Inkstains

by Zigadenus

Summary

What looks like living is sometimes just survival.

Hermione Granger — Weasley — Granger has scars: the ones the war inflicted, and the ones she inflicted. Mostly the ones she inflicted. And Hermione Granger has some wounds that never did heal; here in the smouldering aftermath of her marriage, they're about to start bleeding anew. Written in the conceptual universe of the short story, Lies and Red Ink (generally DH-compliant, EWE?, may require a mature reader perspective).

Notes

Dedicated to the memory of my friend Tra8erse, who immeasurably improved my mind in the time I knew her, and to the lovely and supportive friends who've made fandom such an important part of my life.

This piece is written in the same conceptual universe as Lies and Red Ink, but I maintain that the latter story stands on its own as a complete work. I think you can probably read this as a standalone, as well.

With respect to tagging, I intentionally utilize only minimal descriptors -- my reasons for this are twofold, both personal and philosophical. Speaking personally, I experience reading tags as unpleasant to triggering, and I choose not to make my own work unappealing to myself. Speaking philosophically, I am of the opinion that fiction's most profound task is to break us out of our echo chambers, to expand our experience and in so doing our empathy, by placing us in apposition to themes that challenge us, or in spaces that ask us to confront
ourselves and our beliefs. The fiction that has been transformative in my life has been that which has often made me uncomfortable, has startled me, has sometimes caused me pain, but has always, always made me think, and made me a more careful and contemplative person for the experience of it. I aspire to this in my own writing, and I am of the opinion that tags describing content would cheat readers of the experience of encountering it without preconceptions. I want you to be able to come to it without my authorial intrusion in the form of tags. If this doesn't sound like a good time to you, I heartily encourage you to be kind to yourself, and give my work a miss.

**You should be aware that this work contains complex and mature themes.** I do appreciate that some people can be triggered by works of fiction. While I choose to produce stories that I hope will do more good than evil, I recognize that readers could be challenged by places my stories go. I can only pledge my honest opinion, that I don't think they will cause lasting harm. However, you as a reader know yourself best; you should be kind to yourself and avoid reading my work, if my expressed philosophies make you uncomfortable. If you *do* want to try it, but have mental health concerns re: triggers, I'm happy to give you a quiet heads-up on the general content; ask me in a comment, or on LiveJournal (you can leave anonymous comments there).

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by [Lies and Red Ink](https://www.livejournal.com) by Zigadenus
- Inspired by [Repast at the Table of Glorious Toxins](https://www.livejournal.com) by Zigadenus
“Well, it’s hardly any warmer in here!” Ronald remarks, too loud and jolly by far. Harry smiles awkwardly, and fixes his attention on the task of brushing the snow out of little Lily’s hair. The girl submits to this paternal effort with bad grace: she’s spotted Crookshanks, and is desperate to chase after the aged tom. Hermione hopes, silently but with considerable asperity, that Crooks gives her a claw or two.

It’s wishful thinking. Crooks can barely walk anymore, let alone defend himself from grabby children. And with his ailing heart, he shouldn’t be made to flee a motivated aggressor. She sets her tea back down on the counter, and scoops her fluffy orange monster up into her arms. He rewards this rescue in his usual way, bumping his head up against her chin before settling against her chest. Lily’s forlorn cry of “Kitty!” interrupts the tightness that’s forming at the back of her throat.

“Kitty needs a nap, Lily.” She means it to come across as kindly yet stern, but reckons she’s probably managed only the latter. Maybe she’ll make it up the stairs before there are any waterworks. Having a uterus doesn’t mean she’s equipped to deal with the repellant little things. Harry wanted ‘em, Harry can cope with them. Auntie Hermie has much better things to do with her time.

She deposits Crooks in his basket near her desk, and resets the locking charm. As she sinks into her chair, she tangles her fingers in her curls until the tension between her shoulder blades migrates to her scalp.

It’s not really Harry’s children that are the problem. Except that it is.

He cannot possibly fail to realise that his offspring have become an arsenal mobilized upon a domestic battleground. Ginny is certainly aware of the subtext – or at least, she can’t charitably conceive of any other reason for conspicuous absence from the combat zone. She can, of course, uncharitably conceive of half a dozen.

She pushes the thoughts away, displacing them with a sheaf of revisions. This is a fight she has some hope of winning. Not that she’s at all motivated towards that particular end – her reviewers’ suggestions are, for the most part, grounded, well-reasoned, and respectfully argued. The editorial office has done extremely well by her work, this time. She suspects a familiar hand of pulling some strings on her behalf, and thinks she ought to find some nicely understated trinket to send on to Amsterdam when she posts the rest of the holiday parcels. She doesn’t know Tibs well enough to pick a book, but a fountain pen can hardly be taken amiss. His notes consistently betray that he prefers them to quills; there are never any of the mid-word halts that you see with quillwork, where someone has stopped to re-dip the nib.

She taps her own pen thoughtfully against her lip while contemplating how to rephrase the introduction’s second paragraph. Holkiss (it has to be Holkiss, this was his exact point eight issues ago) hasn’t quite grasped why she’s insisting upon including the new toxicological assay. If she can make it more obvious, somehow, that the secondary metabolites generated under low pH are neither likely to be formed, nor actually deleterious in circumneutral conditions… She isn’t, after all, suggesting that anyone drink this thing. There are much better ways of accessing cytoplasm than via intestinal villi. Perhaps that’s the answer: remind them upfront that she’s talking about injectables. A simple citation to her last paper is apparently much too subtle; best to spell it out in plain text.
This conceptual dragon slain, she reaches for her tea. Which is, naturally, sitting abandoned on the kitchen counter, two storeys beneath her.

She pokes her head into the stairwell, past the bounds of the silencing spell. The children’s screams seem to be effected by cheerful romping. If they’ve torn the curtains down again, she’ll certainly have some choice words for Harry. Ronald’s transparent ploy to warm her to the joys of parenting would have marginally more hope of success had he picked some other -- well-behaved -- children as demonstrational exhibits. She hopes no one is expecting her to fix tea for the lot of them tonight.

No, thank goodness, it appears Ronald has risen to the occasion. He’s stirring a pot of soup on the stovetop, while Harry constructs sandwiches. Bless them, they almost pass as functional adults, and about time. If she’s lucky, she can snag her cup and slink back up to the attic before anyone is the wiser.

It sounds as though Harry has been apologizing for something the children have done. She decides she’d really rather not know. If she doesn’t hear about it, she won’t be compelled to fix it. Hear no evil, see no evil. She hesitates on the landing, as Ronald responds.

“Yeah, well. It’s nice, actually, having them underfoot; I like being Uncle Ron. I always thought I’d have some of my own, you know?”

“You’re still trying, though, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea.” His voice is completely flat.

“What do you mean, you’re either doing it or—”

“Well, no, actually. I mean we are, we do. Just… I don’t know if I believe her anymore.”

Harry is slow in responding. “What, you think she might be taking contraceptives? Ron, that’s… she wouldn’t do that to you, go behind your back. Would she?”

“Hell, Harry. I just don’t know. It’s like living with a stranger, has been for ages.”

“Come on. It’s Hermione. We’ve known her since we were eleven.”

“Yeah, I guess. She’s just… dunno, different since we lost the baby.”

“Have you tried talking to her about that? You guys went through a rough patch, there in the beginning. And it changes people, they say.”

“When?” He scoffs, “When would I talk to her, she’s always buried in those fucking books. It’s like it didn’t even bother her. Just ‘Oops, oh well, let’s get on with the next thing.’ I sometimes wonder…”

“It was almost five months along, though, wasn’t it? Has she been to St Mungo’s, maybe something happened.”

“She said she went, said everything was fine up there.”

“Then, you know, maybe it’s just bad timing. It happens. Gin and I had a bloody schedule.”

“Harry. That’s my sister.” His tone is only mock-aggrieved.

“All I’m saying is—”
“I hear you. It’s just, how likely is it? I mean, here we are, very first time, right off the starting line, and then just nothing? For years?” He sighs, and stirs the soup again. His shoulders are creeping up to his ears, in what even she recognizes as a miserable, defensive hunch. “I thought we were perfect, I thought… It kills me that I don’t even really trust her anymore. I wanted to give her everything, and she won’t let me.”

His plaintive words are a knife, twisting hard in her gut. She abandons the notion of retrieving her tea, and retreats to the safety of revisions.

He turns in early. It’s not even 9 o’clock when she looks out her little window and notices that the house’s lights aren’t glowing across the unexpected snowdrifts anymore. She caps her biro, and resolves to fix things, if she can.

She crawls into bed nude. He’s not sleeping; she can tell by the pitch of his breathing. She places a hand on his hip, and presses her lips against his bare shoulder as she curls a finger beneath the flannel waistband of his pajama bottoms. “Did you have a good afternoon with Harry and the kids? It looked like you were having a snowball fight.”

“Yeah, they’re great kids. Full of energy. Jamie will be a chaser, for sure, good arm on that boy.” Despite his words, his voice lacks any real enthusiasm, and he hasn’t made any effort to help her with his bottoms.

“I should have come out. I could use more exercise.” She abandons his waistband, to trace instead the line of hair trending down from his navel. She can’t make her intentions any clearer, and he’s not stupid.

Indeed not. “Exercise, eh?” There’s some genuine warmth in his voice, and she thinks he might be leering a bit. Good, things are moving in the right direction.

“Mmm. All sweating and hot and panting. Burn some of those extra calories.”

He laughs, another good sign. Even better, he kicks off his bottoms and drawers.

She stretches back into the pillows as he buries his face in her breasts, and his hand in her quim. It doesn’t take her long to find her fantasy lover behind closed eyes. She imagines one long finger tracing her collarbone, soft breath caressing her face as he leans close, not-kissing, not-touching, just observing her reactions. She opens her legs further, mechanically; she’s so intent upon the imagined sensation of a fall of fine hair tickling her neck and the angle of her jaw as he leans ever closer, that she barely notices her husband’s penetration.

And then, abruptly, his weight is gone, and so are half the bedcovers.

“It’s just no good, Hermione. I’m tired of doing this with you.”

“Tired of having sex?”

“Like this, yeah. I don’t know if you’ve ever been into it, but right now you’re just lying there and thinking of England or goddamn potions or something. I can’t do this anymore.”

“I…” His unexpected rejection hurts more than she’d ever thought it might. “Ronald, Ron, I’m sorry. I really am, I’m not very good at this—”

“You can learn anything else, Hermione. Why not this? Surely we’ve practised enough.” His voice has taken a nasty edge.
She reaches out, fumbles to hold his hand beneath the quilts, and prepares to lie for all she’s worth, “I wasn’t disinterested, not at all. I was just enjoying so much how you make me feel. Just falling into those sensations, it’s marvellous.” Too much? She squeezes his hand, rubs the calloused pad of his thumb. “Maybe another night, hey?”

He pulls her into an embrace, tucking her head against his shoulder in answer. “Yeah, I guess maybe I’m just not in the mood.”

Are they okay, then? She isn’t sure. She makes a conscious effort to relax her shoulders, to lay comfortably in his arms. After long minutes of this, she makes another bid for their version of normalcy. “I was thinking of going out to the shops tomorrow. To finish up with the presents, I mean. Did you want to come with?”

“I guess so, I need to find something for Mum anyway.”

“Aren’t we just getting her something from the both of us?”

“Well, yeah of course, but she likes when I pick her out something special. Something just from me.”

“Fair enough. I was thinking Diagon Alley, maybe? We could make a day of it, have lunch.”

“Sounds good. Not the Leaky, though.”

She laughs gently. It’s a long-standing joke that Neville helps out in the kitchen. “No, certainly not. I saw the inside of Neville’s actual cauldron too many times to chance it.”

She realizes her error immediately – she’s made reference to potions. Ronald unwraps his arms from her, and stretches out on his side of the bed. A moment later, he leans over and kisses her cheek, perhaps in apology. “Goodnight, Hermione.” He’s trying, mostly. They both are.

And she hates this.
There’s rain tip-tapping against the window when she wakes. It’s still dark, but Ronald, snoring faintly, has stolen the bedsheets again, and she’s covered in gooseflesh. She eases out of bed, bundles up in a dressing gown, and steals downstairs to see about a cup of tea. Perhaps she’ll make crêpes for their breakfast. It’s an effort she hasn’t gone to in a while, but Ronald is always appreciative of any motions she makes towards domesticity. His winsome smile and lavish compliments are probably what prevent her doing it more often.

But failure isn’t an option. She simply doesn’t know how to do it, so instead she hunts out flour and eggs, milk and butter.

She’s just cleaning up when he creaks down the stairs, sniffing at the air with what is likely comic charm. “Good morning,” he carols.

“It certainly is, although the rain will have made a mess of the streets. But I had an interesting idea for time-delaying potions while I was cooking.” Why does she do this, why remind him of the places she goes in her head where he can’t follow.

“Is that what you’re working on, now?” He never asks. If her brain is a caricatured opera, her conscience is hissing from one of the loges: you should feel guilty. Her conscience has a good view, but is usually [blessedly] hard to hear when she’s busy at the conductor’s stand.

She sifts confectioner’s sugar across his plate and passes it to him, tip-toeing up to buss his unshaven cheek. She’ll try including him, perhaps she can mitigate the damage, ‘Not yet, no. It’s just a thought I had. I’ve just been working on revisions the past week.” Revisions of what, he should ask. She’s finally learned the art of brevity, learned not to overburden a conversation with entire abstracts.

He doesn’t ask, but then his mouth is full. He swallows, follows it with a gulp of tea. “Your crêpes are always fantastic. I think you do them better than Mum.”

So still nothing, then. She manages a wan smile, and polite thanks.

He does the remainder of the washing up while she gathers their parcels, checking against her address book that each is appropriately labelled, before shrinking them into her bag. “I did that already,” he tells her.

She bites back a sharp retort. Maybe he did. Maybe he even did it well. “Alright, I’ll just go over mine, then. My head’s been all over the place, who knows what I’ve written.” She finds two incorrect postal codes, and tidies the writing on one of the cards. They’re all his, of course. But there’s a well-known saying about discretion and valour, so she holds her tongue.

Despite the rain, the morning goes well. They flit in and out of shops, and the rest of the Christmas list looks to be nearly accomplished. She checks each item – each person – off her To-Do list with neat, efficient strokes of her favourite biro. Eventually, he balks at tagging after her into Flourish and Blotts, and they go their separate ways. She’ll meet him for lunch later, they agree. She browses idly for a while, but there’s nothing here she’d feel comfortable sending to Tibs, and she’s still resolved to do something in that direction. A fountain pen after all, then. It’s properly impersonal to a Muggle, but she half-worries that it might be one of those odd gifts that will really tickle a wizard. Or worse, be taken as a political statement. If she wasn’t quite convinced he used one, she’d never dare. Although surely no one who invites you to call them ‘Tibs’ can actually be
on the fully-blown fascist/racist side of the pureblood spectrum, can they?

Ronald’s late to their table at the bistro, and he’s got George in tow. She’s trying to write a quick note to enclose with the pen, and answers them distractedly. Hopefully she hasn’t agreed to anything outrageous.

George plucks the paper out from beneath her fingers as she’s folding it. “What’s this then, Hermione? Love letters?” He laughs, “Ron, do you know about this?”

“It’s a note to one of my editors; pass it back.”

“‘Tibs’? Has he got a tail, like catnip much? Haha, ‘Tibs, with thanks for aaaaallll your help and suggestions – ooh, suggestions, Ronnie, how do you like that? – best, Hermione.’ Well, that’s predictably dull.”

She rolls her eyes, and snatches it before he can grub it up. Really, though, she’s glad George is there. He fills in all of the deadly empty spaces where she has nothing to say.

They offer wrapping services at the Owl Post, so while Ronald sorts out the rates for all their parcels, she is able to address and send this little token before she thinks better of it. She knows the editorial office’s address by heart; all that’s left is scratching ‘Attn: S. Tiberius Prince’ at the top of the column.

She doesn’t quite manage to pass it beyond Ronald’s line of sight.

“‘Tibs’, eh?”

She shrugs in answer, and wonders if he’ll leave it alone.

He does, at least until they’ve apparated into the back garden, when he appears to finally piece one and one together. “Say, wasn’t Snape a Prince? Or his mother, I mean?”

Yes, she nods.

“Any connection, do you suppose?”

“I don’t know. Probably not a close one. It’s an old Continental family, there have got to be a few still knocking about.” And it’s the truth of it. She doesn’t know. She’s wondered, certainly, but there’s never been anything more than very circumstantial evidence to suggest it. But Ronald doesn’t know about the first paper she published, and she’s at a loss as to how to explain that Tibs has put his editorial oar in most of her work from the very beginning. She thinks maybe, just maybe, it was her coauthor’s name that snagged his attention; she’s been given to understand that he doesn’t usually handle junior articles, and that she has thus been an exception. She’s acutely aware it’s a paper castle built in a windstorm, and that she ought to know better than to reason in advance of firm evidence. Or without any evidence, for that matter.

She rattles the key into the lock on the door. It’s sticking again. “Ronald, I do wish you’d take a minute or two and look into this.”

He rolls his eyes, sighs, and casts Alohomora.

“Not quite what I meant. Doing that all the time is what’s making it stick.” She’s scolding him. Again. Distraction’s a useful tactic.

And oh, but the universe is going to provide her with a distraction, all right.
Crookshanks usually mewls around her feet when she comes in, butting his head against her calves and ensuring that she’s well-decorated in crinkly orange hairs. He’ll act like she’s been gone a decade, even if she’s only walked down to fetch the post. The past few years, he’s given her enough time to achieve the kitchen – it’s cold by the open door, so she doesn’t really look for him until he fails to attend to the tell-tale sound of the can opener. “Ronald? Ronald. Have you seen Crooks?” She’s standing there with an open tin of catfood in one hand, and the pit of her stomach somehow down on the floor.

Ronald is, predictably, no help, and with each room, her dread metastasizes. For a moment, when she finally finds Crooks curled on the antiseptic-white bedlinens in the spare room, she is relieved, and can actually draw breath. In the very next instant, she realizes the truth.

She seats herself, woodenly, on the edge of the bed, and cuddles his limp body in her arms. He’s so much smaller, somehow, with his fur lying flat. She isn’t aware that she’s crying until she notices her tears dampening the spot behind his ears, where her fingers are tracing comforting old paths.

She hasn’t cried since the war.

She doesn’t want Ronald’s arms around her. He’s never even made a pretence of liking her bandy-legged, squashed-faced, perpetually scowling old friend. She pushes him away. He doesn’t belong in this room. This room is where she takes sanctuary, where she is tiny and broken and helpless and a miserable, crying child again. She tries to explain this but can’t get the words out properly, not past this bruise in her chest, this persistent hematoma surely spreading beneath her ribs. “Leave, just leave me be,” she finally manages, in great sobbing gulps.

“Fine,” he snaps, rubbing his hands on the thighs of his trousers, as if to brush her away.

He slams the door closed when he leaves the house. The vibration knocks something down; she can hear glass shatter. It shakes her out of crying. She doesn’t do well with loud noises. In addition to the snot and tears dripping down her face, there’s a cold trickle of sweat dampening her armpits, trailing down between her breasts. She swallows hard. Just something broken.

When she can trust her legs to hold her upright, she sets out to investigate the damage, carefully cradling Crookshanks in her arms. It’s their wedding picture that’s fallen off the mantle. The glass is everywhere. She crunches through it, and picks up the frame. The little Ronald figure is gesticulating wildly; Hermione is hiding her face in her veil. There’s a great gash across it, where the glass poked into the photograph. Brilliant. Fitting. She drops it back onto the floor – she can’t very well carry Crooks and the frame.

She nearly runs flat up against Ronald as she stumbles into the kitchen, legs still occasionally quivering.

“What the hell happened in here?” He’s looking past her, into the sitting room.

“It fell. When you closed the door.” She readjusts Crooks in her arms, holding him closer. Defensively.

“Bloody hell. I’ll… I’ll clean it up. I, uh, I was out digging. For him. Under that tree he always used to get stuck in.”

It’s perfect, and of course it’s necessary, and of course this sets her off again. She sniffs valiantly, and bites hard at the side of her cheek.
Ronald has routed up a box. He glances at her, gestures.

“Out there,” she tells him. It is somehow too gruesome to do this on the kitchen floor.

The rain has slacked off, but she gets drenched anyway, kneeling in the dead wet grass near the raw wound he’s gouged into the garden. She settles Crookshanks into the box, tipping his scowling face down so that his head is curled over his paws. A claw snags in her jumper, and she nearly begins sobbing again, thinking of all the scratched furniture in her attic study. She hesitates, as she’s closing the box. Indecision. Sentimentality gets the better of her – it always does – and she prises the cardboard back open to unclip his collar for a keepsake.

She scoops the muddy earth back into the hole with her bare hands. There should be some inspired eulogy for this last childhood friend. All the rest have grown on, have changed, have disappeared. Have died. And have disappointed. But the words that come to her are neither elegant nor poetic, they are only honest: You were ugly. You were an unwanted thing. You were even, objectively, a right pain in the arse, sometimes. But I loved you anyway, because I saw something like myself in you.
She spends a long time washing the mud from her hands. The warm water burns at first, as she works out the stiffness and cold. There’s a stubborn bit of earth beneath her fingernails. But she can’t wash today away, no matter how long she stands here at the sink.

She catches Ronald looking at the collar on the counter. He – wisely – says nothing. But she should dry her hands, and take it up to the drawer she keeps her memories in.

Not her literal memories, of course. Pensieve silver frightens her. The notion of removing one’s history is aberrant, abhorrent. How do you make decisions, if you haven’t your experiences to draw from? And then there’s that rarely-acknowledged part of her that dislikes Pensieve silver for certain personal slights, the way it had ruthlessly attacked inchoate daydreams, ripping off their wings before she’d even thought to release them from their cocoons.

“I’ll fix tea, yeah?” Ronald interrupts her thoughts, rattling a frying pan onto the stove.

“No, don’t bother, there should still be casserole left over from the other night. I’m not really hungry.”

“Hermione, he was a cat.”

“I’m actually aware of that.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“And I’m aware of what you meant. That I’m more worked up about this than is warranted.” She turns, finally, to face him.

“Well.”

“I’m still not hungry.” And you can’t make me. It’s so petty. She needs to get out of here before she says something that she’ll regret. Her fingers close protectively over the collar. “I’m going to go upstairs and put this away.”

He begins to say something, stops. Swallows, visibly. There is a piercing sharpness in the way he’s looking at her that renders her trapped, like some small creature in oncoming headlights, wondering what he’ll say. “Be fast about it, then. I need to talk to you.”

What nonsense now? She’d rather curl up in the guest bed with a book, try to forget as much of today as possible. Even grinding through the last of the revisions holds no appeal. How lonely the attic will be without him! She presses her lips firm, and unlocks the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. There are any number of little trinkets and mementos in here. Old holiday cards from her parents, little school-days gifts from Harry, the Weasleys. And her bridal veil (she didn’t keep the gown; it was too mucked over from trudging through the meadow at the Burrow, not worth salvaging). She sets Crookshanks’ collar gently atop the filmy gauze, and relocks the drawer. Nostalgia, bitter and sweet, will have to wait upon Ronald’s absence or his patience, the latter of which seems thin this evening.

Why does it feel as if she’s marching to the guillotine? It can’t be some latent ability at divination, else she’d have sensed earlier the misery that today intended to mete out.

Perhaps it’s just his quiet, which is breathing its presence into the dining room, a living thing that
writhes about his still form. He’s seated at the table, elbows resting on the honeyed wood and face lowered into his palms.

“Did you want me to heat the casserole?” she asks, gently. She places a hand upon his shoulder.

He flinches from her touch. “Just sit down.” His voice is rough, creaking past his clenched jaw.

She seats herself across from him. She wants something solid between their bodies. She waits. One of the taps in the kitchen sink is dripping, she can hear it from where she’s seated. She’s about to rise and attend to it, when he finally begins:

“You’ve been acting like a real human being. It’s weird, you know.”

She draws in a sharp breath. Holds it. She knows exactly where he’s going with this, and she hasn’t the faintest clue.

“You’ve blubbered over that cat for, what? Hours, now.”

She nods; there’s a chance at conciliation here, she thinks. “He was so old, wasn’t he? I suppose it’s better this way, you could see it was getting hard for him. This must have been peaceful, anyway.”

“A cat, Hermione.” He’s gripping the edge of the table, now, and he’s not meeting her gaze.

She doesn’t know what he wants. She folds her hands beneath her chin. Penitent, making herself smaller.

“I’m sort of shocked you can cry.” It’s a needling jab, essayed with narrowed eyes. Testing, probing, a stick poked in through the bars of her nuptial cage.

“What are you saying,” she deliberately does not ask: she commands.

He lifts his eyes to the ceiling (anywhere but her?), sighs, and gives a disgusted little shake of his head. “The only reason we even got married is because you were pregnant.”

“And whose fault is that?” She’s on the defensive now, because she can tell that, yes, they are indeed talking about something other than what they’re saying.

“You’re a witch. And you’re the one who came into my room.”

She nods, exhales through her nose. It’s true, but –

“It doesn’t matter. Hermione. Stop.” He raises a hand against her opening lips. “The point is, we have nothing. And you cried more for a fucking cat than you ever did for my son.”

His words are scalpelsharp, and they’re finally getting into the flesh of things, where there’s a long-festering abscess that he’s cut open. She’s strangely fascinated by its discharge – pulpy, bloody, gray-green and yellow purulence brimming up to the surface. Maybe they can just have this out, once and for all. “It was never going to be ‘your son’, Ron.” She says it slowly, calmly, “It was developmentally disordered. It was never even going to be a baby.”

“He.”

“No, Ronald. ‘It.’” Why, after all this time, can’t she get this across to him? It’s not complicated.

He just shakes his head again, and turns away, looking into the sitting room. “I cleaned up the
glass. From the picture. That’s totally fucked, by the way. I can’t help thinking that’s a sign.”

“Oh for godssakes, Ronald, don’t be an idiot. It fell because you slammed the door.”

“Yeah, I did a lot of things. And I think you did, too.” He pushes his chair back. The sound is jarring, and she realizes that their voices have not been raised. If anything, they are speaking in hushed tones, only scant decibels above tense hateful whispers.

Who are they hiding from?

“What do you want, then.” She speaks crisply, normally, and again does not ask.

He stands, takes a step towards her. There is something in the set of his shoulders, the faint shaking of his balled fists, that sparks — for the first time — a sickening coil of panic in her stomach. Perhaps she has been unwise, in pushing, in demanding. Taunting.

Has she cowered, does he see fear in her eyes? He rocks back on his heels, anger or mortification blushing clear to the roots of his ginger mop. “I… I don’t know what I want. No, that’s not true. I… You should go.”

“Go?” She grimaces. He’s speaking some foreign language, surely.

“I’m not bloody well moving back into the Burrow when it’s my family made the down-payment. Your parents’ flat is empty.”

“I don’t understand.” She does. She is horribly certain that she understands exactly what he means.

“I mean *go*. I want you, and all of Snape’s fucking books, out of here, gone. I can’t stand this anymore, I—” He breaks off on a strangled, hitching sound, and careens through the doorway into the sitting room. She hears him breaking things. Christmas ornaments and framed photographs of them, probably.

It is funny-not-funny how little this upsets her.

What do you take, in a fire? In some ways it would be kinder if her life were crumbling to cinders a bit more literally.

The books, naturally. She’ll start at the top, with the most important things. They aren’t hers, anyway; she can’t permit them to burn, not even in a metaphor. They represent a legacy that she is merely curating against the day she stumbles into someone who will need them as much as she has. Knowledge – all of it – is, after all, a gift. And gifts create obligations.

The work keeps thinking at bay; she can’t spare a moment in consideration when there are shelves upon shelves of dusty, worn volumes to painstakingly shrink to postage stamps. She’ll be half a month repairing them if she isn’t careful – too many are layered over with protective spells to accomplish this task quickly. Page protection, anti-mildewing, charms to fix the bindings in place, emphasize the ink, translate. It’s a nightmare, the amount of work that the conservation alone represents. She doubts he ever slept much; long nights of obsessively painstaking work are written in every tome, a transcript of near-crippling insomnia.

And abject loneliness, too, she senses.

You can see the shape of a man’s mind through his library. She is still a bit leery of the places this collection hints at. There is so much compulsion and attention to detail recorded here: every volume seems to have a scrap of paper in it somewhere, cross-indexing another reference; carefully
pencilled notes decorate margins throughout; obscure documents abound. It’s a personal tragedy
writ tiny and cramped – and getting smaller with every shrinking spell she applies to it.

It’s nearly midnight by the time she’s finished. The room looks obscene, heavy shelves standing
empty and violated. All of the truly important things in her life have been reduced to a carpet bag.
She tucks her revisions atop the books, turns off the lamp at her desk, and bids the attic a silent
farewell.

She cruises their bedroom haphazardly. The bed’s still unmade from the morning, ghosts of their
marriage outlined in rumpled sheets. Exhaustion has sunk claws into her, and she’d like nothing
better than to burrow down here, beneath quilts and illusions. Instead, she sweeps cosmetics into a
bag, and wrestles her old school trunk from storage. It’s still filled with adolescent detritus. She
shrinks it all with only a spare glance, and heaps in armfuls of clothing. It’s like ripping off an
elastoplast: best done quickly.

Finally, she kneels before the wardrobe and unlocks the bottom drawer. It was eons ago that she
last looked in here, another lifetime. She tips a pair of dress shoes out of a box and kicks them
under the bed with no little satisfaction. They always hurt her toes anyway, and the box will be put
to better use housing her little treasures.

It seems a paltry, pathetic mound, when all’s said and done. She picks up the veil last. Should she
take it? Perhaps she can ceremonially shove it into a fireplace, presuming she can find one. Toast
crumpets over it. She sighs, and shakes it out. A piece of cardstock, postcard-sized, flutters out of
the folds. Seeing this again is nearly a physical blow. She’d known all along that it was there, but
she’d made herself forget (this is a talent she has).

For a live grenade or toxic viper, it is certainly nothing extraordinary, just plain white paper with a
London postmark and eight simple words bleeding across it in scarlet ink.

Some of that ink has lifted out of the paper; there are word-shaped smudges stained into the veil’s
gauze. Snaking tendrils of contamination.

She picks it up between two fingers, gingerly, as though it might attack her. Which is absurd – it’s
already done that, and she barely noticed the bite. Welcomed it, even. But surely that was some
other woman, whose frenzied delight propelled her into hours of grueling research? Who
meticulously investigated, through subtle channels, every hiding place she could envision? Who
waited on tenterhooks, with the publication of every manuscript, achingly desperate for some new
cue, some new scrap of evidence? Who, ultimately, acknowledged with grim acceptance that this
was a cruel joke or perhaps the effects of a time-delayed enchantment.

She bows her head, as if in atonement, and solemnly crumples the paper, rendering it harmless at
last.
Ronald is standing at the kitchen counter when she descends the stairs. He is eating the leftover casserole, cold, directly from the dish. She sees this as a prelude to his next month or so, and is spitefully pleased.

He meets her eyes in the mirror of the night-black window, and swallows. Is he going to speak to her reflection? He's been doing that for years, and she's past the obligation of listening.

She pulls her boots on, and walks out of her life.

The grass is frozen, and makes a satisfying crunch with every step; she lifts the latch on the garden gate, and continues around to the front of the house. She's going to check the letterbox one last time. Because you just never know.

But of course there's nothing there.

She closes the box, and leaves the key in the door. Perhaps Ronald will want to keep up the electricity, which he'll have a hard time doing if he can't get at the utility bills. Really, though, she should probably cancel everything, else she'll end up paying it. The thought of all the new complications stretching before her is nearly overwhelming. Now that she's checked the post, she has no idea what to do next. Everything? Nothing.

She sits down on the front step, shrunken trunk and carpet bag of books at her feet. She can hear Ronald shuffling up the stairs to bed. The lights go off. She wonders if he'll sleep.

Showing up at 12 Grimmauld Place would be the easiest. But if she does, and it transpires this is only a tiff, she'll be telegraphing undue alarm directly to Molly. And if it's not? Well, Harry's a Weasley in every way that counts. He'll bow out as a non-combatant at the earliest sign of open warfare. Moreover, although she'll never rub his nose in it, she remembers only too well how they shunned her over the Firebolt. She is not under any illusions as to how battle lines will be drawn should she ever force the issue.

Her parents’ flat, then. Ronald's incorrect: it's not 'empty' in any meaningful sense, but they're also not in residence at the moment. It's somewhere to sleep, anyhow. And she'd like very much to do that. Maybe just for a month or two, wake up when things have lost their radioactive glow.

She pulls herself reluctantly to her feet. The cold, or some delayed reaction now that the adrenaline is running down, has her shivering.

She closes her eyes and concentrates on her memory of her mother's kitchen, with its spotless white cupboards, gleaming appliances, and surgically clean smell. There are several moments of blinding pressure as her atoms rearrange themselves, and then she's there, stumbling against the stainless steel refrigerator.

It's been years since she's seen this room. But that's alright – it's the one place in their lives that never changes, because it's not as if it ever gets used for anything. She steadies herself against the counter, and notes that there is at least sweetener – not sugar, her mother's been on a diet as long as Hermione can remember - in one of the glass canisters. At least she won't have to run down to the shops before a cuppa in the morning.

