear-to-ear smile as clear as day.

That's it. As much as he doesn't want to crush her excitement, he needs to say something before this– whatever it is, God forbid– goes any further.

"Don't you think that's…I don't know, a bit strange?"

"What do you mean, 'strange'?" Halia scoffs rather haughtily. "I am the best in the class…"

He balls his hands into fists at his sides and releases them with a silent sigh, trying to decide what exactly to say next.

But to his dismay, she changes the subject before anything useful comes to mind. "Anyway, would you mind bringing me to the airport this weekend?"

He choking on a chip and coughs violently. "For what?"

If this has anything to do with Tom Riddle I swear to fucking Merlin…"

"My friend Frances invited me to visit her for a couple of weeks in New York City. Mum and Dad used to work really closely with her mum, President Laidley."

He's so relieved that he doesn't bother to dwell on the fact that she didn't bother to ask his permission before making plans to spend a decent chunk of the summer abroad. Although, there was a good chance she didn't even think about asking in the first place – jumping around constantly from place to place was the way she always lived her life until somewhat recently. At least she seemed to be thinking responsibly about it and wasn't planning to make the trip across the Atlantic completely alone by broomstick.

He's almost convinced to let her go when the prospect of her leaving when they already had such limited time to spend together begins to sink in.

"Remus was planning to visit this weekend – he misses you," Sirius swallows, raking his fingers through his shaggy hair. "And surely you don't want to miss out on teasing him about his new girlfriend," he adds with a grin.

"Well I can visit with him when I get back, right?" Halia shrugs nonchalantly. "It's only a couple of
weeks. And more than anything, I think I just need a change of pace for a while. I start feeling trapped when I stay in the same place for too long…you know?"

"I understand, Halia." He exhales in defeat and forces a compassionate smile to the surface. "Of course I'll bring you to the airport."

-xx-

Chapter End Notes

Bye bye, Bella (for now?)! ;D
Thank you for reading and commenting!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all of you lovely people who have bookmarked, subscribed, kudos'd, and commented! You make the obscene amount of time I spend writing this fic worthwhile.

;D

-xx-

"Anything to drink, Miss?" the flight attendant with a heart-shaped face hands her a small napkin. Halia smiles politely from her seat against the window and orders an orange juice, while the little boy sitting next to her—three or four years old, if she had to guess—and his mother order a chocolate milk and coffee.

It's been a long time since she's been on a plane—probably not since the time she and her parents were sneaking into India.

Wait a second…

Oh. Right. New memories—of course.

Is she ever going to get used to this shit?

The flight attendant distributes their beverages of choice. Halia tips a shot of vodka into hers while the boy takes one sip from the milk carton and pulls a face. "This isn't chocolate."

"Sorry honey, there must have been a mistake," his mother sighs.

He pounds his tiny fist on the tray table. "But mommy I wanted chocolate."

Halia smirks. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go back to a time when something as mundane as flavored milk was her most pressing concern?

"Now don't cause a fuss. We'll get you some as soon as we get off the plane," his mother says sternly with a wave as she digs through her purse and retrieves a gossip magazine.

Halia doesn't know what possesses her to do it, but she finds herself discreetly swirling her fingers over the carton in one easy circle. "Chocolate's my favorite, too," she whispers to him with a wink.

He looks at her curiously (and like she might be a bit mad), but when he takes a sip his eyes suddenly widen in awe.

She grins and presses a finger to her lips before turning her attention back to the book in her lap. The picture of Professor Riddle and Minister Fudge she clipped from the Prophet falls from behind the front cover when she opens it and the boy's eyes follow the movement of the handshake in wonder.

"It's been a long time since I've taken a plane," she writes impulsively, "I've forgotten how fascinating Muggles can be."
"How lovely," comes his sarcastic reply, which she can all but hear in the back of her mind and makes her stomach flutter.

"It does get a bit boring, though. I've been sitting here nearly five hours and there are still about two to go…"

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the boy studying the page as the words appear and fade.

"And this is my problem how, exactly? I did not lend you a valuable Dark artifact in hopes of being called upon to entertain you in times of boredom."

She smirks. "Not even a joke? Funny story? Anything?"

"There are far more pressing things I could be doing at the moment, you know."

"Like re-reading one of your books for a fiftieth time? Hilarious – let's hear another."

A few seconds of pause. Then: "Just charming, aren't you?"

"If you say so, Professor," Halia smiles out the window and bites her bottom lip.

"Goodbye, Pot-"

She begins writing again before he can finish: "So, the last time I flew on a plane, my parents and I were sneaking into India. We couldn't risk using magic in case we picked up Trackers on the way."

Anything related to her memories never fails to catch his attention, not that she can particularly blame him for that – after all, he is an insatiable academic. And who wouldn't want to learn more about the Department of Mysteries if given the chance?

Still, she's found herself thinking more and more about how nice it would be if he seemed interested with simply her for a change. But she'll take her wins where she can get them; at least they're talking.

"The Department doesn't have another method to protect against Trackers? What else do you remember?"

"Guess not…and I don't remember much more, to be honest." She could lie and the thought sounds momentarily appealing because it means a longer conversation, but she's having a difficult enough time as it is keeping her story straight with two sets of memories. "I think we were trying to find some sort of lake or river or something. Not sure why."

"Interesting. Do keep me updated on your progress. For now, I have to go."

"I will. Say hi to Nagini for me." She closes the book with a sigh after waiting a few moments for a reply that never comes.

She should have lied and kept him from…whatever it is that he has to go and do. Which hopefully is not his girlfriend.


Why the fuck can't she get him off her mind?

In the pit of her stomach, she knows exactly why – she has had a crush on a boy before, after all. Only he's not a boy, he's a man who happens to be her professor with an unfortunately snoggable face. And an irritatingly flawless pureblood girlfriend.
It's pointless and completely illogical to fancy him or even to think about him as much as she does. So why the fuck can't she stop?

Even if Bellatrix Black was out of the picture, he'd never see her as anything more than a student with a somewhat interesting past he feels sorry for – though he doesn't really strike her as the sympathetic type. Of course, he also appointed her as his class assistant… but only because she's the best in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Are you a witch?" the boy looks up at her suspiciously, which snaps her out of her hopeless haze.

"Yep," she grins, offering no further explanation to ease his shocked expression before settling in for a nap that lasts until the final few minutes of the flight, just as the plane dips below the clouds to reveal the glimmering expanse of New York City below.

Halia spots Frances instantly among the crowd that awaits when she deboards. She's the sort of girl that always looks effortlessly cool and today she's sporting glamorous sunglasses, a studded motorcycle jacket, and light lavender streaks in her long, golden-blonde waves.

"I missed you!" she squeals, jumping up and down as she throws her arms around Halia's neck.

"I missed you too." Halia beams and hugs her back, smelling an odd mix of campfire and jasmine. From partying the night before, if Halia had to guess.

Frances stands back and sizes her up. "You look tired. Are you tired? I want to hear everything about your trip. Sit next to any cute No-Maj boys?" she nudges Halia's side with an elbow as they walk toward the airport's exit.

"Cute, but not in that way," Halia smirks, wondering how long her little stunt would continue to baffle the kid.

Frances sends her a puzzled expression, but doesn't ask. Instead she takes a car key out of her pocket and dangles it front of Halia. "Guess what? Dad let me borrow the car to get you since Mom's away for the weekend. You're going to love it – it's a convertible." She says this slowly as though certain Halia has never heard of one. But she has, of course – how could she possibly forget how idiotically proud of his new car Uncle Vernon was all those years ago?

"Unfortunately, he also made me bring Ava along." Frances grimaces and sighs dramatically as they approach a sleek white car. "Here, let me take your bag." She presses a button and the back pops open.

"Hello Halia," Ava smiles politely at her from the backseat when they enter the car. Despite being only one year apart, Ava looks far older than her sister with her prim posture, wrinkle-less powder blue blouse and pencil skirt, and dainty hands folded delicately on her lap. "It's so nice of you to visit."

"Nice to see you," Halia twists around in her seat and gives her a little wave as Frances starts the car and presses a button to lower the top. "Congratulations, by the way – do you have a job lined up now that you've left Illvermorny?"

"I do," she tilts her chin up proudly, "I was hired into the MACUSA Treasury Department. It's really quite fascinating—"

"God Ava, we get it: you like your boring-ass desk job," Frances groans as they merge onto the freeway. "Let's talk about someone other than you for once – like, I don't know, our guest?"
Ava's jaw tightens momentarily and she purses her lips. "You're right, how rude of me. How is Hogwarts, Halia?"

"Oh, it's...good, I guess," Halia shrugs, yelling over the wind when Frances picks up speed. "Classes are fine, the professors are fine…"

Really fucking fine in one particular case.

"Watch your speeding, Francine," Ava narrows her hazel eyes at her sister. "Father won't be pleased if he has to Obliviate another police officer."

"Last time I drove I got a felony," Frances explains chipperly while giving Ava the finger. "That's why he made me bring Princess Killjoy."

No real surprises there. She has even less regard for authority than Halia does.

Tom would probably hate her, for many reasons, but this one most of all.

"Anyway, I've been wanting to ask from the moment I saw you: did you recently switch to a vegetarian diet?" Frances asks her suddenly.

"No...?" Halia's brows knit together.

"Oh. Could've fooled me – your aura is absolutely glowing."

In the rearview mirror, Ava rolls her eyes. "Cut it out with this Aurology nonsense already, won't you? It's not even a real science."

"You're right Ava, it's an art." Frances smirks back in her sister's direction. "Yes, you're positively glowing Halia, unlike Ava. Her aura is dark and bitter, sort of like coffee, but yours is pure gold, baby. There's something good happening in your life right now, isn't there? Something new?"

Halia smiles to herself as an image of Tom sitting in his office with Nagini perched lazily on his shoulders pops to the front of her mind and she stretches, feeling the wind whip past her hands and through her hair as they speed toward Manhattan. "Yeah...I guess there is."

-xx-

Tom stands back from the chalkboard and crosses his arms, peering thoughtfully at the spell diagrams and cramped lines of arithmancy equations linked with dozens of arrows. The lab, carefully concealed behind the wall in the basement and accessible only by Parseltongue, would be completely silent were it not for Mahler's Tenth Symphony spinning from the record player.

He erases a two from the top equation and replaces it with a four. Not quite there, but close enough to warrant another experiment.

He spins on his heel to face his newest test subject and the burly Muggle's eyes bug in terror.

"I'm going to release and unmute you, now, as I will need to see how the tests affect you compared to the others – wouldn't want to skew the results, would we?" Tom smiles at him charmingly and clasps his hands behind his back. "But before I do, I should make it clear that you are not to call for help or try to escape. Your best bet is to save your strength and hold out for as long as you can when we begin our tests. If you make a decently noble effort, I might even let you go."

There's no way that's going to happen, of course. But a subject fighting tenaciously for the remote
possibility of survival always makes for a more effective test.

"However, should you choose not to play along, our friend Nagini will, put quite bluntly, rip all of the skin off your face. And then she will kill you." He tips his head toward the surgical-grade exam table where Nagini is perched and she hisses menacingly. "Understand?"

With no other option to indicate a confirmation, the man blinks.

Tom smirks. "That is excellent news, as today has already proven especially taxing."

And what better way to unwind than to channel his irritation into something productive, like the experiments he would never be able to conduct at Hogwarts? Inventing new and improved versions of the Unforgivable Curses has been a goal of his for quite some time, given the increasing number of powerful witches and wizards that are able to overcome the effects of the originals.

A few lines below his previous notes, he pens: 'Cruciatus Alternative – Experiment 11'

"Now then," Tom draws his wand and lifts the binding and silencing curses from his prisoner, "Your job is quite simple, really: all you need to do is avoid fainting."

A semi-circular flick of his wand and a lengthy incantation later, the Muggle drops to his knees, his mottled face twisting in pain. He appears to be fighting quite admirably to avoid crying out, however, judging by the vein that pops out against the strained skin of his neck.

Tom smiles in cruel amusement, allowing his magic to flow stronger and strengthen the curse. This is the strongest version of the curse that he has conjured and the exhilaration of it hits him like a bludger to the chest, causing his breath to hitch pleasantly.

That inane woman, Dolores Umbridge, clearly hasn't a clue who she's dealing with…

Damn it.

So much for avoiding any and all thought of that godawful meeting at the Ministry this afternoon. The mere memory of her trinket-infested office alone is enough to send a shiver down his spine.

But the worst part of all was that he actually entered the meeting with some intention to give her the benefit of the doubt, even despite her insolent interruption during his interview with the Daily Prophet. The fact that Granger looked so fucking exhausted while leading him into Umbridge's office should have been enough of an indication of how things were bound to go. Then came a round of forced niceties in which she insisted on referring to him as 'Tom' and that he call her 'Dolores'…

"Shall we discuss our strategy for the audit?" he asks her coolly in an attempt to shift the subject to the actual intention of their meeting.

At this, Umbridge lets out an irritating, hiccup-like giggle and waves her hand at him. "I think you're getting a bit ahead of yourself. Isn't it important that we get to know each other first? After all, you seem to have quite the story, Tom. Tell me: how is it, exactly, that you managed to get hired on as Hogwarts' youngest professor?"

"I applied and was found to be the most competent choice," he answers dryly.

She continues on, as though she hadn't heard him: "A true success story, from orphanage, to Head Boy, to Professor, to…changemaker – with some help from little old me, of course," she winks. "You could write a book, you know…Well maybe someday when you're a bit more accomplished."
His shoulders stiffen, his fingers twitching instinctively toward his wand; and yet, he miraculously manages to find some shred of willpower and holds off on cursing her into oblivion.

Perhaps this is simply her way of testing his limits and reserve, in which case he cannot possibly allow her the satisfaction of visibly unsettling him. But he could still be ruthless. "And what is your proudest accomplishment, Dolores? Was it when you were appointed the Assistant to the Head of the –"

"Assistant Head, not Assistant to the Head," she corrects him with a saccharine smile, though he takes satisfied notice of the heat sprawling up her pudgy neck.

He wastes no time changing the subject after his brief victory and places the audit timeline he developed the night before in front of her.

She glances down at it once, maybe twice, before folding her hands in her lap. "There is no need to discuss specifics yet, Tom. We'll have plenty of time for that when I move into my new office at Hogwarts that Headmaster Dumbledore so graciously offered me."

That settled it once and for all: the old man really is a sadist.

Tom's eye twitches at the memory and it suddenly occurs to him that the Muggle is still writhing at his feet.

He lifts the curse and the man gasps for air. "Thank you for your participation. How did that feel?"

"Like hell," he answers between labored breaths, his ill-fitting shirt stained with pools of sweat.

Tom picks up his notes and runs a hand through his hair. "You will need to be more specific. Describe the sensation, please."

The Muggle pulls himself off the floor, clearly poised to lunge at him from across the room judging by the animalistic rage behind his eyes. As though that has even a remote chance of success.

"Fucking psychotic freak," he growls.

Tom's mouth curves into a half-smile and he shakes his head slightly. "Oh, I see. You're a bit slower than the others, aren't you? Let's try again – perhaps this time you will find the right words, hm?"

The Muggle blanches. "No, please –"

Round two doesn't last more than a minute – it doesn't need to. The pathetic fool is begging for death within the first ten seconds.

Tom looks down at him coldly. "Your description. Now."

"It's…it's like being burned alive, but from the inside," the man sputters. "Like every organ is boiling."

"Interesting," Tom finishes writing and tilts his head to the side. "I truly appreciate your help."

By the sound of it, the curse should be ready to test on magical subjects quite soon.

"Does that mean I can go?" The Muggle looks up pleadingly.

Tom snorts. "No. Avada –"

"Did you know that the Empire State Building has its own postal code?"
What is *with* this girl's timing?

"Also, *the bagels here are larger than my face. It's brilliant."

He expects irritation at Potter's enduring lack of judgment in differentiating what is and is not a worthy reason to write him. But it never comes and instead, he finds an uninvited smirk sneaking onto his face.

Apparently, he really is that desperate for a distraction from his earlier meeting at the Ministry.

"*Finish him,*" he tells Nagini and turns to start upstairs, ignoring the screams that follow.

-xx-

Halia blinks her eyes open as the first rays of sun streak through the window's sheer white curtains, silky sheets tangling her legs as she sprawls out in the absurdly oversized bed. Her guest room inside of the Laidley's penthouse could probably fit Sirius' entire flat and features a granite-covered bathroom with a whirlpool bathtub, a plush lounge area, a walk-in closet stocked with the latest trends in her size, and a kitchenette (not that she'd ever need it with the amount of food they've been giving her). But absolutely nothing compares to the glass balcony that extends from her bedroom and offers an incredible view of the skyline.

She wipes the sleep from her eyes and pulls on a pair of shorts and a sweater before venturing out to the Laidley's central dining room.

Gloria is sitting alone, examining a newspaper through a pair of reading glasses. "Good morning, Halia," she looks up with a warm expression and gestures at the long table, which is covered in silver platters of every American breakfast food imaginable: French toast, fluffy scrambled eggs, mouthwateringly aromatic strips of perfectly crisp bacon, frisbee-sized pancakes, and more. Of course, the most amazing bit is that it was all prepared by the President of MACUSA herself given their lack of house elves. "Please, help yourself. Randall and Ava just left for the day. Would you like me to wake Frances? I expect that she will not be up until noon otherwise."

Halia pulls up a nearby chair. "No, it's alright. I was sort of looking forward to lounging around this morning anyway."

Small lines hug the corners of Gloria's mouth when she laughs gently and folds up her reading glasses. "I imagine that you're exhausted – Frances has kept you quite busy the last few days."