Morning. It's not that far off, but when she runs the calculation in her head, there is still plenty of time to call to Melbourne. Unfortunate, that, but she can hardly impose without their permission.
She pads into their shared office, and seats herself in front of the telephone. She has to look up the number, but she finds it eventually, so there's no putting this off.

"Hello?" A woman's voice from the other side of the globe.

"Mother. It's... well, it's me. Hermione."

"I expected so when I saw the number. Why are you in our flat?" Our flat. A word that excludes her.

"I... I need a place to stay for a few days. Until I can sort something of my own."

"I find it disconcerting that you've broken in so readily. But then, you don't have a good sense of boundaries."

There is nothing she can say to this, except "I'm sorry. I'll leave if it's a problem."

'I'll discuss it with Lester and call you back." Lester, not 'your father'. There is a click, and the line goes dead. She sets the phone back in its cradle, and carefully touches nothing else on the desktop.

She rubs her eyes. They're burning from the tears shed earlier. She draws in deep, calming breaths, trying to trick her body into releasing the tension bound up in her stiffening limbs. This was a monumentally fuck-witted idea; she could have sprung for a room at the Leaky. Or even some Muggle place, if she didn't want to advertise to half the wizarding world. What has she hoped for, anyway? Sanctuary? The notion's laughable.

The phone ringing startles her half to death, a statement on the efficacy of deep breathing. "Yes?"

"Move my suits out of the closet in the guest bedroom. You can sleep there, although I expect you to wash all the bedding before you leave."

"Of course. I appreciate this very much."

"Then don't leave a mess. I will expect everything in its rightful place. We're back on the 20th. Clear out before then." She hangs up before Hermione can stammer more gratitude. It's just as well, probably.

Alright. She has a place to sleep. That's something, isn't it?

There is considerable irony in that her sprawling life with all its semi-secret tendrils should be reduced to such small victories, and that these miniscule skirmishes should seem so overwhelming. Take the suits, for instance: she sits on the foot of the bed, staring at them. There aren't even that many, a couple dozen, perhaps, but it's more effort than she has the will to tackle. In the morning. In the morning, she'll sort Everything out.

Her Everythings have gotten smaller, too. Although maybe that's a mercy.

She wakes at the crack of noon, with the sensation that she's displaced parts of herself again, forgotten them somewhere: a public loo, a grimy café, a shop in Knockturn Alley that she wouldn't want anyone to see her sneaking out of. Someplace like that. Unsanitary at best, disreputable on the pendulum's backswing.

Her day's all disordered, so maybe it's just down to the lack of caffeine. There aren't any teabags (are they on another health kick?), and the stash of frozen coffee beans is playing at being invisible when she pokes through the near-barren freezer. Nor is there anything she can scavenge for
breakfast: a lonely box of bran in a cupboard, a plastic jar of whey, forlorn Worcestershire sauce in an otherwise empty refrigerator. She runs a glass of cold water from the tap – can she manage a shower and a toothbrush before the corner shop? Is the corner shop even still there?

She's forgotten to bring her toothbrush, so she swipes a fresh one from the drawer after a few minutes' debate. And since she's forced to go out anyway, she ought to track down a letting agency or two. 'Home' just isn't, after all. Having stolen a toothbrush, it's only another small step to borrowing one of the pert suits. It fits well enough, and she can't very well turn up to an agency's office in denims and a Weasley sweater.

The rents are outrageous. She considers swallowing her pride and scouting something on the wizarding side, but her Order of Merlin allowance, once changed for pounds, does stretch to a cramped bedsit that she tours on the fifth day. The agent's smile is brittle: what does a well-dressed young woman want with this tip? She'd prudently removed her wedding band, which would otherwise have been an answer.

In the meantime, she's managed to buy respectable Muggle clothing of her own, have the suit dry-cleaned, replace the stolen toothbrush, procure a ready supply of caffeine, navigate the purchase of a mobile telephone, and even lay in a stock of comestibles from Sainsbury's. This flurry of busyness has kept her mind from dwelling on the fact that Ronald appears entirely serious, and neither of her closest friends, the sainted Potters, have been in touch.

She abandons her parent's flat for the dismal little bedsit with a day to spare, and springs for a cleaning service to scour the place of her occupancy. She leaves the cleaners' receipt on the kitchen table, mute evidence that she's kept to her end of the bargain. Her mother would've cleaned all over again anyway, if she'd had to rely upon Hermione's presumed incompetence. Magic doesn't kill germs, or so her mother believes. Her mother is not exceedingly fond of magic, admittedly with good reason.

She makes one trip into Diagon Alley, to send Ronald an owl. It's a quick note, cold and devoid of any grovelling. Just her new address, and a request that he forward on any mail that she receives at the house. She's not going to be the first to crack, and besides: she's happier this way. Isn't she? She has all the time in the world to work on her research now, which explains entirely why she has yet to complete her revisions.

She finds both the cheery strands of music that pour from shop doors and the unrestrained festoons of Christmas greenery and glittering lights to be utterly oppressive. She hurries back through the slushy streets, fleeing reminders that the rest of the world has not imploded into a yellow room with bed, stove, and dingy narrow shower stall.

The bedsit's not conducive to work. It's barely conducive to sleep; she can hear Next Doors' television set late into the night. So she finds herself drinking coffee at midnight in a little Hungarian café. There's no Christmas music, and the only decorations are bright rustic patterns on the china, and the embroidered scarf that drapes across the dessert display at the till. The coffee comes bitter and so dark it hurts her teeth, and the walrus-mustached man who sets down his invariable paper to prepare her order smiles knowingly at her when he selects a marzipan to perch on the edge of her saucer. He's someone's uncle, surely, he has that kindly look.

So she comes here, evenings and afternoons too. She spreads out her revisions because there isn't anything else to do, between marzipans. When she finishes the last edits, she treats herself to a slice of rakott palacsinta. This is the highlight of her week, although she tries not to frame it that way. Laszlo (because of course his name is Laszlo) sets it on her tiny table with a flourish, but ruins it by telling her that the café will be closed over the upcoming holiday. She nods affably, thanks him,
and wonders where else she can hide until exhaustion walks her home at night.

An owl flutters against her window later that evening. It's carrying a plague-infested note from Harry, a few hasty lines that assure her that they'd love to see her for Christmas dinner, but understand entirely that she might not feel comfortable joining them. Well, now *that's* been made certain, hasn't it? She shoos the owl away into the London night, and unshrinks a few books. She'll get started on her idea for time-delaying the reactive and otherwise-toxic effects of a particular class of antivenins, a Christmas game of 'Howdunit'. If she ever solves the mystery, maybe she'll get another note. She wants to tell herself comforting bedtime stories: you are not alone, not really.
Antivenins are a dead end. Dead and gone. The sheer volume that would have to be administered into the bloodstream is impossible to accomplish via the kind of circumspect encapsulation she's envisioned as a method for controlled release.

She frowns at the graveyard of scrap paper littering her table. It's the first time she's really had a good look at this problem, faced it square-on. First, there was Ronald, who might have broken his sterling track record and actually been curious about what she was working on, and second, she didn't want to know it was impossible. She still doesn't.

She retrieves another cup of coffee from Laszlo. This afternoon's marzipan is tinted a delicate pink, and covered over in luscious dark chocolate. She nibbles it delicately, and reassesses the mess on her table. The way she sees it, there are two big problems: neurotoxins, and disseminated intravascular coagulopathy. She wasn't close enough to see drooping eyelids, and his speech wasn't slurred, but he was definitely in the throes of muscle fasciculation. The scene's writ large in her memory, with the trembling, helpless spasms progressing into rigor, his fingers curled to arachnoid claws. It's the acetylcholine pathway that's under attack, the neurotoxins binding to receptors. She flips through her dog-eared copy of the British National Formulary – isn't myasthenia gravis an acetylcholine receptor problem? What do they use for that?

Neostigmine. It's been on the books since 1931, and what's more, it's been used for snakebites. No one gives him credit for being a brilliant Muggle, the way they say he was a brilliant wizard. She thinks he was probably just plain brilliant, irrespective of descriptive nouns.

But there are still the cytotoxic effects. The phospholipases break down cells walls, rupturing them so that all their contents spew out into the bloodstream. But that could be dealt with. Blood Replenishing Potion if nothing else. No, it's the pro-thrombin-like molecules that interfere with the fibrinogen cascade that are the kiss of death. They initiate microscopic clotting throughout the smallest vessels of the body. Enough of them would turn blood to jelly, but what happens is a more prolonged agony: the clots tear through and occlude capillaries and small vessels; meanwhile, the venom reaction progresses, using up the remaining platelets in this sadistic co-option of the body's repair system. And without platelets, the wounds inflicted by the passage of micro-clots can't be patched, and so the victim begins to bleed out, into their tissues.

But his skin was paper-white, and while he bled out, it was rather more external than you'd expect from coagulopathy. So she doesn't think she's wrong about anticoagulants, but then why didn't he begin to leak uncontrollably when he smashed through the plate glass window? Surely there were cuts and scrapes. To manage such precise timing, between the Great Hall and the Shrieking Shack, when he couldn't have known what was coming… Well, it's beyond the realm of plausibility.

Even with anticoagulants, he would still have needed countless transfusions, or better yet, cryoprecipitates of fresh-frozen plasma. At this point, her various scenarios necessarily involve co-conspirators, accomplices. If he'd had them, he would never have been in the position of desperately needing them in the first place.

Occam's razor is so sharp you might not even feel it if you chose to slit your wrists.

She flips back through her notebook, and peruses again the pages she's marked in the heap of books now surrounding her feet. All the evidence points in one direction, and the only thing that's clear from all her equations and calculations is that which has been obvious from the beginning: Severus Snape had been well and thoroughly fucked.
But her original idea, using elastin or alginares to construct coatings for dried, pelleted precipitates of therapeutic potions, is a good one. A touch brilliant, even, as it's applicable to any number of different compounds, and you could vary the thickness of the coating, so as to sustain release over longer durations. So this hasn't all been in vain. She writes it up as a Short Note for the theory section; someone else is welcome to apply the requisite elbow-grease. Besides, citations all look the same, whether it's a full study or not. It takes her a couple days to get a submission-worthy draft prepared, and by that time it's Christmas.

It's snowed again, and Diagon Alley is strangely hushed. Everyone is home with their families, opening gifts, getting started on the brandied eggnog, salivating at the prospect of roast goose and all the trimmings. She feels like a leper, squeaking through the untrammeled snow on her way to hire a post owl. She should buy one of her own, or demand that Ronald give her theirs. But there's a 'no pets' policy on her lease that she'd have to skirt. This is easier, if somewhat uncomfortable. Hannah Longbottom waves at her as she passes through the Leaky, but she brandishes her envelope on high, gestures in the direction of the Post, and escapes any sympathy or forced holiday cheer.

She should celebrate, she thinks. She's got another paper over the transom, and that's an accomplishment. But the Hungarian café is closed, so she can't indulge in the next thing she was intending to try, a confection called an Eszterházy torta.

Apparating home holds no appeal. There's nothing to do there. So she walks, and takes the Underground, and walks some more. Nothing's open, but she browses windows for lack of anything better to do. Well, not 'nothing' – there's an off-license with a neon 'open' sign. She supposes they must do brisk business; by early evening surely the glitter has either worn off the Christmas tree, or people are discovering that their supply of social lubricant is insufficient to the task of dealing with Uncle Horace.

She grabs a bottle of something, nearly at random, from the tequila shelf. At £37, it should constitute enough celebration. And the streets have gotten dark, so she'd best be on her way home.

Mezcal. It sounds exotic, anyway. The label's plain, a winged woman with a headdress; she looks a bit Aztec, but could just as easily be Mayan. Where is Oaxaca, anyway? She thinks it might be one of those lush, Mexican seaside states. Someplace where you can stand on a weatherworn cliff and hear waves crashing in on a beach so bright it hurts your eyes. Or with rugged volcanic mountains cloaked in mist. Somewhere that's as far away from this London bedsit as to be another planet.

Aztec, Mayan, or commercial fantasy in pen-and-ink scribble, it's clear that this little figure on the bottle is no delivering angel. She's too nude for starters, and her wings are birdlike, not divine. By rights, she should be Mayahuel, goddess of agave. But she's only got 2 breasts, which means she can't be summarily indicted for nourishing drunkeness. So perhaps instead she is Quetzalpetlatl, the winged serpent's sister. In that case, the wings make sense – some things must run even in mythological families, no? If that's the case, then this iconography is a warning: don't make any decisions about bed partners while under the influence. Fair enough, she's certainly staying in, not that anyone's apt to want to shag her anyhow. *Nuestra soledad*, that translates to solitude or loneliness, doesn't it?

She pours a finger in the bottom of a glass, then sips experimentally. It's rougher than tequila, with smoky overtones. Drinking it will be akin to self-flagellation, maybe, instead of festivity. The notion appeals to her, and she pours another finger – might as well do this properly.

But if she's going to get plastered, she should have Hangover Relief on hand. She sets her glass down with a sigh. The best laid plans, ground to a halt on her failure to hit up the apothecary when she was in Diagon Alley.
Well, but she pulled an 'O' in Potions. Just because she hasn't brewed anything in ages doesn't mean she can't. She's a bloody expert in Potions, according to her publication record. Times past, brewing might have precipitated a row with Ronald, but that's not an issue. Or it might have made her maudlin, but hell, she's holding up alright so far, isn't she?

She tips detritus out of her trunk, and arranges her old potions kit across her bed. Cauldron, scales, glassware, dried ingredients, mortars, pestles, stirring rods, aha! Manual in which she'd carefully transcribed the instructions Professor Snape had written on the board. Good, because it's been years, and it would be too pitifully ironic if she poisoned herself inadvertently.

When did they brew Hangover Relief? Fifth year, and just before the holiday break, wasn't it? Sure it was, she remembers muffling her grin, and watching most of Slytherin do the same. His instructions that day were tacit permission to get completely soaked, so long as they didn't inconvenience him or Madam Pomfrey in the morning. The other Gryffindors hadn't appreciated the gift or the joke.

She dices, slices, stirs and strains. Look, she's being a responsible adult, planning to be a productive member of society come morning. She snorts into her glass. Damn, it's empty again. She refills it, two fingers, five, who's even counting anymore? She haphazardly clears her bed, and settles back against the headboard to think about Professor Snape.

She'd never gone to his office hours. If she'd actually imposed upon his time, he might have ended their conversation. Arms-length. She knew enough to see that as the key. No favours in class, no acknowledgement of the dialogue carried out on parchment. Was it a flirtation via citation? She certainly wanted his good opinion, but she thinks her younger self would probably have been mildly appalled at her illicit daydreams of his fingertips tracing the mound of her breasts. She trails her own fingers down, expertly popping the buttons, one at a time. She is visualizing his hands performing this task, his eyes intent upon the flush she can feel expanding across her chest. It's the liquor, surely.

But suppose she had trekked down to the dungeons? Turned up in some Muggle civvies? No, she'd have gone in her school uniform, itchy wool stockings and all. Hermione Granger didn't break rules. Much.

She can't envision any linear flow of speech that would lead from Point A to Point Up on the Prep Bench. But logic and likelihood don't matter. He'll just back her against the bench, snare her with some oblique, cunning remark. He wouldn't undo her shirt after all, just lift it to press his cool hand against the bare skin at the bottom of her ribcage – a challenge: do we go on from here? Say the word.

She'll have given him a knowing smile (how? She doesn't know anything. Best not.) She would instead shake her hair back, lift herself up on the bench, and let her legs dangle wide. Slattern she can manage; one quick burst of bravery before her brain gets the better of her. "Too damnably obvious, so utterly Gryffindor." He'll laugh and say something like that, and assure her that these non-faults can be corrected with some judicious education. He'll linger over that word, as he unhooks her brassiere, lets it fall into her lap, onto the floor.

He'll trace little sigils, alchemical symbols across her skin. A triangle. "Fire", he'll breathe, his face lowered to hers, his nose nudging aside her hair to impart this wisdom in a whisper. "Salt, wealth, the body" – a circle transected by a line, centered on the aureola of one breast. And then with his other hand, along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, an inverted triangle, transected: "Earth". His fingers will rest there a moment, testing. She'll shift, in invitation, or perhaps she'll make some little sound that will render him susceptible to the same desire that's burning through her like lightning.
shimmering like a cascade of magnesium sparks.

Whichever it is, he'll slip those fingers delicately beneath the elastic of her knickers, easing them down. He'll notice the dampness; his observational skills won't have been dulled by mere passion. Perhaps he'll rub his thumb along the gusset, and smirk at her. He's pleased with himself, and she's pleased with herself, that she's pleased him, and while she's thinking through this tangle, he'll grasp her ankles and lift her legs onto the bench, so that her center is splayed out before him like some intriguing specimen.

He'll fold her skirt back, and upon her mons, he'll trace another glyph: circle subtended by cross. "Venus", he'll intone, stroking the tail of the cross down, down into the damp thatch surrounding her eager vulva.

"Please," she'll gasp.

But he'll ignore her uncultured begging; she should know better than to interrupt a lecture. He'll tell her so, keeping that finger motionless inside her quim, while he carefully lifts her flyaway hair from where it's clinging to her face. When she begins to writhe against his hand, he'll withdraw it, his mouth a little moue of disappointment. "Really, Miss Granger. I expected you to exhibit more self-control." But this chastisement will be mockery only, made apparent in the way he guides her fingers, demonstrating how he would like her to pleasure herself. He'll step back to watch, one of those elegant fingers gently tapping his lip – it will be the one he's just had inside of her, she's certain of it, and certain he will want her to deduce it.

He'll quirk an eyebrow, thoughtful, and reach blindly—unerringly—for the ceramic pestle resting in the mortar behind him. It's cold against her folds, and the sheer indecency of this sets her pulse racing. He'll draw it slowly down her vulva, resting it finally at the crux of her cunt. "Did anyone tell you to stop?" He'll inquire, and she redoubles her efforts over her clit. He'll insert the pestle slowly, fingers barely brushing her as he does so, eyes bottomless. Her body warms this foreign object, and soon she's only aware of the rhythmic way he'll drive it into her, in time with the undulations of her hips as her orgasm crests.

But why has she done this? Why has she so relentlessly sexualized him in her mind? What is wrong with her, that she would repay his nobility and sacrifice by desecrating his memory in this way?

And anyway, he wouldn't have wanted her.

Flinching with disgust, she pulls the pestle from between her legs, and lets it clatter to the floor beside the bed. She reaches, blearily, for the half-empty bottle of mezcal and tips back another mouthful, before pulling the pillow over her head.

Sleep is merciful, taking her quickly as she waits, in quiet humiliation, for this day to be over.
"You are, what is it, kémikus, chemist?" Laszlo is looking over her shoulder, at the ball-and-stick models she's been scratching for half the morning. They don't help much with potions, but she likes to keep the important molecules straight in her head, when she is able to find their explication in the literature. She guesses at others, postulates composition based on preparation.

"Yes. Thank you so much." He's brought her another cup of coffee. She reaches for her handbag, but he forestalls her with a graceful little palms-out bow.

"The house will cover. You are here all the time. You are at university?"

She nods. It's a white lie, and safe enough.

"You will do well. Study, study, study. It's good."

She returns his smile. There's a little flicker of warmth in her core. It's the most conversation she's had with anyone in days. A week? Maybe more.

She's losing track of time. If the café didn't keep consistent hours, she doubts she would. She sleeps poorly, tossing and turning on the narrow bed, and when she wakes, it's to a detached fog that drifts around her like the morning miasma off the Thames. She's begun taking long walks near Westminster Bridge. Either the apparition or the exercise clears her mind. Sometimes.

She's not sure if it's the destruction of the note, or the destruction of her hypotheses, but she's begun to see them all as abstractions, now, and not terribly interesting. Although, if she's honest about it, there's still a little kernel of resentment, centered on those eight scarlet words. They were a toxin, leaching through her life. Ink-induced marital coagulopathy – little clots of self-absorbed nastiness, when she shut the door on Ronald in favour of scrambling to produce the next thing, and the next one, and the one after that. A rat-race of productivity, but the joke's on the rat: the promise of cheese is a laugh the experimenters are having at the expense of the hapless creature. And while she was busy stifling any passion she might have taught herself to feel for this other person sharing her life, in favour of ardour for research alone, she'd been unknowingly hemorrhaging every other aspect of herself.

She considers therapy, but in the end, she buys a plant.

It's a species of *Dieffenbachia*. She's a bit leery of Central American introductions, after the mezcal, but she likes its leaves. Too, its foliage is full of calcium oxalate raphides, little intracellular needle-like crystals which, if chewed, will produce localized edema and thus temporary paralysis of the tongue, giving the plant its common name, dumb cane. Poisonous plants appeal to her, somehow. It lives on her windowsill, and she even remembers to water it.

She meets up with Harry, one grey afternoon. The coffee at Fortescue's is inferior to her usual, but Harry doesn't like side-along apparition, so they're limited to Diagon Alley. She thinks he just wants to chat, catch up, see how she's doing. (She'd like him to express some tiny bit of interest in her health or well-being.)

But he's on a mission: "I had a funny sort of owl, last week."

"A funny owl, or a funny letter?" She asks, with a quirk of a smile.

He's apparently not in a light-hearted mood, though. "Funny letter. Weird, y'know. It was someone
asking after your address. Said he'd tried to owl you, but it didn't deliver. I checked later, with Ron, I mean, and he said there was an owl for you, but he didn't take it." He peers at her closely, as if to gauge whether mentioning Ronald's name is going to produce some infuriated reaction.

She rolls her eyes. "I wonder why he wouldn't." She's picturing him beating at some poor post-owl with his Nimbus, and thinks the notion might not be far off the mark.

"Er, dunno." Maybe Harry's imagining something similar. "But it checks out, anyway, about there really being an owl. But I felt odd, y'know, having someone asking me. I guess they know we're friends, everyone knows that. So it stands to reason. Still."

"And?" It's pulling hen's teeth, getting Harry to come to the point. There are things that never change, which ought to be reassuring.

"Well, I felt like it wasn't my place, handing out your address. Old reflexes, I suppose. Gin says I'm a raving paranoid, which turns out to be really useful at work, with one thing and another."

She smiles tightly, and gestures for him to continue.

"Right. Anyway. I owled him back with your mobile number, the one you gave us. I thought, if he's legitimate, he can figure out a telephone and call you for your address. That should be enough to forestall a random nutter, yeah? So I wanted to give you a heads-up. Just in case."

"Thanks, Harry." Thanks for making her correspondence more difficult. Ah well, she can see he's tried to be sensible and cautious, and all the other adjectives she once despaired of him ever attempting.

He witters on, nervously, about the children and their various accomplishments, for just a few more minutes. And then he's gone. She rests her chin in her palm, and watches him through the glass, as he recedes into the swirling snowflakes. It's not always going to be like this, is it?

On a whim, she trudges down to the Post, and sends a bland _Hello, how have you been?_ to Viktor. She doesn't really expect a response, and she doesn't really want one, except that she worries, sometimes, late at night, that she doesn't exist anymore. She'd like some independent corroboration of the reality of her continuing survival. Although maybe she was never real to begin with: Harry Potter's friend, Ronald Weasley's wife. No one at all, except in apposition to others.

When her mobile rings, a couple evenings later, it nearly startles her half to death. By which logic, she's alive after all. It's nice to have that sorted.

"Hello, Ms. Weasley?"

"Yes," she affirms, warily.

"Oh, ehm, apologies, I should be asking for Ms. Granger, now, shouldn't I? Slipped my mind, 'though I saw it on your latest, your, ehm, authorial reversion, I should say, but it did slip, gotten used to thinking of you as Ms. Weasley, don't you know. But I'll try my best to get it fixed upstairs, under my hat, I mean. This is Tibs, by the by. How are you, my dear?" This cheerful bubble of social frivolity (no other word springs immediately to her mind) is delivered in the plummy-est of Received tones, despite its content or lack thereof. _Tibs?_

"Oh! Dr. Prince! I—I'm fine."

"Now, now. I thought I'd gotten you trained, we mustn't backslide into formality. Can't bear it. Worry my father's in the room when anyone asks for Dr. Prince."
"Cer-certainly. Tibs. Then you must of course call me 'Hermione'."

"I intend to do nothing but, save that it seemed a touch casual for the telephone. Wonderful devices, because it's a delight to speak to you. I do so wish they'd get the international Floo sorted. No matter, I've found you now. I did send an owl, but, ehm, it didn't quite manage to deliver my letter, it seems."

She flushes hot. How awful. Her editor has run afoul of Ronald's idiocy. "I'm so sorry, I've changed address, and I didn't even think to include it in my submission."

"Oh, don't fret, there's no harm done. To tell you truth, in retrospect I am considerably pleased at the necessity of channeling this dialogue through, ehm, unconventional means."

"Beg pardon?"

"Well," there is brief lapse, with a peculiar pucking sound – is he smoking a pipe? "In addition to contacting you at a truly unconscionable hour, for which my apologies—" It's later in Amsterdam, so what's he on about? "—I really think it's best I have this chat with you entirely outside the office, as it were."

"Oh?"

"It's rather, ehm, not done, contacting an author outside the regular channels. But I am positively compelled, m'dear, compelled. You see, I've got your manuscript back across my desk right now, or earlier last week, I should say, and I confess that the third reviewer I solicited is just as inadequate to the task as the first two."

She sits back down, because she feels as though she's taken a blow to her solar plexus. Three reviewers? Inadequate. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, no, you mustn't misunderstand me." His voice is up an octave, and she can hear now that it cracks faintly at the edges. She involuntarily reshuffles her mental image, adding greyed hair to the pipe and dressing gown. "I am utterly convinced that you've got something rather brilliant here. But I am constrained, my dear, by the process. Despite my efforts, I've got three separate 'rejects', and there's just nothing I can do with it. The situation, I mean."

Well, it was a good thing she didn't treat herself to the torta she'd been eyeing up in the café. In better than a month, the only thing she's really accomplished is keeping a plant alive. A plant that hasn't even been here the entire time. But she is not going to whinge. Not to an editor. "Is there anything you can recommend, that might see it fit for resubmission?"

"Now that's precisely what I most wanted to discuss. It's..." he pauses, to puff at his pipe, and perhaps to find the word he wants, "Delicate. Yes. With your permission, I should like to send your manuscript on to an acquaintance of mine."

"Certainly; you don't need my permission for that."

"Oh, but I must have it. You see, this would be... ehm, outside of the Guild, strictly speaking."

"Oh. So not to a Guild member?" That puts a different spin on things. Guild membership means playing by the rules; peer review and academic acceptance of one's work functions entirely within its constraints.

"Ehm, no. No, lapsed, quite some time ago. But I can certainly vouch for their discretion."
"Yes, of course. Sorry, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Oh heavens, no, m'dear. Not in the least! If I couldn't vouch for them personally, I'd never suggest such a thing. But I think your little paper will fall on fertile ground there, and some good ideas are apt to sprout up. Now, in consideration of, ehm, concerns you may have as to priority, I've gone to the liberty of drawing up a patent application on your behalf; I shall send that on to you directly. You take a look over, sign it, and pop it in the post. Easiest thing!"

She has the faintest sense she's being hustled into something, so, "May I have just a moment to consider this?"

"All the time you need." He sucks again at his pipe.

A patent's a good idea. That provides as much security as Guild membership; her idea can't be stolen without some pretty comprehensive legal repercussions. She wouldn't have thought you could patent something that hasn't got a process, yet, but Tibs clearly has the advantage over her. And if this fellow's not even a member, he's not going to snaffle her paper and publish it himself. Probably just someone on the applications side, able to commit the 'elbow grease' needed for a full study.

"This person? He's a brewer? Or an apothecary?" Although the latter's unlikely.

"None of those things, I'm afraid." He sighs. "Only someone with entirely too much time on their hands, and too little else to do. An apprentice of mine, who didn't take the field on in any professional capacity."

That's a bit disappointing. Still, if Tibs will vouch for them, there's nothing lost, is there? "Alright, then."

"Splendid! And your address? We'll get the patent on the books, first thing, so you needn't lose a wink over it."

She smirks wryly at the notion of sleeping well, and rattles off her address.

As he's beginning to make his polite farewell, she decides, on a whim, to plumb the depths of a little mystery: "Pardon, I expect this is a bit out of the blue—" she's fallen into idioms, something about his locution must be rubbing off, "—But I was wondering what originally brought my work to your attention?"

He chuckles, apparently delighted with the question, which is some relief. "Ah, my dear, I've an eye for talent. I keep a sharp lookout when it comes to new authors."

"Oh." His praise tickles her straight through, a giddy little buzz. She'll wager it all: "I wondered if it might not have been my coauthor. I thought perhaps you'd known him, Severus Snape, I mean."

"Ah. Well, yes. Actually." It sounds as though he's exhaled through his nose. "Sister's son. Bit of a disappointment, really, that he never accomplished much. Still, he managed to teach you an appreciation for potions, before it was all over, eh?"

"Yes. He... he had a distinctive teaching style. I learned a lot." They say their goodbyes, and she sets her mobile back on the nightstand. The novel she'd been reading doesn't seem appealing anymore; she's curiously deflated in the aftermath of their conversation.

But she does fall asleep, and what's more, stays that way until morning. Perhaps something's ended; perhaps the toxins have finally been neutralized.
An owl flutters up to her window the next afternoon. In her haste to accept the envelope it's clutching, she knocks her photosynthetic friend off the sill. She stares blankly at the mess for what must be minutes, and feels like a murderer. When she kneels to inspect the damage, it's not so bad, though, just one stem broken. Plants are totipotent, right? Every bit of their tissue has the potential to become stem cells, to grow whole new plants from destructive beginnings. She clips off the broken stem, stands it in a glass of water in the hopes it will poke out some roots, and sweeps what dirt she can back into the pot.

The envelope, as she'd guessed, is the patent application from Tibs. She reads it over, and it looks watertight, but since she already has an appointment with a Diagon Alley barrister to begin proceedings, she decides she'll take it along and get her hour's worth.

The plant agrees with her, when she voices this plan. She rewards its contribution by damping down its soil, and readjusting it a bit so that it's directly in the scant sunbeam. She continues to feel badly about the damage she has inflicted upon it.

Unfortunately, now there are two reasons to go over to the wizarding side, although she'd much rather continue reading about the cellulose-degrading enzymes produced by ruminant gut bacteria. (She has theories about what's going on when you add 'sheep's bile' to strengthen the effects of a particular stage in brewing a sleeping tonic. It's not bile, after all, but rather liquid strained from cud taken from a sheep's rumen.) She glances regretfully at the books spread out on her bed, and runs her hands up through her hair. Disaster as always, but what with salvaging the plant, she's run out of time to do anything with it.

She pulls a hat and coat on, trades the coat for a cloak at the last minute, and apparates off to the protective cluster of dustbins, a couple alleys up from the Leaky. The new anti-apparition wards around Diagon Alley are good security, she's sure, but it would be nice not to have to pass through Neville and Hannah's establishment. Too many people notice her. Including Molly Weasley.

"Hermione!" Her voice rings out and people turn to look, so there's no hope of escaping this confrontation.

"Molly, how are you?" Civil, distant, she can manage that.

"Oh, I'm well enough. But my dear girl, you look as though you haven't been sleeping at all."

This tinge of concern is so unexpected that she almost stumbles, between one step and the next. "Burning the candle at both ends, a bit." She smiles helplessly, and scrambles to dissuade a chat. "I'm nearly running late, though."

Molly follows her back through the pub, and clutches at her arm as she's about to tap the access pattern on the bricks. Her fingers grip in a bit too tightly. "And where are you off to, then?" she asks, too much cheer injected into her voice.

"An appointment at Dawlings'."

"Dawlings' and Partners?" Molly doesn't miss a trick, and her eyes sharpen. "Listen, Hermione dear. It's fate we've run into each other. I don't think it's in anyone's best interests for you to go down that path. Poor Ron's pining, I really think the two of you need to talk."

"He's welcome to. Anytime he likes."
"Dear, you're like a daughter to me, so please trust me when I tell you that I think it would go a lot further if you took the first step in this." Molly has yet to release her arm.

Somehow, anytime someone asks her to trust them, she is inclined to do the opposite. Perhaps Harry's not the only one who's a raving paranoid.

Molly must sense her hesitation. The woman's like some tenacious pit bull: "Well, but maybe just consider it. You know, there's no harm waiting a bit. Just two or three more weeks? You could be pregnant, after all."

"Er, no, no I'm not." Is this what she's been about? The abrupt entry of her uterus into the conversation startles her into the admission.

"Oh. Well that's a shame." Except Molly doesn't seem fussed. "But surely waiting just three weeks? I'll give Ron a talking to, and we'll get this sorted out."

Three weeks is an oddly specific timeframe. Oh. Saint Valentines' Day. Bugger. Maybe... maybe there's some hope of things turning out alright? Molly wouldn't be suggesting it otherwise, would she? She bites at her lip, and then essays her mother-in-law a tiny, genuine little smile. "It's... it's not actually what you were thinking. With Dawlings. I... I wanted them to look over a patent application."

"Oh!" Molly's relief is palpable. "Oh, I'm glad to hear that! So sorry to have jumped to conclusions, dear. Goodness, and you're running late. Off you go, perhaps we'll see you around to the Burrow soon."

Perhaps.