It's been a whirlwind of a trip so far, that much is sure. Her favorites among their many adventures was a trip to the Museum of Modern Art, strolling through Central Park, picnicking atop the Statue of Liberty, and touring MACUSA with Ava (despite Frances' protests). And then there were all the places they visited when night came: dance clubs, hole-in-the-wall dive bars, and a slew of dark-lit concert venues where they watched Frances' (astonishingly) Muggle boyfriend named Jake perform with his band.

Being here is like being in a different world. And essentially, it is: it's the Muggle world, which President Laidley has been subtly working to mesh with its wizarding counterpart for years – primarily through living by example. It seems a bit daft, but apparently her people either overlook it or don't notice because she's won reelection three times already.

"I hope you aren't feeling too overwhelmed," Gloria swirls a few drops of cream into her coffee. "She's just so excited that you came to visit."

"It's been absolutely brilliant," Halia tells her honestly while scooping some eggs onto her plate.
"Thank you for letting me stay."

"Of course, dear," the older woman places a hand on Halia's arm, "Merlin knows you could use a bit of rest after everything you've been through."

Halia isn't quite sure what to say and desperately doesn't want to encourage anything more on the subject, so she cuts a large corner off a piece of French toast and stuffs it in her mouth.

She feels Gloria's gaze studying her. "I know you don't remember everything," she says finally, her voice hardly above a whisper. "I can't imagine how difficult that must be."

Halia stops chewing and pivots her head in Gloria's direction.

Wait – what?

"Yes, dear, I know that your parents were Unspeakables…many they worked with did. Frances doesn't know, of course. Nor does Ava or my husband," she shrugs simply. "I had to get approval from the Head of the Department of Mysteries before Frances could invite you."

"Oh," is all she can manage in response.

"I know this is a tricky subject, one that you'd surely rather not dwell on…"

Yeah, you've got that right.

"But I want you to know that they were quite possibly the bravest and strongest people I've ever met and what happened…it was a terrible accident. Please, Halia, if there is anything I can do for you, do not hesitate to ask."

She hates the concerned way that Gloria looks at her in that moment, the same way Dumbledore and Regulus do. Like she's going to remember something any minute that will destroy her.

Like she's going to remember that she was the one responsible.

Halia's heart pounds and she pushes her plate away as calmly as possible, despite her churning insides. "Sorry, I just realized I'm not hungry…I'm going to go take a bath."

She just manages to reach her room before the panic attack hits in full force and she frantically begins searching through her extendable bag for the dose of her weekly potion. After a few unsuccessful handfuls of items, she turns it over and begins dumping out of it: piles of clothes, loose sickles and knuts, the ornament of the Empire State Building she bought yesterday, her plane tickets, the book she hasn't been able to resist writing in for more than a day…

It's not until all of her belongings are scattered around her when it occurs to her to use a summoning charm. "Accio potion!" She holds her breath and waits expectantly.

Nothing. Where the fuck is it?

She runs her hands through her hair anxiously and a new wave of dread floods her when she suddenly realizes that it's still sitting inside her bedside table at Sirius' flat.

What in the hell is she going to do? How would she make it another day without it, let alone another week?

"Fuck," she bites back tears as she furiously pounds her fists against the bed until she collapses in exhaustion. Then she rolls onto her back, concentrating on the upside down view of the skyscraper-
pricked sky as her head dangles off the edge.

_Breathe. Breathe._ She'll pass soon out if she doesn't.

When it becomes a little easier, she reaches for the book lying to her left on the bedspread and holds it to her chest. Should she write him?

No. He already thought of her as completely irresponsible. And even if she did tell him, what would he do about it? Would he come all the way to New York City to give her a dose?

Maybe. But did she really want him to see her as that helpless? She cringes at the thought.

No, she could be strong and handle this on her own. She's already starting to feel better anyway, with the monogramed, leather-bound book cradled in her arms.

Like he's already there, somehow.

-xx-

Regulus hears a small knock in the doorway of his office and looks up to see Broderick Bode.

"How was Romania?" As always, the Head of the Department's voice is solemn and measured.

"Fine. The report's coming along nicely."

More accurately, he hasn't started it at all. But Bode doesn't need to know that he spent all of yesterday drinking with Rabastan, so Regulus reaches for a folder containing a few spare pieces of parchment inside and holds it up with the hope that it's at least somewhat convincing. "I should have it to you by tomorrow morning."

If Bode senses his bluff, he says nothing of it. Instead, he places his hands in the pockets of his long, black cloak and says, "I'm sure you'd be interested to know that Halia Potter visited while you were in Romania."

He sucks in a breath. "She did? What happened?"

"Exactly what you would expect," Bode shrugs, "You were away, so she found the Department in its latent state."

"How did she seem?"

"Confused…rather frustrated. Understandably, of course," Bode stands a bit straighter and licks his lips. "Her seventeenth birthday is in four days’ time."

"I know." Regulus' stomach knots in both anxiety and anticipation.

"I trust you understand why this assignment is yours – why it has to be?"

"Yeah…I get it."

The Head's eyes sweep over him judiciously. "Are you prepared to accept everything that means?"

Regulus snorts, unable to help himself. "Not like I have much of a choice, do I? And I've been forced to accept worse, Bode."

A long silence settles between them.
"Where is she now?" Regulus finally asks while lighting a cigarette.

"At Gloria Laidley's residence."

"Not for much longer, I expect," he rolls his eyes, "It's only a matter of time until she gets into a row with that windstorm of a girl, Frances."

Regulus swears he notices a shadow of a half-smile on Bode's stoic face, but it's long gone when the Head of the Department orders crisply, "She's scheduled in early August for her Apparition test. Do it then."

-xx-

Blurry shadows move above, her limbs useless and heavy. And that ache in her head...

What happened? Did she fall off the ladder while helping Rookwood dust the Hall of Prophecy and hit her head...again?

"She's awake!" The voice is distant and slow, like she's hearing it from underwater. But it's familiar.

Regulus.

Her eyes begin to focus and she forces herself to sit up through the pain shooting through her head. Awareness begins trickling down her spine, spreading to her extremities and she can feel the cool metal of the exam table beneath her legs.

"Halia?" It's Regulus again, this time sharper and closer, and the colors in her vision seem to brighten.

A searing pain in her wrist joins the one in her head and she glances down to see a bright red scar shaped like a lightning bolt that extends into her palm. It burns as though aflame, so much so that black spots begin to form at the sides of her vision and she slumps to the side.

"Hey, take it easy," Regulus grabs her arm just before she clatters to the ground and holds her steady. "Look at me."

All she wants to do is sleep until the burning stops, but she forces herself to cling to consciousness and focus on his gold-flecked brown eyes.

"We don't have much time, Regulus." Halia follows the voice to the corner of the room, where Bode is watching them soberly.

Not much time for what? What happened?

She rubs her wrist against her leg, desperate for the stinging to cease, and glances down at the scar.

Then it hits her – the mountain. The voice. Everything

She tries to swallow, but her mouth turns dry. "Did they...are they...?"

No answer is necessary – it's obvious from the devastated look on his face.

He wraps his arms around her and she collapses against his shoulder, digging her nails into the back of his shirt as she bites back a scream.

It can't be.
He says in her ear, "I'm so sorry, Halia...But you're going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay."

She's not convinced.

Because it was her fault.

"It has to be now," says Bode's rough voice, "Before the memory cements itself."

What he means by this slowly clicks and she starts hyperventilating as Regulus' arms tighten around her while she struggles to free herself. "No. Please – I won't say anything to anyone about the Department, I swear!"

"It is protocol, Miss Potter," Bode's voice sounds terrifyingly close, "And it is for your protection just as much as the Department's."

"Please. Please, don't," she kicks against Regulus.

But he just holds her tighter in his bearlike grip "Hey, it's only for a little while...you'll be back in no time. Probably even before Anders finishes the coffee plant," he gives a mirthless little chuckle.

"Please," she whimpers, but by the time she feels the icy jolt at the top of her head she knows it's too late.

Halia wakes up gasping for air in the Laidley's posh guest room. Almost instinctively, she reaches for the book resting on the adjacent pillow and clutches it against her as she curls into a ball.

Unsurprisingly, it turns out that regaining memories without the aid of hard drugs and or the potion is a total bitch. On the bright side (sort of), her dreams are more vivid and intense than ever.

She shivers and turns over her left wrist, which is as bare and pale as always.

Spooky.

It's also a bit strange that the book seems to be helping her stay a bit calmer through her latest dreams. It's probably nothing more than psychological – something to do with the idea of someone being within arm's reach to help if she needed it.

Frances knocks on her door twice and Halia shoves the book under the blankets just before she waltzes in with a layer cake covered in pink icing and cake toppers launching mini fireworks. "Happy birthday, Halia!"

Oh yeah. It is her birthday today, isn't it?

"Mimosa?" Frances grins and hands Halia a flute off the tray levitating behind her before doling out a large slice of cake.

Inside are dense chocolate layers with raspberry filling in the center – Halia's favorite. "This is amazing," she groans after the first bite. "Thank you."

"Only the best for you, love," Frances winks and pulls out a few brightly colored envelopes from her robe, spreading them on the bed. "Looks like you got a few cards."

They're from Daphne, Sirius, Remus, and the Weasley twins and Halia opens them while Frances slices herself a piece of cake and lounges on the end of the bed.
"So. I hope you're ready because I have an entire day planned. First we'll go to the spa, then dinner at this awesome Thai place – you'll love it. And then, for the grand finale, we're going to The Edge. It's the hottest club in Manhattan and I've been saving it for today ever since you got here! It has everything: glow sticks, glitter bombs, a huge bath filled with foam…"

Halia smiles and takes another bite of cake. "Sounds brilliant."

And it does – well, sort of. She's been having a lovely time and it's definitely helping her keep certain memories (or the lack thereof) off her mind, but every time they go out she finds herself more and more eager to come back and write to Tom. As pathetic as that sounds.

Maybe it's just the fact that Frances is wearing on her.

*Yeah, let's go with that.*

"Jake's coming and is bringing Matt along, too," Frances pinches her arm and waggles her eyebrows suggestively. "He's cute, right? I think he likes you."

Halia shrugs. Matt, the bass player in Jake's band, doesn't really seem like her type. She'd probably like him a lot more if he wasn't a Muggle, was a few inches taller, and had darker hair and a sharper face.

If he looked more like Tom, basically.

-xx-

The Edge is located on the third floor of a decrepit warehouse and earns its name from the precarious, gaping façade of the back wall with no railing to keep one from falling into the Hudson River below. But that danger seems irrelevant in the overcrowded, drug-induced jungle surrounding them, where a new brawl seems to begin every few minutes. It's another world in itself, where all law becomes irrelevant – even the laws of time. Several shots in, still swaying and twisting in the tiny space they claimed near the dancefloor, she loses track of it almost completely.

But surely they've been here for hours.

The world spins when Frances suddenly grabs her hand and pulls her through the crowd away from Jake and Matt, the latter of which she has spent the majority of the night ignoring in hopes of discouraging his apparent interest in her. They push past dozens of fellow partiers dressed in any sort of extravagant costume one could imagine, from clowns to mermaids to nothing but feather boas and strategically-placed body paint. Clearly, her fear that the low-cut mini-dress that Frances talked her into was too risqué was completely unfounded.

By some miracle, they manage to arrive in the lavatory across the club which smells like a stomach-turning mixture of urine, vomit, and sex.

After reapplying her lipstick, Frances opens her purse and pulls out a clear baggie with a half-dozen bright pink pills. "Look what Jakey scored. Want one?"

She does. She really, really does. It's been such a long fucking time since she's been high enough to forget everything.

But alcohol alone was one thing – adding pills containing who-knows-what (and large quantities of it knowing Frances' tastes) to the mix would be a hell of a slippery slope. And then she thinks of Tom and all of the progress she's made because of him and her dream the night before…
Maybe she doesn't want to forget anymore.

Before she can change her mind, she shakes her head and turns away to fix her hair, "I'm fine. I'm not feeling too well."

"Your loss," Frances shrugs and places one on her tongue.

Not much later, Halia is looking on in horror and attempting to decide how exactly to proceed as Frances dances topless on a nearby table.

"That's my girl!" Jake rattles Halia's shoulders and looks up proudly at his girlfriend.

Who just happens to be the President of MACUSA's daughter.

Matt taps on Halia's forearm before yelling unnecessarily loud in her ear, "Wanna grab another drink?!!"

"Okay," she agrees, because there's no way it could be any more uncomfortable than watching this.

The bar area is a bit quieter than the dancefloor, which comes as a relief to the constant ebbing in the back of her head.

Until Matt opens his mouth, anyway.

"So how old are you, anyway?" he asks her after ordering something from the bartender that she doesn't quite catch.

"Seventeen."

"Wow…seriously?" his eyes run up and down her for what has to be the fiftieth time that night. "That's hot."

Charming.

"Your accent's pretty hot too."

"Oh…thanks," she forces out, trying desperately not to roll her eyes. Or shove him into the Hudson River from "the edge", which is only a few feet away from her.

Oblivious as all Muggles are, he grins and examines her curiously through dilated eyes (presumably from the same pills that Frances took), "You're a quiet one, aren't you?"

At this, she nearly loses it in a fit of drunken giggles. Her? Quiet? That's a first.

Then again, she hasn't really felt like herself all night anyway. A considerable part of it must be the fact that all she can think about is getting back to the Laidley's to see if Tom has written her. But as she looks around and surveys the madness once again, she can't help but think that there's more to it than that. She used to love this sort of thing, the inherent thrill and danger of it.

Now, it all just seems rather tiring.

The bartender slides Matt two matching lime-green drinks and he passes her one, smirking as his fingers brush hers.

Given that this asshole's level of creepiness manages to outdo even Draco's, she finds herself rather skeptical of what might be in this drink of hers. "What's this?" she asks him sweetly, curling a lock of
hair around her finger. "It's just…I'm like a total vodka snob."

"It's a punch – The Edge's secret recipe. There's bunch of stuff in it. But trust me, it's good…and I'm sure it'll get you to loosen up a bit." he winks.

Yeah, because that's not questionable at all.

"Anyway, cheers to the birthday girl," he sloppily knocks his cup against hers.

She takes a sip and holds it in her mouth just long enough to spit it back into the cup when he's not looking.

He boldly leans even closer to her and lowers his voice, the stench of alcohol blowing right into her face. "So, you're a witch like Frances…aren't you?"

"Yeah..."

Now, his face is just inches from hers. "Does that mean you could vanish us back to my place?"

That knob-shrinking curse appears in the back of her mind, but there's no way she could get away with it in this sea of Muggles. Sadly.

Instead, she smirks at him and thrusts her drink back toward him, caring very little when half of it sloshes down his all-black outfit. "I could. But I won't." With that, she throws herself back into the crowd and ignores his calls after her.

It takes a bit of work, but she eventually finds Frances and Jake tangled up in each other's arms, passionately snogging. Halia awkwardly taps her on the shoulder. "Can we get out of here?"


Well, hopefully not following her back over here…And if he is, she doesn't have much time. "I don't know, but can we go? Like, now?" Halia tugs on her arm.

Frances shrugs. "I guess. Let's get out of here and hang out at Jake's for a while."

"No, I mean back to your place."

"But don't you want to hang out more with Matt?" Frances looks utterly shocked. "He's so into you!"

"Yeah, and it's a little creepy." Right - just a little. "Can we go, Frances?" she hisses.

"God, you're no fun," Frances pouts while unraveling herself from Jake. "May as well have brought Ava."

That should sting, but at the moment Halia doesn't care. She just wants to get away from it all: Matt, the loud music thumping against the walls, the unending horde of drunken and drugged, sweaty people…

She feels infinitely cleaner the moment they step into the cool air outside. A few guys waiting in line to get in whistle in their direction and only then does it occur to her that Frances is sitting on the curb, still topless.

"Put your damn shirt on," Halia snaps, ripping it out of her hands and forcing it over her head while Frances laughs maniacally and prattles off in complete gibberish.
A few minutes later, they climb into a cab and Halia tells the driver the Laidley's address. Frances groans when the cab starts moving and clutches her stomach.

"Everything alright back there?" the driver, probably a regular victim of the effects of excessive partying, asks rather nervously.

"It's fine," Halia cracks a window and calls back, before discreetly drawing her wand to perform a spell to help with Frances' nausea. It's not a permanent fix, but it should at least buy them enough time to get home.

She seems to calm a bit after that and lays her head in Halia's lap. Then, in a voice so clear that almost convinces Halia that she's sober, she asks, "Are you dating someone or something?"

"No…"

"Liar, liar pants on fire! No wonder you were being so boring," Frances cackles. "I knew I sensed something in your aura."

Halia looks out the window. "It's nothing."

Unfortunately.

Frances drops it for the time being, not for lack of tenacity but because she suddenly falls asleep and stays that way until they get back to her parents' flat. But as soon as they walk through the front door and she grasps Halia's shoulder to balance while slipping off her heels, she asks: "So are you gonna tell me about this mystery man or not?"

Halia wraps her arm around Frances' waist to help her down the hall to her bedroom and sighs, "He's…just this professor."

"Oh. Why didn't you just say so? I made out with a professor last year," Frances shrugs. "It's no big deal."

Because of course she fucking did.

"We're not snogging or anything. I just…I don't know, I guess I just sort of fancy him. But I'm pretty sure he's oblivious to it."

It feels strange, but admittedly a bit exhilarating to admit that out loud.

"What does he look like?" Frances asks while falling into bed.