Whether warranted or not, it's with a lighter heart that she sets off into Diagon Alley. Even recognizing one of the Patil girls as the office's junior clerk doesn't faze her. She can't tell if this one is Padma, who would find both patents and divorce uninteresting on account of there being too little in the way of obscure legal precedents, or Parvati, whose reaction would be borderline schizophrenic – bored to tears and simultaneously slathering after a bite of gossip. Whichever one it is, she smiles, nods, and prepares to disclose as little as possible.

Within a few minutes, she's safely ensconced in a plush, oak-panelled room that smells, ever so faintly, of cigar smoke. Dawlings Sr. is seated behind a teak desk that's lavish with carvings. He shuffles some papers before addressing her. "Now then, Mrs. Weasley. What can we do for you?"

She is irritated, on principle, by people who refer to themselves in the plural, but perhaps he means the firm. "Two things. The first is a patent application; I understand your office deals in such things?"

"We don't draft them, if that's what you're asking."

"No, just to have a look over."

"May I?"

She passes the document across. He unfolds it, peers at it, and then unfolds a pair of reading glasses. The wasted time grates at her a bit, but at least he's a fairly quick reader. "Well, I can't follow the technical details, you understand. I can pass this along..."

"No, the technical details are fine. I'm just wondering about the legal protections this offers, whether it's appropriately drafted."
"It seems to be on the up-and-up. It's an international patent, although you might have difficulty enforcing it in America. Their congress is… well."

"That's not an immediate concern."

"Then I should say that this seems fine. Let me find you copies of our typical templates for this sort of thing." He rummages in the cabinet along the wall, and comes up with a folio, from which he plucks a few papers. "You may have these, of course. You'll see that your own patent accords well with our standard internationals. If your registry office - this is through the Alchemical Guild, I imagine? Yes, well, if they'll accept it, I see nothing that would otherwise cause concern."

"Thank you, I appreciate your time. And, er, the other thing, if I've still got a few minutes on the clock?" Better than thirty minutes, but who knows how lawyers reckon an hour?

He motions for her to go on.

"I might be seeking a divorce from my husband. I… erm, I haven't quite decided, yet, but…"

"Hmm. Well, it's not going to happen immediately, anyway. We wouldn't be able to register your proceedings before the Wizengamot for some time. Our queue of cases there is about four weeks at the moment; Blackwell's across the street is running thereabouts too, I believe. It always gets busy just before Christmas, corporate concerns of course, and then we're all of January digging ourselves out from under."

"So… there's nothing that can be done just now?"

"Well, yes. You may of course retain our firm for that purpose, and we'll certainly draft proceedings. But they won't be registered until the middle of next, at the earliest. You may always drop us a line, and the matter can be terminated if your situation changes." He gives her a hard look over the rim of his steel glasses.

She nods. This seems a reasonable way to proceed, and she says as much.

"Very good." He shuffles the papers on his desk again, jots a note, and stands. "Mrs. Weasley, we shall get started just as soon as we sort you out with billing; there's a retainer, naturally." When she doesn't flinch at this, he plucks at a bell-pull on the opposite side of the room. Within moments, the Patil girl, whoever she is, pokes her head in after a discreet knock. "Parvati, could you start a client file for Mrs. Weasley? Gringotts account on the billing line. Mrs. Weasley will give you her particulars once our meeting is finished."

She wonders how many details Parvati will be privy to, and decides to ask. He's working for her now, after all. "You understand, I'm not committed to this action yet. It would… go amiss if… well, if that particular delicacy weren't understood by your office."

He bristles faintly, and she twists her fingers together, down below the desk where he won't see it for the nervous gesture it is. "Until I register your proceedings with the Wizengamot, your file is going to stay locked in my cabinet. Mrs. Weasley."

She nods, as courteously as she knows how. "Thank you for your appreciation of my situation, Mr. Dawlings."

"Now then. In this purely hypothetical divorce, what are your demands?"

"Demands? Oh. No, nothing. Our incomes and annuities are separate. And there's nothing I particularly want in the way of shared possessions." She can't imagine trying to fit any of the
furniture into her flat. And wedding gifts? She doesn't need a 24-place setting of china.

"And are you presently separated?"

Oh. So there's a technical term to describe her situation. Other people must do this, must survive this. "Yes. Since the middle of December."

"No children?"

"No."

"Very straight-forward, then?" His brow lowers at her, as if he suspects her of being an idiot, or holding out, because this is too uncomplicated. "No part in your husband's salary? I understand he's an Auror."

It's the first indication she's had that he knows exactly who she is. It actually sets her a bit at ease; she unclenches the muscles in her thighs. "No, no alimony." See, she's not a complete dunderhead, she knows some of the right words.

"Hmm." She senses he's disappointed by all this, but there's nothing she's willing to do about that. The easier this can be, the better. He jots a few more notes. "No-fault divorce, no further disposition of mutual property, you to have no claim upon his incomes or properties, and he to have no claim on your personal properties or incomes. That covers it, does it?"

"Yes." She's relieved. It all sounds very civilized.

She fills out paperwork for Parvati at the front desk, and declines her offer of an 'after-work tipple, just to catch up!' with a solemn agreement that they'll do so next time. She makes it to the Post just before closing, and mails her patent back to Amsterdam. She debates stopping in at the Leaky for dinner, but there's a chippy on the way home that will do just as well, and with significantly less potential for awkward social encounters. The day's well into gloaming when she lets herself back into her flat.

"Well, things are started," she tells Plant and Mini-plant. She decides she has high hopes for Mini-plant. It hasn't wilted yet; maybe with a little luck it will grow, thrive, flourish.

And so it does: within a week, there's a little nubbin of root tissue poking out of a submerged leaf axil. She cheers when she sees it, and decides this is a good omen. She'll send Ronald an owl, and perhaps they can actually talk for once.

She spends a long time, penning her apology. She acknowledges she's been at fault, that she's invested too heavily in her research, at the expense of their marriage. She asks if he'd be willing to meet with her, maybe go for a walk together. Have a meal, or even just coffee. She scratches that out, realizes she's fouled the paper with editorial marks, and starts over. Have a meal, or even just get ice cream at Fortescue's. Better. She'd like for them to talk, to try to see if they can find some common ground. She does not say 'work things out'. She does not want to put undue pressure upon him, and the letter's already two paragraphs. He's not going to read it if it doesn't come to the point quickly. She carefully addresses it to 'Ron'.

Mini-plant loses one of its old leaves. In the days between her owl and his reply, it pokes out a new one, though, curled tight and cheerfully green. Ronald's missive is terse: *Maybe. I'll think about it.*

Well, it's not 'no'.

She places his letter on the sill next to the plants, and packs up her day's supplies. She'll go straight
on to the café, once she's taken her constitutional walk down by the Thames, even though it's late for it. She's slept in again, which she's been doing too often, and it's coming on noon. But the exercise gets her brain going, so she's loathe to skip it entirely. She pauses in the entry to collect her mail (bills, flyers, a heavy manila envelope which may be reprints or photocopies of Muggle articles she's written authors for), which she tucks atop her papers and notebooks. She'll find a pleasant bench, and sort through it in the fresh air. It's finally a day of proper sunshine, and she doesn't want to waste another moment of it.
She apparates to the South Bank. It's risky, because there aren't many inconspicuous places to pop into, but the lunch crowds tend to be heavy, and she decides to chance it. She has always enjoyed people-watching along the Queen's Walk. She's coming up on the Eye, and thinking she'll have a sit before she finds somewhere to disapparate from, when a touristy Japanese couple approaches her. They beg, all bright smiles and apologies, for her to snap some photographs for them. They pose together, beneath the giant wheel, and she wonders if they're on honeymoon. Despite their winter coats, there's barely any space between their bodies as they cling to each other in a display of mutual adoration. She'd never clung to Ronald, but then, he'd never clung to her.

She passes them back their camera with a smile, and an unspoken wish that they have good luck of each other.

There's an unoccupied bench beneath one of the barren plane trees. It's a nice view of Parliament across the river, and she pushes her little bout of negativity away. It's just oxytocin, that couple. Of course she didn't feel that flood of happy neurochemicals; she was too busy recovering from torture and war and sundry self-inflicted damages. …quelling negative thoughts is clearly working out well.

The post. She'll do that, and then head off to the café.

There's nothing terribly interesting. She folds the utility invoices up, and tucks them away for safekeeping. Soon there's just the manila envelope left. She hopes it's some of the papers identifying rumen protists and fungi – it's possible, if they don't produce any harmful toxins, that pure cultures might be useful.

There's no return address to worry about saving, but she slits the envelope open carefully anyway through habit. The first thing that's clear is that it's not reprints.

It's just sheaves of paper, varying sizes, varying ages, ripped from some green-ruled notebook. She flips the wad over, and sees that there's a cover letter, of sorts. In neat, plain type, she reads:

Ms. Granger,

A busybody of our mutual acquaintance has sent your manuscript. The enclosed documents may be of some interest to you. As you will no doubt recognize the hand, and Dr. Prince declines to function as an intermediary in this matter, you might as well direct your inevitable inquiries to the following number:

She glares at the page in confusion. This? This is the contribution Tibs' failed apprentice is offering? It's barely a letter, and certainly no introduction. She flips the page over, and glances across the scribbled notes beneath it.

Does she recognize the hand that wrote these words?

Instantly.

Every hurried scratch, every short-handed word, every angle, every loop – they have counterparts in her library, decorating book margins, flowing across lab manuals, constantly dripping their sarcasm and wit into her life.

She swallows hard, and firmly tells herself that there is a perfectly logical explanation behind this.
Her correspondent must have had access to Snape's office during his tenure as Headmaster. These pages are clearly torn from his lab notebooks – she has some of his earlier ones, from Spinner's End, but the last several years are missing. There's nowhere else they could have been.

Draco Malfoy. It's got to be him, no one else would've dared ransack Snape's office. And didn't she hear that he studied alchemy, briefly? He's in finance now, she's seen his smug, pointed face around Gringotts on occasion. She growls wordless fury, when she thinks of the wanton destruction he's practised on these volumes, just ripping out whatever pages he thought might be useful. Entitled little shit. And that remark about Tibs – she reads it again: 'declines to function as an intermediary' – that's got a Malfoy feel to it. Wanting her to keep her Muddy blood a long way from himself.

She sighs.

Although maybe she's getting ahead of herself. There's a telephone number. Malfoy wouldn't have a telephone, would he? Who else might have Snape's things, and be on the Muggle side? She tries to remember if Tibs mentioned any details about this person. Did he even give a gender, or did she assume?

Well, and why is she faffing about? She's got a telephone number, she'll just call and get her answers, and then she'll know. No guesswork or theorizing required. She digs out her mobile.

Her fingers tremble, just a little, as she types in the number and presses 'Dial'.
“Arse-dagger, kindly state your business or you can fuck right off.” The voice is male, young, drawling, and what the bloody hell?

“I… I think I may have the wrong number. This is –?” She reads it off.

“Yesssh, precioussss. Who’re you looking for?”

Oh hell. She knows she’ll sound like an idiot, but now she’s determined to get to the bottom of this, so: “I received a packet in the post today. It’s documents, and a letter to call this number.”

“Righto, hang on.” Then, muffled shouting: “Anyone send someone a bunch of papers?” He uncovers the receiver and asks, “What’s your name, girlfriend?”

“Granger.”

He shouts again, “Oi, got a call here from some bird named Granger. Any takers? Going once… here we are, lovey, got your culprit, just a tick.”

She waits. Her hands are unaccountably sweaty. Endless seconds pass, before she hears a faint growl of ‘Give me that, you tosser’. She can’t deduce a thing from it.

“Damnations. Would you bugger off? Not you, Granger. Sorry. I don’t know what possessed me to give you this number instead of my mobile.” The voice is so instantly familiar she feels like she’s been hit by a lorry.

He’s alive. She can’t breathe. The sodding bastard’s alive and he didn’t tell her.

“Hello? Damn it all, bloody telephones, hello?”

“Yes.” It’s the last of her air.

“Have you got a pen handy? If I could give you another number?”

The scramble to find something to write with, and on, takes valuable instants, despite the fact she’s got all her research materials in the bag at her feet. But she’s started breathing again, just barely.

“Yes, go ahead.” She writes the numbers down in a daze.

“Just give me, oh, fifteen, say. I’m in the midst of something just now.”

“Of course.” There’s numbness creeping over her with every one of his blithely inconsequential words. Vital words. Living words, inanities uttered all unconscious of time of loss of hollowness of death

“Alright, ’til then.” She senses he’s about to hang up, and terror floods through her, but he’s not quite finished which is water and she’s so parched, a morsel and she’s been starving, air in a dark void pressing close. “Please… please do call.” The words are hesitant, uncharacteristically quiet, and she thinks she’s misheard, and she tries to ask, but the line is dead, and he’s gone again, and she’s so afraid it’s forever that she stares fixedly at her wristwatch, desperately observing its hands tick down the minutes.

Thirteen. Inauspicious. She flexes her fingers. They’re cold, and she tucks them under her armpits, but then she can’t see her watch, and what if this is some bizarre magic – she believes in
magic, because of course she has to, doesn’t she? – that will only work if she meets every requirement of the spell?

Ten. A gaggle of tourists presses down the pavement, voices loud and cacophonous. How will she hear him? Her eyes dart wildly; where can she escape to? Panic or stomach acid or maybe the two are synonymous roils up. She snatches up her bag, ducks into the crowd. Weaves, twists, vanishes.

Risky, but she’s home safe, although her stomach has won the battle and she’s heaving into the toilet and

Six. She blows her nose, wincing at the sharp sting of vomit that’s blatantly ignored her soft palate. Blowing was the wrong choice. She inhales sharply, spits. Flushes. Wipes her face on a clean flannel. Well, she hopes it’s clean.

Tap water, gargle, spit. Three. She wants a toothbrush, but knows better. Motherly advice from before the Hogwarts letter: “Run, or count calories, but heavens don’t ever vomit, it will ruin your teeth. And give you chipmunk cheeks, love, which you simply can’t afford, what with those unfortunate incisors. At the very least don’t brush afterwards, it does more damage than good.”

Two. And she’s been wasting brain-space on this, when she should be trying to come up with something intelligent to say. But her words have been left behind somewhere, abandoned, forgotten. She must not have packed them up with her, when she fled the Queen’s Walk.

Damp, shaking fingers – someone else’s, because she’s quite sure she hasn’t asked this of her own – unfold the scrap of paper and punch numbers into the mobile’s keypad. One.

“Ms. Granger.” A soft purr in her ear, followed by a dark little huff, just the barest hint of a laugh. And then, all deprecating wryness, “I didn’t really expect you to call.”

“I—I’m sorry.” Cold, pressing in on her, heavy and smothering. She’s failed again; she’s fallible, but lord, why now, why when it finally matters?

“Oh, I’m tolerably pleased that you have. I just, rather. Well.”

There is a long silence, and her brain refuses to fill it with anything useful. Anything other than the obvious: You’re alive. And you didn’t tell me.

But he has now. Why?

“I haven’t got a script for this, alas.” He sighs. “And mobiles are awkward as all hell. You are still there, aren’t you?”

“Yes. And so are you.” Speaking above a whisper is an anticipation of hurt: she’s so afraid of saying something that will dispel this voice, this thin tendril of sound that encompasses her, that soothes an empty ache deep in her sternum.

“I am. Yes. Still here. I… I expect I owe you apologies. That’s… Ms. Granger, you should know that’s a positive novelty in my existence. Being able to apologize to someone I’ve wronged, I mean. Or, well, someone I’ve wronged that I’ve wanted to apologize to. A meaningful distinction there.”

Wronged? Has he? Wronged implies some deliberate hurt, a dereliction of duty, a willful act of malice. She has long understood that it is only in her own imaginings that he had any obligation towards her. It is Lily for whom he was obliged to live, for Harry obliged to die. “What do you
feel the need to apologize for?” She has managed a full sentence. This is called progress.

“Harm. That which I’ve done, and that which I shall surely continue to perpetrate, because I am that sort of fool. Would you be averse to meeting with me?”

There’s a feeling like a queer hiccup in her chest, a little lurch. “I’d like that.” The words escape her as a gentle sigh, too calm and detached for the chaotic jumble of emotions that is tightening her throat. Who is this foreign entity that has taken control of her lips, her voice, her fingers which unhesitatingly scribe the address he gives her? And who is he, this stranger who commands such actions of her?

“Just knock; I’ll be about, or someone will know where I am.” Such simple instructions. Too simple by far to bridge a gap of years, life: lived, or at least survived.

“I’ll come today. If you want.” But what does she want?

“That would be fine.” He doesn’t bid her farewell, merely disconnects. This is a pattern for him, perhaps.

She slowly sets the mobile down upon the grimy tile, and lets her head sink onto her knees. The acrid scent of puke is still clinging in her nose. She should open the window, air it out, find some clean clothing. Eat something, because she can’t remember when she did, last, and maybe her brain will start working again if she feeds it.

One thing at a time. One foot in front of the other. Make a list, cross off the bullets.

- She strips out of her clothing, unceremoniously dumping it into a pile with the rest of the laundry she ought to have done a week ago. Or more.
- At least there’s one clean pair of denims left in her trunk. They were from her school days, and ought to be embarrassingly tight, but she’s lost weight, despite the marzipans.
- There’s a choice between cashmere that she never wears because it has to be dry-cleaned, or a knobbly pink Weasley sweater. So it’s no choice, really. Besides, she’s fairly certain there aren’t any style guides for what to wear when you meet a dead man.
- She scoops Plant and Mini-plant off the sill. She’d hate for a gust to dash either of them down onto the pavement. They’re only just recovering from their last trauma. “Am I insane?” she asks them. Since she doesn’t hear a response, she is left to surmise that her faculties, though undoubtedly shaken, are probably intact.
- She gargles with rinse, and then brushes her teeth anyway, because to hell with it: Dental charms exist.
- She bolts a bread heel with the tail end of a cup of cold tea – did she make it yesterday? Or this morning, before she opened Ronald’s note?

Ronald. Fuck. And just what the bloody hell does she think she’s doing? (Does it even matter what she thinks? If she thinks?)

One thing at a time. One foot in front of the other.

She survived a war this way.

She survived a marriage this way.

She will survive herself this way.
She will survive Snape.
The cheery sunshine has been occluded by a bank of low clouds that threaten an evening drizzle. The gray light does nothing to improve upon her memories of Hackney Wick Station:

Hermione Granger, nearly fifteen, is standing with her father on the Station’s pedestrian bridge. She is wearing bright new trainers, which she plans to utterly ruin later in the summer, tramping around with the Weasleys. Even now, she’s scuffing them up a bit on the concrete, when her father isn’t looking. Which is a lot of the time. He’s engrossed in photographing the Overground station and its environs from as many angles as possible. Hermione is glad that she can’t see the River Lea from this particular vantage, although she has no doubt it’s on their agenda.

Her father entertains intense but transient hobbies. There have been fairly ordinary adventures, like scrambles along cliffs at Lyme Regis – ordinary except that they went laden with textbooks and hand lenses to aide in classifying their finds, which now sit collecting dust in storage, assuming they haven’t already been thrown out or given away. And there is nothing terribly unusual about stargazing, save that after a few sleepless months of sky mapping, her father’s telescope sat abandoned until she ‘borrowed’ it for a spot or two of Time-Turner-assisted extracurricular Astronomy. Collecting beetles, on the other hand, went to some frantic extreme and was only dislodged by her letter, which precipitated an earnest investigation of ‘magical’ Britain.

Their sharing of these pursuits has been in decline since she started school, but she still tags along after him in the summers. Last year, they spent weeks poking about Parisian sewers and catacombs while her mother ate cheese, drank wine, and caught up on her reading. Hermione can now sex a human pelvis with the best of them, can identify osteological markers for a dozen different disease processes, and has a sneaking, macabre desire to revisit Errancis Cemetery, in order to try out a necromantic draught for inducing visions of the dead -- she saw it when flipping through Moste Potente Potions, but was too much a chicken to seriously consider it. She’d had an unfortunate experience with Polyjuice writ rather large and fresh in her mind.

This year, the summer agenda has been curtailed by the Weasleys’ invitation for her to join them for the Cup, so instead of Viking settlements, she and her father are touring London, hot on the cold, gruesome trail of a pair of serial killers. Already today they’ve done Hampstead Heath and Hendon, where Mulcahy and Duffy, equipped with what they dubbed a ‘rape kit’, began assaulting women in ’82.

By the end of December, ’85, the serial rapists have gotten bolder, and progressed to Hackney Wick Station, where they stalk after a nineteen-year-old girl who is planning to meet up with her fiancée. She is strangled with ligature and tourniquet, after being repeatedly violated. Mulcahy and Duffy weigh her body down with granite cobbles, and dump her in the Lea. Her father would have gladly imparted these details in his bland, indifferent tone, if Hermione hadn’t already apprised herself of them in self-defence against lectures. In retrospect, she rather wishes she hadn’t. Facts conveyed like case notes don’t lodge inside your brain, don’t twist up your heart.

The glitter of the Dark Mark will sear itself onto her retinas in the riotous aftermath of the Cup, but it’s not Mrs. Roberts in her nightdress that she’ll be thinking of, when Arthur decries the practise of ‘Muggle-baiting’. Instead, her mind will conjure again the waterlogged remains of Alison Day. The juxtaposition of the two incidents will jolt her out of panic and into detached analysis.

The world contains things worse than Death Eaters.

Everyone else comes to view Professor Snape with revulsion, and Ronald, perversely, will spend
the better half of Fifth Year trying to catch a glimpse of his Mark. Hermione? For Hermione, this is just another puzzle piece, a detail to file away. She’s curious, but not horrified. Besides, she has seen things that no one else has: scrawls of red ink that lead her into strange and beautiful places, that illuminate wonders, that teach her how to think.

It takes Bellatrix Lestrange and a round of *Crucio* to make her realize fully just how desensitized she is to genuine danger within her world. Whether this is the result of a summer of crime walks with her father, or simply the most logical outcome of a Hogwarts education, Hermione suspects her threshold for terror and violence is higher than average.

And yet Hackney Wick station still unsettles her. Perhaps there’s another place she can apparate into, should she ever come this way again. The Olympic park, maybe. She debates taking the time for a detour, in order to fix its details in her memory. In the end, though, she doesn’t want to be tramping through this ward after dark, searching out the address he’s given her. She glances again at the numbers, then nervously refolds the paper into her pocket. She rolls her shoulders, palms her wand, and tells herself she isn’t the least bit oppressed by the savagely colourful graffiti that looms on either side the streets.

The further she walks, the more this seems a decided step down from Cokeworth. And that was plenty dire. She gets turned around a few times, and her second glimpse of the Lea is two too many. Enough is enough: She ducks into the shadow of abandoned construction works, and whispers, “*Point me*”. It might have been just as simple to ask a local, but if she hasn’t already made a mark of herself, she isn’t about to tempt fate.

She breathes easier when her wand eventually leads her into terraces, but this relief is premature and short-lived. A few more twisting blocks and she’s surrounded once more by broken industrial carapaces. The graffiti is, if anything, more egregious here, and more ferocious. She edges around a corner warehouse emblazoned with ‘*BOURGEOIS CUNTS*’, in puffy letters five feet high. Youths with leather jackets and too many piercings are variously lounging in front of the building, drinking coffee at construction spools that have been repurposed to tables and chairs. She is intensely cognizant of the fact that she does not blend in around here (is she a ‘bourgeois cunt’?), and wonders if she ought not to have cast a disillusionment charm.

Her wand has been growing warmer in her hand, she’s getting close now. The tone of the place hasn’t markedly improved, although there are occasional warehouses that appear under renovation of some sort. She glances up at the scaffolding looming above her, and thinks that a wrecking ball would not be amiss in this place. She pulls the scrap of paper from her pocket, and checks the address against the buildings.

How she failed to spot it immediately is a minor mystery – the building that matches the address is almost defiant in its lack of graffiti, clean windows in neatly painted doors and frames, and a series of tidy dustbins, each emblazoned with a triangular ‘recycle’ motif and some curt designation: plastics, metal, paper, waste. The notion of Snape lecturing about the necessity of sorting rubbish, in full-professorial mode, pops into her head. Well, it is a bit reminiscent of the disposal bins at the back of the potions dungeon (Acids, bases, organics, wet waste, dry waste…). She clamps back a giggle, tucks her wand back in her coat sleeve, and approaches a set of low concrete steps beneath what appears to be the entrance. Passing one of the garage-style doors, she notes that there is a discreet logo across one of its windowpanes. It’s simple: three offset hexagons, and the letters ‘*HIVE*’. As she’s contemplating what this could mean, the door at the top of the stairs opens.

The figure it emits is a study in loud. The tight pink denims throw her off initially, but a second glance confirms that he’s a he, despite artistically swooped shock-blond hair, heavy eyeliner, and a silk poet’s shirt casually cinched in at the waist with a rhinestone belt. Whoever this is, it isn’t
This bloke—this poof?—doesn’t seem to have noticed her. He’s expertly cracking the top on a beer bottle, and scanning the building across the way, where workers have begun to pack up for the day. They look up when Poncey favours them with a piercing wolf-whistle. “Lookin’ fiiiiiiine, lads,” he calls across.

“Fuck you, you nancy-boy,” one of them responds.

“Oh, you’d like to, sweet thing, I know you would!” He takes a swig of his beer, and finally notices her. “Why, helloooooo, precious. Are you lost?”

“I don’t think so,” she says, wondering if it’s still the truth. “I’m looking for a Mr. Snape.”

“Yes, Studley, yes! Work those biceps, baby! Yeah, girlfriend, you’re in the right place. He’s around side, usually.” He jerks a thumb towards the opposite end of the warehouse, “But today’s your lucky day, he’s gracing us lowly mortals with his magnificent presence.” She recognizes his drawl now, it’s the fellow from earlier, on the phone.

“I’ll take you through once the floor show’s done for the evening. Get’em while they’re hot, these boys won’t be back ‘til eight tomorrow!” He returns fingers to lips and whistles again when one of the workers bends to lift a crate into their lorry. He laughs with abandon, as they raise fists and two-fingered salutes. “This never fucking gets old. Yeah, Charlie, you know you want some of this!” He sashays and slaps suggestively at his arse.

“You’re not helping your cause, Val.” This dry observation comes from a petite urchin with too much dark makeup and choppy, uneven red hair, who is closing the door behind herself. When she speaks again, Hermione sees a glint of metal past her lips; a tongue stud, evidently. “And who’s this?” She indicates Hermione with a jerky tilt of her head.

“No idea. She’s on the prowl for our adult. As to causes, I have no causes. Causes are for philanthropists.” Poncey (or ‘Val’, maybe?) says it in a way that makes Hermione suspect it’s a salvo in an ongoing debate, but Urchin ignores him, in favour of surveying Hermione through narrowed eyes.

“You’re not from Council, are you?”

“Ohgodohgodohgod, please tell me you’re from Council.” Val grips at the railing and swoons dramatically. Despite these antics, he’s suddenly interested in Hermione; his eyes are sharp and searching.

“Sorry to disappoint.” She is beginning to think she wants no part of whatever’s going on here. “I’m only looking for Mr. Snape. He told me to look him up here.”

Urchin raises a thin eyebrow, but shrugs philosophically. “You might as well come in, then. Val, if you’re done pestering the local wildlife, you could shift your arse and find that battery pack for me. I can’t very well shoot footage if I haven’t got a camera working.”

“Why not, you could be all artsy and avant-garde.” He emphasizes the words mockingly. “Capture everything with a dead camera, and call it *Ephemera of Gender-War Subversions, Dialectics of Postcolonial Female Identities.*” He scribes wide air-quotes, the blousey sleeves of his shirt flapping merrily.

Urchin rolls her eyes. “It’s no wonder you haven’t got any friends. Are you coming?” This last is directed at Hermione.
“I haven’t got any friends because you lot can’t handle my dazzling good looks, nor the fact I actually get paid. And that I like it that way,” Val sneers at Urchin, who treats them to another view of the whites of her eyes.

As she follows Urchin through the door, Hermione realises that the warehouse’s starchy exterior is a grand deception. ‘Controlled chaos’ only begins to describe the incomprehensible riot that meets her eyes. Dangling above them are beams and struts festooned with wiring and lights; she has to physically step over roadwork and construction signage that appears to have fallen out of a heap; there’s a nude woman reclining on a battered sofa and clutching a bowl of fruit – oh, and a pair of legs behind an easel, so maybe that explains that; a suit of costume armor has been posed beside the door – it’s draped in a lime-green feather boa and someone’s coat; there are computer screens literally everywhere, and televisions, and privacy screens made out of canvas and movie pinups; here’s a retaining wall composed of gallon paint tins – and what’s it retaining? A bloody train track. And a horde of chickenwire frames, which appear destined to be covered in papier mâché, if the completed ones are anything to go by – wait, is that one a giant vulva? It has to be – she watches in horrified fascination as an Indian girl, gesticulating wildly in some argument she can’t hear over the generalized din, adjusts some of the …pubic wires? and they light up, casting scintillating pulses of light across the sculpture. Light emitting diodes, her brain helpfully supplies.

She tries to shake her head clear, but it’s no use: turning away from one spectacle only presents another. Here’s a Middle Eastern fellow gently lifting small skulls out of a tank swarming with beetles. He passes them across to a gangly, owlish woman in a stained labcoat; she grins wide, teeth blinding white against her dark skin. “My pretties!” She crows, and air-kisses in the vicinity of the skulls.

“What is this place?” Hermione asks, faintly. Urchin’s response is drowned out by the sudden crackling whine of a welding arc. The shower of sparks is alarmingly near, spraying up from behind a row of freestanding shelves. Hermione edges forward – away from the door, yes, but also away from the unseen welder. The sound dies away, and Urchin is about to repeat herself, when half the floorspace is abruptly plunged into darkness.

“It is not me!” A cheerful, accented yell (Slavic, maybe) from behind the shelves. The welder, as if to prove his innocence, begins again, and the acrid smell of burning, molten metal makes Hermione sneeze.

The lights come back on. Urchin is grinning wide, with an alarming glee sparking in her green eyes. “This place? This place is The Hive. Welcome.”
The Hive

Urchin’s welcome isn’t an answer, actually. “The Hive? And what, pray tell, is The Hive?”

“It’s not The Hive.” Val has nuck up behind them, and she startles at his pouty addition to their conversation. “It’s Arse-Dagger Enterprises. I say so, and since I’m the one who paid the rent for the past five months, since I’m the only one around here who’s so crass and commercial, and such a sell-out, it’s bloody well whatever I say it is.”

Urchin sighs. “It’s The Hive. We took a vote.”

“Fuck you and your social-collectivist democracy.”

The woman in the labcoat has set aside her ‘pretties’ and come up to hear the conversation. She’s frowning at Val’s latest. “Democracy is not, contra your naive presumption or ill-intentioned inflammatory statement, a socialist construct. Yes, the worker’s revolution is ideally carried out in a democratic paradigm, in that ownership of the means of production can be peacefully transferred to the workers through modification of existing—”

“Boooring. Arse-Dagger Enterprises. I pay the rent. I am the Evil Capitalist Overlord, paying the rent to the Evil-er Capitalist Over-overlord. And besides, you asshats make me answer the phone. So Arse-Dagger it is, and if you don’t like it, get a job.”

“It is Hive, Valentine. You are outnumbered. That is not democracy, that is logistics of battlefield. We should get pizza tonight, yes?” the Slav has emerged from behind the shelving; he pulls up his safety visor to reveal a pleasant, open expression framed in sweaty curls.

“Veg with feta, hold olives. The Hive,” Urchin turns back to Hermione, “is a collective workspace. We’re post-capitalist, or some of us think we are.”

“Properly speaking, we are Makers,” Labcoat stresses the word as a proper noun. “We exist in an autonomous post-capitalistic economy of skill-bartering, to the extent that we can maintain niche industry and—”


“Well, I think that might be a touch grandiose, Maddie.” Ah, so Urchin has a name.

“True art is supposed to be grandiose. Ergo the artist is grandiose, if we do what we are. Or we are what we do. And it wasn’t grandiose, so much as poetic.”

“No, I think ‘grandiose’ sums it. For my part, I should prefer to be taken as serious, lest I run the risk of being mistaken for, well, for Val.” Labcoat lowers her voice a touch, but Val and the Slav are bowed over a takeaway menu.

“Dry is not the same as serious. And successful art isn’t sober, it’s provocative. The purpose of art is provocation.” Urchin – Maddie – is apparently warming up to a favourite subject.

Labcoat’s lips are pressed firm, and her next words are terse: “There are myriad kinds of provocation. Just because my work is not flashy, and does not play on civil outrage, does not diminish its impact. Provocative need not be classless and offensive; art does not need to engage tropes and popular culture to succeed. Warhol did that already; so did Banksy. If it’s not different,
it’s derivative. As for ‘dry’, look, come here, you.” She grasps Hermione’s arm, and her fingers are like clamps.

She has two choices: come, or be dragged. Labcoat pulls her past the tank of beetles; they are swarming over decaying carcasses, rats mostly. Behind the tank, there’s a workbench with precision lighting. Skulls are arranged according to size or species, and someone has been drawing branching diagrams across them in ink. Labcoat lifts a glass teardrop, inside of which is a skull, nestled among Irish moss, and some strange, greyish plant that pokes up out of the hole near the apex of the glass. “This is one of the pieces. The exhibit I’m working on is Jardin Memento Mori. These little gardens,” She gestures back towards the large window, where dozens more are hanging, “will be suspended at intervals throughout the space.”

“Alright,” Hermione says, because she intuits that she should say something.