Hesitantly, Halia pulls out the newspaper clipping folded up in her purse and hands it to Frances.

Her eyes widen. "Oh my god, he's hot. Halia. You have to make a move! And if you don't, I'm now half-convinced to transfer to Hogwarts next year."

"He hardly seems like the type to mess around…" Halia scoffs.

As fucking amazing as it sounds to snog him.

Frances yawns and hands her back the picture. "Oh, please. I'm sure he'd be all over you."

Halia's insides flutter pleasantly at the thought, but then sink. "I think he has a girlfriend."
"So?" Frances closes her eyes. "Not your problem."

As if everything was actually that simple.

Frances soon dozes off and Halía returns to the guestroom with nothing but Professor Riddle on her mind. Without giving it a second though, she grabs the book, lets herself onto the balcony, and writes: "I had another dream last night – the worst one in a while. I think it's because I stopped taking the potion."

She smiles to herself as the words of his reply almost instantly appear: "When did you stop taking it? And why?"

"Late last week." And she's not about to tell him she forgot. No – it needed to sound much more impressive than that. "Ever since the dreams began I've been on something – first the drugs, then your potion…I wanted to see what it would be like without any of it."

It's not really a lie anyway.

"I see."

What an irritingly ambiguous response. Was he happy with her or simply annoyed that she abandoned the potion he spent so much time brewing for her?

His neat lettering appears once more, "How is that going?"

"Well, like I said, the dream last night was the worst one in a while. But it was an important one…so I think that means progress."

"What was the dream about?"

Ah, yes. The inevitable question. Couldn't they talk about something other than her memories or the Department? Just for a bit?

"I don't really want to think about it right now…can I tell you when we're back at Hogwarts instead?"

"Of course."

Now for the real question: "Can we talk about something else right now?" She takes a deep breath and holds it, but then exhales in relief when she sees his calm, surprisingly snark-less reply:

"Sure. What would you like to talk about?"

Perhaps she should have thought a bit further ahead than this. What did she want to talk about? She could tell him that it's her birthday and that she spent the whole day out with Frances before ending up at The Edge. But as she thinks through the night once again, a numbing sense of loneliness hits her.

Why had she so looked forward to this trip, with its exhaustion in trying to keep up with Frances? Why did she think that she would feel so much better here than at Sirius' flat in London or at Hogwarts? Was it all just an attempt to cling to one of the few legitimate parts of her past that wasn't just in her head?

In that moment, she so wishes she was back in Tom's office at Hogwarts with Nagini and him.

"I'm not sure," she finds herself writing back. "But I wish you could see the view. It's amazing."
"Perhaps you could show me. Would you like to try?"

She doesn't have any idea what he means by this, but the answer is overwhelmingly 'yes'.

"Take your time and examine every detail until you can picture it clearly in your mind. Then, imagine that you're sending it to me through the diary, just like sending words."

She traces the outline of each building with her eyes and studies the stars above with care before moving on to the smaller details: the patterns of the lights in each tower, the slight curve of the river... She closes her eyes, fighting to remember everything as pristinely as possible, as though she could take a picture of it all and place it on the page.

Her fingertips begin to tingle against the book and her eyes snap open, "Did it work?" she writes.

"Whoa – that's sweet!" Frances' voice suddenly appears behind her shoulder and Halia's pulse skips a terrified beat. "Who are you writing to?"

"Nobody," Halia slams the book closed.

"Oh, you're embarrassed... it's the hot professor, isn't it?" Frances laughs and lunges for it, wrestling it from Halia's grip. "Once again, your aura totally gives it away."

"Give it back, Frances," Halia says in a calm, but threatening tone.

"Knew it," she sticks out her tongue and dashes out of the room, with Halia sprinting close behind her. But Frances manages to slip in her bedroom and locks the door, leaving Halia pounding against it in desperation and attempting every unlocking charm she knows but to no avail.

"Give it back!" she yells, "For fuck's sake, Frances, you have no idea how important this is!"

"It's fine, Halia!" Frances' muffled voice calls back, "I'm just doing what you wouldn't have the courage to otherwise!"

'Shit. Shit. Shit.'

"Frances!" she screeches, her heart thundering against her ribcage. "If you write in that book, I swear on Merlin's grave--"

Frances emerges and tosses the book at her with a nauseatingly satisfied smile on her face, which Halia immediately wants to smack off.

"What did you say?!" she demands, her face bright red in fury.

Frances simply shrugs and tells her with a wink, "Enough."

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He had been so careful to adjust his sleeping schedule to the New York City time zone to prevent missing any of Potter's dreams, but apparently it was for naught. It's past three in the morning there and Potter has yet to turn in for the night as evidenced by the sudden voice in his mind, stirring his consciousness.

She says something about her dream from the night before: a rather fascinating one he did manage to catch which confirmed a few of his suspicions about how she lost her memories to begin with. But it was Regulus Black's apparent sentimentality toward her that took Tom entirely by surprise. Clearly they were once quite close, a detail that poses far more questions than it answers. But if Potter is as
curious about this as he is, she doesn't mention it; in fact, she breezes past any details of the dream and tells him that she stopped taking the potion he brewed for her.

He's so momentarily preoccupied that it takes several seconds for him to realize that Nagini's tight grip around his angle is cutting off the circulation in his foot, leaving it pale as paper tinged with sickly shade of purple. He carefully disentangles himself from her and asks Potter how she's been handling her symptoms without the potion.

"Well, like I said, the dream last night was the worst one in a while. But it was an important one... so I think that means progress," she answers.

He leans back against his pillow in satisfaction, certainly not about to argue with faster progress. Managing things without the potion wouldn't exactly be easy for her, of course, judging by her reluctance to discuss her dream...

But that's not his problem, is it?

She suggests talking about something else and this is his chance to leave, to get her voice out of his head again for the time being and move on with the rest of his day as falling back asleep seems rather unlikely at this point. But he's quite comfortable at the moment, with his eyes closed and Nagini nestled up against him for warmth, and Potter is acting a tad less tiresome than usual.

So instead, he says, "Sure. What would you like to talk about?"

He rolls his eyes when, for at least the eleventh time since her trip began, she brings up the apparently incredible view the Laidley's have. It's just a city – how amazing could it really be? But then a curious idea hits him which could prove to be a valuable test of this little connection of theirs.

"Perhaps you could show me. Would you like to try?"

It's probably not going to work. Although she's written him fairly regularly, there's no way that alone would be enough to create a strong enough bond between her soul and the diary...

Then again, perhaps it is – a warm prickly feeling appears in the back of his mind as the image of impossibly tall buildings against a dark blue expanse of sky slowly paints itself onto the black space behind his eyelids. Eyes still closed, he clumsily reaches for the sketchpad on his nightstand that he recently began drawing various scenes of her dreams in.

"Did it work?" she asks, the image already beginning to fade as her concentration shifts.

He blinks his eyes open and quickly finishes the sketch before it completely disappears. "Yes, it did."

Fascinating.

"Well done," he tells her. It was rather impressive, considering how distractible Potter's thoughts always were... A bit more practice and this could prove quite useful. "And it is a nice view," he admits with a smirk.

Oddly, he doesn't hear her voice in his head when she next responds. Instead, he sees it written across the page just under the sketch: "Do you know what a better picture would be?"

Hm... perhaps Hogwarts in the snow? Or Diagon just before term begins, when all the merchants set up shop outside in the bustling alley to make a profit on all the latecomers? The Austrian mountain top where she found his Horcrux...?

None of the above, it so happens: "Me, on top of you. Or vice versa – whatever you prefer, really."
What?

His breath hitches and his mind kicks into high gear, scrambling for an explanation.

It is almost three in the morning there…Maybe she's intoxicated?

But this alone didn't explain away the more concerning matter at hand – that Potter is flirting with him. Quite…directly.

What the fuck?

Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised. After all, he is quite aware that he's been the subject of other students' fantasies over the years given his natural brilliance and attractiveness.

But this was different. This was Halia Potter…his Horcrux.

Who practically buzzes with energy every time he's near her.

Was this his fault? Did he give her the wrong impression when he sent her away for the summer with his diary in hand?

And more importantly, how in the hell is he supposed to respond to this?

Seconds later, her voice fills his mind again: "Whatever you just read, ignore it. I can explain."

He lets out a breath of relief, but only momentarily – because what possible explanation could she have for this?

"Frances walked into my room and saw me writing you. I guess she thought it would be funny to write something."

He chucks aside the sketchbook in rage. Fucking unbelievable.

What did she fail to comprehend when he warned her not to let anyone get their hands on the diary – let alone the daughter of the President of fucking MASUCA? He would almost prefer the alternative that Potter really had been flirting with him.

"But don't worry – she's really drunk right now…she probably won't even remember in the morning."

Right – there's no reason to worry at all.

Seething, he rips his bedspread off of him and begins pacing around his room, ignoring the irritated look Nagini sends him for waking her.

"I'm really, really, really sorry," she continues. "I promise it won't happen again."

No, it surely won't…In fact, he has half a mind to fly to the States right now and take back the diary. But he can't because that would mean breaking into Gloria Laidley's house.

"Professor?"

He mutters a string of at least ten swearwords under his breath. She is so going to pay for this.

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Halia pales, her fingers shaking as the page in front of her remains frighteningly blank. "Now look what you've done! He isn't even responding!"

"Why are you freaking out?" Frances scoffs as she lounges on her plush bedspread and examines her nails. "Give him time. He will."

"You don't understand," Halia throws up her hands. "God I can't fucking believe you!"

What in the hell is she going to do? Not only is it positively humiliating, it breaks the one and only rule he laid out before lending her the book. There goes any and all respect he had for her…

She had to find a way to fix this. How would he want her to fix this?

Her head stops spinning with sudden clarity. Because really, there's only one answer…

"Sorry Frances, but you totally brought this on yourself," Halia takes a deep breath to steady herself and draws her wand. "Obliviate."

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"I'm back in London. Can we talk? Please? I can explain everything."

He's been waiting all morning after receiving the message in a café across the street from the flat rented by Potter's guardian, Sirius Black.

If he wasn't so furious, he would take a moment to revel in how strong their connection has become since he last saw her at the Wizengamot hearing – apparently, he doesn't even need to be in the same building as her to feel that buzz of her presence in the back of his head. Under any other circumstances, this progress would be at least somewhat satisfying; but at the moment, it's nothing more than a bitter reminder of his stupidity for placing so much trust in her.

He lights his third cigarette of the morning which, incidentally, is more than he's smoked in the last year. But that's what this Potter girl does to him.

Sometimes– especially in the last twenty-four hours or so– he finds himself wondering whether he would have been better off if he had killed her the moment he found out about their soul-bond. It certainly would have been far easier to deal with on a daily basis.

But the day-to-day irritations paled in comparison to his overarching plan to gain all of her secrets about the Department of Mysteries. And that wasn't even the half of it – if she followed in her parents' footsteps as he intended to persuade her, he would have a valuable spy ignorant of her own usefulness to him.

And so, he would need to be stern, yet merciful with this confrontation. Controlled, despite the anxiety and edge clinging tightly to every nerve in his body – no Unforgivables allowed.

Finally he sees a man with shaggy hair and an equally shaggy beard stroll down the steps. Tom flicks his cigarette into the ashtray, hastily tosses a few coins on the table, and starts toward the flat just as Sirius Black rounds the corner of the adjacent street.

He knocks on the door thrice and a few moments later, Potter swings open the door wearing a flowy yellow sundress, her eyes widening. "You're here."

He strolls briskly into the flat without invitation and shuts the door behind him. "Start talking," he growls.
"Can I get you anything? Do you want tea? Or maybe a glass of Firewhiskey...?" she laughs breathily and leads him into a small sitting room with a mismatched set of two chairs and a couch to the right of the narrow foyer.

"No. Start talking," he repeats, a tad more threateningly this time.

"Right, okay..." Clearly, she's nervous to face him judging by the way she avoids his glowering stare and wrings her hands.

Good. She should be.

"Well it's sort of a long story..." she continues, "Can you at least sit down or something?"

Salazar give me strength not to curse this insolent girl straight to hell...

He crosses his arms and doesn't move from where he stands in the cheaply painted, dark gray arch leading to the sitting room. "Potter," he snarls in one last warning.

"Alright," she sighs, running a hand through her hair. "Well, two nights ago was my birthday and Frances and I spent the whole day together before ending up at this club, The Edge. This place was absolutely insane and we met up with this Muggle guy she's dating and his friend..."

Muggle boys? What the fuck?

Why is his Horcrux talking to Muggle boys?

And why is he thinking about this when he still doesn't have a full explanation of how Frances Laidley got her hands on his diary...?

"Anyway, we all ended up getting really smashed, but Frances was way worse from the pills Jake gave her...She fell asleep right away we got back to her place and I went to my room to write you – apparently she woke up again a bit later. I didn't hear her come in until it was too late and she saw me writing to you."

Why did he ever think her explanation would abate his anger?

"Where is it?" he asks her in the calmest voice possible, but snaps when she does nothing but stand there and look up at him while chewing her lip. "Now, Potter!" he half-shouts at her.

Any trace of shame or nervousness is gone from her face now, as she folds her arms and answers coolly, "No."

"No?" he feels a cold laugh of disbelief escape his lungs. "Fine. I'll go get it myself."

It's easier than ever to slip into her mind and reveal the exact location of the diary and seconds later, she's chasing after him upstairs.

"Just wait, Tom! Stop!"

Tom?

What in the – was this girl put on this earth for no other purpose than to provide a constant test of his sanity?

He slips into her bedroom, still largely unpacked from her trip, and locks her out. It's a simple charm that she breaks in just a few seconds, but it's enough time for him to seize the diary from its hiding
place under her pillow. She throws open the door just as a newspaper clipping flutters out of the pages.

Tom catches it just before it hits the floor and turns it over to see the picture of Fudge and himself shaking hands that ran in the *Daily Prophet*. He holds it up with a questioning arc of an eyebrow, her face flushing bright red as she says hastily, "I brought that with me as a reminder to talk to President Laidley about your proposal."

She's obviously lying, but while he tilts his head to the side curiously to ponder why, she moves in a swirl of yellow cotton to make a swipe for the diary.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he snarls as she tries to rip it out of his hands. "This belongs to me, Potter."

He overpowers her quite easily and manages to pry it from her, but she trips over herself in momentum, her head smacking against his chest. He stiffens, suddenly feeling a bit trapped in this tiny room of hers, between the unmade bed and pine dresser.

"I know, but I don't want you to take it," she pushes off him in recovery and thrusts a slender arm around him to reach behind his back, her fingers carelessly brushing the inside of his wrist as she narrowly misses the corner of the diary.

The tingle that etches itself across his wrist in response leaves him with disoriented, slightly queasy feeling.

Holy fuck – how can she not feel that?

She gasps and jumps away, rubbing the bright red mark on her shoulder where he pushed her and apparently burned her with a wordless, wandless curse that spun through his mind in an urgency to get as far away from her as possible.

But this is all her fault anyway, so he doesn't apologize.

She swallows and looks up at him, her eyebrows furrowing. "Please don't take it." So desperate and dependent, Potter's tone reminds him of the way Nagini sounds while begging to see her. "It was just an accident...I'd never do anything to break your trust."

"You already have," he narrows his eyes at her coldly.

A shadowy look passes over her face. "I'm sorry." It's obvious from her tone that she means it, but that didn't change what happened... "I took care of it, though. I Obliviated her."

He just stares at her for a moment, his jaw slackening slightly. "You...did?"

"Yeah," she shrugs. "I planted some memories that we were fighting – we fight all the time, so it was pretty believable."

Well that...changes things a bit.

Why didn't she begin he conversation with the little detail that she so casually Obliviated the President of MACUSA's daughter?

"Please don't," her eyes drift down to his arms which are still clutching the diary behind his back. "It's been helping a lot now that I'm off the potion."
"And you tested the results of your Obliviation charm?"

"Of course. I triple-checked it using the Somnin-Requie criteria."  

"You were thorough," he straightens his spine and gingerly extends the diary to her. "Do not make the mistake of allowing anyone but yourself see this again."

"I won't." Her eyes glimmer happily and he suddenly finds himself thinking again about the picture carefully tucked in pages of the diary, that startling message Frances Laidley wrote him, Potter's near insistence to talk to him on a daily basis and the slip of his first name just a minute or so earlier…The way her skin seems to pulse for him when they're close, so much stronger than the effects of his other Horcruxes. He thinks about the buzz of her presence in the back of his head, like a hum feels sometimes nervous, and then other times excited.

She actually fancies him, doesn't she?

There's at least one way to know for sure: "Frances Laidley could have written anything to me," he says casually while she takes the diary from him. "Why do you think she wrote what she did?"

"How should I know?" Potter says a bit hastier than usual along with an odd laugh. "She has a strange sense of humor. I don't even know what she said, anyway. Why, what was it?"

"Never mind," he shifts his gaze from her, "It doesn't matter."

Well that answers his original question, though he isn't sure quite what to think about it.

It would be rather natural, of course, for her to feel some degree of affection for him given her bond to his Horcrux. Does that mean this is nothing more than pure instinct for her, or is she actually aware of how close she's still standing to him?

It would also be a lie to think that he didn't find some satisfaction or amusement in the fact that this high-strung daughter of the Department of Mysteries is so inescapably drawn to him. It all but proves that she at least partially belongs to him, a concept that is gradually becoming easier to accept.

So that's that, then: Halia Potter fancies him.

Curious.

"Anyway, I should be going," he says casually while smoothing down the front of his jacket with his hand.

She nods and smiles up at him. "I'm glad you stopped by, Professor."