“These are not the entire point, of course. They’re the aesthetics.” Labcoat continues to pull her along, to a bank of computer screens and sundry electronics. “Look at these, do you know what they are?” She brandishes pieces of cardstock with little rectangles cut out of them in regular intervals. “They’re FORTRAN punch cards.”

Hermione has begun to feel that she is superfluous; Labcoat could talk to a coatrack just as easily.

“Punch cards were used in the early days of computing. The interval at which lines are punched are read as commands by the computer. What I’ve done is evoke that aesthetic, as a kind of technostalgia. Each of these cards actually represents a genetic barcoding region. These, here, are the base pairs from 16S rRNA – it’s a mitochondrial region that we can use to distinguish vertebrates from one another. It’s not perfect, because it’s a short region, only about 250 base pairs. But I can only fit so much on a punch card. Plants, for instance, it’s pretty standard to use both matK and rbcL together as barcodes. They’re chloroplast genes, and you get upwards of 75% species discrimination that way. But depending on the plant, that’s easily 2,000 base pairs, and that’s outside the parameters of what my system can cope with. So I’ve copped out a bit, and done the plants with rbcL alone: 450, 500ish. It is, after all, just a physical metaphor.”

Hermione’s brain has switched off, but she makes a valiant effort, nonetheless. The faster Labcoat is finished with her as a captive audience, the faster she can find herself relinquished, find Snape, and flee. “So the cards each represent identifying bits of DNA, one card per species?”

“Yes, exactly!” Labcoat beams. “Each card in the exhibit is a physical object that the audience interacts with. They’ll be positioned in trays, throughout the space. The patrons can lift the card out of the tray, and physically carry it to the reader. Although, it’s not an actual card-reading system. What I’ve done is highlight each SNP,” she pronounces it ‘snip’, “Each single nucleotide polymorphism, the individual base pairs that differ between species – each one has been painted with a fluorescent dye. When you bring the card to the reader, the SNPs epifluoresce, and that’s what the system actually reads. The neat bit is, the patron can see all the SNPs while this is happening. This creates agency, it makes the patron an active participant in the exhibit. And that’s important, vital.”

Labcoat has been positioning the card inside of a machine, and Hermione can see, yes, that the margins of some of the punched holes are glowing.

“Look here,” Labcoat commands, pointing to the screen. “Once the program reads the card, it uses the sequence of SNP reads to call the video file for the species.” A tiger’s tail twitches from amidst gently blowing grasses; the camera pans and the beast springs into view. Words coalesce atop this image: Panthera tigris tigris. Endangered, IUCN Red List. Fewer than 2,500 individuals remain in the wild.
“Think of it, imagine yourself there. The room is empty, echoing, with just the orb-gardens and their skulls, dangling at eye-level. You, and a dozen other patrons, walk amidst them, accessing the vital statistics of a world in decline.” Labcoat’s voice has sunk low and gentle. “Every one of these cards is a species that is endangered or extinct. All of these living things, reduced to punched paper and electrons. From the Garden of Eden, to Le Jardin Memento Mori. You can’t tell me that’s not provocative,” she finishes softly.

“Sure, whatever floats your boat.” Maddie’s tone is dismissive. Hermione hadn’t realised that she’d come along. The two are obviously engaged in some disagreement that stretches beyond the confines of the workspace. Labcoat is bristling up again, but before she can say anything, Maddie claims Hermione’s arm. “Look, Cathy, the lady didn’t come for a lecture, she’s only looking for the landlord. C’mon, Snape’s back by my space. You get the full tour today, unfortunately. But I guarantee that at least my stuff is visually interesting.”

With this Parthian shot, Maddie hustles her out of the **Jardin**, and back into the generalized chaos. The pubic wires on the giant vulva are still glowing; they pass beyond the monstrosity, and into a scene that is visually something, alright.

There’s a theatre set mocked up in miniature. Red velvet curtains frame a stage, upon which are situated: a large crocheted doily upon which someone has painted a clenched fist inside of the symbol for Venus; a miniature plush divan; and a lady’s vanity, complete with teensy bottles of perfume and little palettes that presumably represent makeup. Loops of tiny pearls and bijoux spill out of small glass dishes, and doll-sized shoes poke out from beneath the divan. The backdrop to this set is a dizzying collage of Harlequin Romance bookcovers, all featuring the same chiselled male. The words ‘Fabio Forever!’ blink in a tiny theatre marquee. Sat amidst all of this minuscule opulence is a beaver.

It’s clearly stuffed, but that only enhances the macabre effect of its red-painted rodent lips, the heavy false eyelashes above its equally false eyeballs, and the crimson enamelled nails on its tiny paws, which are clutching Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*. To complete the horror, it has been fitted with a tiny bra and knickers set, which glitter with sequined hearts. She is torn between revulsion and laughter – it is both hideous, and hilarious.

Denizens of The Hive are milling about, adjusting cameras and spotlights. This is, apparently, a set in the literal sense. “Maddie, did you find that battery pack?” Someone is trying to get her guide’s attention. Another: “I’m not sure, but I think maybe we should put charges under the platform, too, because we’re only going to get one shot at this.” “Maddie, do we really need that area, Gwen’s space, to be completely clear, or can we cover? It’ll be dark anyway.” “When are we starting? Do I have time to use the loo?”

Maddie makes a calming palms-down gesture with both hands. “We can’t start until the alarms and sprinklers are disabled. Do we know where we’re at with that? Kevin?”

Kevin must be the whipcord swot with the intense stare. He’s ogling Maddie as if she’s a goddess or the last chocolate in a box; Hermione can almost see him panting. “Uh, hang on, I’ll see.” He darts away, and Hermione watches as he skids to a halt near a hole in one of the plasterboard panels that line the nearest wall. He addresses a pair of legs and buttocks that are leaning into said hole: “Mr. Snape? Sorry, Maddie O’Shea wants to know how the sprinklers are coming?”

The legs and buttocks straighten up, and emerge from the wall, followed by a torso, followed by Severus Snape’s face. His Led Zeppelin t-shirt is grimed up with plaster dust, and he has charcoal and plaster on his face, and in his hair. “Maddie O’Shea wants to know?” he repeats, sneering. “Maddie O’Shea should be thankful I’m even here, and not calling the Met to file an arson report.”
“Maddie O’Shea is properly grateful,” says Maddie O’Shea, sighing. “But she thinks that if you’d just made the wiring accessible, you wouldn’t have had to go to half the trouble.”

“And if I had made the wiring accessible, you and your ilk would have disabled the fire alarms years ago, and we’d all have been blown to bits when your inevitable meth lab exploded.”

“Inevitable? And a meth lab, yet.”

“Well, I thought the obvious remark about your being Irish was probably tasteless.”

“Thanks. Git.”

One of Maddie’s compatriots pokes his head up from behind the set. “Hey now, I’m the one setting the charges, why is she getting the credit?”

“Because, Brian, I’m the lead artist, it was my concept. You’re technical assistance.” Maddie shakes back her hair, and Snape, perhaps unconsciously, mirrors her motion. Some of the plaster chips dislodge. Hermione realises she has been staring, quite as fixedly as the hapless Kevin, and looks away.

“Yeah, well, I’d like to see you accomplish your grand artistic gestures without my pyro know-how.” Brian huffs, as he picks up miscellaneous tools. The word ‘pyro’ clicks in Hermione’s head. Charges. Arson. Are they really blowing things up?

“So are we good to detonate?” Maddie asks Snape, with a bright, cheerful smile. “Oh, and you’ve got company, by the by.” She gestures over her shoulder, in Hermione’s general direction. Snape’s eyes widen, momentarily, and he begins and aborts a gesture to brush away more of the dust – if she hadn’t been looking, she’d have missed the play, because in the next instant his face is an expressionless mask. He nods at her, once, and turns back to Maddie.

“You are entirely welcome to detonate your beaver or whatever other asinine thing you so ardently desire to do. Mind you, if Townes doesn’t rewire the alarms, I swear I’m throwing the lot of you out of here, first thing tomorrow.”

“The lot of them, you mean.” Val has sauntered up. “I, of course, am a legal tenant. With rights, and everything. Out of curiosity, who’s this skirt, and why’s she here?”

A dozen pairs of eyes are suddenly riveted upon her, but Snape leaps to her rescue. Sort of.

“This is Hermione Granger,” he says, shortly, “She’s my alibi. An alibi with whom I am leaving.”

“What? You’re not really going. After all this hard work?” Pyromaniac Brian appears to be put out at the prospect.

“Townes, the last place I want to be this evening is within a half mile of you and the rest of this merry band of morons. Someone has to be an adult here, and think about what they’re going to tell insurance when half the building explodes.”

“I resent that. As if I haven’t done this a hundred times already,” Brian scoffs. “I know what I’m about. You could show a little respect.” Respect? This fellow clearly did not realise that he was speaking to one Severus Snape.

“You will have earned a modicum of respect once you’ve consistently demonstrated incorporation of the term ‘plausible deniability’ into your respective vocabularies. I wash my hands of you idiots; good day.” The effect of this pronouncement is somewhat ruined when he pauses, mid-
stride, to query “Have any of you seen my sports jacket? I could swear I left it back here.”

“This is it, yes?” The Slav has wandered in as well; he tosses a bundle of drab brown fabric in Snape’s direction, and then peers down at the clipboard he’s armed himself with. “How about you, Jahmshid, you want pizza?” He says, turning to another member of the cult. Collective. Whatever.

“I have to go for prayer, but you can save me some; I’ll be back later. No bacon, and make sure—”

“We know, we know. So no olives, anchovies, or bacon; one veg, one pepperoni, one cheese—”

Val is frowning. “I don’t see why we can’t have one with anchovies. It’s my credit card, after all. In fact, I don’t see why I’m not the one placing the order.”

“Now, Valentine. You know we cannot allow this; only competent people can order the pizza.”

“Competent? And you think you fit that descriptor, Alojz? Watch this, we’ll all end up with sauerkraut on our slice. And vodka, instead of soda. And don’t call me ‘Valentine’.”

“You are mixing your stereotypes, Valentine. Slivovitz. Is better than vodka, no hangover.”

“I swear to God, if you call me Valentine one more time, I will never speak to you again.”

“Oi, Valentine, does that go for everyone?” Maddie grins, as the call is taken up by half the building.

Val exhales through clenched teeth. “Mr. Snape? When can I schedule a meeting with you in regards to evictions? My guests have about overstayed their welcome.”

Snape smirks. “Technically, I have no authority to evict your guests. Valentine.”

“You bastard,” he mock-wails, “I thought you were on my side – I pay the rent; on time, even!”

“Ah, that’s where you’re mistaken. I’m on my side.”

“I hope you die.”

“That has been the ardent wish of more people than you can possibly imagine.”

“Why?” He asks, sourly, “Have you burned down an orphanage? Worked a kill shelter? Conducted telemarketing for an office supply company?”

Snape’s upper lip twitches. “Oh, much worse than any of that: I taught school.”

There is nearly instant silence. Maddie eventually breaks it with a disbelieving laugh, “Go on, pull the other one. What’d you teach, then?”

“Chemistry.”

“Good Lord, you’re not serious? Your students must’ve been scarred for life.”

Snape appears to contemplate this, as he shrugs into his sports jacket. “I don’t know. Would you say you were scarred for life, Miss Granger?”

His unconscious use of an outdated honorific spirals her back into his classroom -- no matter that he’s dressed in casual Muggle clothing, no matter that two decades have passed. He’s Professor
Snape, and she's sixteen again, and aware that her mouth has gone dry. She swallows. Thinks about Polyjuice equations and citations. Thinks about a library of books, with answers to every real dilemma she’s encountered. Thinks about a postcard with eight words that bleed into a wedding veil. “Maybe,” she says, finally.
Come along, he says, and she does. Like a well-trained dog, a beagle perhaps. Harry’s children have one. They are not terribly bright creatures, but following orders seems within their limited capabilities. Beagles, she means. And her. She can follow orders.

Or maybe he doesn’t say anything, only gestures, a meaningful look and a tilt of his head. And she takes a deep breath, plunges back through the mayhem, chasing after the sight of his blandly innocuous sports jacket, so absurd in such a setting, so absurd on such a well-remembered frame.

However it happens, she emerges into the wan evening light a pace behind him. She is close enough that she can smell his aftershave, something piney and bright. It’s another piece that doesn’t fit. He should smell of dark places, subtleties of dusty books and potions ingredients, the faintest whiff of leather, the tang of staled coffee.

He half-turns to appraise her. She can’t read his expression. It is something like curiosity mingled with wry humour or else it isn’t. Their eyes meet, anyway, and in that moment between his slightly parted lips and a breath of words that will [she is certain] irrevocably drag them from known past to unknowable present, she reaches out to clasp at his forearm, to assure herself, flesh to flesh, that he is no figment of her addled imagination.

His eyes break from hers to peruse her fingers, lightly splayed across the juncture of coarse brown woolen coat sleeve and pale skin. She watches his lips quirk, as he gingerly lifts her offending hand. He meets her eyes again, and she thinks she might read challenge there. He readjusts his fingers upon hers, drawing her index and middle fingers into parallel lines that transect the faint ridges of veins when he releases them upon his upturned wrist. The black lines of a serpent’s tongue flick down from beneath his cuff. Perhaps it would seem to undulate in the right light, something low and close. She can feel the hot rush of his blood, the steady beating of his heart. The rhythm of it should make her calm, but every moment in which she is too tense to breathe only exacerbates the panic (or is it something else?) that is coiling in her gut.

He drops his wrist away from her as she chances one shaky gulp of air. There is something about the way he leans away, against the iron railing, which strikes her as studied despite his nonchalant survey of the building opposite. “This entire neighbourhood is changing faster than I could’ve imagined.” His voice is completely indifferent, not emotionless but bored, uncaring. This is some cover for whatever has been communicated through ritual of fingertips and pulse.

“You’ve been here all along? Since —”

“Yes.” It’s clipped, underwritten with an impatient tightening of his lips. “And before. It was convenient, at times, to have a retreat that wasn’t on either side’s registry.” Perhaps not so impatient after all? Or maybe he’s revising on the fly, trying to decide what trajectory they’re on, just as lost as she is. It is a faintly chilling thought. She is used to him knowing all the answers. It is, perhaps, why she continued to strive to know everything in turn. But she doesn’t know how to respond to this new bit of information, or whether he even expects a response. She stares out at the scaffolding across the way instead.

An eternity passes, until she realises that he is peering at her, surreptitiously, from behind the curtain of his hair. He glances away when their eyes brush again. “Did you want to get coffee?” he asks, finally. “Or whatever.”

She nods, but he’s decidedly not-looking at her, so, “That would be fine.”

“Something around here, or are you partial to that Hungarian place?”

“How do you know —” Understanding comes on a wave of vertigo.

He turns to face her fully, and she sees he’s smirking. Not much, just a little twitch at the corner of his mouth, but there’s a matching glint of devilry in his dark eyes. “You really shouldn’t give your address out to just anybody. They could be stalkers. Or they could know stalkers. Not that anyone’s confessing anything, mind.”

Has he followed her, then? Watched her through the half-curtained window as she sips her coffee? Studied her as she’s marked up reprints, scribbled notes? And why?

The question must have formed across her brow, or in the way she’s bit at the inside of her lip, because he answers it: “I was trying to decide. Whether to respond to your manuscript.” She mentally substitutes how for whether, and wonders if it’s not closer to the truth. He has not only revealed himself but given her access to his sanctum. These are not, she intuits, the actions of a man undecided about whether to send someone a packet of pages torn from his lab notebooks. Perhaps he has been watching her longer than he’s admitted. Well, wake up, Hermione, it’s a certainty, isn’t it? Red words drip through her mind. *I have read your article with great interest.*

Is ‘great’ a meaningful quantity? And of what, really?

“So. About coffee?”

“Wherever. Here.” He does not belong amidst the embroidered flowers and the marzipans. It’s a space that she has claimed, as her own. Dead men can stay on their side of the glass. For now, anyway.

He nods. “There’s a place up the street. It’s… a bit… well, their espresso is top-notch.”

With that glowing endorsement, who could resist? She gestures for him to lead the way. She doubts either of them really cares about the coffee anyhow. It is just something to be doing, a kind of adult fidgeting. You slow a conversation down, catch a good look at what someone is saying. Decide how you’ll respond, before you do. It’s why the girls all wanted to go to Madam Puddifoot’s -- yes, to be seen there, but also to avoid getting boxed in by words that might mean more than they seem to.

She can feel her face heating, at this unfortunate parallel with the tea shop and its giggling hordes. And now she can’t un-think it, but he’s not really Professor Snape anymore, or is he? Well, it hardly matters: she’s no innocent schoolgirl. Hermione Granger, Top Swot of Gryffindor Tower, had never spared a thought for Professor Snape’s agile hands.

That came later.

Once he was safely dead.

She is so busy trying to cram this back into the deep dark corners of her brain that she is wholly startled to find they’ve stopped. It’s the warehouse with the construction spools and the graffiti. *BOURGEOIS CUNTS.* It’s on the door, too, in golden curlicue script. The door, which Snape is holding open for her, so she steps forward, instead of back. *It’s a bit…* indeed. Well, she isn’t about to be intimidated by a coffee bar. Even one with spanners, screwdrivers, and circular saw blades randomly cemented into the floor. She’s seen the sub-cellar at Malfoy Manor, after all, and not much will make you blink after that.
She picks her way past a decorative arrangement of old gin crates, in order to lean her elbows on the bar while perusing the specialties menu. There’s a goodly selection of cocktails, but This. Is. Not. A. Date. (She and Ronald had tried having date nights. With cocktails, even. It had been spectacularly boring, aside from determining how many she could tie on and still apparate home in one piece.) She firmly banishes both Ronald, and Madam Puddifoot’s, from her mind once more, and orders a hazelnut latte, because she has it on good authority that the espresso is decent here.

Snape insists on paying, and she shrugs after a token argument. He’s probably got more money than she has, anyway. Did he manage to collect life insurance, she wants to ask. There’s a little bubble of slightly-hysterical laughter ricocheting around inside of her; she bites the inside of her cheek, and tests her latte.

It’s good. Not as good as the coffee Laszlo provisions her with, but then, it’s more a dessert than a proper cup of brain-starter. She rolls some of the tension out of her shoulders while Snape is occupied with choosing their table. She rejects the one by the window; it’s unfair for one of them to be backlit and expressionless, whilst the other is put on display by the sun’s waning light. She bets that choice was deliberate on his part; he’d have to have instincts for that kind of thing. Once a spy…

A roadsign clamped to a pair of sawhorses and lit by a dangling incandescent bulb fitted with wire guards proves an acceptable compromise. She seats herself on a varnished construction spool. Crosses her arms. Uncrosses them. “It’s got ambience, anyway,” she finally opines, for something to say.

“It does at that. It was an attempt at a high-end lingerie shop, a few years ago. That’s when it was first tagged.”

“Tagged?”

“The graffiti. The lease has changed hands a few times, and this lot have finally got a sense of humour about everything. I expect the place is on its way to becoming a fixture. If there’s one thing London will always support, it’s another pub.”

She nods; it’s probably true. They appear to have descended to axioms. Maybe it’s a date after all, because this is what happens, in her experience. She shakes the thought out of her head with an admonishment to be serious.

She must have visibly twitched as well, because Snape sighs and carefully sets his mug down. He steeps his fingers beneath his chin and gazes solemnly at her. In that grave instant he is fully once more the critical taskmaster, the domineering genius; both the secret friend she cherished in the margins of her stuttering attempts at serious work and the unknowable mentor whose own experiments she painstakingly reconstructed from green-ruled notebooks, and ultimately surpassed.

“I confess I’m still surprised you’ve come. But I suppose you are curious, that you have questions.”

She can’t really respond to this. She isn’t sure why she’s come. Curiosity is a good enough excuse. Curiosity killed the cat. Except that it didn’t, old age did. She shrugs; he can interpret that how he likes.

“Go on, then.”

“I suppose I mostly want to know why.”
“Any particular ‘why’, or are you after the existential?”

“Why send that note in the first place? Why invite me to call you, to meet?”

He opens his mouth to answer, stops. Worries his lower lip behind the raised coffee mug, probably thinking she won’t see. Begins again, “I think… I wanted to talk to you. I’ve never actually spoken with you before, and I find I have no idea who you are.”

“Why now, then? Why not any time in the past decade or more?”

“You mean the postcard.”

No, she hadn’t. Well, yes, but… Well, yes, fine, that’s it exactly. “Why did you send it in the first place?”

He is silent. Beyond a faint tension in his lips, his face reveals nothing, and his eyes are looking past her. Abstraction is a country which you cannot travel to or from with any great haste, so she studies him with impunity.

This is not unlike the long glances she was sometimes afforded, when there was a lull in her brewing and she could contemplate the potions master: either seated at his desk, or idly flipping through the inevitable tome upon his lectern, or even stalking up and down the rows, arms tightly folded over his chest to prevent the long sleeves of his robes dragging through their work. He seems just as unaware of her scrutiny now. The only differences lie in how much smaller the physical space between them. She can see the lines at the corners of his mouth and between his brows, purpled shadows beneath his eyes, the beginnings of stubble, that his sideburns have been trimmed slightly uneven, that there are stray silver strands at his temples, disappearing behind his ears where he has pushed his hair away from his face. She’s never seen his ears before. They are almost delicate; strangely graceful and thus at odds with the promontory of his nose. She wonders what, if anything, it signifies that he tucks back his hair now.

“There are a lot of people who would be pleased to know you’re alive,” she offers finally, tentatively; anything to break the quiet.

His mouth twists up in what could be a mocking smile in some particular light, but here is only a grimace. “There are a lot of people who would like to own me again, you mean. I have had my fill of being a possession, thank you.”

She nods, she can understand this, and so she shares her own metaphor for what they were: “A playing piece.”

He tilts his head in acknowledgement. “You’ll understand, then, that I would prefer…” He trails off, and there is a slight pinking of his sallow cheekbones, as if he is embarrassed by what he was about to say.

Oh. “Who would I tell, even if I were inclined?” Well, Harry, but no. She’d have to give him backstory and context, and… No.

He gives her a short nod, a little ducking of his chin, as though they have accomplished some mutually acceptable transaction. Perhaps they have. She sips her latte.

“I don’t know why I sent it.” This snaps her attention back; she’d half-thought he meant to ignore her after all, but he is continuing in spite of his earlier reticence. “There are half a dozen different things I could tell you, but the truth, the only truth of it, is that I have no idea. I don’t know what I thought to accomplish by it. There was no clear good it could have done. You were standing on
your own two feet, you’d taken those ideas we shared and created something brilliant. And you had plenty of people telling you so, I know Uncle Tibs fairly raved over you. So if there was no good it could do, I’m left to presume that my sending it was intended to produce harm. And I am sorry for that, because it was not something you deserved at my hand. At anyone’s.”

His eyes, guileless and a little sad, are searching her face. She isn’t sure what reaction he’s looking for, or what her own eyes convey. The trouble is, she doesn’t believe him. Severus Snape, repentant martyr, is at odds with the reality of this man, sitting in front of her, very much alive and breathing in his scruffy sports jacket and Led Zeppelin tee, nervously toying with the handle of his mug. She’d believe that the dead one, Professor Snape, might have chosen to submit malice via the daily mail. That fellow’s goals and aims were obvious and one-dimensional. She could accept a superficial explanation from him. But not this man, who had at least cared enough for himself to keep on living.

“The moment I tipped it in the mailbox, I regretted having done so. There were so many people, I couldn’t risk being seen summoning it back, and by the time the crowd had cleared, well, they’d collected the post, and… I hoped, later, that perhaps it hadn’t delivered. Your research ticked along just fine, and you’d gotten married, stayed out of the press; nothing amiss, that I could tell, from reading your papers.”

Plenty had been amiss. But she’s confused now, why did he think she’d gotten married after – oh. She’d started using her married name after that first article. So was it her reversion to ‘Granger’, on the latest submission, that had drawn him out of the woodwork? Was he curious, did he think he could satisfy his pet hypothesis, pin some blame upon his note? Decide, finally, whether or not he’d intended to provoke some distress by sending it in the first place? She pictures him, standing in front of his shaving mirror, and asking himself, Well, Snapey my lad, are you a good person or ain’t you? Sinner or saint.

The trouble is, the world does not fall into neatly dichotomous categories.

It has been her turn to sit in abstraction. Her mind travels on, to a cramped yellow room and a rickety café table and the little pool of warmth that wells up when Laszlo recognizes her as his regular. “I think,” she says, tasting her words as they slowly fill the space between them, “That if any forgiveness is necessary, you may certainly have it. But I think you’re wrong. I think you sent it because you wanted someone to know that you existed, that you were real. It’s easy to lose track of whether or not you’re real, I’ve found.”

He looks away, focussing on his hands, which are still now. “Maybe that’s it,” he finally says.

They finish their drinks in silence, and exit the café in unspoken accord. Did you want me to walk with you to the station, he asks, but she declines. Let me know if you have any questions about the papers I sent you, you know where to find me. She does. She nods goodbye, and hurries away. Back to her yellow room. Huddled beneath her blankets, she twists her fingers in the fabric, but it’s no good: she can still feel his pulse.
Suppositions

She wakes from a dream of stickiness, of blood. She has been back in the moldering remains of the Shack, and the sharp metallic smell of it is overwhelming. She has pressed her fingers against the fountain of it, and dark rivulets flow down over her white knuckles, and he says, look at me, and she is pushed aside and it seems then that the blood is welling from her own hands, or no, not her hands, but from between her thighs, blossoming beneath her robes as she lays here on the floor, back pressed hard against the cold ceramic base of the toilet, teeth clenched against a piteous moan of apology to the universe at large. To Severus Snape.

It didn’t happen like that. She recites the phrase over again, silently mouthing the words. It wasn’t like that. And it slowly dawns on her that she’s awake, and it really wasn’t. Not at all. Because he’s alive.

He’s alive.

She claws her way out from beneath her blankets and stumbles, in the grey half-light, to lean against the cool glass of the windowpane. She can feel this, it’s real. She reaches out to brush Mini-Plant’s leaves, and even though she can’t see the variegations, their smooth, slightly damp feel is enough indication that they’re real, too. And she feels silly having done this, so she turns this odd gesture into something practical, and pokes the soil around Plant’s base. It’s getting a little dry, she’ll give it some water later. She lifts her hand to her face, hoping to smell earth, clean dirt. Anything to get the odour of blood out of her nose, out of her mind.

Her fingers are smeared over, with something dark and tacky. She turns her hand, like a foreign object, while tendrils of cold coil in her stomach. Not a dream, her mind supplies, as she frowns at the blood crusting along her cuticles. Not – no, of course it was. She plucks at her knickers.

“Fuck.” She startles at the volume of her own voice, but she’s quite sure she’s awake now. “I liked this pair,” she whines for good measure, as she pulls the cord on the light, above what passes for a bathroom sink.

She turns the tap to run cold water. It’s not so different than it was back in school, always fretting about spots and stains, and why wasn’t there a good spell to repel blood from fabric? Maybe there was. Molly probably knew one. She’d never asked, never thought to. But it would have come in handy, and not just for blood. She’d had a ‘Potions set’ of robes, because even the house elves couldn’t launder the worst of what she occasionally splashed. Professor Snape’s robes had never looked grimy, though – maybe he knew some decent charms for it. She could ask him. Her fingers tighten involuntarily on the wet fabric, and it takes conscious effort to remember how to open them.

He’s alive. But she can’t think about that now. Not until she’s had a cup of tea, gotten showered. Sorted out her bloody knickers.

She grimaces: one of the stains won’t lift. Soap? Chlorine? Just give it up as a bad job? She misses contraceptives. There’d been whole years, when she hadn’t had to worry about waking up to something like this. But it was just like Lavender Brown had said, sooner or later they always stopped working, so you had best get a thermometer and keep track of your temperature. It’s the kind of thing that every witch knew. Except Hermione, of course, so it was lucky, in retrospect, that Lavender was a horrid chatterbox – she’d actually learned something important from her, despite her younger self’s annoyance that they couldn’t take their gossip elsewhere.

Her present self gives up scrubbing, shoves the stopper in the sink, and runs some water. She’ll let
them soak, and maybe that will accomplish something. Wonder of wonders, the sheets have escaped. She switches the electric kettle on, sees that there’s still some blood on her hand, and retreats to the shower.

Has anything really changed, though? She watches a swirl of colour, rust-pink, as it dilutes across the tile, disappears toward the drain. He is alive, yes, but so what? She is not a part of a world where this makes any real difference, nor is he. He doesn’t owe her anything, and neither of them owes the past.

Unless, of course, the past owes them – owns them? Did his apologies of yesterday anticipate absolution? For the postcard? For setting her on this path to begin with? For… she can’t imagine that he would want to be forgiven for having abandoned her, because surely it only looks that way from her own self-absorbed perspective. ‘Because I wanted to talk to you’ he said. What does that even mean?

She scrubs her body and wonders what these years have looked like to him. What kind of person is he, now – or was he always? There is a version of this man who inhabits her mind, but how much reality does that invention encompass? Can the two be reconciled – and does she need to?

She should not, she firmly admonishes, as she binds her hair in a towel, be making her life any more complicated than it is.

A bedsit, a shrunken library, a rejected manuscript, an estranged husband, and a cup of tea do not really offer enough permutations to qualify as ‘complicated’, but she hasn’t had that tea yet, and the older she gets, the broader her definitions are in the absence of caffeine.

The question at the core of this is, what does she want of him? Not of her distant childhood mentor, nor of the fantasy figure with his deft hands, but of the man who sat across from her in his scruffy muggle clothes, with his searching sad eyes? There is only one Severus Snape who is real, and she needs to figure out if she desires any of whatever he imagines he might owe her.

Does she owe him anything?

She places her mug of tea upon the bedside table with careful deliberation, and seats herself cross-legged against the headboard. The iron struts behind her shoulder blades remind her of the way the lavish carvings on her dormitory bed used to dig at her spine. The sheaf of pages that she pulls from the confines of their manila envelope have a slightly herbal scent that she hadn’t noticed in yesterday’s sunny afternoon. Here it mingles with swirling dust motes that catch in the square of dawn that is creeping across her tangled bedding. She ducks her face into the pages and inhales. Her shoulders have hunched in, an involuntary reaction. She scowls and straightens. No one can see her here. And yet she sets the pages down, summons a notebook and a biro, and prepares to be properly detached and scientific about this.

She can’t quite convince herself that he’s set her a challenge. It is more likely that he simply refused, for whatever reason, to annotate these pages for her convenience. A fast shuffle through them does not reveal intent or connection; they seem disorganized, disjoint. But she has spent plenty of time with his mind before. She takes a sip of tea, readies her biro, and starts again at the beginning. There will be a thread, somewhere; she only has to find it.

She skims through a ream of notes on alginates and elastins, on preparations of shellac. It is clear enough why he sent these; the correspondence with her own work is obvious. She pauses to marvel at a table of observations: from what she can tell, he’s encapsulated a reactive dye and subjected the resultant beads to digestion in varying concentrations of hydrochloric acid, and then in solutions of pepsins and bicarbonate. It is obvious enough that he’s simulated digestion. There
are lines scratched through whole columns – not enough to obscure the data, but certainly a
statement of frustration. She can see gouges and miniscule rips where the point of his quill dug in
too deeply. The back of one of these pages contains a scrawled list:

\[
\begin{align*}
C_{12}H_{19}NO_{20}S_{3} \\
\text{warfarin? oral} \\
\text{acetylsalicylic acid } C_{9}H_{8}O_{4} \\
Echis carinatus
\end{align*}
\]

It strikes her as an aside, a semi-random doodle of a distracted mind. There are no other mentions
in the next several pages; she flips through to make sure. No, it’s more of the same. He tried
suspending a powder of something in a gel matrix, it looks like. That too was subjected to pepsins,
and then the matter abandoned. Shellacs have a whole page, he seems to have spent some time
with them: the consistency and flow of his ink changes at least four times, and there are random
spatters and smears of something spilled on the page. She isn’t surprised to find that these offenses
have fixed this page to the one behind it. Do they belong together? Or did he just not make an
effort to peel them apart, before he ripped them out of his lab book? She summons the cloth from
her shower; it’s still damp, and per her suspicion, moistening the paper allows her to tease the
pages from one another.

The second is also arranged in a table, and it gives her an icy chill: its columns are headed **Dose**
(µg/kg), **Coag time** (s), **Venom concentration** (µg/L); halfway down the page the ‘Dose’ column
becomes **Neutral blood draw + X compound** (µg/L) – she senses that the data have not been
cooperating with him, and that he has given up careful analysis in favour of ex vivo
experimentation. *E. carinatus* soln. shows up here. And *neostigmine*, too. Threads, just threads.
But he was clearly thinking in the same direction she did, and she sloshes her tea when she tries to
lift it, to drink. There are sharp scrawls all across the margins: **worthless useless idiocy fuck this
waste of time stupid pointless**.

It is clear enough that he has been attempting to create a prophylactic, one compound or several,
some measure to prolong his life, to cheat death. Her breathing has gone so shallow, and she feels
lightheaded, a horrified nausea clawing at her throat. A small sound escapes her, a sort of animal
gasp, and then there are burning tears pooling into the corner of her mouth. How must he have felt,
meeting failure after failure – for there are no successes writ in the tables, only hashes, X’s,
unrelenting strokes through entry after entry. How must he have felt, pursuing these fruitless
endeavours, certain in the knowledge that it could only be a matter of time before he met one bad
end or another?