He is too, because that went infinitely better than he anticipated it to. Yet something still continues to eat at him when he Disapparates from her room and arrives on the front porch of the Gaunt manor.

He unlocks the door with his wand and scowls, shaking his head in disdain.

If she fancies him so goddamn much, why was she out with Muggle boys?

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Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you to all of the lovely people who took the time to leave comments on the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

-xx-

August, 1997

Bella twists her hand back and forth, examining the way all 3.12 carats of the diamond catch the light.

Bellatrix Lestrange. She takes another sip from her martini to wash down the sour taste in the back of her throat. It doesn't seem remotely possible, but in just a few months that's exactly who she'll be:

Bellatrix Lestrange.

Unless…

She hears the creak of the pub's door and cranes her neck, but her fleeting rush of hope and excitement is in vain because, of course, it's not Him.

Nor was it him the last dozen or so times she checked – not that the Leaky Cauldron was ever a place he frequented regularly anyway. And yet, she cannot seem to help the almost manic optimism that one of these days, she'll just happen to run into him. It's with this possibility in mind that she's made trip after trip to Diagon and Knockturn Alley over the past few weeks. Just once, that's all she needs – just long enough to flash around her ring and, ideally, inspire him to come to his senses and take her back.

They belong together. It was only a matter of time until he realized that.

"Another, Miss Black?"

"Please," she smiles sweetly at the bartender.

The night is still young, after all.

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"You sure you don't want me to tag along? I really don't mind you know," Sirius lingers at her bedroom door while shrugging on his cloak.

"I'm sure," Halia nods, "Besides, you can't really afford to miss another day of work with Glenda on the lookout for any excuse to get you sacked, right?"

"The unfortunate truth," he sighs and strokes his beard. "I just…I know you'll pass without a problem, but I'm just sorry that it had to be today, of all days…"
Well, it wasn't exactly coincidence that her Apparition test was rescheduled on the date exactly one
year past the afternoon she woke up in St. Mungo's as this version of Halia Potter, the orphaned
daughter of two Magical Ambassadors.

In fact, it was she who requested it.

"I'm fine," she smiles in a way that hopefully seems convincing enough and looks away from his
sympathetic, profoundly sad gaze. "Oh, and I forgot to mention – my friend Daphne invited me to
dinner at her parents' house tonight. You don't mind if I go, right? I might be back a little late."

"Of course not, Halia... And I'll look forward to hearing all about how you passed your test with
flying colors tomorrow morning." He crosses the room and pulls her into a warm embrace, telling her
softly, "Just take care of yourself, alright?"

"Always do," she hugs him back, the wiry hairs of his beard tickling against her cheek.

As soon as he vanishes with a crack, she reaches for the book under her pillow and feels her heart
skip as she scans the message waiting for her on the first page:

"Are you ready?"

By this, of course, he's not referring to her Apparition test.

"Yes," she writes, "Are we still planning on meeting afterward? I'm sure there will be a lot to
discuss."

She's all but certain, in fact – this time, she's not leaving until the Department of Mysteries reveals
more to her than a dusty broom closet. She'll sit there all day if she has to, but instinct tells her that
won't be necessary: after all, how could they resist approaching her again on today, of all days?

"Indeed. Where shall we meet?"

At least he hadn't changed his mind entirely, but she was really hoping he might take the initiative to
invite her over. Still – small victories. "My parents' house: 16 Windsor Road, Godric's Hollow. I'll
write when I'm back from the Ministry and we can meet there."

"Very well."

"Mind bringing Nagini along? I've been missing her a bit."

His reply etches across the page slowly, as though he's still turning over in his mind, "I suppose that
could be arranged."

She grins and flicks her wand to begin tying up her hair. "You're the best, Lord Slytherin. Never
mind what everyone else says about you..."

"Ha-ha."

Her smile widens when he doesn't correct her with the usual: "It's Professor or Sir, Potter," and
closes the book, tracing the initials as has become habit.

Thank Merlin he hadn't actually decided to take it away from her. She can't explain why, exactly, but
having it around truly seems to help. Despite her initial fears of quitting the potion, her dreams aren't
affecting her nearly as harshly as before and her almost paralyzing hesitation to learn more about the
past is quickly eroding away into determination.
No more feeling helpless.

It's not until that afternoon when she strolls into the Apparition Test Centre that a hint of apprehension finally strikes, mixing with the anticipation that's been building all day to create a sensation like she's had far too much caffeine. A suspiciously sweet looking witch greets her as she approaches the front desk and hands her a sheet of parchment to sign in on.

"Ah, Miss Potter," dimples form at both corners of the woman's mouth after scanning the sheet for her name, "Are you feeling better? I'm so glad that we had a space open up at the last minute and could reschedule your test. We're all about efficiency here."

She must be in on it.

Halia smiles vacantly back, eyeing the Ministry Employee badge pinned to the woman's chest, "Yes, how incredibly convenient, Malena."

If that is your real name.

Malena gives her a strange look, but apparently decides her inherent passive-aggressiveness is out of test anxiety. "Just remember to breathe and you'll do fine, dear. Have a seat and I'll go fetch Wilkie."

Then again, maybe the woman is simply a good actress – surely one of the most basic prerequisites to becoming an Unspeakable.

Halia bypasses the stiff-looking office chairs which remind her far too much of the ones for guests that had been in her room at St. Mungo's and stops in front of a tank holding a pair of Steam-Huffing Pufferfish. She bends over to watch them peacefully float around and rubs her jaw, which aches from chewing the same piece of gum for the last hour and a half. It's nothing more than a tasteless, stringy mess slowly disintegrating in the back of her mouth at this point, but she keeps on chewing anyway.

It's not long before she hears footsteps behind her and a voice, which essentially proves the theory she based today's entire plan around. "Hello, Halia."

"Hello, Regulus," Halia slowly turns to face him. Despite her hopes, she can't be certain whether her nonchalance actually shocks him at all because his placid expression doesn't falter once. Her head tilts to the side and she continues coolly, "What are you doing in the Apparition Test Centre? Did you get demoted for impersonating more of Hogwarts' faculty members, perhaps?"

At this, he cracks a smile and a breath of a laugh escapes his lungs. Without another word, he strolls past her to the door and she follows him into the corridor automatically. "Off to the Department, then?"

He doesn't answer as they enter an empty lift, but he extends his wand and the button for Level 9 illuminates. They stand side by side and he doesn't glance at her once as they accelerate past Level 7.

"What, no cryptic messages this time?" she sneers, unable to help herself.

He keeps his eyes trained forward, but his shoulders stiffen almost imperceptibly. And finally, he speaks: "I've forgotten just how bloody annoying it is when you chew gum." He looks over and smirks just as the lift dings.

She continues to gnaw defiantly while following him toward the entrance hall, which appears identical to the one she saw during her last visit – though this time, she's willing to bet that there isn't a broom closet behind that lone door.
He pauses, leaning against the stone archway that sits just before the domed ceiling of the hall. "I know you visited a few weeks ago."

"I assumed as much."

"You were early."

She raises an eyebrow. "Early?"

"Yeah," Regulus says plainly and smacks his hand against the gray stone. "And because of that, you found the Department of Mysteries in its latent state. The Arch of Arrival controls what you have access to based on one's identity and intentions."

"What do you mean, 'intentions'?"

"In your case, finding a broom closet had everything to do with who you are," he shrugs. "But others, for example, would find the same result if they planned to steal or exploit Department research."

"How does it work?" Such a feat must require an incredible amount of magic, after all.

"The Department is sort of a sentient —" he waves his hands around as though trying to find the right words and then sighs. "Never mind…it's complicated. Don't think too much about it."

Sentient?

She ventures toward the arch and upon closer inspection, she notices little silvery lines threaded through the stone like veins that almost seem to pulse, slow and…ancient, somehow.


Pretty much hit the nail on the head with that one, yeah.

"The good news is that you'll get a few of them today," he continues.

Finally.

"And the bad news?" she asks pointedly while swallowing her gum.

He clears his throat and turns on his heel, leading her across the hall. "We'll get to that later."

The single door swings open to reveal an office outfitted with two desks – one impeccably tidy and the other utterly chaotic – and Regulus ushers her inside. "Seem familiar at all?"

A weight settles in her chest.

"This was your parents' office," he tells her, though there's no need. She's seen it a dozen times in her dreams and even if she hadn't, the collage of pictures on the far wall capturing some of their travels would give it away. He nudges her with his elbow an places his hands in his pockets. "Go ahead, take a look."

It feels surreal as she walks into the middle of the room and carefully glances around. She's spent countless hours here in between their mission assignments, but even surrounded by the trinkets on her dad's desk and her mum's collection of every color of ink imaginable, it's a tough sell to her mind which continues to grapple for any tangible, irrefutable memory. Her dreams are only ever hints at
reality at best, puzzle pieces that don't quite fit with the picture she was sold when the Department stole the truth from her.

She glances up at Regulus, who leans against the door and watches her with an unreadable expression, and asks, "You said I would get answers…I'm listening."

He stares back at her for a long time before giving her a small nod and moving to sit at her father’s desk. "Let me start from the beginning."

She digs her nails into her palms – how dare he go anywhere near her parents' things? Yet the promise of answers somehow gives her the willpower to keep her mouth shut for the time being.

"As you know by now, your parents were Unspeakables. More specifically, they worked in the field with foreign leaders to negotiate the Department's international investigations – among other duties, of course. That's why their public cover as Magical Ambassadors, as you remember them, was such a good fit."

"So all of the leaders they worked with knew they were Unspeakables?" she asks, thinking back to her conversation with President Laidley.

"Some yes, some no," he slouches in his chair (the same way that Sirius always does, eerily enough) and lights a cigarette. "That usually depended on the nature of the investigation. But because of you, your parents told as few people as possible about working for the Department."

"Why because of me?"

"Well first, you should probably know that you and your parents were completely unprecedented in the Department. I don't really know the full story behind why or how they were allowed to become Unspeakables because it was before my time, but they joined about a year after they graduated Hogwarts and were the first couple – ever – to do so. Even more surprising, of course, was that your mother was pregnant with you at the time. You were born and raised in the Department as some sort of junior Unspeakable, and when you were old enough – probably around five or six, I'd guess – Bode authorized the three of you to begin traveling.

"The only problem is…well, this is where it gets complicated," he rubs the back of his neck. "But when someone signs their soul to the Department of Mysteries to become an Unspeakable, they're granted certain protections. The most important of these is called the Memory Space. It's a bit vague, but you can think of it like a separate compartment from the main area in the mind where memories are held. It acts like a filter to protect any memories that might reveal classified information, which means they cannot be accessed by others through Legilimency, or erased by Obliviation. It also prevents us from telling anyone anything that we don't have the authority to share – hence the title, Unspeakable. Still following, Halia?"

She nods and he takes a long drag from his cigarette before continuing, "Now, the crucially important bit is that the Memory Space relies on Soul magic to create a deep bond between Unspeakables and the Department. Your parents joined and signed their souls normally, but you weren't even born yet…and even if you were, your magic wouldn't have been powerful enough to create such a bond. So, it took a bit of experimentation, but your parents and a team of other Unspeakables were able to create a sort of temporary Memory Space that would become full-fledged as soon as you were able to sign your soul to the Department.

"The only issue with your Memory Space is that it obviously wasn't– and still isn't– as strong, so your parents were always very cautious about who knew they were involved in the Department just in case its protections failed and someone tried to get information out of you or something. It's for this
same reason that we had to place a lock on your Memory Space when they died – Bode was concerned that it would start to break down if you held on too closely to your memories of them. You didn't lose any of your memories though, Halia, they're all still there."

In reality, this revelation isn't all that far from the theory that Tom proposed to her months ago. But her skin still crawls at the confirmation.

'Then when can I have them back?', she's dying to ask, and her heart leaps when he draws his wand and says, "I'll show you."

"Close your eyes," he instructs and feels the tip of his wand tap against her temple as he murmurs a string of words in a language she can't place. But his voice soon fades as she plummets into the memory…

She's taking lunch in the Department staff lounge, practicing her wandless magic by flicking grains of rice at Regulus from across the room. He blocks most of them while examining a copy of the Prophet sprawled on the table, but once in a while his attention wanes and she snickers in victory as the occasional grain hits the back of his neck.

She stops abruptly as Bode appears in the doorway, narrowing his eyes slightly at Regulus, "I take it you didn't receive my message, Black."

"Message?" Regulus straightens in his seat, shaking out a few bits of stray rice from his hair.

Bode's eyes narrow further. "Yes. You should have noticed an update to your morning orders – I will need you to record the London Spellograph readings as Rookwood is out today. He reported an unusual amount of magical activity around the city last week and we need to know where it's coming from."

Regulus rubs his jaw. "Oh. Sorry, I erm –"

"We'll need them as soon as possible for Brickenden's report of casting patterns. In fact, why don't you take Potter along for help?"

Halia grins, somewhat grateful for something to do while her parents spend the day writing out an account of their recent trip to France.

"Yes, Sir," they tell him in unison.

"But just to be clear: no dawdling," Bode's pointed stare lingers warningly over them before he turns to leave.

As soon as he's out of earshot, Regulus smirks at her while folding up the newspaper. "Right, you heard the man: no dawdling. So let's make this a bit more interesting, shall we?"

"What did you have in mind?" she places her dishes in the sink, where they begin cleaning themselves.

"You take all the Spellographs to the east of Diagon – I'll take the west. Then we'll meet in Diagon to check the last of them. First one there gets dibs on the Minister's stash of birthday sweets while the other stands guard?"

"You're on," Halia flashes him a toothy smile and bounds down the corridor, shouting back over her shoulder. "I am so claiming that pint of Fortescue's Never-Melting Chocolate Mint Chip!"
A door appears in the wall in front of her with a wave of her wand and she slips through it, arriving in an empty alleyway for only a moment before Apparating to the first of her seven Spellographs...

Regulus' wand lifts from her temple and her eyes snap open to see a slightly older version of the face in her memory. It was so vivid, unlike her dreams...so incredibly real.

"I suppose I should have assumed that I already knew how to Apparate," she manages to say.

"Yeah – you were licensed by twelve," he snorts. "But since you learned here, the Department had to take away your knowledge of how."

Licensed to Apparate by twelve? She laughs breathlessly in disbelief. "So I sat through Twycross' entire course for nothing? Brilliant...thanks for that."

"Well you won't have to take your test today, if it's any consolation," he gives her a small smile and his gaze softens the same way it did sometimes when she saw him in her dreams, reminding her especially of that awful one when Bode locked her memories away.

Along with the memory she just witnessed, it's yet another slap-in-the-face reminder that she and Regulus were apparently somewhat close at one point. It makes her feel almost guilty now, for her suspicion of him when he first spoke to her about her parents after Malfoy's Christmas party...for assuming he was nothing more than Sirius' blood-purist brother.

"Can I ask you something?" she spits out before she has the chance to change her mind.

"Of course," he bows his head slightly, "Though you know I can't promise an answer for everything."

"Last Christmas, when you first told me my parents were Unspeakables, you told me that you didn't interact with them much," she inhales deeply, "But what about me? We were...friends, weren't we?"

A shadow crosses over his face and she watches his Adam's apple bob up and down with a swallow, his eyes falling away from her. "Yeah. We were. And that bit about your parents was a lie...I knew them well."

"I figured. I'm sorry, I guess, for not remembering," she fidgets with the sleeve of her blouse, unsure quite what to say and half-wishing she hadn't brought it up at all.

"For fuck's sake, Halia, don't apologize," he tells her in a low voice and rubs the bridge of his nose before looking up at her with a curious expression. "What was your memory about?"

"Bode assigned you to check Spellograph readings and we turned it into a race of sorts--"

"Of course," a loud laugh escapes him, "You and your goddamn ice cream...Merlin, that was ages ago – just a year or so after I joined." He laughs again with a shake of his head and she can't help but smile.

It just feels so fucking good to have a memory she knows is real to hold on to.

She's about to ask him for another when his expression darkens once more. "Now for the bad news, Halia...and I'm really, really sorry about this, but I have to run a couple of tests on you."

Her mouth runs dry. "What sorts of tests?"

Regulus says nothing and swings the door open again; but instead of the entrance hall and lift, she
follows him into a circular room containing a shallow pool of lightly fizzing, turquoise liquid. The door behind her closes abruptly and vanishes, leaving her trapped.

"What sorts of tests?" she repeats, willing her tone to stay even, despite the thumping of her heart in dread against her chest.

He crosses his arms and sighs. "We have to make sure your Memory Space is maintaining its integrity – like I said, this is all rather unprecedented. My previous visits were to present you with vague and in some cases misleading information to see if it triggered a reaction. Today I'll need to examine your Memory Space for those reactions and any potential breaches," he looks at her apologetically, his voice turning slightly bitter as he adds, "Bode also wants me to check on how it's interacting with the rest of your consciousness – he can't bear to miss out on a research opportunity, after all."

Oh – so that's all, is it? She's nothing more than the Department of Mysteries' lab rat.

"I'm sorry, Halia," he approaches the edge of the pool and dips the end of his wand into the liquid, "I'll do my best not to look at specific memories. Like I said, I'm only checking for breaches and how the components of your Memory Space are working together."

It's only then that it hits her that he's bound to discover the fact that she has been regaining her memories…and that Professor Riddle has been helping her do it.

Shit.

She reaches for her wand in panic only to realize that it's not on her. Regulus isn't even watching her as the liquid begins to swirl in a figure-eight pattern, but he draws her wand from his cloak and holds it up as if to know this would be her instinctive reaction.

Asshole. He must have lifted it from her while giving her back that memory.

"Come here, Halia," he orders, sounding rather exhausted. "Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be."

She rocks back and forth on her feet nervously, loathing her lack of options. Trying to resist would be stupid, she knew – she was in the bloody Department of Mysteries, after all, and they could make her participate in as many tests as they wanted. If she was cooperative maybe they'd go easier on her for neglecting to tell them about her dreams.

Maybe Regulus would help her, seeing as they were friends and all…Maybe he wouldn't even tell Bode.

Cautiously, she approaches him.

"You've always been so brave…I still wonder how you weren't sorted to Gryffindor," he tells her with a half-smile and taps the stone step leading up to the pool, instructing her to kneel and look over the small ledge into the effervescence.

Dread floods her core and the little pat he gives her shoulder does little in the way of reassurance.

"I'll make this as quick as possible. The only thing is…it might hurt a bit." He lifts his wand from the pool and presses it to the center of her forehead, drawing a small 'X'.

A bit, she finds, is a profound understatement.

It feels like her head is being split apart, like a million nails are chipping away at that 'X'. Her ears are
filled with a piercing ring and her vision begins to cloud at the edges when she sees a squiggly line of light curl down between her eyes and past the tip of her nose. As it travels closer to the pool, it feels like she's being stretched thinner and thinner, and it slowly occurs to like that the line must be an extension of her Memory Space or soul or – something. Something that should not, under any circumstances, be separated from her body.

How she manages to avoid fainting out she isn't sure, because **fucking hell**, it hurts. Her nails, still painted bright pink from the manicure she and Frances went to get, begin to break and bleed as she digs her fingers against the stone edge. She wants to pull away, but her legs are frozen in place and her throat is raw from screaming she can't hear.

And yet that glimmering gold line continues to strain and stretch as it dips closer. Surely it's bound to snap any moment, now. What would happen if it did? Would it break her Memory Space? Would she go irreparably mad? Would she die?

Any of those sound preferable to this, if she's being honest.

But just when she thinks she can't hold on any longer, a cool, peaceful wave washes over her and she glances down to see that the line has reached the pool, filling it with flashes of memories. She gasps for air and watches Regulus swirl his wand in the liquid again, causing it to bubble and foam as the images transform into an intricate design of interlocking lines with rune-like symbols filling the spaces in-between.

She tries to focus on the words he's muttering under his breath, but suddenly can't remember why she would care. Or what she's even doing here in the first place. Her eyelids feel heavy, but she fights the urge to close them because some instinct tells her she needs to stay awake. Merlin, she's **tired**, though…

Just when she thinks she can't fight the allure of sleep any longer, a momentary jolt of pain shoots through her, throwing her away from the pool and onto her back. She doesn't move, in fear that the same sensation will strike again, and Regulus' face appears above her. "Halia? Can you hear me?"

She nods once, still gasping for breath.

"Sorry…that looked like it was a lot worse than I expected."

"I'd say so," she scoffs a sound that grates against her raw throat and reaches up to rub the miraculously smooth skin of her forehead, shocked that it still seems to be intact.

"On the bright side, it appears that your Memory Space is operational and lacks any breaches."

Wait – what?

So he didn't know about her dreams? How could that **possibly** be?

Despite her immense relief, it's admittedly rather annoying that she just went through hell for an apparently worthless test.

She takes a deep breath and braves rolling onto her side while pushing herself off the ground. She's a little dizzy and her muscles ache in fatigue, but it's nothing compared to the excruciation she just endured.

"This means I won't need to conceal anything you leaned today, including your ability to Apparate, of course," he winks at her and conjures a glass of water. "Your Memory Space should be able to prevent you from telling anyone any sensitive information."
She downs half the glass and asks, "How will I know who I can tell what to?"

And if this is all true, why has she been able to tell Professor Riddle *everything*?

"It's quite obvious," Regulus shrugs. "You literally won't be able to speak. You'll see what I mean. Try telling Sirius that your parents worked for the Department – they were never allowed to tell him because of my assignment here."

That brings another barrage of questions to mind, but they're the least of her concerns at the moment.

"I'm guessing I won't be able to tell anyone at all about today, then? And nobody would be able to see it if they used Legilimency to check my memories?" As she would undoubtedly be trying with Professor Riddle later…

"That's right," he extends a hand and pulls her to her feet. "Welcome back to the world of Unspeakables, Halia."

A shiver of dread mixed with excitement travels down her spine. Despite everything this means, it is as close to the truth as she's been in a year.

"If my Memory Space is working, can I have the rest of my memories back?"

"Sorry, but no," Regulus says solemnly while handing her wand back, "That's too much of a risk…you'll only be able to regain everything when you sign your soul to the Department and gain a fully developed Memory Space. You're technically eligible now that you're of age, but your mother was always very clear that, if anything were to happen to them, they wanted you to graduate from Hogwarts…so you'll need to wait until then."

But is that what she actually wants, anyway? Because of course, getting her memories back was only one part of that decision; it would also mean committing the rest of her life to being an Unspeakable. And so far, her impression of the Department of Mysteries has been far from positive.

"And if I choose not to sign?" She has a fairly good idea of the answer, but it seems sensible to clarify her options.

"We would have to completely destroy your Memory Space and you'll lose your real memories of them forever," Regulus frowns and tilts his head to the side. "But why wouldn't you want to sign, Halia? You belong here."

Does she?

"I know it doesn't feel like it right now, but you do," he sighs as though sensing her thoughts. "Then again, you haven't felt much at all in the last year, hm?"

"What do you mean?"

"The lock we placed on your Memory Space is, obviously, creating a barrier between your mind and the truth of who you are…You've been struggling quite a lot with how to feel about all this, haven't you?" he eyes her thoughtfully.

"I guess…" she shrugs, "Isn't that the same as being in denial?"

Because she's *definitely* been in denial.

"Not really. I could tell right away while examining the link between your Memory Space and
consciousness that your emotions and ways of processing this are all out of whack. It's proving impossible for you to feel a strong connection to any of the false memories we planted, which is then preventing you from grieving properly."

She thinks back to her parents' funeral, when she hadn't shed a single tear – when it felt like something was so incredibly off that even the thought of her parents felt foreign. In fact, she's felt so despicably hollow about it all up until the night she wound up in Professor Riddle's office after that awful dream of the mountaintop.

Maybe it's true.

Maybe she hasn't been grieving properly without having the real memories to hold onto.

But quite honestly, she doesn't want to talk to Regulus about it even if it's true. Maybe Tom, but not Regulus. It's too much, too soon – because even if she was close with him once doesn't mean she feels close to him now.

Besides, she's had enough of the Department messing with her head for one day.

"Can I go now?" she asks him coldly.

He straightens, looking a bit like she just slapped him across the face. "Yeah." He waves his wand and a door appears in the wall nearest her.

She starts toward it without hesitation.

"I'm sorry, Hals." His voice is strained and genuine – so genuine it hurts.

"Don't call me that." She wills herself not to look back at him before slipping through the door and finding herself across the street from Sirius' flat in the middle of a downpour.

_How appropriate._

She breathes a little laugh and stands there, feeling the rain soak her hair and stream down her face.

All of this is so completely _fucked._

A pair of headlights fall onto her and she hears a loud honk of a car. Because she's standing in the middle of the road, so it seems. She gives the driver an apologetic wave and jogs toward the sidewalk, but apparently she was enough of an inconvenience that they decide to speed up and splash a puddle of dirty brown water all over her.

Seriously? Fuck this day.

She slams the door to Sirius' flat and falls to her knees without warning as an anguished sob escapes her lungs.

Why in the hell had she _wanted_ this to happen? How stupid she was, expecting the Department to give her memories back without a price…

_Play along and be our lab rat or you'll lose everything you've ever cared about._

She leans back against the door and massages her forehead once more. Maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to lose everything if this was what it was like to be part of the Department…

But on the other hand, it felt…_indescribable_ to catch a glimpse of a real memory outside of her
dreams for the first time in months and merely thinking back to it triggers a host of unfamiliar emotions.

If she chose to have her Memory Space erased completely, would she ever really feel anything again?

She sighs. Perhaps it's a decision for another day. After all, Professor Riddle is waiting for her to write and she is dying to know if she'll still be able to talk to him about all this. And if so, how in the hell it's happening…

Maybe he'll help her find a third option. A loophole.

First, though, she desperately needs a bath.

With this momentary resolve, she pushes herself off the floor, fetches the book from her room, and grabs a pair of fresh clothes before climbing into Sirius' fireplace and Floo-ing to her parents' house.

A lump in her throat forms immediately when she arrives and she cautiously steps out and surveys the living room. She's not sure why it comes as so much of a shock that it's still just as stylishly arranged and covered in treasures from their trips abroad as it was the last time she stepped foot here, over a year ago.

Then again, a year ago the things surrounding her were just that: things. They mattered so little to her then, particularly because she learned the importance of packing light from a very young age. But now they're stories. Memories.

Worst of all are the items she can't quite place, or the ones where her memories are fuzzy and nothing like the vivid picture Regulus showed her today.

She takes a deep breath and looks around as little as possible as she pushes herself from the living room and upstairs to the small bathroom attached to her old room. She draws a bath and strips, but even here she can't escape the past because she soon spots the collection of bath salts that Neema gifted her during a trip to Cairo.

But at least she knows that actually happened.

She drizzles in a scoop from the jar scented with lavender and lowers herself into the tub. The heat feels glorious against her muscles, fatigued from her struggle to get away from that terrifying pool, and she reaches for her wand to begin healing her broken nails.

If only healing her broken mind could be so simple.

-xx-

Chapter End Notes

So Bella's in denial, the Department of Mysteries shows a bit of their hand, and Halia attempts to process...everything, basically. I will say that I struggled a lot with how to split this chapter up, but I think this was the most natural breaking point so I apologize for the lack of Tom!

However, there will be plenty of Tomalia goodness next chapter - I promise! Want it
sooner rather than later? Comments are a great motivator! ;D
Chapter 14

Tom immediately recognizes the quaint stone cottage from a handful of Potter's more domestic dreams, the only real difference being the overgrown state of the ivy scaling the façade and hedges that line the yard. It's just before dusk and the village itself is quiet as he lets himself in through the small wooden gate, Nagini shifting on his shoulders for a better look.

"Where is she?" Nagini demands, as though this is all some elaborate set up to get back at her for the constant pestering about when she'll next see Potter.

It's not the worst idea in the world, come to think of it.

But there's no need to answer, because Potter swings the door open as soon as he arrives at the front step.

"I heard you Apparate," she smiles up at him and then Nagini, though the expression seems to lack its usual perkiness. "It's lovely to see you, Nagini," she promptly switches to Parseltongue and leans toward him to pat the snake on the head, which instantly triggers that familiar prickle in the back of his mind.

"And you, Potter girl," Nagini hisses back.

"Come on in," Potter flicks her wand to close the door behind him and leads them to the left through a modest kitchen with mosaic tiles and white cabinets. "What have you been up to, Nagini?"

At the same time he notices her voice straining to sound casual, he senses her unease and the magnitude of her thoughts without even meaning to. Clearly, whatever happened today is weighing considerably on her; she hasn't seemed so obviously shaken since that late night she arrived in his office and confessed her belief that she was responsible for her parents' deaths.

As ironic as that was.

"Hunting and sleeping," Nagini hisses back, "Sometimes, Master Tom lets me help with his experiments..."

He grits his teeth and bats the snake on the head, giving her a warning glare out of the corner of his eye.

"What sort of experiments?" Potter asks over her shoulder.

"For a paper I'm working on," he invents on the spot.

"Sounds interesting." She doesn't even seem to be listening that carefully anyway as they arrive in a den with a wraparound sofa and a bookshelf containing a rather sizable collection on potions and herbology, judging by a quick skim of the titles.

"My mum's," she follows his gaze while falling onto the sofa next to a steaming mug of tea. "Feel free to borrow any you haven't read."

A tempting offer, but finding a new book or two is far from the top of his priority list at the moment. "How was your visit to the Ministry?" He deposits Nagini on the couch and she promptly slithers
over to Potter for a long-awaited spine massage.

Admittedly, he was rather impressed that she had come up with the plan to shift her Apparition test date to today, providing the Department a perfect opportunity to show some of their hand. He's been eagerly awaiting her tale all day, in fact…

"Well, it was certainly informative," she laughs darkly under her breath and gives him a long, thoughtful look before gesturing for him to sit across from her on the grey ottoman near the sofa, "Legilimency?"

Well, he's certainly not going to argue with that offer.

As he settles in opposite her, Nagini sprawls over her legs and hisses happily, "You're much warmer than he is."

It's probably true, especially if her touch affects Nagini in the same way it does him, but he can't help rolling his eyes as Potter sends him a triumphant smirk. But it fades a moment and he can sense her anxious tension as she sits up and reaches for his hands, placing them on either side of her face, just above her temples.

This is nothing new, but feels a bit disconcerting nonetheless given her lack of hesitancy to touch him and the sensations that come along with it, both in his fingertips and the back of his mind… And even more so when he remembers the reason for her lack of hesitancy. The same reason, perhaps, that her knee carelessly brushes his when she sits up and that she smells suspiciously pleasant of— if he had to guess— lavender.

It's a small wonder he hadn't noticed her little crush on him sooner.

"Well," her eyes fall onto his, "Let's give this a try, then."

He isn't sure what she means by 'trying', because he's successfully used Legilimency on her dozens of times, but he wastes no time contemplating it as he slips easily into her mind.

'You said I would get answers…I'm listening.'

'Let me start from the beginning.'

The scene unfurls, featuring Potter standing in the middle of a familiar, cramped office while Regulus opens his mouth to speak.

'As you know by now, your parents were Unspeakables. More specifically, they worked in the field with foreign leaders to negotiate the Department's international investigations – among other duties, of course –'

"It works," her green eyes are wide as she jerks away from him and inhales sharply. "But…how?"

He gives her a questioning look and though she still looks a bit stunned, she resolutely presses his hands back to her face. "You'll see."

With no further explanation, he falls back into the memory and listens to Regulus' explanation of her parents' roles in the Department and the Memory Space in fascination.

'Now, the crucially important bit is that the Memory Space relies on Soul magic to create a deep bond between Unspeakables and the Department.'
Soul magic – *of course.* He's assumed such for a while, but this is the first time that the implications truly strike him.

'Your parents joined and signed their souls normally, but you weren't even born yet…and even if you were, your magic wouldn't have been powerful enough to create such a bond.'

But perhaps her magic was predisposed to soul bonding because of that temporary Memory Space the Department designed for her. Perhaps, when the Potter's stumbled across his Horcrux last summer, her bonding to it was a spontaneous reaction just waiting to happen.

The scene shifts to the memory Regulus gave back to her to prove the existence of the lock on her Memory Space. It's a bit surreal to witness this memory within a memory, and in such vivid form – it's nothing like the haze that surrounds her dreams.

And just as surreal is witnessing yet another instance of Potter and his old protégé acting so amiably. It irks him for some reason. But maybe the only reason for it is because the memory doesn't exactly provide any new information – save for the fact that the Department apparently tracks magical activity and that Potter could already Apparate.

At twelve, apparently. Soon, nothing will surprise him any longer.

'Now for the bad news, Halia...and I'm really, really sorry about this, but I have to run a couple of tests on you.'

Never mind.

He just catches a glimpse of a brilliant blue pool when Potter twitches against his fingertips, the steady stream of memory turning into choppy flashes. For the very first time, he feels her mind pressing back against his to resist the memory as he triggers it to play forward.

She abruptly pulls away from him again, her eyes flickering down toward Nagini who is still sprawled across her lap like a housecat. "Sorry," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "I guess...I'd rather not relive it so soon."

Despite his curiosity and the irritation that comes from her hesitation, it's clear that it would be imprudent to press her on something she would probably end up having a dream about anyway.

"Basically," she continues while rubbing the center of her forehead, "It was a test to see if there were any breaches in my Memory Space. And Regulus...well, he didn't find any. He told me that it's fully operational and that it should keep me from revealing any sensitive information to anyone." She glances up at him with a curious expression. "But how is that possible? How can I tell you? And why didn't he detect that, or the fact that I'm regaining my memories?"

Well thank Salazar they hadn't detected Potter's bond with him – that would have been disastrous. And that meant one of two things: either Regulus botched the tests or their bond is even stronger than he previously thought. Intuition mixed with pride tells him it must be the latter, though there's no way to be sure until he can examine her memory of the test himself.

And regardless, there's no need to fill in blanks for her that he would prefer to leave empty. "That is certainly curious," he says slowly while studying her face. "But I couldn't begin to theorize...as you well know by now, Miss Potter, the mind is extremely intricate. There could be thousands of potential explanations for such an effect."

"I guess," Potter signs and Nagini rests her head in the crook of her elbow. "Maybe I'll test it by trying to tell Sirius something about the Department since Regulus told me he isn't supposed to know
anything...To be honest, I don't really care why there's a breach as long as there is one...it could mean that I wouldn't have to join the Department after all..." She says this mostly to herself, but it catches his attention immediately.

"What do you mean?" he asks, leaning toward her slightly.

"After the tests, Regulus told me that they only way to regain all of my memories is to sign my soul to the Department after I graduate to become an Unspeakable and gain a full Memory Space. And if I don't sign, they're going to erase everything," Potter tilts her head to the side, "But if I have a breach they can't detect – if I still have access to those memories, what if that means I don't have to sign? What if they couldn't actually erase it all?"