**worthless useless idiocy fuck this waste of time stupid pointless**

The experiments, or himself?

The last of the pages is titled *Weasley antivenin*, but is a tabulation of dissolution rates; shellacs are
back, and so too are alginate gels, a collagen compound, and what looks to be a kind of cellulose
acetate. Atop all this is a spatter of ink and firm letters that form the words ‘permits only
inadequate quantities’. They are the most deliberate words he’s written throughout these pages,
every letter well-formed and distinct. They are a judgement, not unlike the way he graded papers.
His letter grades could never be mistaken for one another, no matter how hard Harry and Ronald
had tried. And these words are just as certain, an indictment of failure far more desperate and
abject than harmless ‘T’. Only the ink spatters convey that this proclamation may have been
accompanied by any emotion.

She swipes at her face again. She isn’t crying, but her eyes won’t stop watering. So acute is this
problem that at first she fails to notice the note scratched at the bottom of the page: *keep it simple, stupid.* The word *portkey* is enclosed in a sphere labelled *gel*, itself surrounded by the words *shellac capsule*.

She half-stumbles, half-falls off the bed, laughing like something possessed. It’s too beautiful, too perfect, too absolutely, irredeemably pragmatic. Her every scenario had ground down on the need for a co-conspirator – he’d bypassed scenarios entirely, and probably bled all over Tibs’ dining room floor. She stuffs a fist against her mouth, bites hard at her knuckle, but it’s no use, another hysterical gale collapses her onto the floor again. Finally, her ribs are aching too much to sustain more than the occasional weak chuckle, and she wonders to what extent the mysterious Dr. Prince has been manipulating her. Them. Her.

Because if her suppositions are correct, it is clear enough that he was likely party to his nephew’s pursuit of the same theories she’d so smugly written up in a short note. She is no longer sure of the terrain here in Slytherin-Land: does Tibs want Snape acknowledged? Does he genuinely want them working together? Were there even three reviewers? He’d said that he thought her idea was quite brilliant, but *that* can’t have been the truth. How much else is suspect?

She takes a deep, calming breath, untangles her feet from the sheets that are snarled up around her legs – no wonder she fell – and pulls herself into some semblance of a dignified posture. She’s still on the floor, but you can’t tell that over a mobile. She presses in his number before she can think better of it.

It rings a long time. It’s still early, she’s probably waking him.

Connection, finally, but the voice that answers it is all wrong. A woman’s voice. That Irish lilt can only be Maddie O’Shea. “‘Lo, how’s the day treating you then?”

“I… I was calling for Mr. Snape.” She should hang up. She should hang up *now*.

“Right, mate. Here he is,” then, from a distance, “It’s for you, Severus.”

“Of course it is. It’s my mobile. Good morning?”

“Er, good morning. It’s Hermione Granger.”

“Yes?”

“I, uh, I had some questions. About, about…”

“The papers I sent. Fast questions, or… No, just come over. I have the morning free.”

Her hands are clammy when she disconnects, and nothing is the slightest bit amusing anymore. She jabs a cleaning charm at a pair of denims and a tee that she thinks probably still fits. She really must do the laundry properly. It is time to grow up.

Or to pretend familiarity with the state, at a bare minimum. She wonders if there are niceties to be observed, and wishes, once again, that she’d been prescient enough to ask Molly’s advice. She’ll bring pastries, she decides. It doesn’t hint at familiarity the way bringing coffee might, and she won’t have to knock on his door empty-handed. The Hungarian café is out – she can’t fathom that sweets are in order – but she knows a bake shop that sells croissants. That is casual enough, without looking cheap. She is a professional, after all. A near-colleague, and not some grimy schoolchild.

White paper pastry bag in hand, and the smell of butter in her nose, she pops into existence in
Hackney Wick, half-hidden in the shadows of construction works. Crews are coming to life; she hears the low grumble of a crane, a distant shout of *Oi, watch yerself!*, the clang of hammers, the high whine of saws. The day is fully in motion, even as she’s thinking forlornly of her bed, and wishing she were back in it. With a hot water bottle, perhaps.

But she told him she would come. She squares her shoulders and sets off to the warehouse. The Slav is sitting on the concrete step, smoking a cigarette. He forestalls her greeting by pointing to the far end of the building. Is she expected, or has he merely ascertained she has no business with any of their little cult?

Or does she? Is Snape only the landlord, or is he a participant? And why are they even here – it hadn’t sounded, from the way they talked, that he collected much rent off them. It is odd, but not, she decides, her mystery to solve. Her lips turn down in a wry smirk. She is procrastinating, she acknowledges.

Snape’s domicile, if such it is, is not thematically distinct from the larger part of the warehouse. There is no graffiti, and the pavement is free of rubbish. The windows are conspicuously clean, and one even has a window box beneath it. There are little green spikes poking up out of its soil. That, and the mat in front of the door, are such unexpected touches of domesticity that she is nearly cowed by them. The only thing that prevents her departing immediately is that the doormat reads *UNWELCOME*.

She re-rolls the top of the bag, and presses the buzzer with the last spasm of courage she owns. She is cognizant in that moment that this is a remarkably daft idea.

Evidence of that supposition opens the door. It’s the red-headed urchin, Maddie O’Shea. Her mop of hair is tousled, there are archeological smudges of dark makeup circling her narrow eyes, and she is wearing nothing more than an unflattering tee and a pair of knickers. “Hullo?” she asks, peering at Hermione as if trying to place her, “You’re the bird from yesterday evening, right?”

“I, umn, Mr. Snape said to stop ‘round this morning. I, uh, I brought croissants.” It’s so inane. Why is there no construction around here, there’d at least be some saving grace in the chance of being brained by a falling brick.

“Knock your boots off and come in. Oi, Snape, your company’s here!” She turns back to Hermione, “Thank the Lord you’ve come prepared. Croissants are perfect, this one hasn’t got the faintest clue about breakfast. It’s been porridge all week.”

“Fuck you too,” the man himself says conversationally, as Hermione follows her in. Snape is dressed once more in muggle civvies, a button-down shirt and nondescript trousers. He looks to have been awake for some little time; he’s shaven and his hair appears slightly damp. “You’re entirely welcome to exert your own good self, you know. Good morning, Ms. Granger. Coffee, or tea?”

God, and what can she do? Deposit the croissants and flee? It’s too ridiculous. “Coffee, ta.”

“This way, Ms. Granger. Maddie, tell me you didn’t answer the door like that.”

“Of course not. I just naturally took my trousers off after I said ‘hello’. Doesn’t everyone?”

For all Snape’s drawling tone, she can’t help but feel that she’s walked into a particularly awkward situation. She looks around, anywhere but in the direction of her host. Hosts, plural? The room is vast and open. There are bookcases towering along the far walls, but everywhere else is a sprawling confusion of greenery, tendrils and fronds, leaves and stems, an explosion of tropical
growth twisting down from hanging baskets, striving toward the wash of sunlight that filters through the bank of windows. She pivots on her heel in quiet wonderment, before noting, belatedly, that Snape has retreated to the region of the room that serves as his kitchen.

Maddie relieves her of the pastry bag, and beckons for her to follow them. Snape rattles up a cafetière, and no one says anything. Maddie retrieves a baking tin, and finally breaks the silence, swatting at Snape’s hands as he reaches for the bag. “Leave off, Snape, I’ve got this. I am exerting.” She spreads the pastries across the tin, readying them for reheating. It’s such a bizarrely muggle action; Hermione experiences a sense of reality slippage as she simultaneously understands what the young woman is doing, and wonders why she doesn’t just use a wand.

She accepts the cup that Snape passes her. He doesn’t offer sugar. Clearly he took notes while he was stalking her. She perches on one of the stools at the kitchen island and tries to suffocate her discomfort with a bland smile. She wants to run. Not quite screaming, but certainly not grinning this frangible mask.

“I don’t know why you won’t even consider it.” Maddie is stirring sugar into her own cup, and her voice is plaintive. “You told Cathy you would.”

There is only slight annoyance in the crease of his brow, but she knows that his lips, when pressed that tight, are closed against something particularly biting. What he says, though, is mild. “That was a long time ago. And I am entirely uninterested in becoming party to your disagreements. I am Switzerland; take your battles elsewhere.”

“I’m not asking for you to get involved. Just… I really want her for the exhibit.”

“No.”

“Look, I don’t even need the entire series, just Faceless Girl. Just one itsy painting.”

“Cajoling isn’t going to work, and you can stop pestering, too. No. That painting doesn’t mean what you think it does, anyway.”

“Oh, come on. Art is subjective.”

“And I’m a plebeian. No.” He rises, and tends to the croissants, and Maddie scowls viciously into her mug.

“What if… what if I talked to Cathy, and she said it was fine and…”

“Switzerland. Not bloody Canada. Find a peacekeeper elsewhere. And give up on The Faceless Girl, I’m not loaning her to your exhibit.”

Maddie pulls a pout. It is a surprisingly adorable expression, and Hermione cringes. “If you really loved me, you would.”

“Probably. Haven’t you got things to do, today? Ms. Granger’s time is valuable, and I’m fairly certain she is entirely uninterested in this.”

What she is, is aghast at being stripped of her observer status, but Maddie only sighs agreeably, snags a croissant, and heads toward the door. She stoops to pick up a bag, and there’s not much left to the imagination.

“Well, I’m off to The Hive, then. Have fun, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”
“There are things you wouldn’t do?” Snape’s tone is dry as the Sahara.

She lifts a brow, and appears to consider this. “Don’t know. Probably? I mean: murder, arson, larceny, theft, wanton destruction of property… OK. Murder. Although if the circumstances --”

“Go,” Snape commands.

She scowls fiercely again, but hefts her bag up on her shoulder. “Watching daytime American soap operas. I wouldn’t do that, and you shouldn’t either.”

Snape huffs a breath of laughter, “How about Corrie?”

“Christ. Try a little: EastEnders at least, you grimy manc.”

“See, it’s pejoratives like that, what get you in trouble. You’re going to finish dressing before you leave, I hope?”

“Honestly.” Her voice is filled with withering scorn. “How long have you known me?” She steps out the door, and it clunks shut behind her. Snape’s expression is merely resigned.
“So. Questions? Although I hope you won’t mind not asking about that. Chiefly because I can’t answer in any satisfying way.”

Hermione realises that her mouth is hanging open. This is absolutely no business of hers, but telling herself so doesn’t stop her cheeks flaming.

“I really can’t, you know. I have this theory that she was dropped on her head as an infant, but it seems like the kind of accusation you shouldn’t make of someone’s mother. So I don’t know.” He spreads his palms, and one corner of his mouth is raised in an innocent, helpless smile.

She releases some of her embarrassment in a breathy chuckle, as if she is sharing his jape, and inside she wilts a little further. But alright, questions – for which ones does she have any right to an answer? “Needless to say, I’ve looked over your experiments, your results. I can see why Dr. Prince wanted to put me in contact with you,” she begins.

“Or vice versa. Has he not got you trained into a more informal mode of address, yet?” Snape’s amusement hasn’t abated, and he seems to be inviting her to partake of further jesting.

“Sadly, yes. Why is that?” She has an opportunity to ask, so what harm could it do?

“Uncle Tibs is a character, but you really should make an effort to ask me something I can answer.”

“Sorry.” Her fingers have tightened on the handle of the mug. It is passing strange to hear Professor Snape saying something as inane as ‘Uncle Tibs’. She’d gotten used to the idea of him as someone’s son, but ‘Eileen’ is a dowdy name, the sort you find inked at the back of an old photograph, or propped up glowering in a dimly lit corner. It draws no attention to itself, it recedes into meaningless history behind the reality of swishing black robes, tense shoulders, narrowed eyes and the menacing grace he’d projected stalking amongst them.

But someone who has an ‘Uncle Tibs’ is at once awkward and odd, and strangely approachable, the sort who apologizes when you’ve mistaken their intent. “No, I didn’t mean – I only – It’s just that he’s odd, I mean. Not to cut you off. Let’s see, let me think how to put this. I think he likes people to underestimate him. It’s not false friendliness, exactly, just… he disarms a person before they even realise what’s happened. I sometimes think it’s part of a grand strategy, but then I talk to him again, and I decide I have absolutely no idea if that’s wishful thinking or not.”

“You keep in touch with him.” This is bordering upon what she decides she does want to know the answers to.

“Is that a question, or an observation? Yes, in any event. One’s co-conspirator does thereafter hold a certain amount of power over oneself. Little chats become somewhat unavoidable.”

His sardonic tone conveys more than his words alone do. He’d been bullied into contacting her. She should get to the point of this, and cease harassing him. “In looking over your work, it’s become clear to me that –”

He has stood, and interrupts her: “Come; bring your coffee. I’ll fetch my books – have you brought the pages I sent, by chance?”
She nods; she doesn’t need clarifications of his work, she understands it at a level that is quite frankly molecular, but he’s already heading into the jungle of plants. She follows obediently, and sits on the sofa he gestures to. There are coasters. She sets her mug down, and crosses her legs in what she faintly hopes is composure. She feels like an inkblot, glaringly grubby against the pristine white of the fabric.

For all the riot of life in this room, it is strangely antiseptic and impersonal: Every spray of greenery seems deliberately oriented, and she can’t see any knickknacks or photographs. The only personal touches are the books, in their heavy dark cases, but they’re not what she would have expected, either. The titles she can make out run to words like *Spin and Memory, Dune* and *Neuromancer, Blue Mars* and *The Forever War*. He is nimbly ascending a rolling ladder, retrieved from behind the staircase that leads to a loft, where she presumes he makes his bedroom. Instead of watching him retrieve his afore-mentioned lab books, she sneaks a peek at the back cover of the paperback he’s left open on the end table. The publisher’s blurb mentions “the ancient, inflexible laws governing the women of her class” – it does not seem like the sort of thing that Severus Snape would read. Maddie, then? On the balance, that’s more likely. She returns it to the table, and watches as he descends the ladder. He has a collection of battered paperbacks that are even now shivering in his hands, as their concealing glamours fall away.

“I think I sent you nearly everything you might find of use. My indexing was off, though, towards the end.” He seats himself across from her, and reaches to take the papers she’s extracted from her satchel.

She should interrupt him, hurry this along and be done. But she realizes, with a pang like something snapping beneath her ribcage, that she isn’t likely to ever see him again. This is the culmination of the conversation they began in assignments and margins. She will have no further excuses to seek him out in the future; this is the end of a tale that stretched too far.

“It’s quantities that will be your limiting step; at least that was what I found.”

“I saw that. That elastin gel –” She reaches forward to indicate the page “– Did adding the egg wrack affect its stability? I would think the organic acids would limit its usefulness, if they interacted with the suspension.” She re-crosses her legs, faintly discomfited by the microscope sharpness of his eyes.

“Ah, here, let me find the procedure I used to purify the alginates. I culled it wholesale from a muggle research group in Ireland, it’s a fairly standard commercial protocol. They’re mostly inert, though I didn’t experiment much with actual potions, you understand. I didn’t have time, and I was trying to be clever, in case someone got creative with testing my blood. Most potions have a residual magical signature, it’s just unavoidable.

But blood replenishing formulations are chemically similar to erythropoietin; I don’t think that would react. And their anticoagulant additives – well, they’re basically just thrombin inhibitors, and I did test those, so…” He trails off, as he flips through one manual, and then another. “I really should just give you all of these.”

No, she wants to tell him. It’s one last tenuous link. “On the contrary, I should be returning your library to you.”

He frowns. “Don’t be foolish, Miss Granger. It doesn’t become you. It’s a case of simple pragmatism: you have a use for the books, and I do not.”

There is a weight crushing her down into the confines of the sofa. She tries to fight her way free of it. “Nevertheless, I can’t begin to express how much I’ve appreciated your gift.”
“Well, you’ve put them to good use, and it’s more than I ever did.” He tucks the loose pages inside the front cover of one manual, and presses the stack of them upon her, brushing off her feeble gratitude once more, “And I’m sure you’ll continue to do so.”

“Echis carinatus?” she asks, panicking as the termination of this short dialogue looms ever closer.

“Oh that. I suppose it might be worth looking into further. It’s the saw-scaled viper, native to India; its venom has some interesting anti-coagulant properties. I isolated a whole suite of proteins, they’re in that last book. Come to think of it, the solutions are probably still under a stasis spell at Hogwarts, unless someone broke through the wards on my lab. I’d tell you the password, only… well, it’s a personal joke, really.” He actually bites at his lip, and his fingers twist together in an involuntary action that he rapidly stills. “And I can’t go and fix it. There are some things, Ms. Granger, which one does live to regret. Or that I have, anyway.”

“I’m glad you have, though,” she says, in all seriousness. “Glad that you lived.”

He catches something of her tone, and his face becomes empty and expressionless. “Well.”

This is the end, so it doesn’t matter much, what he thinks of her once they’ve parted. “It tore my heart in two, Professor, to think that you’d cared so little for yourself.”

He doesn’t say anything, but she thinks she sees him swallow.

“F-for what it’s worth, I’m glad that wasn’t the case.” If someone could only stupefy her now, before she digs any deeper.

He finally delivers the mercy blow, in the form of a small crooked smile. “Me too, Miss Granger. For what it’s worth.” It’s an inexplicably kind expression that is centered more in his eyes than anywhere else, and she feels herself pulled into their depths.

Whatever might have passed between them in this moment, as it stretches out like a tightened wire, is irretreivably lost in a resounding crash from somewhere deep beyond the bookcases.

“Good God! What was that?”

Snape rolls his eyes, and his dry, sarcastic mien is instantly back in place. “If the building doesn’t collapse, I dare say we’ll never know. And be happier for it. One thing I’ve learned, with this lot, is that if you value your sanity, there comes a point when you need to embrace not knowing answers to questions like that.”

“Willful ignorance as a skillset – I suppose you cultivated the talent as Head of Slytherin?” she responds to his wryness, but she must have gotten the tone wrong, because he shoots her a look of pure incredulity, the most movement she’s seen on his face since the immediate aftermath of Maddie’s departure.

“Lord, no. I grew up with Horace’s example of where that managerial strategy would lead. No, I only ever pretended ignorance of what went on in the Common Room. Had anyone truly clever ever sat down to compare notes, they’d have discovered a pervasive network of spies and counter-informants. Bless them, and the internecine paranoia that prevented their ever rallying together.”

His lofty manner relieves her, and makes her smile. “You miss it.”

“Parts, yes. Some parts, decidedly not.”

His gaze has shifted to the arm of the sofa, and she is certain that this time, she has put her foot in
it. But after a moment, the tension vanishes from the line of his lips, and he raises his eyes.

“Perhaps that’s why I continue to tolerate these miscreants. There were always a few first-years… Just one or two, but a regular trickle of them over the years, who just seethed over with a blissful kind of nihilistic anarchy. I was always a little saddened when the House stomped that out of them, and they turned their energies to more genteel pursuits of power, cunning, and self-interest.”

This angle of conversation seems to have run aground in his wistfulness. She can’t decide how to respond, how to keep him talking. And it’s too late, anyway. He rises, and casually levitates their respective mugs away to the kitchen sink, with nothing more than a lazy flick of his wrist.

“I never did learn how to do really basic things wandlessly,” she confesses.

“Well, necessity is the mother of mastery, to bastardize the old saying.” Confirmation, of sorts, that he doesn’t have a wand anymore.

“You couldn’t have gotten a wand through…” She realises the absurdity of this even as she’s speaking.

“Through back channels, Slytherin friends? Black market wand makers, after Riddle had… No. And I wasn’t about to ask Uncle Tibs to exert himself further on my behalf, either. You know what they say about secrets and three people.”

Is this an unsubtle warning? Her face must have done something peculiar, because he starts laughing. It’s a smooth, rich sound, thick like honey, and his own face is suddenly so open and bright, his eyes sparking as he leans against the bannister of the stair to recapture his dignity.

“Good Lord, no. More fool me, I trust you entirely. I’d have kept to myself if I really thought you were anything less than circumspect. I’m sorry to have implied otherwise, yesterday. Truly.”

These words should make her feel better; it’s praise of sorts. But all there is, is a hard wedge of sadness in her stomach. She nods at him, because her throat is too tight to say anything. But somehow she has to choke out this last question, and no better segue is likely to manifest itself.

“Do you know, what does Dr. – your uncle – what does he expect?”

“With respect to your manuscript, you mean? I can’t tell for certain, but this has all the hallmarks of being one of his gentle shoves. I think you could just resubmit it. He didn’t send me any of the reviewer comments, and when he gives me a first glance at your work, he does usually like to violate the niceties of peer review. It makes me think he didn’t send it out in the first place. I’ll tell him off for you, if you like?” He presents this last option with an abbreviated genuflection, a motion of one arm, which nonetheless evokes errant chivalry.

She starts to smile again, but her brain is worrying away at one of his phrases and it becomes a thoughtful frown instead. “What do you mean by ‘gentle shoves’? If I can ask.”

He casts his eyes up to the skylights in the ceiling. “The esteemed Dr. Prince has distinct opinions about how people should go about their lives. I wouldn’t concern yourself with it. If any of my experiments end up being useful to you, I suppose you could just add my name as a posthumous coauthor again. He can’t insist on more than that, and you can explain it truthfully as having utilized my work.”

“Of course, that’s certainly fair. And the idea was yours to begin with.”

“Don’t start down that road, Ms. Granger. You know there’s nothing new under the sun. It doesn’t diminish your own efforts to have independently arrived at similar conclusions – quite the contrary, in fact.” He pauses, not to allow her to bask in these words, although she does, but clearly
because he is carefully considering something. “Would you… Would you ever do any practical work? In Potions. If you had the space, the equipment?”

“Of course. I’ve only stuck with theory because—” She doesn’t know how to complete this sentence. Because of Ronald?

“Then you need my things from Hogwarts, and that’s all there is to it.”

“I—I really can’t accept anything more, you’ve done so much for me, I—” She stammers to a halt beneath his glare.

“Nonsense. Absolute and utter nonsense. Stop protesting, and come with me -- I need to show you something, first, if only to salvage what little shreds of my dignity I have left. The password to my wards sounds astoundingly petty unless you’ve seen these.”

She follows him back into a narrow hall that was hidden by the staircase. It must run behind the main body of The Hive. He pauses at a door, extracts a ring of keys, and unlocks it. There is a faint swish of displacing air, and he beckons her inside. The light, when he flips the switch, is only murky, dim, and there aren’t any windows at all.

The air in this room has a sharp dry bite, and is too cold to be comfortable; her bare arms prickle up gooseflesh as she follows him past ranks of shelves. They are made of a slick, uniform grey metal -- deep, and crowded with what she realizes are paintings. She can’t see their subjects, because they are standing on end within the shelves, but rich pigments leap at her from their edges, barely repressed by the muted light and shadows. The center of the room is squared off by still more shelves, and Snape has paused at the table that fills this otherwise empty space. She watches him as he opens a binder, and scans through it.

“Here we are. This catalogue’s dead useful, so in gratitude, I try to not to kick up much fuss when they want to come in to do any archival or conservation work.” There is a drawer beneath the table, from which he extracts a pair of white cotton gloves; he slips them on before disappearing into the maze of artwork.

“I’m going to show you two of these. People always want to think of them as parts of a larger series, and they are, in terms of style and content; there’s a repeat of motif and visual strategy. But the others were all done much, much later. These two belong together, and they’re old friends of mine. This is the second of them, ‘part two’ as it were.” He’s re-emerged from the gloom, carrying a heavy panel that he gently lays across the table.

She leans over to examine it, sucked in almost against her will, by this gloriously macabre portrait of what might be a young woman. Pale fingers, with elegant shapely nails, frame the core image. They are finely rendered, and the delicate shadows that pick out the texture of their skin make them nearly ethereal. They are holding aloft the skin of this woman’s face, which hangs from them like two dripping fabric wings, only vaguely attached to the woman’s head, splayed out and open like some grotesque butterfly.

It is as if these fingers are patiently displaying another’s handiwork – this woman’s entire face is peeled away, a red mask that dangles inert from digits lacking any indication of tension. Nor is there anxiety or pain in the yellow cat’s eyes that gaze out from deep sockets. What at first glance takes the form of exposed musculature is on closer inspection a panoply of miniscule withering vipers, pierced and shredded by stylized cats’ paws, claws mistaken as gleaming drops of blood.

She remembers to breathe, but it feels like it is a near thing.
“And here is the first one. This is the one Maddie wants for her exhibit. I think you will recognize her.” He smiles, with the air of someone introducing a cherished acquaintance, and sets the frame in front of her.

The bronze placard at the bottom reads:

Eileen Prince, ca. 1950-2
The F[ace]less Girl (I of II)

But in this rendition her face is intact, for all that her fingers are digging in along the center of her features, creating bloodless little punctures that seem to emit a faint, sickly amber glow of light. She is not faceless at all. She is Minerva McGonagall.

The likeness is utterly uncanny. She is younger than the stern witch of Hermione’s childhood, but the dark coil of her hair, the structure of her bones, the keenness of her expression, the pursed moue of her lips – they flow seamlessly into her earliest memories of Hogwarts. “How? What does this mean?” She can’t even articulate herself properly, but Snape answers anyway.

“She never explained this piece. She didn’t explain any of her work, come to that, and I’m not sure I would have understood if she had. When I was young, ‘Faceless Girl’, in both her iterations, was one of my best friends. I used to visit her in the attic, stare at her for hours. I don’t remember the first time I met her, she seemed to have always been there.

That alone inclined me positively towards Minerva, when I was a student. I recognized her straight off, as you can imagine. If my memory isn’t playing tricks, I was actually a little sad when I discovered after my sorting that she was head of Gryffindor, and not my own house. It seemed like an existential unfairness, maybe, like the universe had gotten an important detail wrong. She’d been around my entire childhood… I think maybe I thought I owned her, had a right to her by dint of familiarity.” He trails off, and chews absently at his lower lip.

“There was never any answer forthcoming during my schooldays. I suppose I must’ve eventually assumed this painting was just some meaningless likeness. One does grow out of one’s imaginary friends, after all. But when I was leaving my apprenticeship – Dumbledore insisted he wanted me under his thumb at Hogwarts, so I finished early, to go and teach – anyway, the night I left, Uncle Tibs packed me off with a bottle of good brandy and the advice to be careful of McGonagall’s right hook.”

His eyebrows are up, his eyes a little too wide. He is inviting her to ask him, to resolve her perplexity.

So naturally: “I’ll bite, what did that mean?”

“I never found out, and she never did take a swing at me. Well, except for flinging some hexes, there at the end. And… Well, anyway. One good thing came of that last awful year – you’d be surprised just how much information you can get access to as Headmaster of Hogwarts. I think I solved a bit of this mystery, looking through hospital records.” He pauses, smirking, teasing her. And God, he’s going to leave her hanging now? He has lifted the first painting, evidently to return it to its shelf.

“Well? What did you find?” She knows her voice is impatient and she doesn’t care, she’s drowning in curiosity at this point. It’s too weird a coincidence not to mean something.

He laughs. Again she’s struck by the richness of this sound, how it washes over her and tickles like an electric current along the back of her neck. She would like to hear that sound right in her
ear, feel it vibrate through the bones of her skull—she is aware that her lips are parted, her breath hitched. Snape doesn’t notice her discomfiture; he’s busy re-shelving the paintings.

He peels off the gloves and continues his story, “There was a very, hem, interesting record of a time when Minerva McGonagall, Seventh Year Prefect, turned up to the Infirmary having sprained her wrist, split her knuckles, and broken three metacarpals. The date and time correlated quite neatly with my own mother having had her jaw dislocated and most of her front teeth caved in. The only other details I ever turned up were an indication that it took half a dozen follow-up visits to correct the resultant lisp.”

He’s still smirking, but she doesn’t think it’s the least bit humorous. Maybe he’s misreading her expression, because “Think about it,” he huffs, “What does the word ‘faceless’ sound like with a lisp?”

Light dawns, even as he’s flicking the switches, turning them off. “So the password to your lab, then—”

“. Minerva McGonagall is faithless,” he intones solemnly. And then he grins, wide and fleeting, but she doesn’t miss an instant of it. “And if you can’t avoid saying that in her presence, I offer the same sage wisdom I myself received: watch out, because by all accounts, she has a wicked right hook.”

Maybe the image of Headmistress McGonagall in a fistfight should be funny, but it somehow really isn’t. “It’s not untrue, though, is it?” she says seriously, ”You were colleagues for nearly two decades; she had to have known you so much better than I ever did, and I trusted you. I never truly gave up hope that you were on our side.”

He takes this in with a look she can’t fathom, but doesn’t respond until he holds his front door open for her. “Thank you. For telling me that,” he says, as she steps past him. “And, Miss Granger?” He holds her gaze for a heartbeat, two. “Good luck to you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hands up, who guessed—even a little—where this was going when I dropped *The Faceless Girl* into the last chapter?

…I think I am often writing fanfiction of my own headcanon, if you are wondering how or if *Inkstains* is tied to *Repast at the Table of Glorious Toxins*. Heartfelt thanks to all of you who are supporting my work with your kind and generous comments, and especially to the regulars who really keep this going. Love you all!
At the risk of being spoilery, Tra8erse has drawn my attention to this absolutely exquisite tarot card, by artist Lisa de St. Croix, which presents a beautifully astute observation about this chapter.

Her feet carry her down to the Lea.

The pavements here are particularly uneven, and she walks with her eyes cast down. It keeps the graffiti at the periphery of her vision, and it is somehow more threatening there, uncertain flashes of colour ripped free of context. The smell of the water cloys in her nose. It’s not the green, algal scent she remembers, but muddy and a little sour. She skirts a rusted shopping trolley piled high with plastic bags. She should be looking for somewhere to apparate from; she has no business being here. And yet here she is. She raises her face into the light rain that is dimpling the murky water, scans the dilapidated warehouses opposite, muses on the barbed wire that tops the fence on the lock-up behind her. She’ll have to walk on, this is too exposed.

It would be anonymous at night, though. She has no trouble understanding why no one had seen them dragging Alison Day’s body along these pavements. Her footsteps slow, and she peers into the space between two boat hulls, as if she expects to see a decaying hand, or a seaweed swirl of hair. There is only a bit of rotting water weed, and a candy wrapper.

It’s her mind that’s the problem: she encourages it to deceive her. Although, she hasn’t been the only one having trouble disentangling the present from fantasies of a past that might or might not have existed. What does it mean, that he can’t seem to keep her straight in his head? She hasn’t been Miss Granger for years, so just who is the intended recipient of his wish for luck?

Or is it that he sees her clearly, truly, for what she is? A shell-shocked schoolgirl pretending all these years to be something she is not? And he, ever the distant mentor, wishing her well as he washes his hands of her. She shivers. The rain is picking up. She should go home. There is nothing there, but there is nothing here, either.

Just the River Lea.

There is a pedestrian bridge spanning the water ahead. The metal handrails remind her of a palisade of blades, like you might find in a cheap plastic razor.

Across the river, two dark figures are attacking the back of a warehouse with spray cans. She watches their movements with detached curiosity. Their limbs have an arachnoid grace, choppy yet purposeful motions, each arc of their arms revealing a new tendril of image. When they intermittently duck to retrieve a different can from their respective duffle bags, it is as though they are bowing to one another in some strange courtship of creation. Pale forms begin to emerge from the dirty bricks; gaily-coloured fishes, belly-up along the wall. She rakes her wet hair out of her eyes, and shivers again. They sort of hurt, these pretty fish. They are floating, dying, deep inside her stomach.
“Hunh,” says a thin voice, behind her.

She whirls, startled, but it is only an adolescent boy. He’s dragging at the last of a cigarette, and watching the performance opposite, as she has been.

“They’ll be swimming down in the water, when the sun shines.” He drops his butt, grinds it out on the pavers, and continues on, a carefree looseness in his limbs.

She looks again at the fish, and mentally rotates them into a reflection across the Lea. When the sun shines. If the sun shines. But not today – the rain is getting heavier, and rendering the surface of the river into choppy wavelets.

Enough. She hunches her shoulders, and ducks into an alley; picks her way past sundry rubbish, fouled mattresses and rivulets of draining water. She concentrates on the image of her bathroom sink, complete with drowned knickers, and in an instant like a sucking breath, she is back there. She pulls the cord on the light, looks at her pale face in the silvering mirror. Her hair is quite as wet as when she got out of the shower. Did today even happen?

She pulls off her dripping cardigan, her wet tee, scrubs her shoulders with a towel, and binds her hair up.

What is the next thing to do?

She pulls the last of Snape’s lab manuals from her satchel, spreads them out on her unmade bed. Sits cross-legged in front of them. Picks up a biro. Sets it down again. These books are not going to breathe new life into Professor Snape. Professor Snape is dead. He died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, and whoever was reborn from antivenins and anticoagulants, from portkeys and blood replenishing potions – she is not going to find that person here. She is only ever going to have access to the ghost of him: spectral traces in old experiments, lingering dust motes in an abandoned laboratory.

She should probably investigate his final gift. Send an owl to Minerva McGonagall. Is faithless. So many people were. Was it everyone, from his perspective? How could it not have been?

He lives in spite of them, she is certain of it. To spite them? Except that no one knows, so where is his vengeance? Perhaps he is taking to heart the adage that the best revenge is a life well-lived. He seems to be accomplishing that much.

She supposes she should be happy for him. But she can’t be, because she doesn’t know this man, with his hesitations and his crooked quicksilver smiles, the memory of his laugh -- a memory which claws at some vital organ nestled against her spine. She can admit it, barely: she would rather have found him pining for Lily fucking Evans. Because at least Lily is dead.

Time passes. The grey light throws the little details of her life into relief, and then they fade back into shadows. Rain lashes against the panes of her window, and the amber streetlights transform droplets into clinging jewels. She hides from them beneath her blankets, turns away to face the wall.

Plant starts to droop alarmingly, and there is some kind of scum growing along the side of Mini-plant’s glass. On one trip to the loo, she works up the energy to give them both some water. This act of mercy briefly inclines her toward the hypothesis that she can pull herself out of this state, and she contemplates fixing something to eat. The bread is gone moldy, though. She bins it, and then stands staring blankly into the glow of the refrigerator. Pickles? In the end, she closes the door, and retreats to her bed once more.
Morning. Or evening. Night. She should revise and resubmit her manuscript, but what is the point anymore? There are no further rewards to garner from these academic displays; she has found the answer to her postcard. And before that card had arrived in her postbox, turning her world upside down? Polyjuice equations were both distraction and salvation, an escape from lives playing out and ending before her eyes. An escape from her choices, a reassertion of self. But it was so long ago, and she doesn’t remember who that self was.

She only knows the self she is. The self who lays here wooden, except for these strange hiccoughing sobs that start and stop without warning or reason.

The sheets are starting to stink, but she’s too tired to do anything about it. She closes her eyes. Opens them again, to peer at the unstructured shape of what she knows to be a heap of dirty clothes, but in the darkness could be nearly anything. Nearly anything except two lovers, which is what she sees on the inside of her eyelids.

Maybe the creeping tendrils of plants trail across her skin, as she reclines upon the sofa. They would match her eyes.

Maybe he loses his page in a novel he’s reading, as she kneels in front of him, putting that tongue stud to use.

Maybe he lifts her onto the kitchen island – it’s about the same height the prep benches were.

But the worst things that play out in the shadows of her mind are the simplest: Maybe he pauses, on his way to fix their morning coffee, to simply brush his fingers through her hair.

She rallies, sometimes, and tells herself to be rational. Maddie O’Shea didn’t know who the Faceless Girl was. Maddie O’Shea didn’t even know he’d been a schoolteacher. She’s just a muggle, and she doesn’t know anything -- not about their world, not about who he was. But then, she knows who he is. And maybe that’s the way he wants it. A fresh start, a clean slate. What had he said, that he didn’t want to owned?

The past owns people.

It owns her. Wholly.

Chapter End Notes

My profound thanks to all of you who have offered your support of my work -- it means the world to me.
Commitment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fucking hell. Someone is pounding at her door, and it feels as though she’s only just fallen asleep. She pulls the greasy pillow over her head, and hopes they’ll go away. It can’t be the landlord, because she paid the rent, and she is very certain she hasn’t been in bed a whole month. Although, she is a little fuzzy on just how long it has been. Not too long. She’s not starved. But she’s through the caffeine-withdrawal headaches, so it’s been at least a week.

The insistent pounding hasn’t stopped.

Plant looks to be drooping again. Alright, maybe it’s been a little more than a week.

She wishes they’d go away. She’s doing exactly what she wants to, which is nothing. Nothing doesn’t require company or an audience, nor a horrible incessant soundtrack of knuckles on wood.

“Fuck off,” she begs, but knows they won’t hear her.

The doorknob rattles, and there is a muffled masculine voice from the other side of the door.

Shit, maybe it is the landlord.

She lurches up out of bed, and the room swims when she bends to rummage for a dressing gown.

“Alohomora!” says the voice on the other side of the door, and Harry Potter finds her swaying and falling as she struggles into the sleeves and some semblance of decency.

“Hermione!” He’s kneeling in front of her, eyes wide with concern, hand outstretched in midair, as if he wants to grasp at her but has just thought better of it. Maybe she’s contagious.

“I’m alright, just dizzy. Not feeling well, been in bed.” He voice sounds strange and harsh in her own ears. “I guess I stood up too fast.”

“You look like hell.”

“Thank you?”

“When’s the last time you’ve eaten?” His eyes are narrowed, and now he does reach out to touch her, a hand on her shoulder as if he thinks she needs steadying.

But she’s fine, and it hasn’t been that long, so why is he asking? “Dunno. The other day, I guess.”

“Right. About the same time you showered last? Christ, Hermione, I knew you had to have been upset about everything with Ron, but I didn’t think you’d fall apart like this. You’re supposed to be the one with sense!”

“Why? And why wasn’t I informed of this rule?” She needs a drink of water. “Oh hell, where’s my wand?”

Harry is looking steadily more alarmed, and his eyes are darting about so quickly now that it makes her dizzy. Dizzier.
“Accio Hermione’s wand! Here,” he passes it to her, and she refills her water glass, drinks. Better.

“Why are you here? What’s going on?” And do I need to sort it out? She pulls the front of her gown a little closer, and leans back against the bedframe.

“Nothing, never mind. It’s… Oh, it’s just something… It’s not important right now.”

She doesn’t believe him. But she can choose to let it go, and that’s the easiest thing. He’s not her responsibility. No one is. And that’s for the best, really. She closes her eyes, and tries to ignore the fact that he’s poking about her flat. His footsteps tell her where he’s going, which makes it harder to be entirely disinterested.

The refrigerator door creaks. He sighs through his nose. “OK. Hermione, this is… Let’s, uh, d’you think you could manage a shower? I’ll buy you lunch. Or maybe I can just order some takeaway, yeah?”

“Whatsoever you like.” He’s clearly not going to leave. Pity. She cracks one eye open. He’s picking through her clothes.

“Ablutio,” he mutters, poking his wand at a pair of denims.

“When did you learn household charms?” she asks idly, as he tosses them into her lap.

“I survived toddlers, are you forgetting?”

Maybe just a little. He must’ve figured out implacable persuasion in the course of that experience too, because the only other way he could’ve gotten her up off the floor and into the shower would’ve involved the Dark Arts.

“I don’t hear the water running,” he calls.

She growls wordlessly, cranks the tap, and ducks beneath the spray. It’s miserably cold, but that’s alright. This can be penance for how she’s been behaving. By the time she gets the shampoo rinsed out of her hair, it’s starting to warm up, but her teeth won’t stop chattering. “D-d-d—downstairs, laundrette!” she answers, when Harry asks her if she does her wash the muggle way.

He’s gone by the time she finishes drying off, and so are her dirty clothes and her bedding. Her satchel is turned out on the barren mattress and her coin purse is missing; she doubts he’s taken to petty thievery, so there’s little doubt he’ll be back. He’s forgotten to leave her a bra, but she decides it doesn’t matter. She manages to get her knickers, denims, a jumper, and one sock on. The second sock is abruptly too much of a commitment, and when Harry returns she is lying across the foot of the mattress and contemplating a crack in the ceiling plaster.

“Right.” Harry surveys her with his hands on his hips. “You can put that sock on or not, but we’re going out to the Leaky.”

“I need to give Plant some water, first.”

“Sorry?” he looks perplexed for the first time since he’s walked into her bedsit.

“The plant. On the window. Its name is Plant.”

He barks out a laugh, and he looks younger, more like the Harry she knows of old, with the worry lines temporarily erased from his brow. “God, it’s a good thing you didn’t have kids. You and Ron would’ve named them Offspring and Chaser, probably.”
“Probably,” she agrees. She pulls herself up, and tries to thwart Harry’s plan by lavishing some much-needed attention on her flatmates. Plant has a couple browned leaves; she twists them off as gently as she can manage. She doesn’t apologize, because he’s standing there watching her, but she is sorry. There was no excuse for this. The scum in Mini-plant’s glass is distressing, too. She carries it into the bathroom. Her dried knickers are still lurking in the sink; she flicks them into the shower. Runs some water in the basin, and gently swishes Mini-plant’s root ball. She should give it some soil, a proper pot.

Harry is not so easily dissuaded from his plan of action, and he drops her shoes beside her as she is minutely rearranging the plants on the windowsill so that they are quite precisely even. She sighs, acquiesces to the inevitable, and summons her sock.

It must be a weekend -- Neville Longbottom is behind the bar of the Leaky. He beams when he sees them in the doorway, beckons them over, and offers to pull them a pint. “On the house!”

She tries to protest that it’s too early, but apparently it’s after 5 o’clock, and “Once you’re a working dad, you get your pint in as soon as it’s reasonable,” Harry assures her. She’s not a working dad, but this apparently does not matter.

They settle into a back corner with their glasses, and Neville pulls up a chair and joins them, once he’s distributed bowls of thick stew and crusty rolls. Harry’s stern glare cows her into tasting it, and she discovers that she is hungry after all. Neville and Harry fill the space up with speculations on Gryffindor’s quidditch team; she gets the impression that money is changing hands somewhere in all this, which is new insight into why Ronald was always so keen, even after he gave up playing. But in spite of her long-held assumptions, it seems they actually can’t talk about quidditch forever, and she is pulled into the conversation before she’s quite ready.

“I still wish you’d joined us on Staff, Hermione. That Delgado bloke who took over from Slughorn… your lessons would’ve mopped the floor with him.”

“Oh?” she manages.

“They’re onto essential oils in the fourth year classes. I’ve had half the girls skulking around Greenhouse Five, nicking foliage.”

“Well, we learned essential oils in fourth year. Later in the spring, though. There was at least a week.”

“Yeah, but Delgado’s been teaching them how to make air fresheners. Well, alright, aerosolized potions for regulating emotional energy in a room, but still. It seems, well, soft, y’know. And they keep traumatizing my plants, so they’re clearly brewing in their dorms. Every time he tells me about his lesson plans, I just cringe in abject terror at what he’s going to come up with next.”

“It… it sounds like they’re interested, at least. So he can’t be all bad, and there’s something to be said for learning the techniques. Aerosols are… well, you’d learn about boiling points, and van der Waal’s forces, and polarity…”

“Well, if they learn it. Potions classes seem to involve a lot more giggling than anything I remember.”

“Still, I don’t follow why that’s terrifying.”

“I just have this spooky sense, every time he tells me about his lessons. It’s like cold fingers, and I can’t help thinking old Snape’s ghost is going to manifest in the Great Hall and haunt us forever.
He’s playing with fire, he is.”

Harry is laughing, “Imagine!”

“Thanks, I have. Instant nightmares,” Neville says, eyes wide, but he can’t maintain the façade for long, and breaks into a chuckle of his own.

She, on the other hand, is thinking of the cheerful chaos in the Hive, and cannot even begin to crack a sick smile. “I’m sure Severus Snape is entirely happy wherever he is.”

“Likely. Poor sod.” Harry drains his glass, a casual dismissal in counterpoint to whatever genuine sentiment might have underlain his words.

Hannah is bringing them another round; Hermione holds her hand over her glass – she hasn’t managed more than a third of it. Hannah smiles brightly at them all, and takes Hermione’s empty bowl. “Nev, you aren’t making fun of poor Javier again, are you? He’s such a nice fellow!”

“He is, actually,” Neville assures them as his wife returns to the bar. “He stayed with us here at the Leaky over hols, back when he first took the job. And the students aren’t doing terribly on the OWLs or the NEWTs, and it’s hitting the standards that matters in the long run. Too, he’s been chatting up that Greengrass girl, d’you remember her, Daphne? That seems to be going well, so hopefully word spreads back to Hogwarts, and we can return to some semblance of sanity again.”

“The notion of girls mooning over the potions professor breaks my brain.” Harry mimes a retch.

“But some of the boys, too, mate. He’s like Lockhart, only, y’know, baseline competent. And he’s got an accent, and y’know how birds are with accents.” Neville quaffs his beer, a knowing man of the world.

Harry nods seriously.

Perhaps the Encyclopedia of Manliness has a whole entry for ‘how birds are’. “Really,” she says in her driest tone.

“Well not you, Hermione, but you’re not normal, eh?”

“Thanks-I-think. Keep digging, I’m sure it’ll be good for you.”

As if on some unspoken cue, they raise their hands in mock-surrender. She rolls her eyes and laughs, and it’s almost strange to feel a real smile on her face. She realises she misses uncomplicated afternoons with the boys. Neville isn’t Ronald, of course, but Ronald isn’t who he used to be, so that’s all for the best. Or maybe she isn’t who she used to be. Or maybe none of them were ever who they thought each other were. How did their friendships work, then? Was it just mutual delusion?

“It’s really good to see you again, Hermione. We were actually talking about you a couple weeks back, McGonagall and I, how we’d both lost track of you.” Neville’s open smile is perfectly earnest. “You should come up to the school, drop in on her for tea. She’d love that.”

“Love might be a little strong for it. She made it, uh, clear to me, that she was disappointed I didn’t apply for Slughorn’s job. You’d have been great -- I can’t even begin to follow your papers, but Delgado nearly lost his mind when he found out I was friends with you, so clearly you’re
amazing.”

Whoever this Delgado is. “I never gave it any thought, teaching at Hogwarts. I don’t think Ronald would’ve been at all keen. And well, some of us deal with the past by facing it head on, and some of us deal with it by walking into a different kind of future.” She nods firmly, and hopes that he will drop the matter. She doesn’t want to think about might-haves and should-haves. She especially doesn’t want to think about Ronald, but now she can’t get him out of her head, how his heels would become heavy and his brow furrowed with silent rage whenever she got her preprints or reviews back.

“Still, you should come up to the school sometime. I’ve been doing amazing things with the grounds, I’d love to show you.” Neville has that hopeful wheedling tone, and Harry is nodding along with him. She suspects conspiracy. Which… is slightly adorable, and gives her a warm little tingle. She wonders if Harry’s told him about her and Ronald. Or, rather that there isn’t a ‘her and Ronald’ anymore.

But she’s not-thinking about that. Which only leaves the other thing she’s not-thinking about. “I might do, actually. I, uh, I found something in one of my books. One of Professor Snape’s books, I mean. It looks like it’s a password, to his private laboratory maybe.”

“Really?” Neville practically bounces up. “We’ve tried everything short of blasting the door!”

“It’s still intact, you mean?” She feels cold and queasy all of a sudden.

“With all the bodies and everything, most likely. No one’s ever been able to get in. It drives Javier demented. That fixes it, you’ve just got to come up!”

“A-alright. I’ll send McGonagall an owl about it.” She isn’t sure she wants to do any such thing, but it stops Neville hauling her off to Scotland that very instant.

Of course, she knows she’s gained only a brief reprieve, so she actually does head out the next morning to spread her things across her usual table in the café. Laszlo seems delighted to see her again, and exclaims loudly over how poorly she’s looking. She hadn’t thought it was all that bad -- her face is a bit pinched and her colour isn’t good -- but he puts two marzipans on the edge of her saucer and insists upon bringing her a plum dumpling as well.

It takes her most of the day, and seven separate drafts, but she finally manages to pen a letter to Hogwarts’ Headmistress. She even bravery Diagon Alley, and posts it.

It’s a little easier the next day, and the day after that. She settles back into a routine: long walks in which she carefully thinks about nothing whatsoever, followed by afternoons in the café, where she pulls out her resubmission and even manages to work on it sometimes. She owes it to Tibs, to finish this. She needs to ignore whatever game he might be playing with his nephew, and focus on the fact that he’s always helped her. She has no objective way of reckoning up how much she’s learned in the course of revisions, nor how many of her papers have been vastly improved by his careful selection of reviewers. He has been her mentor as surely as Severus Snape ever was, and she can commit to finishing at least this last paper.

She gets two owls, later that week. The first is from McGonagall. It’s practically effusive by the Headmistress’ starchy standards: she’s delighted to hear from her, and very much looking forward to seeing her again, and she simply must come, and I shan’t take no for an answer. I shall be looking for you at the weekend, Ms. Granger. The second owl also brings post that’s making plans for her. It’s a note from Ronald. It’s very short, just a single question. Will you be in, the evening of the 14th? She grips the parchment so hard that it actually rips. She sends the owl back into the
night with her reply. Yes.

She lays in bed for hours. She is trying to remember what he felt like, entering her. And it seems somehow terrible to her that she can’t recall this, because it hasn’t really been that long. She does remember his arms, though, and laying with her face against his chest, coarse copper curls tickling her cheek. And maybe that’s enough?

Chapter End Notes

As a heads-up, we may be entering into hiatus territory. I have some [potentially bleak] personal stuff going on this week.
Making Efforts

Faint echoes of church bells are pealing out across the frosty morning. Moor grasses with their winter-bleached seed heads and brown tussocks of heather poke up through the few inches of snow, which have blown up into little drifts across the lane. The walk between Hogsmeade and the school is as picturesque as it always was; the sky here is sharp and clear, and the sun is spreading, golden, across the surrounding hilltops. Away behind her, towering firs are picked out in hoarfrost, and the village is still nestled in blue shadows. She pulls her scarf up a little higher – the wind is making her cheeks sting a bit – and raps smartly at the imposing wrought iron gates.

“State yer business,” growls one of the winged hogs, from its pedestal above the gate.

“Hermione Granger, to see Headmistress McGonagall.”

A gate swings open obligingly, just enough to walk through, and then slams back in place once she’s passed.

Neville surely has been to work on the grounds. There are countless new topiaries and beds, and the south slope at the castle’s foot has been utterly transformed. In their day, it had just been a grassy expanse; once the lake had frozen hard enough to support their weights, they’d gone sledding down it, careening madly across the ice, until that unfortunate incident with the Sixth Year Hufflepuffs – it was a miracle none of them had drowned, really. Whether the moratorium on sledding had been enforceable or not, there’s clearly no longer any need for it – Neville’s transformed the entire thing into a cascade. It’s frozen, now, but someone has worked charms upon the ice, and gleaming sculptures are erupting along the margin of the lake. She actually claps her hands at the beauty of it. God, she has missed this place.

Smoke is curling up from Hagrid’s, and there’s the Whomping Willow, on the distant shore of the lake. There’s a team out on the pitch; their shouts echo through the morning, joyous like the flocks of tits that are squabbling at feeders along the drive. The last remnants of the castle’s lazy Sunday brunch will still be spread out in the Great Hall. The library will be cozy, and the sun will be falling just so through the high windows, making glowing tapestries of colour across the books in the restricted section.

Her eyes smart, and she sniffs, but that’s just because the wind is making her nose drip.

Soon she’s passing through familiar halls, and it nearly hurts to see how little has changed from her brightest memories. The paintings are the same, mostly, and the suits of armor gleam. There aren’t any scorch marks from stray hexes marring the stone walls. The glimpse she catches of the Great Hall is nothing like the carnage that still lives in her nightmares. Maybe she was wrong, when she told Neville that she wasn’t interested in facing the past. Perhaps she needed to see this place, to know that life goes on. A swarm of students rushes past, Gryffindors. They’re so tiny! Their faces are so smooth and perfect, their gaits so carefree. Surely they’d never been that young, that innocent.

Professor Flitwick catches her loitering. He’s all smiles and handshakes, he’s missed her terribly, and so happy to see she’s well. She assures him that the feeling is mutual, and allows herself to be swept up to McGonagall’s office.

“Mrs. Weasley, it’s so wonderful to see you again!”

“Please, Professor, won’t you call me Hermione?” She begs, once the Headmistress has released
her from her hard embrace. It feels wrong to answer to ‘Mrs. Weasley’. She should do something
towards canceling those divorce proceedings; maybe that will help her conscience.

“Oh, of course, of course. Hermione. You didn’t walk up? You must be frozen stiff, let’s get a
cup of tea in you, straight off!”

She’s divested of her cloak and chivvied into one of the plush armchairs with all haste. Harry had
always described this room as being filled with astronomical models and whirling contraptions, but
if it was so in Dumbledore’s day, it is no longer. McGonagall’s taste runs to books, and
understated luxury. Every bit of exposed wood is elegantly carved, with motifs running to roses,
thistles and swords. There are tapestries, too, and she has no doubt they are ancient and authentic,
for they are worn, a bit shabby in places, and lack the brilliance of the spelled wall hangings
elsewhere in the castle. They are somehow not at odds with the lighting, which is provided by
chandeliers of stag antlers that hold pulsating orbs of golden light within their upturned tines.

Probably the only decorative continuity are the portraits of the previous Headmasters. She waves
to Dumbledore, who has looked up from his book. He gives her a smile and a nod, and goes back
to his reading.

What did this room look like, when Professor Snape inhabited it? Dark, likely. Quiet. Probably
he didn’t even remove Dumbledore’s things. Ginny would know, she’s snuck in here once, hadn’t
she? Perhaps she’ll ask sometime. But she highly doubts that it would have looked much at all
like the verdant, precise jungle hidden in Hackney Wick.

McGonagall provisions her with strong tea and shortbread, then snaps her wand at the nearest
grate. Flames burst into existence, merrily crackling and faintly redolent of peat. “Now, then,
Hermione! You must catch me up on what you three have been doing!”

For her own part, there’s little to say, and she brushes past her theoretical work to wax on Harry
and Ginny’s brood. The Headmistress laughs over Jamie’s latest exploits, and seems familiar with
several of Harry’s favourite tales; too, she seems pleased that Ronald is settling in with the Aurors
so well. “I despaired of that boy, you know. He had a jealous streak, a bit of petulance that none
of the other Weasley boys did. It’s good to hear he’s come into his own.”

This revelation is fairly startling. She rattles her teacup in setting it back in its saucer. Perhaps she
could…? But no:

“Oh, I don’t mean anything by it, you could always see he had a heart of gold. Just, it can’t have
been easy, being the youngest boy.”

“No,” she agrees. “But Molly and Arthur have always cheered on all their children. And now all
the grandchildren, too.” She is almost deflated, because for a moment, she had thought she might
have found a confidante in her favourite teacher. Better to direct the conversation back to harmless
channels.

“Goodness, when I think of how that family’s grown – we’ll have an entire form of Gryffindor
Weasleys, in a couple years!” She does not seem put out at this prospect, quite the opposite, in
fact. “But you haven’t hiked all the way up here just to blether, have you? You mentioned
wanting to poke about the castle, in the owl you sent.”

“Yes. I’ve… found something, I think it might be a password. Probably to the private laboratory
that Professor Snape kept. It was written in one of his books, you know that I have them?”

“Yes, I had heard. It still seems so profoundly strange that he would have done that,” McGonagall
says slowly, “Left you his books.”

She can’t help bristling; the number of times she’s heard some variant of this have left their mark. “Why is that so strange.” It’s a challenge, not a question.

“I should have thought he would have left them to Tiberius, is all. Not to some Gryffindor girl.”

Ah yes. She’d momentarily forgotten that Minerva McGonagall – *is faithless* – probably knows Tibs. “Oh. Tiberius Prince, do you mean? I hadn’t imagined – was he related to Dr. Prince, then?” she asks, as innocently as she knows how.

McGonagall shoots her a sharp look. “Yes. And he even did an apprenticeship with Tiberius, so it has always struck me badly. I have wondered…”

“Yes?” She has the distinct sense that she might be poking a wasp nest.

McGonagall purses her lips tight. “Never mind.” She stands, to pluck the floo jar from the mantle. The flames turn green. “Professor Delgado, when you are able, I would appreciate your coming by my office.”

A disembodied voice floats back. “Of course, Headmistress.”

But Hermione can’t leave things well enough alone. “Please, Professor. What did you mean to ask?”

McGonagall emits a little snort of what can only be anger or extreme distaste. “It gives me no pleasure, to ask, Mrs. Weasley, but I have wondered if… if Professor Snape ever behaved indelicately towards you.”

She can feel her eyes growing wide. It’s like being hit with a bludger, maybe. Some hard, solid object, right in the center of her skull. “You… you can’t honestly think… No! God, no, of course not.” This has consumed all of her oxygen and she finds she needs to grip the carved arm of the chair, to steady herself while she draws breath for another round of assertions and explanations. “Not at all. He only, I think he knew I enjoyed Potions, that’s all. It surprised me, honestly, that he left me the books. I… He used to direct me towards citations, sometimes, leave a note or two on my papers. If I’d missed something, or else just pointing out primary literature that dealt with the topic. That’s all.” It’s even mostly the truth. She doesn’t feel better for having expressed it. There is no redemption in this confession, because McGonagall still looks suspicious.

“It just struck me as out of character,” she finally responds.

“Perhaps he didn’t get on with Dr. Prince. Or maybe it was just a bad joke -- I’ve thought so.”

“Perhaps,” McGonagall concedes, “Severus and I were never really close, so I suppose I wouldn’t know. He did leave his apprenticeship early; it’s possible there was bad blood.” She seems to like this theory, and it is miles above the one she previously held, from Hermione’s perspective. “And it would probably annoy Tiberius to have a muggleborn demonstrating proficiency in his own fiefdom.”

She feels it like an icy finger, a quivering chill in her bowels. “I… I never got the impression that Dr. Prince was… particularly biased in that regard.” Please no, please no. She’d worked *so hard.*

McGonagall actually flushes red, and sits back down a little too quickly. “Lord, no. No, Hermione, I didn’t mean to imply *that.* No, for whatever faults he has, I sincerely doubt Tiberius was ever… I only meant, your own success in apposition to Severus, who… well, I know Tiberius
once held great hopes for him.”

You could fill half the Great Hall with whatever McGonagall isn’t telling her in all this spluttering. But she has no opportunity to press her on the subject, because Javier Delgado chooses that instant to enter the Headmistress’ office.

He’s beautiful. She’d had no idea that the word could apply to a man, but he’s more than simply handsome, and the English language is deficient of any other adjective that could possibly do him justice. He has startling blue eyes framed in sooty lashes, a slightly patrician nose that would have looked at home on any marble statue, shapely brows, and full lips that on a woman could be accused of pouting. His cheekbones are high and graceful, and the three-day stubble darkening his jaw simply has to be deliberate, it’s so perfectly symmetrical. His hair falls in perfect dark curls to his crisp collar.

She swallows hard, and feels suddenly very dowdy.

“Professor Delgado, excellent. This is Mrs. Weasley, she –”

“Ah, but Neville he has told me that you are coming!” Delgado sweeps forward and grasps her hand. “It is my honour to meet with you! For surely, it is a rare day, to have such a genius descend upon us here.” He presses those perfect lips to the back of her fingers and she experiences it as a visceral jolt.

“Professor Delgado, it’s… it’s nice to meet you, too,” she manages to murmur.

“Javier, you must call me Javier.” He gives her a roguish wink, and she begins to fathom why Neville considers him a problem.

But what can she say, except, “You’ll call me Hermione, then?”

“It would be my pleasure.” The way he stresses the word does alarming tingling things to her spinal cord. Imagine if Professor Snape had had even an ounce of this physical appeal? She’d have never escaped Potions without drenching her knickers. Her brain is suddenly very hard-pressed to recall any favourite fantasies of his hooked nose against her breasts.

McGonagall to the rescue: “Javier, perhaps you would be kind enough to allow us access to your quarters. Mrs. Weasley thinks she knows the password to the wards Snape set on his private lab.”

“But of course, of course,” he flourishes for them to precede him into the Floo, which McGonagall has reactivated.

He doesn’t have bookcases, is the first thing she notices. It makes it easier not to melt beneath the light pressure of his fingers at the small of her back, as he quietly implores her to “Come with me, the door it is over here.”

It is very definitely a door, and of course it doesn’t open. “I suppose it’s impervious to any unlocking charms?”

“Quite.” McGonagall confirms what Neville had told her. “You can get a rather nasty concussion from the backlash. We’ve tried everything, but it seems it won’t open except with the proper password. Most spells wind down with their caster’s death, but not all of them. Trust Severus Snape to have known a few exceptions to the general rule.”

But distrust Severus Snape in any other regard, apparently. “If I’m right, well, it’s a bit rude. Well, a lot rude.” She doesn’t really believe what Snape’s told her, but why would he lie?
Something had to have happened, and McGonagall seems to have known *Tiberius*.

“Hermione, my dear girl, I have taught school for half a century. Nothing will startle me at this point.”

We’ll see, she thinks, and says to the door, “Minerva McGonagall is faithless.”

It swings open, with just the faintest of creaks.

“Really.” McGonagall’s tone is curiously flat. Hermione glances over her shoulder at the Headmistress, and sees that her lips are tight, and her colour a little grey. But she hasn’t got time for any more observations, because Delgado is pushing past her and into the room.

“He steps back, and bows his head in acquiescence, although she catches something of his expression that makes her think he’s annoyed. It’s something in the pull of his lips, but it’s gone before she can identify it properly.

“That’s certainly fair enough,” McGonagall weighs in.

Good, because she’d been worried McGonagall mightn’t be her ally after hearing *that*. Not that she should be blamed for Snape’s sense of humor, but still. They’re easy words to misinterpret, and the actual interpretation isn’t all that flattering either, whatever that painting means. She’ll go for broke, because nothing ventured, nothing gained. “Too, I would like to lay claim to the equipment in here.”

“But surely it belongs to the school, yes?” Delgado’s expressive brows have climbed his forehead.

“In fact, I can find proof of purchase for everything in this room, Professor Snape kept very meticulous records of his private investments.” They’re positively anal records, and she knows exactly how many treasures he hid away in here.

“While I can’t dispute that Professor Snape spent his own monies on his equipment, I should think,” Ah, there’s the aspersion in McGonagall’s tone, it just took a while for her to catch up, “I should **think** that his next of kin would have best right to his belongings.”

“In fact, I fully intend to apprise Dr. Prince of all of this, and to make my request of him,” she counters, calmly. “It was my thought to remove these effects – I can give you an itemization – and turn them over to Dr. Prince, but if you would prefer I solicit his agreement first, I can certainly come back.”

A cloud seems to have passed over McGonagall’s face, at her mention of Tibs. It’s not her mystery, she reminds herself.

McGonagall shakes herself, minutely, and comes to a decision. “Very well. An itemization will suffice. Javier, perhaps Mrs. Weasley will like your assistance.”

Perhaps Mrs. Weasley would like someone looming over her shoulder, to ensure she’s not doing anything untoward? She doesn’t think she’s wrong in this interpretation, and it hurts a little. Too, she’d have rather discovered more facets of the mysterious Professor Snape without an audience. How is she going to replenish her supply of daydream material with this dandy swanning through her field of view? She doesn’t quite sigh, but it’s a near thing.
Well, she’ll put him to work. She extracts the lists she’d copied from the lab manuals, and hands them to her new assistant. “When I find things, tick them off. Number three cauldron, pewter, serial number eight-seven-four-eight-twenty-two, alpha epsilon. Got it? Next one, number seven cauldron, platinum…”

She’s exhausted by the time they’re done. She doesn’t let him stop for dinner, either. If she has to suffer his presence, he has to suffer her determination to get this job done in one go. He actually goes off on a whinge, and she tartly informs him that she knows for a fact that the kitchens are open all night.

Curiously enough, he doesn’t offer to walk her down to the gates.

Hagrid does, though, and it’s good to see him again. He doesn’t make her rattle on about Harry and Ronald, only remarks that she’s looking tired. She is, she agrees. It’s been a long day. She tells him, without his asking, about Professor Snape’s laboratory. She caresses her satchel possessively as she talks. It’s what she has, now.

“‘Spect Professor Snape woulda been happy, like, ter see how yeh’ve got on. He never suffered dunderheads, he liked to tell us. But yeh could see he was also right proud of the smart ones, even if he never said.”

She quirks him a sad smile, in the darkness. “Thanks, Hagrid.” She can see it now, people will have been putting all sorts of kind and conciliatory words in Snape’s mouth. Rewriting his sarcasm and cruelty, into something that will better fit the narrative Harry shouted at Riddle, not half a mile from here. Ah well.

She bids Hagrid goodnight at the gate, and reassembles her molecules in London, where it is drizzling down. Again. She sets the satchel aside, she’ll deal with it tomorrow. Or the next day. Some day. She hasn’t got space to lay any of it out, but sure, maybe someday. She told him she would.

It hasn’t all been in vain, her journey up to Hogwarts. She has learned two important things: it doesn’t hurt the way she thought it would, and her genitals are not, after all, solely fixated on Severus Snape. If she can appreciate Delgado, who is little more to her than a pretty face, surely she can appreciate her husband. They fought a war together. They have been each other’s best friends for years. They have history. And that has meaning.

Come morning, she takes herself off to Diagon Alley. She has thought of a solution for dowdy.

The window display at Malkin’s strikes her as overdone. The mannequin appears to be in drunken repose, champagne glass transfixed in the act of rolling off her anonymous fingers. The filmy dress robes on display are pooled up her white thigh. You can’t tell anything at all about their cut, except that garters are apparently optional. She pulls a sneer, and considers apparating down to the river after all. But no, she’s committed to Diagon Alley for her morning ramble. And at least it’s not busy. She’s getting drenched standing here in the street, even with the umbrella charm, which does nothing for the rain that the wind sweeps up under its canopy of influence. She scowls again at the mannequin and resolutely steps into the shop. A tinkling chime announces her entrance.

The younger one, Miss Malkin, is folding scarves, and smiles brightly. “Good morning, love!”

Hermione nods civilly, and wonders how she can escape personalized attention.

“Just in for a snoop, or is there something I can help you find?”
“Just looking.” She smiles tightly, but then efficiency strikes her as the better idea, “Actually, I need something for St. Valentine’s. Nothing over the top, just, y’know, nice. More on the casual side. Black.”

“Heavens, no, not black, my dear! Plum, or aubergine, I think, with your colouring. Come with me!” She abandons the scarves, and sweeps off into the depths of the shop.