Maybe there's a chance of that. Maybe not. But it doesn't matter, really, because he's far more interested in the prospect of her becoming an Unspeakable. After all, while the information he's gained about the Department through her memories has been incredibly illuminating, it would pale in comparison to the potential benefit of her working there. If her soul's bond to his Horcrux proved strong enough, he could achieve what nobody thought possible and would have his very own spy immersed in the happenings of the Department of Mysteries.

Of course, this means convincing her that joining is her only real option – a task which shouldn't be all that difficult given the amount of trust she places in him already.

He forces his face into what he imagines to be a concerned expression. "Is that really a risk you'd be willing to take?"

"I don't know," she glances away with him and draws invisible circles on the arm of the sofa. "Maybe."

"And you find the prospect of becoming an Unspeakable unappealing?"

"Uh, yeah. A bit," she snorts and shakes her head while reaching for her cup of tea, "Especially if it's anything like today. It wasn't enough for them to take everything from me – now I'm just some experiment to them."

He folds his arms over his chest, "Well, research is their main objective…"

"–and they're just following protocol. I know," Potter interrupts with a sour expression. "I still think I hate them for it."

"Then you must hate Regulus Black as well, for his part in this," he presses, knowing that it will be a trigger point after witnessing her strong sense of guilt in the memory.

She opens her mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. "I...Maybe. For all I know, everything he told me was a complete lie. What if they're just messing with my head to see how I react?"

"The memory he gave back to you certainly wasn't a lie," he eyes her pointedly, "Was it?"

He slips into her mind again, though far more carefully this time to avoid being detected and sees flashes of the memory on the forefront of her mind along with snippets of the conversation that followed:

'But what about me? We were friends, weren't we?'

For a reason he cannot place, the words leave a strange, metallic taste in his mouth.
She swallows and says slowly, as if trying to convince herself, "No. You're right...it was definitely real."

Her mind floods with a barrage of emotions again, a dark spiral that pulls her thoughts deeper, tangling them into a conflicted, indecipherable mess. It's then that he knows broaching the subject any further will be pointless at the moment because clearly, she won't be able to look at anything objectively. It's all too fresh, too painful.

So he would wait patiently until the right time to sway her decision – he couldn't afford a misstep that would sacrifice the rapport he's built with her now that this meant gaining his own personal spy amongst the Unspeakables. And in the meantime, he had plenty of research to do into how he might maintain their bond and ensure that it remains hidden when she finally does sign her soul to the Department.

"I can imagine that all of this is a lot to take in, Miss Potter...You should take time to process it before rushing into such an important decision – let's discuss this again when you have a clearer mind." The words are easy enough to formulate, but he knows there is more to playing the part of Comforting Professor/Mentor than this alone. Though it's all still a bit foreign, he follows an instinct to lean in and place a reassuring hand on her forearm which is curled around Nagini.

But instincts can be misleading, it seems, and he quickly withdraws as the prickle of their bond emits a surge of energy in the back of his mind.

"That's...erm," she clears her throat, glancing down at the spot on her arm where his hand rested moments before and then back up at him, her cheekbones tinged with pink, "...probably best. You're right, yeah. Wouldn't want to rush anything."

Well fuck, she had to have felt that. This is what he gets for pretending to be nice.

He stands calmly, takes a few long strides over to the bookshelf in the opposite corner of the room, and begins skimming the titles as though nothing happened. It's acting on instinct all over again, this time in hopes that putting some distance between them will dull the sensation of her bond to him back to its normal levels.

"Are you finished with your human talk?" Nagini hisses impatiently.

He's never been so thankful for an interruption from her, not to mention one that provides him the perfect transition to leave–

"And does that mean we can go find the rats?" she adds.

"Rats?" he feels Potter's gaze shift from him to Nagini and, thankfully, the surge of energy in their bond begins to wane, "What rats?"

"Can't you hear them? Their little steps on the floor above?"

"I can't...But we can go upstairs if you'd like to look," he can hear the amusement in Potter's voice as she offers and sees Nagini slithering off her lap out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, I would," Nagini hisses excitedly, gliding past him into the kitchen before he has a chance to argue, "I'm starving."
"Well, how did it go?"

Regulus looks up incredulously; Bode actually had the nerve to show up in his office after what happened today?

Un-fucking-believable.

"How in the fuck do you think it went?" Regulus snaps and reaches for a cigarette out of habit, only to remember he already emptied his daily pack a couple of hours ago.

Bode stares back at him, his composure never once faltering. "I thought you were prepared for this mission, Black. Is this your way of saying that you failed to complete it?"

"No," he barks, though to him, the mission still felt like a failure. "Her Memory Space was fine – nothing out of the ordinary."

Bode blinks at him, "Then you should be pleased that we didn't need to detain her."

Staying furious was pointless – the emotionless bastard would never fucking get it.

Regulus exhales and rubs his eyes, "Do you honestly expect her to sign after all this shit?"

"She will. You know that."

Yeah, he does – the real issue is that he can't decide how he feels about it. Despite everything that joining would mean for her, she's so inextricably tied to this place that there's really no other alternative. After what he witnessed today, it's clear she'd be a shell of herself if they erased her memories.

It makes him sick, talking about this with Bode like she actually has any choice in the matter.

"Right. Well anyway, I'm going home," he pushes his chair away from his desk with a loud screech, "And I won't be in tomorrow, either."

Fortunately, Bode doesn't argue and everything feels a bit better when he makes it out of the Department for the evening. But he knows he can't just go home, either. He needs a distraction – something to keep him from moping around, staring at the wall for hours on end, which is precisely what he had been doing in his office ever since Halia left.

Under normal circumstances, he would unwind by having a few drinks with Rabastan. But Rabastan's been so bloody happy all week because of some deal he negotiated at Gringotts that spending the evening with him just sounds exhausting at this point.

No, what he needs is to be around someone having just as fucking miserable time of it as he is, if not more so. This is precisely why he finds himself strolling in the front door of his family's manor, where his mother and father insisted that Aunt Druella move into when she first fell ill – and with her came her youngest daughter.

Kreacher meets him in the foyer and gives a low, respectful bow in greeting. "Mistress Walburga will be pleased young Regulus is home. Kreacher will tell her now."

"Actually Kreacher," Regulus quickly holds up his hand, in no frame of mind to deal with his mother at the moment. "I'm here to fetch my dear cousin Bella." A smirk spreads across his face as he adds,
"I think it's about time that we celebrate her engagement."

-xx-

"Are we getting closer?" Halia glances down at Nagini when they reach the top of the stairs.

"Yes, I can smell them now. But they are higher still, Potter girl."

She smirks. Potter girl. She's missed Nagini all summer but never realized quite how much until now. "Must be in the attic then," she waves her wand and a door slides open at the end of the hallway, a narrow flight of stairs unfolding downward from the opening. "Here – climb on my shoulders."

Halia kneels to allow Nagini to slither up her arm and the snake's weight almost makes her topple over. She tries to hide her sharp exhale as she hoists herself to her feet once more and starts upstairs, wondering how Tom makes this look so easy. Apparently, he's stronger than he looks.

"Oh yes, there are many here..." Nagini's tongue flicks out of her mouth several times as they reach the cobwebbed jungle of dust-covered boxes. "I can smell them."

"Well, eat as many as you want," The snake disembarks her shoulders and Halia lowers herself to sit on the wooden plankboards to rest and catch her breath. "There are probably more in the cellar, too, if you want to check there next. Do you want me to help you find them?"

"No, I will hunt on my own. You should wait with Master Tom so he doesn't grow impatient."

There's flash of something that Halia can't quite place in Nagini's eyes – something reminiscent of amusement.

Could snakes be amused?

"Are you sure?" Halia's stomach flips at the thought of being alone with him, especially after the way he so casually touched her arm in reassurance and made her pulse race so quickly that she swears he must have heard it. "I don't want to leave you up here all by yourself..."

Lies. She's floored at the chance to be alone with him for a bit. He's the best distraction she could have possibly hoped for after everything she just went through and while their conversation about it was brief, she feels immensely better already.

"I am sure. You are too noisy to be a good hunter."

"I'll leave you to it, then," Halia grins and brushes off her jeans. But when she takes the first step down, she pauses and says impulsively, "Before I go, Nagini, I have a question and I don't want you to tell Professor Riddle about it..."

Nagini tilts her head up. "I am loyal to you, Potter girl."

She swallows; there's no going back now..."Does he have a girlfriend?"

"What is that? A mate?"

Halia shrugs. "Sure."

"Of course he does."

Oh. Her stomach sinks even though it's not really that surprising – she already expected that there was something going on between Bellatrix Black and him, after all.
"You're his mate," Nagini adds.

Halia snorts a laugh. Clearly, the concept is getting lost in translation and Nagini doesn't know what she's really asking about. "No, I mean do you ever see female humans? When you're at home?"

"No longer."

Halia's interest perks up immediately. "No longer?"

Nagini shakes her head from side to side. "Not since three nights before the last full moon."

"I see," a wide smile winds itself across her face, "Thanks, Nagini."

"Of course, Potter girl. Now leave so I can hunt."

There's no need for Nagini to repeat herself; Halia glides down the stairs with that same unbreakable smile and tiptoes into the kitchen, peering from behind a cabinet into the den. He seems to have made himself comfortable enough and is paging through one of her mum's herbology books with a sizable pile of other titles next to him and his long legs propped up on the ottoman.

She quietly pours a new cup of earl grey, pauses to check her reflection in the metallic sheen of the tea kettle, and takes a deep breath to summon her courage before strolling casually into the den. He doesn't look up from the book when she enters, but she sees him rolls his eyes as he says, "You'd think I starve her by the way she carries on."

"You don't mind that I let her eat them, right?" she sets the mug on the floral-pattered ceramic coaster near his elbow.

"I suppose not," he sighs, his expression shifting to slight surprise when he notices the tea, "Thank you."

"No problem," she plops down next to him on the couch, fighting to remain calm and collected even though her nerves prickle in excitement at the fact that the only thing separating them is the small pile of books he picked off the shelf. "Find anything worth reading?" she pretends to skim the titles in interest, though her eyes are far more preoccupied with him – specifically, how sharp and attractive his jawline looks from this angle.

"I suppose we'll see," he turns another page, apparently oblivious to her wandering eyes.

Silence settles between them and it seems that he would be content to read until Nagini finishes hunting and joins them again.

Fuck that. Halia is determined to make the most of this – partly because she's terrified that allowing her fixation on him to wane will lead her mind right back to the dark place it just escaped from. And partly because her new intel from Nagini is making her feel bolder than usual.

"Well like I said, feel free to borrow them. Seems like we'll be seeing quite a bit of each other this year so you can return them whenever," she smiles up at him.

"Thanks," he mutters, his dark eyes never leaving the page as he takes a sip of tea.

He is so incredibly irritating at times.

"Anyway," she shifts just a hair closer to him and sends out her legs to rest right next to his, her feet
an inch from his ankle. "I'd offer you a tour of the house, but honestly, I'm trying to limit the number of rooms I go into. It gives me a weird feeling, being around all this stuff we found on our travels. This is the first time I've been here since...well, you know."

"I can imagine it is quite difficult for you." Finally, he closes the book and looks at her, but the piercing intensity of his dark eyes as though he's sifting over her emotions catches her off-guard.

This Unspeakable-Memory-Space shit is clearly making her paranoid. There's no way he'd perform Legilimency on her without her knowledge — right? No. She trusts him that much, at least. He's just incredibly perceptive and surprisingly understanding at times.

Merlin she hopes that's simply the case, anyway...it would be absolutely mortifying if he knew about the fact she fancied him. And it's in that moment when Nagini's words ring through her head again...

'You're his mate.'

That snake better not blab to him about what she asked earlier.

Halia nods and glances up at him, "Yeah. It's sort of a reminder of all the memories I still don't have. For example," she gestures to the line of bronze, statue-like trinkets sitting on the fireplace mantle, "I have no idea who gave us those, but they were a gift or reward for some sort of investigation we did..." she scratches the back of her neck, "I think. But there are other things I remember vividly — like my mum's books, obviously. She was always reading..."

Then Halia freezes momentarily when she notices the carved wooden box tucked neatly in the bottom row of the shelf and then jumps to her feet to fetch it, "And this —" she grins as she lifts the cover and sees the familiar, checkered stone board and rows of matching intricate pieces, "this was my dad's special Wizard's Chess set that used to belong to my grandfather. He taught me to play one Christmas and I made him play again and again until I finally beat him in a match."

Professor Riddle smirks at her. "You're sure he didn't just let you win?"

"Of course he didn't. He was just as competitive as I am," she tosses back a playful look, "I just happened to be quite good, actually...want me to prove it?"

He folds his arms across his chest and eyes her with an amused expression. "Do your worst, Miss Potter."

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It's dusk when they arrive in Moscow and her nerves tremble in anticipation as the guard leads them down a narrow staircase to the cavernous, repurposed crypt below which is packed wall to wall with men yelling and waving paper banknotes in the air while a fierce duel rages on the long platform in the center of the room. The air is heavy, saturated with sweat and testosterone and stale smoke.

Regulus presses a familiar charm bracelet into her palm as they approach a half-goblin with greasy hair who must be the bookmaker given the sizable briefcase resting on the bar next to him and the two burly men on either side of him, wands drawn.

The half-goblin's beady eyes rake over them, lingering on Bellatrix just a bit longer. "Aren't you two a little young to be frequenting this sort of establishment?" With the bracelet clasped tightly around her wrist, Bella understands his Russian perfectly.

"Not at all," Regulus smiles and extends a bar of pure gold. "One for the roster, please."

The half-goblin presses his lips together and inspects the bar, weighing it between two hands.
Satisfied at its purity and apparently convinced of their seriousness, he asks, "What's your name then, boy?"

"Rurik," Regulus says while tucking a cigarette into the corner of his mouth, "But the payment's not for me – it's for my sister, Beatrice."

The bookie looks down his crooked nose at her and lets out a raspy laugh. "Is that so?"

With the conversation's attention shifted to her, Regulus ducks past them to order a couple of drinks at the bar. Bellatrix expects it; as per their typical routine, her cousin provides the introduction and she talks specifics.

"Yes, Sir. I wish to add my name to the roster." Bella answers in fluent Russian– again, thanks to the mysterious bracelet Regulus nicked from work– and holds her head high.

"I don't think so," he shakes his head and smirks, "I couldn't live with myself if I allowed such a pretty, delicate little thing such as yourself to get hurt."

She digs her nails into her palms at his condescension but manages to keep her voice calm and pleasant. "Pick three of your best duelists. If I beat all of them, I get eighty percent of your cut of the winnings."

"A cocky one, aren't you?" he looks at her in amusement. "And your other terms if, hypothetically, you didn't win against all three of my most accomplished duelists?"

Bella wets her lips with her tongue and leans in close enough that her breasts brush against his arm, "You can use your imagination. Pick your own prize."

His eyes roam over her again like he's already won and he flashes her a stained yellow smile, "You drive a hard bargain, Beatrice. Very well. Your first duel will be after the next two matches."

After a quick 'thank you' and saucy smile, she joins Regulus where he sits, resting his elbows back on the bar as he watches the current pair of duelists.

"What in the hell kind of place is this?" she hisses and picks up the martini that is presumably hers, "Since when did we begin dealing with half-breeds?"

"Since it became pretty fucking difficult to find a bookie you haven't emptied the pockets of," Regulus blows his too-long hair out of his eyes, "I thought you'd take it as a compliment. What is it they started calling you back in London, again? The Bloodshed Beauty?"

Indeed, it is.

She grins arrogantly. "It's been a long time since we've done this, Reg."

"I know. It's about time that we got back into it and there's no time like the present…"

That couldn't be truer. Save for her occasional, hopeful strolls around Diagon Alley or drinks at the Leaky Cauldron, she's refused to leave the manor for a couple of weeks, now. Regulus' proposition was just about the only thing that could convince her otherwise.

"I've had one hell of a day," he says with a long sigh, "and you, dear cousin, have had one hell of a month."

She hates him for saying that – for the reminder (as if she actually needed one) and his sympathetic
smile that accompanies it. It's not like she's surprised that he knows, of course...

But how much did he know?

Did he know about the way things were between Tom and her? That he treated her like nothing more than a common whore?

The thought makes her nauseous and shame floods her like a cold sweat.

If she was really being honest with herself, she always thought the things he said to her were just part of some twisted game – just one big act that he got off on.

Had it been completely stupid to believe that was the case? Did everyone around them, including Regulus, fancy her a fool for playing along for so long?

When they were together it never mattered to her. She would have been anyone or anything he wanted her to be. She loved him that much.

Still loves him that much.

They sit through another two matches until, finally, her name is called.

Regulus flicks the ash off the end of his cigarette with his little finger and sends her a wink. "I'll reel for you."

There are several audible gasps and a few laughs as she climbs the platform. She ignores them, a passive expression on her face as she surveys the crowd. She can see everything from up here, from the leering smiles of several men near her feet to the lounge on the other side of the hall where the wealthiest bettors sit, surrounded by a posse of Veela.

Among them is none other than Lucius Malfoy, his light hair pulled back from his regal face. Though she holds his gaze for several seconds, neither of them make their recognition of the other known. Nor would either of them speak of this encounter to Narcissa; they're both somewhere they shouldn't be, after all.

Her first opponent is tall and broad-shouldered, but moves sluggishly and proves to be no match for her agility as she dodges his attempts at disarming her while firing back a string of Blasting Curses. In all, the duel takes less than thirty seconds before he's thrown from the platform and she calmly tucks the curly strand of hair that fell out of her up-do back into place.

"You consider him to be among your best?" she yells to the half-goblin over the roar of the crowd, and laughs wildly with a surge of adrenaline. "Pathetic – give me a real challenge!" A team of pixies zip around the room to collect the new bets that are suddenly thrown into the air.