Hermione takes a deep breath, and acquiesces to what has just become inevitable. This is stupid, she tells herself firmly, as Malkin retrieves one filmy creation after another. She doesn’t need anything romantic, just something dressier than her usual plain black robes. She tries in vain to impress this upon the woman, but Malkin merely tuts and shoos her into the changing room.

Each one seems worse than the last. At least puffed sleeves are gone, and instead serenely draping trumpets are in this year. Outer robes have commensurately lost their sleeves entirely, but are now buckling at the waist with immense jewelled pins, instead of falling open to display a corset and skirt or cotehardie. In fact, aside from colorful embroidered sleeves, inner robes have gone rather plain – the fabric leans to sheers or silk, but the cuts are simple and the effect is more evocative of undergarments than dresses. Most are lacing at the front, which completes the resemblance.

The majority of the robes Malkin brings her will clash horribly with anything Ronald might wear. She finally settles upon a dark pewter inner robe in rough silk. The sleeves are even livable; their scattering of embroidered silver ivy is subtle in comparison to the glimmer and sparkle of crystals adorning several other contenders. “Sedate, please!” she keeps stressing, but that word doesn’t have any meaning in a shop like this.

She finally bullies Malkin into giving up on the evening wear section when it comes to the outer robe. Just a business robe, in a colour verging more on Tyrian purple than aubergine. Malkin clucks her tongue, but Hermione quite likes the effect. It’s professional, but stylish. She can justify buying this setup, because perhaps she’ll finally go to a Guild meeting this year, and she should have something nice to wear. She does let Malkin talk her into a pin that is more ornate than she would normally choose, but at least it’s not a dense shield of glitter. The filigreed leaves are close enough to those on the sleeves that she has to agree it’ll look superb.

Ronald will like it. He’s always said that he enjoys showing her off when she’s kitted out like a proper witch. She’d gone off in a harangue, of course. She is a proper witch, and it shouldn’t matter what she wears. And she isn’t a possession, for him to show off.

But she can make an exception for once. He has done things for her, put up with things he’d rather not have. Even if he hasn’t done it cheerfully, he has still done it. Nothing of value comes without some effort, and it is past time she herself made some.
She has new bedtime rituals.

Instead of lying in the dark and imagining what she can’t have, envisioning pale limbs entwined together, dark hair tangled with flame, green eyes rolling back and lips parting as those long fingers delve into intimate places… Instead of imagining these things that knot her guts in spite and loathing, and make her want to cry and scream and break things and rip things and… And, well, her pillow can only take so much abuse, so many tears. So instead of indulging these childish antics, she is tending to her immortal soul.

Or to her marriage, anyway.

She dwells on memories of his rough, calloused fingers, how they scratched against her tissues, how his thumb always ground down a little too hard. But it still worked. It just… took a little longer. Her body doesn’t really care what her brain is doing, and she’d curated an abundance of naughtier, more aggressive scenarios to play out while he thrust into her, grunting and sweating. But she’s not allowed to think of those anymore.

She refocuses on things she does recall, real things. The sound of his balls slapping, wet, against her quim. The ache in the ligaments of her groin, as he held her legs wide. No, she’s doing this wrong again. How about the feeling of his fingers curving into the swell of her arse, as he lifts her hips against him, the head of his cock jolting into that spot that almost makes her feel like she has to wee. Damn it.

She tries again. The feel of stiff, wiry hairs, gliding against her clit as he pushes into her. The texture of loose, silky skin, curiously mobile atop the pulsing vessels that ridge his cock. The smell of his ejaculate. The salty, bitter taste of it on her lips. The way he’d tugged her hair as she teased the slit in his glans. The way that had hurt, how it had brought tears to her eyes.

Fuck.

Well, at least she can’t say she doesn’t remember anything.

And there have been some good things. The attentive way he’d suckled her breasts, licking her nipples into buds. The tickling marathons that had turned into panting kisses – and he’d learned to do that right, just enough pressure, and his tongue promising, hinting, at the penetration he longed to perpetrate upon her, a splendid teasing prelude, even if the main show was… Feeling his arms around her in the aftermath. Being able to fall into dreamless sleep, knowing that his body was between her and the world. The possessive way he’d traced her curves, caressed her hip. Mine. It was nice to be certain she was truly wanted.

Nights pass. In the daylight, it’s easier. She drags her memories along with her into the shower, how he’d soaped her shoulders and teasingly pinched her bum. How they’d laughed and splashed
water at each other. And then there’s breakfast, and she reminds herself that he’d often fix her coffee before preparing his tea, that he’d thank her if she cooked, and that he’d do the washing up more often than not.

Too, there could be spirited conversations over the daily news. The *Prophet* was always good, and sometimes he’d ask her to explain something in the muggle paper. He did try, she couldn’t fault him there. He tried where he was able.

Heading off to the café is a relief, though. She can let her guard down, and just focus on the work in front of her. It’s calming: rephrasing sentences, drafting new paragraphs, flipping through lab manuals in an attempt to report these experiments in a way that is compatible with publication. She’s already figured out how to incorporate the dissolution analyses he’d done. They’re not perfect, but it’s certainly a proof-of-concept. It would be nice to include some indication that the techniques actually *will* work with potions, but there just isn’t the requisite experimental evidence to demonstrate it. But this alone isn’t standing in the way of resubmission.

The trouble, she can admit, isn’t with the lab manuals, isn’t with the tabulations of experimental results.

The trouble is with her attention span. This isn’t riveting her the way it used to, and Ronald keeps intruding at the edges of her thoughts. Ronald, sweaty from playing quidditch with his nieces and nephews. Ronald, untangling yet another clump of her hair from the bathtub drain. Ronald, pushing her on the old wooden swing at the Burrow. Ronald, digging a grave for poor Crooks.

She’s staring out the window again, idly watching as occasional muggles hurry past the soft folds of old-fashioned lace, anonymous and unidentifiable, shrouded in their umbrellas and their raincoats. It was only grey and misty when she’d set out this morning, but it’s picking up with a vengeance, now. She observes droplets coalescing upon the glass, melding, growing. Gravity finally wins out against surface tension, and they invariably give way to runnels down the pane.

A fresh cup of coffee is intruding upon her attention, she sees it from the corner of her eye. She looks up to thank Laszlo for once again going out of his way, but it isn’t the mustachioed Hungarian who is looming over her table. It’s Severus Snape.

He has a dripping umbrella hooked over one arm, and a coffee cup of his own in his off hand. Buttoned up behind a long double-breasted coat, he looks so like the Professor Snape of old that her heart nearly stops.

“Do you mind if I join you? There aren’t any other seats free.”

He’s lost his mind, evidently, because there are three tables in the immediate vicinity that are entirely devoid of occupants. “Be my guest.” She gestures at the chair opposite; he’s already pulling it out.

“Do you eat, these days? And if so, would you care for an extra candy, because I confess I’m not much for sweets.” He plucks the marzipan from the edge of his own saucer, and sets it on hers when she nods, still shaken. “Are you still working on time-release coatings? I should have thought you’d sent that back to Uncle Tibs by now.”

“Yes, er, it’s taking me longer than expected.” She can manage words, if only just barely. “Too, I wasn’t feeling well, last week.”

“Sleeping aids will help with some of that,” he says, his eyes holding hers for such a long beat that she has to look away, look down. She knows legilimency doesn’t work like that, but still.
For good measure, she also shrugs off his suggestion, then takes a sip of coffee to give herself time to regroup, and to figure out how to redirect his attention back into safe channels. “I’m going to incorporate the coatings you developed, and the mock-digestion trials – with the dye capsules -- that you performed. Because I do want to include you on this paper, it was your idea first.”

“Suit yourself. It’s one of those social niceties: Posthumous contributors ought to keep their opinions to themselves.”

What is that supposed to mean? She repeats the question aloud.

“Oh, nothing, really. Noise. This is excellent coffee, by the way. I see why you haunt this place. Well, not quite nothing, but only a suggestion. Chiefly, good papers are finished papers, and excellent papers are published papers. And you shouldn’t fuss with it endlessly, or you’ll accomplish neither. But I didn’t actually come here to offer you unsolicited advice.”

“Oh?” Her tone is perhaps a bit more wary than she’d intended.

He favours her with a wry grimace. “No. I’m playing least underfoot, which is a more comfortable way of phrasing the fact I’ve been forced out of my own home.”

She raises her eyebrows, continues to sip her coffee. He takes it for what it is, an invitation to continue. “With any luck, talks are proceeding to disarmament. At the very least, there finally are talks. Between Martin and O’Shea. God knows what started it all, anymore, but it’s like any of the spats this lot have, it’ll have been something abstract and philosophical. And frankly, I did my tour of duty in conflict resolution, thanks kindly.”

She’s getting the picture now, she thinks. “Martin is the one with the DNA barcodes, the exhibit of extinct species?”

He nods. “They were planning an exhibit together, a year ago.”

“I… I got the sense they had artistic differences.”

“Well, they’ve certainly developed them since. Here’s hoping they hash out an armistice, though, because I’d like to go home sometime. In the interim, though… It’s clear enough to me that you’re not actually working on this anymore today. How do you fancy coming along on a walk? And before you ask, yes I have got friends. But I’ve decided you can be one of them, so deal with it.” He sniffs, pushes his hair back, and turns away to observe something on the far wall that is apparently quite fascinating.

How do his words do this? She feels a smile tugging up the corners of her mouth, but at the same time, it’s as though her chest has collapsed in upon itself. “Do you really mean that?” It escapes her in a breathless little croak.

“Of course not. I should think that in all the years you’ve known me, I’ve made it quite clear that I frequently waste my breath saying things I don’t intend to.” He’s positively stroppy now, and she can’t help but giggle, despite the way her eyes have gone inexplicably blurry.

She reaches across the table, to press her fingers to the edge of his coat sleeve. “Thank you,” she whispers, “I’d consider it an honour to be your friend.”

He gazes down at her hand, and his lips do a funny little quirking thing, not anything you could mistake for a smile. “Well,” he says after a moment, “Typically, then, when a friend asks if you want to go for a jaunt in a rainstorm, you respond in the affirmative. So?”
She laughs outright, and it feels like wings beating, lifting her up. “Yes, then! Let me pack my things away.” It’s the work of a few minutes, to tidy her papers and books, finish draining her cup, and twist the marzipans into a paper napkin. But it hasn’t been long enough to dampen the grin that’s fighting to break through her control. She releases it, finally, when she’s following him out of the café. She turns to give Laszlo a little wave, and he beams back at her, clearly amused by her expression. She’s got it out of her system by the time Snape turns to her, and she can behave normally towards him again. “Did you have any place in particular in mind? To walk?”

“Have you got an Official London?”

“The apparition guide?” It’s a yearly publication of the Ministry’s officially maintained apparition points, with pictorial references.

He nods. “Can’t apparate without a wand. It’s just more energy than can be controlled at once. Or, in theory, anyway, and I’d rather not risk splinching, testing it out.”

But then… No, she sees what he’s getting at. “I could do it, and take you side-along, you mean.”

“If you know where you’re going, yes.”

Fair enough. She would certainly hesitate in trusting other people to apparate her, too. “I do have one. An Official. At home, though. I could go and fetch it?”

He presses his umbrella upon her, which is only good sense, because she can’t very well use a charm in the midst of muggle London. She leaves him leaning against the wall, beneath the café’s awning. “Back in a jiffy!” she assures him.

She fairly skips around the corner, to duck behind a dustbin, and pop back into her apartment. She drops the umbrella, scrambles to her trunk, and roots through the detritus. Somewhere... There! It’s last year’s, but the new editions come out in March, so the points should all still work. It’s a bit battered up – Ronald is never careful with books, and he never could be bothered to buy his own, just nicks hers all the time. Ronald. She glances up, from where she’s kneeling on the floor. Her new dress robes are hanging above her, she’d hooked them on the coat tree.

What is she doing? What is he doing?

She startles, when the apparition guide clunks onto the floor. It’s fallen from her fingers. She pulls away from it, as though suddenly realising that it’s something dangerous.

What if she just stays here? It would be for the best. She reminds herself of the way Maddie O’Shea had opened the door. This helps, and she even goes so far as to take her coat off, to unpack her papers. She tastes one of the marzipans, and stops herself from sniffling with a furious glare that she directs at the guide, still splayed out on the floor, abandoned.

But she has his umbrella. And he can’t apparate home the way she can, so he’ll get soaked straight through and what if he catches his death of cold? She’s grasping, now, at reasons to go back, against all her better judgement. Well, here’s one: he said he’d decided that she was a friend. So what if she didn’t quite think that was how you were supposed to do it – there weren’t any trolls around for them to battle together, and that was how she’d established friendships before. Well then. They’d agreed to be friends. And friends didn’t steal each other’s umbrellas, no matter how fucked up their respective lives were.

She pulls her coat back on, grabs Snape’s umbrella and her own, and finally scoops up the Official London before she can think better of this madness. She can’t be sure the dustbin will be as safe to
apparate to as it was to disapparate from, so it’s several minutes of fast walking before she’s back at the café. He’s still there, leaning idly against the wall as if he’s got all the time in the world. He’s not looking in her direction when she arrives, but he doesn’t startle, just casually cocks his head when she announces herself.

“You do know, Ms. Granger, that a jiffy is a measureable unit of time.” His tone is severe, but also, she thinks, a bit mocking. There is just the barest hint of laughter lurking in his eyes. “In fact, it is equivalent to the length of time it takes a photon to travel one centimeter in a vacuum.”

“So I’m back in several jiffies, then.” She holds the Official up as evidence of her success, despite the time it’s taken her to wrestle her conscience into submission. “Where did you want to go?”

“Several jiffies? Your math appalls me. Try twenty-one trillion, five-hundred-eighty-five billion, sixty-three million, and er, I’ve lost track now. But more than twenty-one trillion jiffies.”

“You’ve sat here calculating that the entire time, haven’t you?” It is so terribly, horribly wrong how badly she wants to snog that supercilious smirk off his face. There is something deeply disordered in her brain.

“Possibly.” He takes the book from her, and flips through to the ‘S’ section. “Here we are. Stoke Newington, think you can manage it?”

“Since it doesn’t involve calculating the speed of photons – who memorizes something like that, anyway? – I suppose you can trust it’s within my capabilities.” She takes the book back, and studies the page he’s indicated.

Ministry apparition points have a sameness to them, empty flats with one or two identifying details. Nothing that’s ever too challenging to visualize, but distinct enough you can keep it straight in your mind. Stoke Newington’s is above a Caribbean takeaway, right next to the Overground station. It has broken venetian blinds, a worn orange rug, and an ornate frame centered on an off-white wall. The frame contains the words ‘Stoke Newington’, in alternating blue and red letters, which is the Ministry’s usual. “Got it,” she proclaims, and Snape follows her into the alley. She closes her eyes, calls it to mind, and then checks her recollection against the photograph. Excellent. Because it would be just awful to splinch Professor Snape.

He gives her a nod, and extends his hand. A suffocating eye blink later, she releases his fingers and sneezes in the dust their entrance has raised. He gives the shabby room an appraising sneer. “Well, I suppose I can’t offer the usual complaints about Ministry standards, since I’m not paying taxes anymore. Come on, then.”

She follows him down, into the street and the rain. There are nicely appointed new houses opposite the row of squat tenements they apparated into. Property values must be high around here. Probably the Ministry point won’t be around much longer, taxes being what they are.

Snape is a brisk walker, but he slows after they dart across the street, and pauses while she struggles with her umbrella, which has popped a spoke. She mends it momentarily with a stitch-in-time charm. “So where are we going, then?”

“Here.” He indicates the heavy iron fencing they are stopped in front of. The fence is fronting a brick walk, with trees on either side of it, which seems to wend off into a wooded park. But it isn’t. “This is Abney Park Cemetery,” he informs her, just as she’s reading the words carved into the stone pillars on either side the gates.

His shoulders hunch up a little when she doesn’t immediately respond. “I like coming here, is all.
But we can go elsewhere.” Why does she get the impression he’s suddenly embarrassed, sorry to have suggested this?

“Lead the way,” she says firmly. This is a place he likes, a place he’s sharing with her, and she’s not about to turn up her nose, for all that it’s unconventional.

It isn’t many paces before the neat grass and brick gives way to rough gravel paths, with funerary monuments and winter-bare trees looming on either side. They come to a fork in the path, and Snape, naturally enough, chooses the narrower one, which angles off into deeper woods. It is strangely surreal, to see cherubs and angels, spires and crosses, poking up out of trailing ivy and moss, seemingly abandoned to the forest that is consuming them.

It is so deeply still, here. The sounds of London, the traffic, the trains – it’s gone entirely. She can only hear the crunch of their footsteps on the wet gravel, that soft patter of raindrops on their umbrellas. The air is redolent of wet earth, a good clean smell, for all that they are surrounded by the dead.

“This was one of the first of the garden cemeteries. Back in the 1830s, 1840s. The crypts and vaults, all the burial grounds in the City, they were literally overflowing. They were digging over the graves and scattering the bones, just to accommodate the newly dead. The smell, too, was deemed a sanitation problem. They used to punch holes in the coffins, tap them, to release the gases, else they’d explode.” It’s a horrible image that he’s painting, but his words are so soft, falling in gentle cadence with the rain.

“So they brought the dead out here, to the big estates. Abney was for the Dissenters. Methodists, Unitarians, the Salvation Army. The lot of them. It was originally designed as an arboretum, a park. The wild’s taking it back, because dead human beings hold no power against Nature. But the trees are here through our original benevolence, 2500 different species of them, or thereabouts. They don’t bury anyone here, anymore. It’s nearly full-up. See those gravestones?” He points to serial files of them, leaning in crooked rows, one atop the next. “Where we’re walking here, this is essentially a common grave. It sunk down over the years, as the coffins fell in. When they infilled it, they stacked all the stones off to the side like that. I don’t suppose anyone down there minds much, anymore.”

She nods at the justice of this, and thinks of the gilded mausoleum the Ministry had constructed to honour those who had died in Voldemort’s war. “We go to such elaborate lengths,” she offers.

“To memorialize the dead. Yes.” He pauses, then gestures at a row of statuary. “Of course, the Victorians did it to the extremes – these monuments, with all their carvings. They’re each one more intricate than the last. There’s even a lion in here, you’d like him. He’s atop the Bostocks, who owned a menagerie, if memory serves. This stonework,” he rests his hand against the granite drape of an angel’s robe, “It’s all so beautifully formed. They must have been stunning when they were first carved. But I think I like them better, like this. Lichen and moss, covering over their names, anonymizing them.”

“But don’t you think it’s important, to carry some memory of these people forward?” She can’t see his face quite clearly, in the shadow of his umbrella, so she is not sure what emotions he might be displaying in the long minutes that pass before he answers her. They have walked on, before he finally speaks.

“I think that those who need memories will carry them on, regardless. But sometimes, I think the greatest kindness to the living is to let them go, to let the dead be truly free. I didn’t always think so, but I’ve come ‘round to the notion.” Is he talking about Lily? There is something slow and
wistful in his voice that assures her this is so.

“Too, although this stonework pleases the eye, and it may soothe the heart to think of having some winged guardian presiding over one’s family, these monuments are just lids. It’s nothing beautiful beneath them, just brick shafts, vaults with rotting coffins, stacked two by two all the way down, suspended above each other on naught but iron bars. Where is there beauty or grace in that? Better to be a tree.”

She tries to imagine how densely green, how overflowing with life this place must be, when the trees are leafed out, and the stonework receding into shadows. Not quite forgotten, but no longer the centerpiece. Life, with its feet sunk down into the past, but nevertheless embracing the sky. She understands why he says he likes it here. She thinks she does, as well. “Thank you.” It’s too simple, but it’s all she has. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

The woods open out to a mouldering chapel, but they observe it only briefly, before passing on. Snape is here for the trees, and she is more than content to keep him company. “How did you come across this place?”

He frowns at graffiti that is decorating a marble column, and presses his hand to it. It vanishes, like an ink blot spreading in reverse. “My mother came here to sketch.”

“Oh.” His childhood must have been so strange, the Faceless Girl for a friend, and afternoons in a cemetery. “Was it under better repair, when you were young?”

“Hmm? No, I’ve not been clear. I found Abney Park in her sketchbooks; she only came to London after we’d parted ways. When I was finished school.”

“So the Hive, then—” she blurs, before quite realising that he seems disinclined to expand on this.

“Her old collective bought the space, with some aid through arts and culture grants as it transpires. I became its de facto custodian when the Borough was tying up loose ends, some years back. Did you ever keep an ant farm, when you were a child?”

The speed of his apparent non sequitur nearly gives her whiplash. “Like, with the blue gel, and everything?”

“Or even dirt. I never did, never had the money or supplies to build one, but I always sort of wanted to. Having that lot underfoot makes up for it, I think. And well, before I was actually living there, it was nice not to have to worry about squatters. Although, to be fair, most of them aren’t paying anything like a reasonable rent. Still, they’re squatters with an internal vetting service, so the quality’s a little higher, one imagines.”

She chuckles softly at the endless depths of wry sarcasm in his tone, and decides that this explanation fits her understanding of the quiet, dour man who thinks such exquisite thoughts about graveyards. She has no difficulty imagining him staring endless hours at the incomprehensible motions of artist-ants.

“Hah! Look here!” He’s dropped to a crouch between two towering memorials. “Galanthus nivalis, snowdrops.” And so they are, a little crowd of them, pearly petals nodding on fine green stems.

“There will be crocuses, soon, and then the daffodils. The woods have eaten any tulips that might have been here, but there’s still bluebells. We’ll have to come back, so you can see it in full spring, when the leaves are bursting.”
“I’d like that very much,” she says, and is nearly surprised at how deeply honest this assertion is. He has said we and not you, and hoping that this is a promise tightens up her throat.

“But we should probably be getting on for this evening.” He stands, and gestures back the way they’ve come. “They’ll be locking up soon.”

They part near the gates – she to apparate home, and he to make his way from the Overground. He doesn’t tell her to contact him, doesn’t indicate that he will be in touch with her. Lying in bed again, staring at the crack in the plaster above her, she is overwhelmed with a certainty that she has imagined the afternoon. She lets the remaining marzipan melt in her mouth, and doesn’t try to stop herself from crying into her pillow.

But the clouds are scudding across the sky in the morning, and in the sunlight it is easier to remind herself of Ronald, to resolutely dwell upon memories of his laughter, his little jokes, the way he would kiss her forehead or nuzzle her neck, before she took herself up to the attic to work. Before she took herself up to the attic to spend time with Severus Snape.

She doesn’t take his lab manuals to the café for the remainder of the week.

She doesn’t even go to the café, on Friday. She can finish her manuscript anytime, but today? Today is for Ronald. Her walk by the Thames runs long, but she still has hours when she returns to the flat, and she puts them to use. By the time the sun is setting, her hair is falling in sculptured waves, and the dress robes swirl stylishly, when she darts from her trunk to the mirror, unpacking the few cosmetics she’s had no excuse to use yet. She checks the time. It’s nearly after dinner, perhaps she should have eaten. Well, it’s too late, and he might have been clearer as to what he meant by ‘evening’. She purses her lips, and applies some colour, then touches a bit of kohl to her lash line. She smiles experimentally in the mirror. She looks quite lovely, really.

She wishes Severus could see her.

But that’s stupid. He has Maddie, and doubtless plans of his own for the evening. A vision of his hands on the little urchin’s tattooed wrists, pressing her against the winged back of one of the Abney angels, springs fully formed in her mind.

She whirls away from the mirror, and seats herself on the side of her bed, to wait. She’s just being ridiculous. Or perhaps she’s absolutely, completely insane. It’s hard to tell, but she’s definitely somewhere on that spectrum. Severus Snape, she tells herself firmly – again – is her friend. This is a nice, neat category for him. Harry is her friend. Neville is her friend. And she has no desire whatsoever to lick either of their cocks. She wouldn’t want them grinding up against her arse. She does not want to feel their hands tangled in her hair.

She needs to get laid. She needs it badly; it’s clearly been far too long. If Ronald makes the slightest intimation in that direction, she resolves she’ll drag him straight off to bed. She’ll even go on top, if he wants, because she has got to exorcise these sexual obsessions from her mind.

The tension falls out of her shoulders, when the knock at her door finally arrives. She takes a deep breath, pastes on something that she hopes passes for a seductive smile, lowers her eyelids, inclines her head coquettishly, and opens the door. He’s wearing dark blue robes, is the first thing she notices, and she’s unexpectedly thankful, because they won’t clash. The second thing she notices, is that he’s not Ronald.

“Hermione Granger?”

She nods.
He passes her an envelope with her name on it, and the Ministry seal in wax. Her fingers are suddenly clumsy, but she manages to fumble it open. She barely registers when he leaves, doesn't hear or recognize what he tells her, because her attention is taken over with words on the parchment that spell out incomprehensible things like *called to appear before a six member assembly of the Wizengamot and formally charged by Mr. Ronald Weasley as a party at fault and proceedings of the divorce to be further established pending disclosure of fault.*

She is shaking, badly, as she stumbles into the night.
Grimmauld Place, she thinks. Harry knew this was coming, and he hadn't told her. *It's not important right now.* When the bloody hell did he think it would be worthwhile mentioning? He's supposed to be her friend, how could he just… Why isn't she worth any loyalty? She wants to rage at him (she wants to rage at Ronald) and she wants him to fix her tea and give her a hug and tell her that they'll always be friends, no matter what. Friends. Why hasn't she got any, she's thinking, as she pictures the entrance foyer at the Potters'.

The pressure of apparition is positively suffocating this time, and instead of simply popping back into reality, she's flung. She's aware of a crashing boom, which echoes through every bone in her skull, and a nauseating swirl of streetlights, just before the ground reaches up to smack her. It knocks the breath clear out of her, and for several instants while she's struggling to remember how to do this inhale-exhale thing, she doesn't feel the pain.

But those instants don't last. "Oh fuck," she moans, as she struggles to sit up, to assess the damage. She's fucking *splinched*, hasn't she? Fuck, fuck, fuckity-fuck, where are her legs? Okay, they're there – or they hurt enough that they should be. "Ow, shit!" The palms of her hands are lacerated, she flinches from using them to raise herself up.

"What the bloody hell is going on out here? Townes, is that you?" A door across from where she's landed has opened. "Shite!"

And Severus Snape is suddenly in her field of view, brows contracted, eyes wide with alarm. "Have you splinched yourself, then? Fucking hell, Granger!"

"I don't know," she manages, past teeth grit against pain. What the bleeding fuck is she doing in Hackney Wick, of all places?

He's making a quick study of her limbs, patting her down through the tangled fabric of her robes. Apparently they're intact, because next he pulls her into a sitting position, lifts her hair back.

"Right, torso, limbs, and ears accounted for. Fingers too, toes. Looks like the only casualties are your shoes, if you were wearing any."

She can't help it, she starts laughing and oh God, it hurts so much. There's going to be a pair of shoes outside Grimmauld Place in the morning, likely, and her brain has supplied *Cinderella*, and the resulting mental image is just too pathetically absurd.

"Lovely. Hysterics. Do you want to stop on your own, or should I slap you?"

She stops. "Ouch, please don't, I'm in enough pain."

"A learning experience for you. Let's see if your astounding good fortune lasts long enough to get you up off the street before someone else comes to investigate your excessively dramatic
entrance." He hooks an arm around her back, and lifts her up by the armpits.

"Ohgodfuckno! My ankle!" It won't bear her weight. He catches her as she crumples. "Ow!" He's prodding at it, rotating her foot.

"Sprained, I think. Can't tell for sure in this light, but at least it's not broken."

"Oy!" Comes a shout, "Snape, is that you? What's going on?"

"Don't know!" he calls back. "I thought it was you lot."

Fuck. The muggles have arrived. Or one of them, anyway. It's the poofter, Val. Snape moves to intercept her view, or perhaps Val's view of her. Her and her dress robes. Where's her wand? She'll need it to confound this interloper, at minimum.

"Nah, it's quiet on our side. Everyone ok, what happened?"

"Like I said, no idea. Maybe a gas main blew somewhere – sounded close, though."

"What's the damage here?"

"Her? Bints in heels, isn't it always? She's done in her ankle."

Val adopts a pose, hand on hip, "Girlfriend, those things are deeeaaad-ly."

"I'm becoming aware," she grinds out past clenched teeth. Can't Snape confund him? He managed battle hexes without a wand.

But Snape seems to be starting up a fucking conversation with him: "I suppose you're all alone over there? I should've thought you'd be out with the sisterhood, taking back the night."

"Sisterhood? Okay, seriously, Sevvie, I do not have a va-jay-jay. And I am slightly worried for you, if you can't tell the difference."

He rolls his eyes, and his sigh seems long-suffering and deeply felt. "Your quarrels with absolutely everyone aside, Valentine, isn't it close to forty percent of gay men who experience some form of sexual violence? I'd think you could stand to offer your support."

"Forty percent, yeah? Isn't it also two in five people that bring up statistics who get punched in the face?"

"Hah. You'd break a nail. Here, Hermione, put an arm over. I think we're cancelling tonight." He guides her arm around his neck, and leans across her body. Under this visual cover, he's tucking the bulk of her robes in against her thighs. It's dark enough that she supposes they might pass for a dress, if his intention is to make Val believe they were heading out to some function. A date. Worst. Date. Ever.

"Well, there is that. And I just got 'em buffed." Val extends his hand as if inviting them to admire his manicure.

Snape turns to regard their audience, and, his voice dripping mock-pity, says "They didn't invite you along, did they?"

"And I wouldn't have gone," Val replies, with an air of serene disinterest, "Besides, I'm hooking up tonight. Say, if her ankle's broken, do you have tickets for anything, that are just going to be tragically wasted?"
"'Hooking up' and opera hardly seem compatible. And you're a vulture, did you know?"

*Opera* is actually a good cover. She's impressed, or she would be if he hadn't just jostled her leg, in bending her knees up.

"Yeah, that's tragic alright. And true. Maurice just doesn't seem the cultured type, so sad. Drywallers, you know. But oh-em-gee, his biiiiiiiceps! Aaaaaah! So good, so good."

Snape's snort of disgust is a thing of perfection. It's got exactly the same intonation that he always used for whatever horror Harry and Ronald had managed to brew in his class. "Enjoy yourself," he says, darkly.

"Thanks, I will." Val simpers at them. "I'd wish you the same, only y'know, ankles. You are totally not getting any tonight." He gives them a wave, and saunters back around the corner of the warehouse.

"My wand," she mutters.

"Let's see about some ice for that ankle," Snape answers, a bit too loudly, and hefts her up.

It hurts, but she clenches her jaw and bears through it, and only winces when he deposits her on his sofa. "You could have just confunded him," she points out.

"I could have done. But his brain needn't resemble Swiss cheese any more than it already does. Thinking fast is just as easy. Right, then– if you're fine for a second, I'll go and look for your wand."

She nods, and he heads back outside, emitting an obvious sigh as he passes out the door. Maddie's apparently not here, but that doesn't mean he wasn't planning to meet up with her. He's back in short order. Without her wand. He shakes his head, but it's an unnecessary communication.

"You tried summoning it?"

"Of course not, that would never have occurred to me." He seats himself across from her, pushes his sleeves up a bit – he's wearing a jumper, a nice one in a soft cable knit. He unbuttons his shirt cuffs too, and rolls them back. And then abruptly begins to laugh.

"My wand is missing, I don't see what's funny!" She is beginning to panic, and all he does is laugh harder.

"Sorry! Sorry, except, no, it's just too funny. Oh, God!" He wipes at his eyes, and bursts into another howl of laughter. Finally he pulls a cushion off the side of the chair, and buries his face in it. She watches his shoulders heaving – is he silently laughing, or trying to breathe? She can't tell. He finally raises his eyes above the edge of cushion; they're still sparkling with amusement, from behind the curtain of his hair, but he seems to have control of himself. He relinquishes the cushion entirely, and sags back into the upholstery. "Oh, gracious me. I am sorry, Miss Granger. But it's just… ah, the irony! Now, splinching your shoes – that's a very Hermione Granger kind of thing to do, but your wand? Lord, what kind of witch splinches her wand, and where have you stashed Miss Granger's body?"

"Hah. Yes, this is all very funny."

"Been that kind of day, eh?" he asks, sympathetic now that he's done laughing at her expense. "Oh, I tried 'Accio Granger's belongings', thinking maybe it'd turn up a shoe or two, at least, but I only got this."
It's the Ministry envelope. She must be insane, because she actually takes it from his outstretched hand. "Thanks," she even says, and sets it beside her on the sofa.

"Let’s see about getting some dittany for those cuts and scrapes. It's up to you if you want me to give that ankle a go. Shame about your wand."

A shame indeed; she could've healed her ankle in a trice. He's rummaging about in the plants off next to the window, and comes back with three round, fleshy little leaves, covered over in velvety grey fur. He peels them open with his fingernails, and gestures for her to extend her hands. It is strangely intimate to have him swiping the leaf juice across her scrapes, but he doesn't make any comment, just watches as a faint trickle of greenish smoke seeps off her healing wounds. "It's not as efficacious as the essential oil, but for minor injuries, the raw leaves certainly suffice." They do, she sees.

"I didn't realize your plants were magical."

"Most aren't, but I've got a few interesting things tucked in, here and there."

"It's impressive, all this. I've got a brown thumb, I think. Though I have managed to keep a Dieffenbachia alive," she puts in.