His mouth curls into a smirk and he says something to one of guards who then ducks behind a velvet curtain near the bar, presumably to fetch her next opponent.

The second duelist is, to her delight, a bit more of a challenge. This one lasts an entire minute before she hits him with a Severing Curse that slices deeply just under his neck. The crowd roars for her as he falls to his knees, the blood gushing down his shirt.

Now the booker looks truly shocked, not to mention a bit irritated. His first duelist had been a soft play in hopes that she would remain unscathed for the 'prize' he hoped to claim from her later and the second only marginally more difficult when he saw that she was actually skilled. Only now, in her final duel, would she truly face one of his best. It's all part of the same game which she's played
dozens of times.

Fuck them for underestimating her.

Meanwhile, Regulus inches across the bar in preparation to accept her payout and Lucius holds up a bet which she assumes is quite substantial by the way the blue eyes on the Veela beside him widen.

The final duelistswaggersto the platform, a man with a wolfish face and thick eyebrows. They bow and she manages to block his first attack, though it knocks her back to the end of the platform, where she teeters on the edge. She takes a fraction of a second to catch her breath and drown out the surrounding noise in concentration.

After that, she begins to find her stride. Her forehead begins to sweat as the beams of light from each of their wands stream back and forth over the platform in rapid succession and she runs through the encyclopedia of spells in her mind. Though her opponent's expression is equally as focused and determined as hers, it also betrays a sense of surprise and awe. It's the same sentiment rippling through the crowd around her, filling her chest with pride and confidence.

As it should. She learned from the best, after all.

She remembers so vividly the way he used to look at her in composed admiration whenever she successfully mastered one of the advanced curses or dueling techniques he taught their little group. More often than not, she caught on far faster than Regulus, Rabastan, or Rodolphus and it wasn't long before he began teaching her even more when the others weren't around. Then they would spend hours together in the Room of Requirement as she practiced and he read, glancing up occasionally to correct her form or technique.

And then one day, she performed a successful Crucius Curse on her first try. He gazed at her for a long time with an expression so indecipherable she began to feel uneasy despite her triumph and excitement. Finally, he began to stroll toward her and she waited as though frozen in place.

He slowly circled her and she remembers shuddering slightly when he stopped behind her and suddenly traced his fingertips around her neck.

"Proud, pure Bellatrix Black," he murmured in her ear, the tone of his voice betraying a smirk, "You are positively ruthless."

At the time, it sounded like the best compliment in the world. And it still does.

It hits her in that moment, as a hex narrowly skims the top of her head, that this is exactly what he wants from her – what he's always wanted from her:

For her to be proud and, above all, ruthless.

Over the last few weeks, she's been whiny and desperate and essentially everything he doesn't want. Oh, but she could be ruthless and now that she understands their game, she's ready to play. After all, she's Bellatrix fucking Black and losing just isn't her – not one bit.

She beams ear-to-ear as the sort of cry that comes only from excruciating pain resounds from the other end of the platform and the crowd erupts into chaos as her opponent's dueling arm drops to the ground with a thud, wand still in hand. Lucius barely shows a reaction, raising his eyebrow only slightly in amusement and sending her a shadow of a smile. And the half-goblin, once so sure that she would be sharing his bed that evening, glares up at her with a furious expression mixed with incredulity.
She's high on victory and takes her time to bow to the sea of people cheering rowdily while the men in the front rows fight for a chance to kiss her feet or the hem of her robes. But now Regulus is arguing with the booker, presumably demanding their payout, and she knows they'll need to make a quick escape.

But they're not quick enough to avoid a spontaneous duel with the half-goblin's guards, as it turns out. Bella hops off the platform and manages to fight them off just long enough for Regulus to grab the case of winnings and they nearly make it to the door unscathed when a wayward curse hits him right in the stomach.

After Apparating to safety, Regulus slumps against a lamppost, groaning and clutching his side. "I think that fucker broke my rib. You know, Bella, when they say 'disarm', it's not meant literally…"

She throws her head back and laughs harder than she has in months.

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Tom's mind turns as Halia studies the board, debating her next move. She is actually quite good and even managed to win one of the three games they've played, though his current preoccupation with her account of today's visit to the Department of Mysteries probably gave her a bit of an advantage anyway.

There's something he can't get out of his head and the more he pours over the situation, the more cautionary he becomes, wondering if perhaps he had gotten ahead of himself earlier. Was the fact that the Department didn't detect their bond too good to be true? It seems unwise to begin planning how he might convince her to join the Department when he couldn't even be certain whether the test was a fluke or if their bond was actually that strong…

What if the Department actually did detect something, but hid it from her? He would need to see her memory of the test and everything it entailed to know for sure, but he couldn't afford to wait until Potter had a dream about it or randomly decided to show him.

No, he needs to see it now while it's as vivid as possible in her mind.

He'll just have to be cautious that he's not detected, that's all. It shouldn't be too difficult now that he's gotten rather used to the intricacies of her mind. Plus, the fact that she's quite distracted at the moment should help…

He finds the memory right where he expects, just beyond the border of her mind that separates conscious and subconscious thoughts. It's almost funny how easy it is, like it's there waiting for him, but of course that isn't the case – it's simply because it's weighing heavily on her, even if she's not consciously thinking about it.

Carefully, he skims it and awaits her reaction, but nothing follows and she's still staring at the board with her chin resting in her palm just like before. Gently, he presses deeper, catching longer glimpses of Potter's screams of pain as the thread of light trickles out of her forehead and how it transforms the pool as it reaches the liquid.

He understands, now, why she was so hesitant to relive the experience.

Then he watches Regulus study the thousands of symbols that appear in disorderly segments, waving his wand every so often to spin and warp the reflecting image. Tom doesn't recognize any of the symbols and doubts that Regulus could possibly be reading them in such a short amount of time. In fact, he seems far more interested in examining the spaces between them and measures a few with
the tip of his wand, his expression calm and unsurprised. Nothing out of the ordinary, then...

And it certainly seemed as though Regulus knew what he was doing – surely if there was a way to fuck up the test, Bode would have checked it himself.

Tom relaxes slightly as he plays over the memory again, this time in a bit more detail – perhaps he had worried for nothing.

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After examining the board once and then reexamining it another couple of times, she's fairly convinced that this is the only move she could make without allowing him to win again. Halia orders her knight ahead, but then begins to question herself when she glances up to see him staring back at her with a blank expression.

"What?" she scans the board again. Did she miss something completely obvious?

He doesn't answer her, doesn't even move as he continues staring back at her.

"Hello?" she reaches over and pokes his arm.

Without warning, she's right back in the Department of Mysteries, her legs trembling and forehead searing as she kneels over that deceptively calm pool.

*Make it stop – please, make it stop.*

She clenches her eyes shut and screams. And then, as fast as the pain began, it abruptly cuts off and she's back in the den at her parents' house, her scream still ringing in her ears.

Her eyes whip open in disbelief and Professor Riddle's gaze carries a strange mix of shock and dismay for a fraction of a second. And not because he's concerned for her sake. She can see that in his gaze, too, and when she jumps to her feet his eyes turn cold and unreadable.

For a moment she can't breathe, as though she's being strangled by her own disbelief.

"You were reading my memories, weren't you?"

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to.

Betrayal socks her hard in the gut. She *trusted* him.

"How dare you!"

"I wanted to ensure that you were processing everything that happened today in a healthy manner," he says finally, his tone calm – too calm. Calculating.

"I can do that just fine on my own, thanks," she snaps.

He raises an eyebrow. "Can you?"

The way he's looking at her is so condescending that she feels a strong urge to slap him. Like a bucket of cold water is suddenly dumped over her head, the fact that she ever believed he wanted to help her out of compassion suddenly seems completely idiotic.

But she *wanted* it to be true – all she wanted was one bloody person she could trust and, of course, it didn't help that he went and acted all *charming* and *handsome.*
It all seems too convenient now and so obvious that it should have struck her far earlier.

"Are you one of them?" she asks.

He smirks slightly and lets out a snort of a laugh, "No."

There's that urge to slap him again.

"Then why can I tell you everything?"

"I don't know," he folds his arms over his chest and looks up at her vacantly, but she's almost positive he's lying. Fucking hell, she hates how calm he is right now.

"What the hell is this, then?" she demands angrily, "You wanting to 'help me' is a complete load of shit, isn't it?"

"Of course not, Potter," he tilts his head to the side and looks up at her with a slightly puzzled expression. "Why would you think that?"

"Why? Because guess what?!" Her voice is shrill in disbelief, "Perusing my memories at your leisure isn't helping. And I'm not stupid enough to believe that you were making sure I'm 'processing' correctly – so be honest: what are you actually playing at?"

"Call it a professional curiosity," he says casually with a shrug.

Of bloody course. She should have seen this coming from the way he always seemed to perk up whenever she brought up anything about the Department and remained politely disinterested at best with everything else she mentioned. Even so, it hits her hard too– right in the same spot of her gut that betrayal did– and she's simmering in such profound rage that her hands begin to shake.

She's had more than enough people poking around her mind for one day.

"Right. Well, it turns out that I'm already a 'professional curiosity' to an entire Ministry Department. So if you could be so kind as to fuck off, I think I'd prefer not to have your 'help' from now on."

She expects him to be shocked or at least a little angry and his complete lack of any particular reaction is infuriating on a whole new level.

"Very well." He rises and looks over to Nagini, who has apparently been waiting at the edge of the den. "We're going, Nagini."

Tom strolls past her without another glimpse in Halia's direction, but Nagini doesn't follow him and looks sadly up at her instead.

"Nagini," he says again, with a bit more edge this time.

"Thanks for the rats, Potter girl," the snake tells her before slithering across the kitchen tiles after the professor.

Halia breathes for a few seconds, her nerves still smoldering in fury.

_Fucking prick._

All this time he was using her and she was stupid enough to _fancy_ him – stupid enough to trust him.
Stupid enough to trust anyone.

"What did you do to Potter girl?" Nagini hisses accusingly when they slip outside.

"Nothing."

It's Potter's fault that it happened anyway, with her fucking lack of boundaries. She never would have detected his Legilimency if she hadn't reached over to get his attention and triggered yet another spike in their bond.

There goes months' worth of progress of earning her trust.

"You lie, Marvolo." Nagini looks poised to strike, her brilliant white fangs on menacing display. He'll be sure to take an extra dosage of antidote tonight, just in case she tries to kill him in his sleep.

He should have been far more cautious – it's so unlike him to allow a plan to go so awry.

But he would regroup. After all, there's no way he'd allow himself to lose his potential spy over something so foolish. And not only that; he would need to find a way to keep her in line, too.

Maybe she'd get over it when she reached a more stable frame of mind and realized her overreaction. And if not...well, he'd find another way. It's not like he has much of a choice in the matter.

"Hey, wait!" The door swings open behind them and he turns just in time to see Potter fling his horcrux at his face. "Don't forget your stupid book!"

-xx-
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Now that the new term is about to begin, we'll be picking up the pace and visiting a few POVs this chapter. I have lots of plot arcs planned between this point and when Halia graduates - so excited to reveal 'em all! :D Thanks for reading!

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September, 1997

Draco cuts into the poached eggs on his plate while very purposefully drawing out the squeal of his knife against his family's fine china.

Seated a few yards away at the other end of the table, his father looks up at him in petulance and after a measured sigh, he says coldly, "Anthony Goldstein's parents must be so proud – their son becomes Head Boy today, officially."

A snapping retort springs to mind, but Draco buries it; this is the most his father's spoken to him all summer, after all. No need to spoil it.

"I do hope you intend to make something of yourself this term. You cannot afford otherwise after last year's missteps," his father continues. "I expect flawless N.E.W.T. scores, Draco, is that understood?"

"Of course, Father," Draco responds with a slight sneer.

"Additionally," Lucius clears his throat, "You will take the proper steps to repair your relations with Halia Potter."

His pulse halts momentarily at the mention of her name and he abruptly stops chewing, mouth half-full of toast. "You're joking, right?"

"Not at all," his father raises a single platinum blonde eyebrow. "I would like you to determine the nature of her relationship with Tom Riddle and –"

"Let me guess," Draco snorts, "Because Bella wants to know?"

"As understandably curious as she may be," the elder Malfoy narrows his eyes, "Did you ever stop to wonder, Draco, why I advised you to befriend Miss Potter in the first place? Or were you too busy thinking with something other than your mind to have pause?"

While not entirely untrue, that seems a bit unfair; it's not as though his father would actually tell him a damn thing if he had asked anyway.

So, Draco says nothing and takes another bite of egg.

"This is the least you can do, really, after sabotaging your chances at Head Boy," his father stands and strolls from the dining room without another glance in his direction, "Dobby will accompany
you to King's Cross this afternoon."

That's it. Conversation over. No goodbyes. No 'have a successful term'.

Only demands.

Draco balls up his napkin and throws it on the table before storming upstairs to finish packing.

He's so sick of this shit. Who cares that he didn't get the fucking Head Boy position? He never even wanted it in the first place. But that didn't matter, of course, because it's not about what he wants. He's nothing more than a pawn that is only slightly less expendable than the others.

But after being ignored for essentially the entire summer, he doesn't owe his father anything – quite the opposite, really. So maybe it's about time that he invests in his own interests rather than his father's because clearly, nobody else gives a damn.

Come to think of it...perhaps there really was a way to regain his pride and even manage to get close to Halia again.

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Halia squiggles a design in the fog-covered compartment window with her finger, every bump of the tracks serving as a reminder of where she's headed and who will be waiting for her when she arrives.

Why is she so apprehensive? It'll be fine. All she has to do is tell him she doesn't want to be his assistant and she'll suggest that Nott take her place, or maybe Blaise. Riddle will probably be pissed, but she doesn't care – she's plenty pissed off too.

And pretty fucking confused.

Despite her lasting anger toward him, that's really what it is: the need to stay as far away from him as possible until she figures out what the hell is going on. Why could she tell him everything, but then found her own words betraying her and derailing the conversation when attempting to do the same with Sirius, Remus, or Daphne?

Since that evening at her parents' house, she's tossed around theory after theory but nothing makes sense and the more she tries to think about it, the more scattered and unfocused her thoughts become. Now she feels worse than she has in months, since before Professor Riddle even began helping her.

It certainly doesn't help matters that, through all of this, she's felt a pestering urge to see him and fix things – which is completely irrational because of course there isn't anything for her to fix. For now, she's chalked it up to residual traces of her former crush on him, but even this explanation she doesn't quite buy.

Whatever that Department test involved really fucked with her head, apparently.

"Are you alright?" Daphne's round, bright blue eyes are examining her in concern.

Not really, no. You know that hot Defense Against the Dark Arts professor of ours? Yeah, turns out he's an asshole. Majorly. I'm 99% sure he was just using me to get information on the Department of Mysteries while pretending to help me figure out the truth behind my parents' death. That, or he's an Unspeakable too and lied to me about it. Of course, I can't tell you or anyone else I care about because the Department of Mysteries is a shit place with even shittier rules. But I'll probably end up signing my soul to them anyway because that's the only way I'm ever going to figure out the truth about anything.
In other words I'm pretty much dying inside.

"Never better," Halia smiles hollowly, "I was just thinking about which of the samples Fred and George gave us last week that I'm going to prank Pansy with first."

"Dungbombs in her trunk while she's on rounds tonight, since she won't have a chance to unpack her clothes beforehand?"

Halia smirks, "You know, I think Fred's right – you do have an eye for pranking."

Daphne suddenly seems incredibly preoccupied with a strand of light blonde hair. "He said that?"

"Mhmm, right after he told me how happy he was that you decided to come to their grand opening with me," her smirk widens, cherishing these few moments of distraction before the inevitable, foggy ache settles over her mind once more.

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"Well, I suppose I won't be surprised if Aurora is the first to go," Severus sneers as they round the corner and descend the stairs from Dumbledore's office.

The first staff meeting of the term just came to a close, during which Umbridge introduced herself in that sickly sweet tone of hers that makes Tom's skin crawl. But it soon turned sour when Aurora proceeded to inquire about Umbridge's qualifications, causing the woman's poodle-like face to twist into something truly sinister as she answered crisply, "I do assure you, dear, that I have the full trust and support to represent the interests of the Ministry in this endeavor – whatever form that may take."

The room fell silent for a moment after that and out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw Umbridge scribble: 'Sinistra – Astronomy' in her notes; the beginning of her laundry list, so it would seem.

"We'll see," Tom gives Severus a smug glance, "Fortunately for Aurora, Umbridge only carries half the vote." And despite the Astronomy professor's irritating tendency to voice what ought not be said, at least she was competent in her position. For now at least, he had far more pertinent changes to focus on – ones that he and Umbridge might actually find themselves agreeing on judging from the way her eyes narrowed subtly like a hawk zeroing in on prey when Charity Burbage introduced herself as the Muggle Studies professor.

He and Umbridge wouldn't agree on everything, of course, but perhaps his initial worries that she would only stand in the way of his progress were unfounded and they would find common ground after all. Her infuriating habits could actually prove to be an advantage. In fact, given the staff's almost palpable dislike of her after a single encounter, it seemed entirely plausible that he would be able to shift the blame of some of his potentially more objectionable plans for the reform onto her to avoid rising tensions between himself and the other staff members.

"If you can manage to keep her in line," Severus says in a low voice.

He would – he could be sure of that. Everyone had a weakness – all he had to do was find Umbridge's and she would soon cease to be a problem. It is precisely the same thing that he planned to do with Potter, her weakness being truth and her utter vulnerability to it.

After the slip-up at her parents' home a couple of weeks earlier, he began to delve into the subject of Soul Magic like never before in an effort to decide how exactly to proceed. What he found was most interesting and, ironically, some of his most considerable discoveries came from his study of The Eye of Duat, which he still possessed on loan from Potter's friend Neema of Cairo.
From what he could reasonably deduce, the contract-like Soul Magic responsible for the bond between the Department of Mysteries and its Unspeakables as well as the bond between his horcrux and Potter's soul both appear to have similar effects to the Fidelius Charm. Here was his answer for the Department's incapability to detect their bond and why she finds herself unable to tell anyone else her secrets – or his.

She's his accidental Secret-Keeper.

Which is very, very good news. Obviously, his original plan to act charming and win her trust gradually had backfired. But with this new discovery, things would be far simpler; what Potter wanted more than anything was the truth and, that evening, he would present her with as much of it as she could handle…Save, perhaps, for the more questionable details about the existence of his horcruxes.

Now that he had seen the Department's examination of her Memory Space himself, confirming her inability to betray his secrets as well as the Departments inability to detect them, it's not as though he had much to lose by pursuing this plan. And really, this would need to happen sooner or later anyway. She was getting closer to asking the right (or wrong) questions, and it would be far more strategic to supply answers for her concerns before she truly began distancing herself from him.

She might never fully trust him, but that didn't matter. She didn't even have to like him. All he needed was for her to trust him more than the Department of Mysteries, and given the way they greeted her during her last visit, that didn't seem to be a particularly tall order.

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One rare afternoon, Gellert summons her for tea in the garden. The air is crisp and lovely, a stark contrast to her stuffy prisonlike room in the castle tower, and Ariana enjoys filling her lungs with it so much that she hardly hears his incessant musings about Nurmengard, Fudge, and the International Confederation. He fell into the habit of telling her everything long ago and she used to listen intently, gleaning for details of her brother and praying for a slip-up that would provide a clue of how she might escape. She used to wonder if he told her all of this because he was lonely and miserable, an exquisite thought, but one crushing day she realized it was just another game. He told her everything to remind her how alone she was and that escape would only exist in her dreams – after all, he wouldn't dare trust her with his darkest plans and secrets if there was any hope of the contrary.

So she tunes him out and surveys the grounds. Due to the usually hot summer, the rose bushes have already begun to dry and twist into a mangled mess. Her mother, Kendra, would have been appalled at the sight of it. She was always so talented when it came to horticulture and their yard in Godric's Hollow had been the envy of all their neighbors. Ariana, on the other hand, had always toiled away in an attempt to help with remarkably little to show for her efforts. When she complained to her father, he would tell her it was the sort of thing that tended to skip a generation and then took care to remind her of her other talents.

The roses might have stood a chance if Gellert would simply hire a few house elves to tend the castle rather than the talentless muggles he enslaved. But in his eyes, house elves' possession of magical ability meant they were a superior species destined for a greater purpose than cooking and folding laundry. It matters little to him that a house elf would be perfectly happy to continue filling its days with such tasks, of course.

"Malfoy is getting sloppy," Gellert continues without glancing up once to acknowledge the muggle who sets a silver platter of tea and sandwiches on the wrought iron table, "I do wish Dolohov didn't have such an aversion to returning home. I would have much preferred he handle the operations, but the boy takes things so personally. You know--"
"Thank you, Paul," Ariana interrupts to smile pleasantly up at the muggle, whose eyes immediately widen into a terrified expression and dart rapidly between she and Gellert.

He gives her a long, impenetrable gaze as the wrinkles on his face seem to deepen. "He no longer has a name. In fact, he doesn't have much at all anymore, isn't that right?" Gellert looks at the servant who begins to nod obediently.

She knows she should quit and admit defeat, but she simply can't help continue and supply the details that had come to her a week ago in a vision of this very moment: "Actually, Paul has a wife, three children, and a PhD in Organic Chemistry from the University of Heidelberg."

She sees the gears begin to turn in the muggle's head, the sudden influx of memories fighting against the experimental curse that Gellert uses to control him and the others, given the infeasibility of using the Imperius on the whole staff.

'Run,' she tells him with her eyes. If he did, maybe she could divert Gellert long enough to let the muggle escape and she'd be that much closer to repaying the moral debt she has collected all these years. Her vision hadn't supplied what would happen next, but she was optimistic that her instincts wouldn't lead her astray. 'Run.'

Paul, the muggle, just stands there – like he wants to run, but can't quite make his legs move.

Gellert's half-annoyed, half-amused gaze settles upon her, and only her. "Well, isn't that sweet? I never knew you cared so deeply for our servants, Ariana."

His lips barely move as the muggle suddenly collapses onto the stone pavers that line the garden. Gellert searches her face for a moment, surely in hope of devastation – and indeed it poured through her, but she would not allow him to see it. She digs her teeth into her cheek and tilts her head to avoid catching a glimpse of the crumbled body out of the corner of her eye. Apparently her instincts had led her astray after all. She should have known better than to trust it given the scarcity of her visions nowadays. But it was too late for regrets; here she was, with another death to lie on her conscience.

Gellert stirs some honey into his tea and clinks his spoon against the side of his cup as though nothing out of the ordinary had just transpired. Although, killing members of staff really wasn't that out of the ordinary for him to begin.

"They're getting closer," he says suddenly, as though she should know precisely who 'they' are, or what 'closer' means. "Yes," he muses, "I think we should see them quite soon. I have a 'sense' about it, you see."

That sticks with her the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening.

He knows that she's losing her Sight. And if his words meant what she thinks they did, he's gaining it.

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One more year. That's it. Just one more year and Halia Potter would be finished at Hogwarts and Severus would never have to see her again. Thank Merlin, too, because the mere fact that she's sitting across from him in the Great Hall for another meal is enough to make his blood pressure rise noticeably. He quite nearly pities Tom for being forced into hiring this toad of a girl by Dumbledore. If such a fate had been thrust upon him, it might actually be enough to make him reconsider the offer Durmstrang sent him over the summer.
In the more rational part of his mind, it occurs to him that his loathing might be somewhat unjustified, but he simply cannot help himself. He hates her—absolutely hates her—for the constant reminder she provides. Especially after the devastating event that happened four weeks ago.

He was on his way out the door to visit Diagon Alley for a few ingredients to replenish his stores in preparation for the new term when he heard an owl screech in greeting at the window in his kitchen, which he occasionally leaves open by accident. The owl was gone by the time he walked to the kitchen and to his surprise, there was no post to be found. He'd been searching for a few minutes when he realized there was a small space between the stove and the wall right before the window, and sure enough, there was a small pile of mail that had been collecting for who knew how long. He levitated the stove away from the wall to vanished the dust and cobwebs covering the pile before beginning to sift through it. Most of the post he had missed seemed fairly inconsequential and he was pleased that today's happened to include a coupon for the apothecary he planned to visit.

And then he spotted it. There was no name or return address listed, not that there was any need for one; his heart skipped several beats as soon as his eyes fell upon that familiar, loopy cursive. He simply stared at it in disbelief for a moment, and in the next he found himself sitting on the floor with his back against a cabinet while edging his thumbnail under the plain wax seal.

Dear Sev,

How are you? Are you eager for a new term to begin at Hogwarts? It's been quite some time since we last saw each other, and even longer since we last spoke.

Of course, he knew instantly that the last time he saw her was in the Atrium of the Ministry. He didn't even remember why he had been there that day, exactly two years and seventy four days ago, but he certainly remembered seeing her. He remembered being too cowardly to say hello, partially because her daughter happened to be with her at the time. He also very distinctly remembered thinking about how she seemed to become more beautiful every time he saw her, in a way that seemed both impossible and entirely unfair.

I can hardly believe how quickly time passes. How can it be decades since the days we spent near the river, when you would tell me all about magic? Poor Tuney was always so terribly jealous—especially when we started practicing. You remember, don't you?

He scoffs. Did he remember? Of course he did – those days comprised the majority of the memories that painted his black, sleepless nights.

I think of you often, Sev. I worry for you and I fear that you haven't given up chasing the Dark. But I know you have a good heart and I know that, eventually, you'll find your way to the Light. I've always believed in that…and in you, too.

He swears under his breath as a drop falls from his eye and lands in the center of the page, distorting the word 'Light'.

One of my biggest regrets is that we've grown apart so much over the years. You were always the best at giving advice, something I've been in significant need of lately. Which brings me to the point of this letter: would you be willing to meet this Sunday at noon, at the old deli on Pine St. in Spinner's End?

If not, I understand perfectly. I know it's been a long time…but I do hope to see you.

Best wishes, always –
It was crushing enough to realize he had accidentally stood up the love of his life after years of being too ashamed to apologize for his misgivings, not to mention the fact that she's gone and he'll never have the same chance again. But when he saw the date scribbled at the top of the parchment (June 24, 1996 – just a few weeks before he received news of her death), he could do nothing but lie on the linoleum floor and stare up at the ceiling for the rest of the day.

He had been doing fine up until the day he found the letter...Well, perhaps not fine, but at the very least he was functioning on an acceptable level. But four weeks have passed since he found it and it was all he could do to muster some version of a semi-professional persona for today's obligatory staff meeting and Start-of-Term festivities. How long it will take him to reach normalcy again, he isn't sure, or if it's even possible given this new low.

But teaching Halia Potter two days a week in double-Potions surely can't help matters.

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Halia is lounging with Daphne, Astoria, and a couple of Astoria's friends in a corner of the common room, listening vaguely as they gossip about the new first years and then Dolores Umbridge, who rudely interrupted Dumbledore while he was trying to introduce her to the school. Meanwhile, Blaise makes his rounds with a few bottles of Firewhiskey and one or two brave (or idiotic) first years try a tiny sip and promptly spit it out while coughing profusely. With Pansy away on Prefect duty, Tracey and Milly follow him around and let out piercing giggles as they watch.

It's only been a couple of hours since Halia and the rest of the school arrived back at Hogwarts, but it's quite clear already that this term will be very unlike the previous one. The fact that her 'new girl' status and the attention that came with it has faded is a considerable relief. She even made it through the Sorting Ceremony and dinner without an interaction with Draco or Pansy by some stroke of luck and Professor Riddle hadn't glanced once in her direction. Maybe she wouldn't have to talk to him after all and they could pretend he had never offered to help her in the first place. It's so unlike her to enjoy being on the outskirts of the action, but if it weren't for the constant pounding in the back of her head she might actually feel quite content. Maybe this year would be a completely fresh start and she could keep to herself while trying to figure out what in the hell she's going to do about the Department of Mysteries when she graduates.

A little optimism never hurt anyone, right?

But it can make you feel really, really stupid.

Shortly upon arriving in the common room, Pansy strolls up to her and says while examining her cuticles, "Professor Riddle wants to talk to you about your duties as his assistant. He's in his office." Pansy's casual tone doesn't even come close to veiling how annoyed (and quite possibly jealous) she must be to be forced to deliver this message and for a moment, Halia feels embarrassingly smug about it.

But her stomach clenches when she enters the corridor. Maybe she could just wander the castle for a while and figure out what exactly she planned to say before showing up in his office…

No, she should get this over with. It's going to happen eventually, anyway.

The door swings open after her second knock. Riddle is sitting at his desk, watching her with that steely, thoughtful gaze of his, and Nagini's head immediately twists in her direction from her usual spot on the window seat.
"Hello, Potter girl."

Halia swallows and lingers in the doorway, fighting the strangely inexplicable urge to enter and join Nagini on the window seat. Instead, she tilts her chin up and crosses her arms over her chest. "I've decided that I don't want to work for you. I'm sure Nott or Zabini would be happy to be your assistant instead. And if they don't, that's not my problem...it's not like I volunteered in the first place, you know, you did that for me. Just like you decided to read my thoughts without my permission."

His expression doesn't change, even for a moment. "That is perfectly reasonable," he says in a calm voice. It disappoints her for some reason, perhaps because part of her hoped he would be irritated and that this would be a way to get back at him for what he did.

And of course, he doesn't apologize.

"Then I guess I'm glad we're on the same page," she snaps and is just about to turn on her heel to leave when he says softly,

"What they did to you was awful, Halia."

Her face flushes in rage as she storms right up to his desk and glares daggers down at him. "You have absolutely no right to talk to me about that anymore. I thought I made that pretty clear when I said I don't want your help."

The door swings shut and she swears she hears the lock click into place. But she forgets all about it when he tells her, "That afternoon was the first time I performed Legilimency on you without your permission, and only because I needed to examine that memory specifically." The look he gives her is almost apologetic – almost, but not quite.

"Oh, I see," she waves her hand and drawls sarcastically, "Well in that case it's A-okay – no problem at all."

The corner of his mouth twitches and her glare hardens.

I fucking dare you to smirk right now.

Thankfully (for his sake, anyway), he seems to collect himself and lets out a sigh. "I realize that I owe you an explanation."

"You think?" she snorts. "Save it, Riddle, I don't want to hear it."

He catches her by the forearm when she turns to leave and her breath catches sharply as the persistent ache in the back of her mind which has plagued her over the past couple of weeks abruptly ceases and is replaced with a tingle that is equal parts pleasant and nauseating. "Are you sure?" he gives her a pointed look, like he knows exactly what just happened.

The bastard must be reading her thoughts again.

Apparently he takes her momentary silence as an invitation because he releases her and states calmly, "I know that you aren't able to confide in anyone else about what happened. I already suspected as much, even before your visit to the Department." He stands and clasps his hands together behind his back, "But I couldn't be certain why that was the case and I had to examine your memory of Regulus testing your Memory Space to be sure."

She considers lying and telling him that, in fact, she could tell Sirius and Remus and Daphne about
the Department, but that seems a bit pointless now. "Then why?" she demands instead.

"Because," he moves around his desk in a smooth motion to stand right in front of her as his dark, annoyingly handsome eyes pour into hers, "We're connected, Halia."

Her throat goes dry. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"We're connected," he repeats as though it's completely obvious and should have occurred to her ages ago. "It's the reason you can tell me everything and that you've been regaining memories the Department can't detect...it's the reason you were suddenly able to speak to Nagini," he nods to the window seat, where the snake continues watching them intently, "And it's the reason your negative symptoms of memory recovery seem to improve when you're around me."

Is that true? Are all of those things connected because she and Riddle are somehow...connected? Or is that just what he wants her to believe? And if so, why?

"I've suspected this for a while, ever since you showed me your memory of the day your parents were killed. I recognized the mountain immediately because a few years ago, I hid an extremely valuable Dark object there for safekeeping. After you showed me your memory, I went to investigate - the object was gone, of course. But I examined the traces of the protective curses I created to guard it and found that the one that should have prevented you from going anywhere near the cliff had been lifted before you and your parents would have arrived. And the far stronger curse, which I constructed to kill anyone who willfully approached, was altered by someone and drew you in for some reason. I believe it was then that our connection was created - perhaps because of the properties of the experimental Memory Space the Department gave you. From what I could tell, a loophole in the curse was formed because you technically weren't approaching it willfully and in the end, your parents were the ones who triggered it when they ran after you."

Her mind spins and she remembers that strange force of the cliff that kept pulling her closer and closer until...

"It's your fault," her heart begins to pound furiously in realization, "They're dead because of you."

Her parents' killer has been staring her in the face this entire time, 'helping' her. Nausea sweeps over her. She trusted him.

She trusted him.

"It wasn't my fault any more than it was yours," an edge appears in his voice, as if he's annoyed by the mere suggestion. "It was a setup, perhaps by the Department itself. Neither of us were responsible for sending your parents there."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier, then, if you're so innocent?" she demands coldly.

"I should think that is fairly obvious," he shrugs, "At first, I thought you might be investigating me on behalf of the Department."

She lets out a snort of a laugh at the thought, despite herself.

Riddle gives a slight bow of his head, "Obviously, it became clear rather quickly that this wasn't the case, but I still couldn't tell you anything until I knew how much the Department knew of my involvement...or of the connection I suspected between our minds. What do you think would have happened to you if the Department detected such an incongruity when they tested your Memory Space? Waiting to tell you was for your protection as much as mine. Why would I ever tell you any of this if I was actually responsible for killing them? Why would I leave you, the only loose end,
alive and well? The truth of the matter is that I want to find out what happened, perhaps just as much
as you do. I can take you there and show you everything if you don't believe me."

But that isn't the problem. She has no doubt that, if they were to visit the cliff, she would find the
traces of the curses exactly how he described. They were nothing more than the facts that he spun
into this narrative of his, which she cannot possibly be certain is true or not. She can't really be
certain about anything related to him because she doesn't really know very much at all about the sort
of person he is. After all, what sort of person was he if he possessed the sort of 'Dark object' that
would warrant investigation by the Department?

Professor Riddle presses his lips together and gives her a long look that seems apologetic – but once
again, not quite genuine enough to convince her. "I promise that I will not perform Legilimency on
you without your permission again. I could teach you Occlumency as well, if that would make you
feel more comfortable."

She swallows hard, her mouth still chalky and dry from shock though it seems almost laughable that
anything at all manages to surprise her anymore. "I'll think about it."

He nods. "You do understand, don't you?" he moves closer to her, close enough to make her swoon
if it was still a few weeks ago when her oblivious crush on him was in full swing. Now, she just feels
slightly ill – especially when he adds, "The only people either of us can trust is each other."

She's never, ever felt as alone as she does in that particular moment.

The door creaks open and she turns away to escape into the corridor while she still has the chance,
though that calculating and eerily triumphant way he follows her with his eyes haunts her until dawn.

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