"That's a start," he says judiciously, "I began with a Sansevieria, myself. Common houseplants are gateway drugs, so you might want to exercise caution. So what's your decision on the ankle?"

"Ice, I think. Maybe if the swelling goes down?"

He goes off to rummage in the kitchen, and she wonders again if she's intruding on his plans for the evening.

"So where were you trying to apparate, before gracing the Wick with your dress robes?" He passes her an ice pack, and she wishes he weren't watching, because she'd apply it to her flaming face.

"To Grimmauld Place. I was going to give Harry a telling-off." And she'll definitely have to go tomorrow, and see if her wand turned up there. Whether she tells him off or not…

"Doubtless he needs it, but what's Potter done in particular?"

"Nothing." She ducks her head, but this isn't a good answer, and when she risks a glance at him, she can see he's about to tell her so. "He knew Ronald was going to have me served with divorce papers today."

His eyebrows raise, and he gestures at the Ministry envelope with a mute query.

"Yeah."

"Hmph. That's tasteful on his part."

"Exceedingly so. A nicely romantic gesture, suits the occasion." Echoing his sarcasm somehow takes the sting of embarrassment out of it.

"I'd offer you hard liquor, on such a joyous and momentous occasion as your impending freedom, but I haven't got anything to hand, more's the pity. Do you drink wine?"

She nods.

"Red alright? There might be a zinn around here somewhere, but I respect you more than that."
"Red is fine."

"I've got a fairly good cabernet sauvignon, and a cheap merlot, which would you rather?"

She sees that there's a glass beside his chair, so "Whatever you're drinking will fine."

"Cheap merlot it is. There's more of it, three entire bottles, and quantity seemed appropriate for the occasion." He rises, to fetch the remains of the bottle he'd been working on, and a second because apparently he's serious about this. She nods her thanks as she accepts the glass he overpours for her.

"I thought you'd have been doing something, for the holiday. Aren't you?" Where is Maddie, she wants to ask.

"Oh, I was doing something. Exactly what I do every other day."

She raises her eyebrows expectantly.

"Read. Books, you know?"

"I'm intimately familiar with the concept, yes." She responds to the curl of his lip, rather than his tone, which is nearly dry enough to be cause for offense. "But what do you get up to aside from reading?"

"Did you know, every year there are more than seven hundred titles published in science fiction and fantasy alone? Let's charitably assume half of them are worth reading once – even at a novel a day, even if the publishing industry entirely collapsed, I've got enough backlog to last me the remainder of my life. On the rare occasion that the novelty of reading for pleasure pales, I tend to my little ant farm, yonder."

He's taking the piss, probably, but it doesn't seem as though she's interrupted anything important. Shall they have conversation, with their cheap merlot? He seems inclined, so she extends a question: "What are you reading now, then?"

"Heinlein. It's called 'Friday', so clearly I'm reading it for the depth of the symbolism on such a day."

She smirks in appreciation, and fumbles for what to say next. She hates it when people ask her what a book is about – if they're genuinely curious, they can read the publisher's blurb. So instead she asks, "Is it any good?"

Severus – he's fully Severus now, because she calls people by their first name once they've proven themselves willing to talk about books – Severus hefts it in his hand, as if its weight plays into his consideration. "Not really, no," he says, eventually, "It hasn't got a plot, to begin with. Perhaps it will redeem itself in the last few chapters, but I have my doubts."

"I didn't realise novels could lack plots."

"Oh, easily." His hands sketch a breezy motion as he elaborates: "You just string together unconnected narrative events in no particularly meaningful order, and with no attention to the principal structure of a novel, which is to say, being centered upon a conflict and its resolution. When you think about it, it's not even surprising how many people won't notice when a work contains only events and not plot."

She frowns thoughtfully. "I'd notice. And you'd think something without a plot wouldn't even be
"In this case, it's probably because it was Heinlein. Everyone on the editorial side would be afraid they were simply failing to 'grok' the text." He gives her a sly, conspiratorial smile; she mirrors as if they are sharing a joke. She doesn't really get it, but the context of the word and his expression are clear enough that she can see he's being sarcastic.

"What I meant, though," he continues, "Is that a mundane reader might be easily satisfied with a series of events – after all, that's what their own lives are made up of. Which also adequately explains the popularity of television serials, so I'm fairly comfortable positing it as a general theory, instead of a mere hypothesis."

She nods. "Books end, life doesn't. I wonder, do you suppose people who have more life experiences than familiarity with literature are just confused by books, when considered from a structural perspective?"

"Hah, there's a thought. Perhaps. Although I think the other sort might be worse, honestly."

"People who read?"

He raises his glass, toasting her look of incredulity. "Consider: there's ultimately more danger, to self and society, from someone who's apt to conceptualize their life as a narrative, and themselves as its protagonist. I expect that's why people are always careening from one disaster to another – it's because they're searching for a plot, they need conflict – with others, with circumstance – they need it in order to feel like they're even alive, because they've gotten hold of a skewed metric by which to judge the condition."

"Life: heroes and villains need not apply?"

"Precisely. Just do your bit, take what joy you can in observing. Leave things better than you found them, if you can, or at least no worse. Read books, drink wine." He does.

She is momentarily fixated on the sight of his lower lip pressed against his glass. "Are you quite sure you're not a secret Hufflepuff?" she asks, attempting to recover some sense of dignity in the half-mocking abrogation of his.

"Good Lord, I hope not. I think, at their core, we Slytherins are motivated by self-interest, of which ambition is only an extroverted facet. And there's nothing more fundamentally self-interested than doing something solely for yourself, perhaps in utter violation of society's expectations. Or – actually, there is a higher pinnacle of that: doing nothing at all."

He swings his legs up over the arm of his chair, the perfect picture of indolence, and a physical exclamation mark on this point. "That's supreme self-interest. Using up oxygen and resources and doing no good whatsoever by it. No evil, either, because evil acts give the do-gooders something to rail against, and then you've actually contributed to humanity, in a backwards way."

"Have you just made an argument that Voldemort was a good thing?" Is she mocking him, or trying to pick a fight? Both, maybe, because Professor Snape – Severus – Professor Snape should not look quite so cozy, even in his own home.

He's not going for it, though. He just smiles, gently, and seems to contemplate the question. "I have, haven't I? Things are better for the muggle-born now, at least. I've kept up with the news a little; the Ministry enacted that preferential hiring policy, and the last I heard it was approaching fifty-percent saturation. I think it sometimes takes great evil to really shift consciousness, to enact
"Maybe you're right about that much," she concedes, "Things have changed. Maybe not on any personal front, but statistically. Y'know, I heard from Neville that there are even muggleborns in Slytherin House, now."

"Neville? Longbottom?" he straightens from his repose in a single fluid motion, and doesn't even slosh his glass.

"Hah, yes, would you believe he's teaching at Hogwarts?"

"God. And the castle's standing?"

He looks so horrified and affronted that she can't help laughing. "Well, he's taken Herbology, so I suppose there's a limited amount of damage he could really do."

"There's certainly comfort in the observation that plants don't habitually explode."

"Come now. You've got a bomber next door."

"Fair enough," he agrees with a little shrug. His next words, however, are grave, and back on topic: "It's a dangerous misconception, though, that Slytherin was pureblooded before the War. I'm surprised no one is saying otherwise."

"Oh, well, they do. Everyone knows there were always half-bloods, and it's common knowledge now that Riddle was, himself," she hastens to reassure him.

"No, but the muggleborns - there have been muggleborns, too. Not many. But some. They didn't advertise, for obvious reasons, but everyone in the House knew who they were. It was considered sporting, to bring them up to speed as quickly as possible, to make sure they could assimilate and pass. I won't say there weren't predictably toxic effects from that mindset, but…"

He draws in a deep breath; she is close enough to hear that it shudders, at the end. "But they weren't disadvantaged by their origins. There has always been a reasonable argument that if other Houses had done the same, most of the issues that Riddle's supporters hoisted up as causes – those issues simply would not have existed."

Disadvantaged. His stress on that word means something more than what he's said, she's sure of it. She thinks of grimy, desolate Cokeworth, and a two-up, two-down with a privy out back. He may have known some magic before turning up at Platform 9¾, but he certainly couldn't have held his own against posh acts like the Malfoys and the Blacks. Even she would have fit in better than him, for all her bucked teeth and arm-waving. She'd had the right robes, and she'd read enough in Hogwarts, A History that she could have passed. Would have passed, if she'd ever made any effort. Slughorn had even been coaching her on how to do it, hadn't he? Offering her a likely genealogy. Was that just spillover, leakage, of internal Slytherin ethos that she'd never known existed?

She's let down her side of the conversation, she realizes. He's giving her an inscrutable look, and his shoulders appear to have tensed. Oh. He's just advocated muggleborn assimilation.

"I… You know, I actually agree with some of that." She sees his shoulders lower, just a little. "If there's proper emphasis on respecting muggle culture, acknowledging muggleborns as having originated in non-wizarding circumstances, but not holding that against them… I don't really see where spending a little time teaching them the nuances of wizarding society is harmful. There are so many things I had to learn the hard way, so many mistakes I made – and I was such a bloody know-it-all, but there're things that just aren't in books."
sense of betrayal. "The problem comes in when muggles are deemed subhuman."

"Yes. It's a kind of racial violence, isn't it? We perpetrate it upon muggles, the way they do upon each other. Even those of us with the best intentions. Ever think about some of the concealing charms we use? How many of them are predicated on distracting muggles from what they're doing? Even yourself, earlier, you wondered at why I didn't just confund Val."

"Hmm. There is definitely justice in what you're saying," she concedes, "But I confess I don't know what the answer is."

"What I think is this: If you're faced with an insoluble problem, where everything you do is only going to make things worse, or change them not at all, just do nothing. Where's the problem with just settling in and reading a good book?"

They've come full circle, and she is beginning to suspect him of being something more than merely cynical, a nihilist in truth. Or acting the part, anyway. And the Severus Snape she thinks she knew was a master at method-acting any part he chose to play. "But then, reading plots inspires us to find plot in our own lives," she reminds him, curious to see how he'll counter this apparent tautology.

"Yes, there's that problem. That's why inaction is important. Either that, or imagine this! What if the Universe were authored by someone vaguely competent in the art of writing? We'd just play out our respective narrative arcs, and then at our moment of supreme triumph or utter tragedy, pffft, out like a candle," he mimes a pinching motion as if snuffing a flame, "And that's the end of that. No further opportunity to make a mess of it all. And it would be so much easier than ever-after deliberately avoiding the search for plot."

"Our own narrative arcs. They ended when the war did, didn't they." She flops her head back into the sofa. Done before she'd turned twenty, what a story. "We're just epilogue, now."

"And aren't those unsatisfying."

She's becoming uncomfortable with what he's implying about his own existence. Because surely that's what he's been saying, wrapped up in all this deliberately ridiculous philosophy: that he's sorry to have persisted. Sorry to have outlived his 'plot'. "What do real people do, though? They go and find another plot, don't they? A sequel, and some of those are worth reading, in my experience."

"That seems like a terrible lot of effort to go to. Reading, maybe, but convince me it would be worth living it."

She opens her mouth, but the words disappear as her eyes graze the Ministry envelope, which is still sitting beside her on the sofa, taking up space, a hostile observer waiting to get a word into their conversation. So it isn't surprising that when she does speak, it's the parchment giving her voice: "Nope. Don't think I can, actually. Evidence suggests sequels are generally unpleasant for every character involved."

He nods sagely, and reaches across to pour her more wine. He must've noticed the direction she looked, because he issues her a grim sort of smile. "Feel like burning it?"

"Wouldn't change anything, would it?"

"It might make you feel better."

She scrubs at her face. She's maybe had too much wine already; she should stop before she blubbers on him, and he should stop trying to be sympathetic, because he's been managing it a little
too well for comfort. "So if you're not in favour of plot, I take it you are actually enjoying that book?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. Maybe. The writing isn't terrible, although I suspect I am still holding out for a resolution. You don't need plot of your own if you're getting a steady diet of it vicariously."

"Can't interest you in any of mine, then?" Whoops, she'd been intending not to talk about this, hadn't she?

"While I appreciate your generosity, I think I'll pass."

She can't think of anything to say, and it seems he can't either. The resulting silence isn't quite painful, but it's not comfortable, either.

He rises, finally. "Let's see about that ankle."

She pulls the hem of her robe up. It doesn't hurt so badly to twist it, now, but there's a sizeable purple knot.

"Looks like you've only twisted it; take the swelling down and you should be fine if you're careful on it." He is looking a question at her, his hand hovering a few inches above her injury. She nods her permission, and he places his fingers upon her. There is a brief warm tingle. "There, good as new."

It seems to be. Right, then, she should make motions towards leaving, "Thank you. And I am sorry, turning up like this."

"Nonsense. So tell me about this situation, that's had you so rattled. Have you – have you not been on the outs with Weasley for a while?" He has poured himself another glass, too, and gestures for her to take up her own.

"A couple months. I thought you weren't interested in my excess of plot?"

"Oh, vicariously, I'm sure it'll be fine. Besides, I can't exactly fetch the Crisis Bints for you, tonight."

"What?" she splutters into her glass.

"Er, from next door. They're, uh, not really the agony aunts, and, er, they seem to create as many crises as they solve, but… uh, if you wanted someone else to talk to? Maybe they're back by now."

She shakes her head. No, she's going to pour her heart out to Severus Snape, of all people. "It's your fault, you know. You shouldn't have told me we were friends. Friends have to listen to each other's melodrama, there's no escaping it."

"I'm familiar, yes. Go ahead, what's the ruddy tosser done?"

Had he been Lily's sounding board? Had she been seeing James, at any point prior to the extinction of their friendship? Or maybe some other boy. How many tearful conversations might he have had to endure? She resolves that she is not going to cry. "I reckon we did it to each other. We split up before Christmas. Crooks, Crookshanks, a cat I had, had died."

"The same you had at Hogwarts? I'm sorry to hear that," he interjects. "I shouldn't tell you this, probably, but I once entertained a plot of kidnapping him. For company," he responds to the look
she's giving him.

She smiles weakly. "He was very good company." How lonely would you have to be, to want to steal a student's cat? She really should not dwell on this question, she knows. "Anyway, Ronald and I had it out that night, and decided to live apart for a bit. And I thought we were going to talk it through, finally, figure out where to go next."

This isn't even half the truth, on more levels than one. "No, I didn't think it. I assumed. And then this shows up. He couldn't even have the decency to file the proceedings as a no-fault divorce; I'd have done. I was doing. I held off filing because Molly said to wait until St. Valentine's and I believed her, that she'd talk to Ron and—" She bites hard at her lip, because she's very close to tears now and she promised that she wasn't going to make him endure her crying. She takes a sip of wine, instead.

He's shaking his head. "I wasn't quite being serious before, but he is a tosser. Listen, don't let it upset you unduly, he's probably just grandstanding. If he's claiming fault, well, the Wizengamot will sort it out; unless there's been infidelity or violence, it almost always settles out as a no-fault divorce, they're used to one party or the other having their bitty feelings hurt and wanting some public vengeance."

"How do you know all this?"

"I taught at a boarding school, have you forgotten? We saw the effects of this kind of needless drama all the time."

"I guess I hadn't considered. It didn't seem like divorce was all that common, except in half-blood or muggleborn families."

"Maybe not common," he revises, "But not uncommon. A wizarding marriage is just as soluble as a muggle one. Historically less-so, because people were more concerned with familial relationships, and many pureblood marriages were arranged with an eye to politicking. So expectations were lower. But even then, not uncommon."

This is reassuring, and the picture he's painted of proceedings… well, she can sketch Ronald into that scene quite easily.

"Look, I know what'll cheer you up – it's the most depressing waltz known to mankind, it's perfect." He darts up – how is he still moving so precisely? He's had a lot more wine than she has – and fiddles with something complicated and electronic on one of the shelves.

Strands of music fill the air, and at first only the resonance of the singer's voice is interesting. But the words are clear and then suddenly she hears A tree where the doves go to die, and she understands what he means: this is the most depressing waltz known to mankind. Oh yes, a broken love song is perfectly appropriate to the day she's had.

"It's Leonard Cohen; he translated this from a Spanish poem, by a fellow named Federico Garcia Lorca."

"You read poetry, in addition to science fiction?"

"Not in the least. I was only curious about this, so I looked it up. It turns out Lorca was executed at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Civil wars are hard on geniuses, look at what happened to Lavoisier. So I've decided I like it; that probably owes more to having a predilection towards clever people offed in the name of political expediency, than it does to any genuine taste. I think it's to do
with a cautionary moral I've internalized."

"It's visually arresting, anyway." The song is beginning to repeat itself, he must have put it on a loop.

He extends a hand towards her. "Come," he commands, pulling her up off the sofa with a maniacal grin. She doesn't know what he's about until he extends their paired arms in a parody of a couple waltzing. She half-stumbles, laughing, as they careen between the plants and furniture, but she catches her balance and somehow they are suddenly in sync, their bodies moving together, and neither is laughing anymore.

_ in some hallway where love's never been _ — The pressure of his hand at the small of her back, the scent of his clothing, his skin. She is so close that she can hear his heart, or is that her own?

_ my mouth on the dew of your thighs _ — And this is precisely where she wants his mouth. His lips are slightly parted, and without the tension of a habitual sneer they are almost obscenely vulnerable.

They have slowed, and the waltz flows away without them. She looks up at him. His lips tense on a word, then close. She lifts her hand from his, slowly, and it is as if this motion has him under a spell; his eyes fix upon it, until her fingertips are brushing the slightest stubble along his jaw. Again his lips move, soundlessly. She raises up on the balls of her feet, and tastes them.

But there is no answering softness, no yielding to the pressure she's applied, and the final discordant notes of the waltz tell a truth she failed to recognize in the sorrow of _the pools that you left on your wrist._

He steps away, and his face is curiously frozen for a moment. Again, he begins to speak. Again, he does not. Instead, he turns away, and turns the music off. Then, with slow steps, he ascends the staircase to his loft.

She collapses onto the sofa as if her strings have been cut.

She finishes her wine.

It is clear that he is not going to come back.

She lets herself out, and begins a lonely walk home, into a night that is beyond the power of anyone to retrieve or claim ownership of.
In Vino Veritas

Hermione Granger is drunk. Or is she Hermione Weasley? Because she thinks maybe she had more sense, back when she was ‘Granger’, and wouldn’t it be pleasant if a divorce could reunite her with her faculties?

Hermione Granger didn’t do profoundly stupid things, like attempting to walk to Hackney Wick Station without any shoes. And Hermione Granger certainly never did such profoundly stupid things as splinching an apparition and losing her wand — Professor Snape was right about that. Finally, Hermione Granger didn’t do profoundly stupid things like kissing Professor Snape.

What had he asked? Where did she stash the body? She doesn’t know.

She sags against a convenient brick wall. Even if she did know, it’d be all to maggots by now, anyway. Beetles and worms heaving out the eye sockets, and he wouldn’t want to kiss that, either. Though maybe he’d come to visit. If she were in Abney Park. But they don’t bury anyone there, anymore.

So it’s useless, really.

Holding the concealing charm in place without her wand is taking its toll; her head is beginning to pound from it, or maybe that’s the wine. The way the world won’t stay still, and how she keeps stubbing her toes – that’s definitely down to cheap merlot. She’ll just sit here a bit, take a rest. She’s got nowhere in particular to be, anyway – it’s a month ‘til the Wizengamot hearing, and surely she’ll have made it home by then. She pulls her outer robe off, for a cushion against the grime of the pavement. But sitting isn’t much better than standing, and perhaps she’ll just lay her head down for a minute or two, until the nausea passes.

“Sweetie, love, are you okay?” Someone is prodding her shoulder.

“Probably just a wino. Come on.”

“Maddie, that kind of classist discrimination is highly unattractive.”

Oh good, it’s the competition, come to have a laugh. She tries to get her eyes open, but that makes everything worse, because now she can see her tormentors. Martin – Cathy, was it? – is kneeling in front of her, but her dreadlocks don’t block out enough of O’Shea. Apparently Maddie doesn’t own clothes. She’s decked out in garters and lingerie, rhinestones and body paint, or maybe it’s all tattoos, in which case she’s clearly someone with a pain kink. She’s got a plume of ostrich feathers erupting from behind her, too, which Hermione has to squint at twice, to make sure she isn’t hallucinating.

If this is what Snape would rather have, she’s glad he turned her down. She can’t compete, nor would she want to.

“So let’s call 999 and get on with it. I’m freezing my tits off out here.”

“Then you should’ve brought a coat, shouldn’t you? Some of us have a sense of civic duty to our sisters. We’ve already abandoned Meenal—”

“What, abandoned? She’s got Gwen and the boys. And if she’d taken Alojz up on his offer, instead of building that thing out of chicken wire—”
“You cannot possibly have missed the point, about the fragility of feminine power.”

“Why, for godssake? Why is it fragile? It’s only fragile because we keep saying it is.”

“Sometimes I want to shake you; weren’t you listening to any of the statistics tonight?”

“So we’re going to make meaningful change to our downtrodden-victim condition, by whinging on about how we’re delicate flowers?”

“No, you idiot. We’re going to make meaningful change by acknowledging that we’re not men with vaginas, that we approach power as a collective property — that we give it to each other, through our support and our sisterhood. And that’s what I’m doing, helping out a sister. Leave, if you can’t pretend you have any empathy.”

Hermione wishes they would both fuck off, and take their argument with them. Maybe she’ll hex them. Can you perform *Silencio* without a wand? Or fuck it, maybe she should go straight to offensives.

“You don’t have to get nasty.”

“Do something useful, find my water bottle in my bag. Sweetie, are you okay to sit up? Can you tell me if you’re okay?”

Martin’s arms are around her shoulders. Her head lolls; she seems to have lost her muscles. Her tongue is thick, but it works, sort of. “No, I’m not okay. I think… I think I’m devastated. That’s a good word: laid to waste. Waste, garbage, debris. That’s what Ronald thinks, just throw me away.” The words are catching in her throat, and she’s starting to cry, all those tears she wouldn’t let Snape see.

“Whoa, easy, love. Take a breath, I need you to stay with me. Is Ronald someone you were with tonight? Do you know where he is?”

“No, I don’t know! At home, I guess. No, that’s not right, because I don’t live there anymore. There’s no one at home. I don’t like my home, maybe I won’t even go back there.”

“Sweetie, it’s going to be alright. Come on, let’s just have a sit, okay?” Martin has plopped herself down alongside, and is cradling Hermione against her shoulder. “Can you tell me where home is?”

“Cath, this bint’s langered; you’re feeding biscuits to a bear trying to get any sense out of her,” Maddie puts in.

“Maddie, shut up if you can’t be helpful,” Martin says from between gritted teeth.

She is liking Cathy Martin more by the minute, except for how she keeps insisting upon asking questions, like: “Sweetie, can you tell us where you were, earlier?”

And what Hermione wants to do, is express an opinion: “You know, I think I hate you. Not you. You, O’Shea. Maddie. You’re Lily, only you’re worse than Lily, because she’s dead.”

“Wow, feck me, Cathy-girl. It is seriously time to call this one in to the pigs; this bitch is freaking me out.”

Cathy ignores her. “Babes, stay with me over here. Who’s Lily? Is she a friend of yours?”

“No, she’s his friend. He was in love with her, though. He’ll never love anyone else.” Actually,
that’s a good thing, it means he doesn’t really love Maddie, either.

But Maddie O’Shea isn’t someone you can ignore, evidently. “Cathy, this freaky cunt knows my last name. Have you noticed that?”

“Because she’s local, obviously.” So Cathy doesn’t recognise her, either?

“I’ve never seen her before.”

Apparently she really is that forgettable. “But I brought croissants!”

“Well fuck me gently.” Maddie whistles, and rocks back on her ridiculous heels. “I do know who she is; remember, she came by the Hive the night we blew the beaver, and you hijacked her to look at your garden? She’s a friend of Snape’s.”

“I don’t want to be his friend anymore,” she tells them, earnestly. She believes it, too. She’s done getting run over like this; she can’t survive any more heartbreak.

“Well, then, give me a hand with her, Maddie — we really can’t just leave her like this, and I’m not about to bring the filth down on one of our own. Sweetie, let’s see about going someplace a little less dodgy, okay? How come you don’t want to be friends with Mr. Snape anymore?”

“Because he’s just like Ronald.” Maybe all men are alike, maybe she’s been deluded in thinking otherwise. Cathy is gently wiping her face with a handkerchief; she hopes she hasn’t been leaking snot down, that it’s just her eyes that are dripping.

“Who’s this Ronald bloke you’re on about?” Maddie asks, as they haul her up to her feet.

“My husband. He didn’t send me roses and chocolate — he sent divorce papers!”

“Wot, today? What an utter shitehawk. Still, that’s no excuse for you: honestly, your best and brightest idea was to go on the tear, have yourself a right bender? It were me, I’d’ve done the bastard in, fed him his bollocks battered in ale. Gone ‘round to his, and castrated the motherfucker!”

“No wonder he likes you,” she says miserably. Because Maddie’s got her priorities straight — of course this is what she should have done. Or better, she should have gone to the Burrow, and told Ronald’s mother what he’s been about.

“Who likes me?”

“Pr’fess’r Snape.” Her words keep slurring up; this is annoying because it makes her sound stupider than she is. Which isn’t much, but still.

“Yeah?”

“He probably thinks I’m a dunderhead, too.”

Maddie bursts out laughing. “What kind of antiquated word is that? Girlfriend, you simply cannot rage against the patriarchy without a decent vocabulary; no wonder you’re a wreck.”

“’s’not my word. Pr’fessor Snape called us that. At school.”

“That is still so weird, imagining him as a teacher.”

“Why?” Cathy asks, “A swot like him? He’s totally the sort.”
“Him? Seriously? He’s a mopey muppet, they’d have eaten him for breakfast. I mean, ‘dunderhead’. Really.”

“Be nice, he’s hardly a muppet.”

“I can call him a muppet if I want to, he’s my mate.”

“He’s only your mate because you refuse to acknowledge the sarcasm he consistently levels at you.”

“Well that’s the way you’ve gotta do it, with fellas like him.”

Hermione’s losing the thread of what they’re even talking about, and she’s about to lose her composure too. Where ‘composure’ is several glasses of wine on an empty stomach.

“Oh! Hang on! Maddie, lend a hand here! It’s okay, honey, we’ve got you.”

“Better out than in.” And for once, Hermione is in full agreement with Maddie O’Shea.

Cathy is holding her hair back, as she retches helplessly into a rubbish bin. The smell keeps her stomach heaving, even after there’s nothing left to come up. God, she’s probably puked all down her pretty new robes; maybe the stains won’t show on the outers, except she’s not wearing them anymore, is she. Damn it, she can’t even keep her clothing in one piece, let alone her mind, her sense of self. She swipes at saliva that’s trailing down her chin; Cathy interrupts her motion: wipes her hand, wipes her face.

“Honey, come on, don’t cry. It’s okay. It’s going to be alright.”

No it isn’t. She’s made a complete fool of herself tonight – for Ronald, with Severus, in front of these women.

They’re pulling her down onto a doorstep. Cathy presses a water bottle to her lips. “Here, rinse and spit. It’s okay, I’ve got you. Just spit. Good. Okay, little sips. Just a little bit, give that a chance to settle. Where are your shoes, baby?”

“Dunno.” She blows her nose in Cathy’s handkerchief.

“Look, Cath, we’re not going to get Cinderella here back to the Hive on our own, she’s blotto.”

She pushes the water bottle back, panicking. “No, not to the Hive, I can’t go there!”

“Is that where you were, were you with Mr. Snape this evening?”

“We were talking about books. Severus and I. And about plot, and how we’ve lost ours —”

“Someone’s lost the plot, alright.” Maddie, of course. Sarcastically. She is perfect for him.

“—And then we were dancing, and I kissed him!”

“Snape? Seriously? Bet that went over like a cup of chunder.”

“Jesus, Maddie, must you? Sweetie, are you okay, did he hurt you?”

“He wouldn’t, you know he wouldn’t.” Maddie is fiercely indignant, “She’s completely plastered, he’d never.”
“Maddie, take a flying fuck for half a minute, please, and let me talk to her. Did Mr. Snape – did Severus – did he make you do anything you didn’t want to?”

“No, he doesn’t want me. No one wants me!” she wails.

“Okay, sweetie, I need you to take a deep breath. You’re pretty intoxicated right now. You need to—”

“You need to calm the fuck down, is what you need. Slap the crazy bitch, already.”

“Maddie.”

“Look, Cathy, you’re trying to rape-counsel a drunk girl. Ten to one, you’re wasting your time. There’s nothing to it, I’ve known Severus for years.”

“So have I.”

“Well then, it’s a load of tosh and you know it. Even if she weren’t pissed, I seriously doubt Snape would ever make a pass at her; he’s a fecking daffodil. Poor old Mother Superior probably just hurt her ickle feelings. Let’s just shove her in a cab, already.”

“Yeah, okay, if we go with her.”

“What, dressed like this? It’s brass monkeys!”

“Should’ve thought of that before dressing to make a point, then. Go home if you want, I can handle this.”

Maddie sighs. “You bloody well can’t; I’ll come with.”

Hermione comes to the rational decision that she would like to die, as the cab lurches through London’s crooked streets. The back seat smells of stale cigarettes, and if she had anything left in her stomach it would reek of vomit, too. Their cabby keeps glaring at them in his rear-view, and occasionally mutters something dark, in Arabic or Farsi.

“She’s fine,” her captors reassure him. Cathy steadies her head against her shoulder, and rubs circles at the back of her neck. “You’re okay, you’re okay.”

She wishes it were true. She is a long, long way from ‘okay’. The last time she was ‘okay’, she was tucked up behind the bed curtains in Gryffindor Tower, about to find out what Professor Snape thought of her polyjuice equations. She’d like to be back in that innocent ignorance. Because having found out what he thinks of her is a reality she is unprepared to cope with. She’s crying again, and snotting up Cathy’s coat.

“Come on,” Maddie’s tone drips exasperation, “If you’re that broken up over your husband divorcing you, what the hell were you doing with Snape?”

“I’m not cry—crying over him. I just—I want—” she hiccoughs a sob, “Why doesn’t anyone want me, what’s so wrong with me?”

“Oh God,” Maddie groans. “Listen, silly, don’t take it so personally, you’re just not his type.”

“I know. You are: he’s in for sporty, popular redheads. Fucking Lily.”

“Wait, who’s Lily?”
“Lily Evans. Potter. Harry’s mum.” Oh, no, they won’t know who Harry is. “He went to school with her, he was in love with her.”

“Her? Like, of the female persuasion, ‘her’?” Maddie’s mouth is hanging open. Hermione is pleased to see that there is at least one expression that doesn’t make the redhead look mischievous and cute.

“Yeah. She was pretty, like you. Maybe prettier. I saw her photo, Harry has some. Maybe if I were pretty, he would’ve kissed me back.” She sniffs, but it’s no good, the tears just keep welling up, and they’re draining down her nose, and no one will ever want to kiss someone who cries down their nose.

“Hang on, we’re talking about Severus Snape, here? You’re saying he’s not gay? How is that even possible?”

“Yeah, but Snape?”

“Why are you so confused about this? Apparently he’s straight, what’s the problem?”

“I just have a hard time reconciling that with the evidence – I mean, I don’t think he’s ever even glanced at my tits!”

She’s stopped crying, and now she sits bolt upright, even though her stomach protests the change in position. They think Snape is gay. He’s not sleeping with Maddie. Hope is spiralling up through her, except —

…that means it really is her. He doesn’t want her. “He would rather have a dead woman, than me,” she tells her new friends.

“Wait, what now?”

“Lily. She died. When Harry was a baby. Professor Snape loved her forever. That’s probably why he’s so sad about being alive, because he wanted to be with her again.”

Maddie is shaking her head. “There. That is all the proof anyone needs. If that’s even remotely true, I rest my case, Cathy: he is a mopey muppet.”

“You don’t know the facts, Maddie. Maybe this is recent, people go through bereavement at different rates—”

“Oy, Cinderella, you with us? Contribute: how long ago was this, when did this Lily-bint kick the bucket?”

“Hallowe’en. ‘81.”

Maddie flails out her arms, and flops back against the seat. “Christ Jesus. I’m done. Muppet. Mopey fecking muppet. And I’m going to tell him, so, too.” She frowns spectacularly, and subsides into silence.

Hermione considers this a good thing, because her head hurts.

It hurts when she wakes up, too, and she hadn’t thought it could be any worse than the blinding pain that had her collapsing on the stairs up to her flat the night before, but it is. It definitely is.
She sees they’ve left a glass of water and the paracetamol on her nightstand. She downs two tablets, and gravely considers the rest of the bottle.

It’s a way to do it.

Maybe later. Her stomach is not happy about the water she’s just put in it. She closes her eyes, sinks back into the pillow.

She doesn’t know how much time has passed; she thinks she may have slept. The scents of ginger and lemongrass are tickling her nose, which is bizarre, because her flat usually smells of boiled cabbage from the neighbours’. The other thing – which is no less strange – is the soothing sensation of someone stroking her hair.

“Good morning. Or good afternoon, rather. I apologize for intruding; I worried, when you didn’t answer my knock.”

Severus Snape is sitting on the edge of her bed.

Clearly, she’s still intoxicated.

“I’ve been given to understand, at great length and considerable volume, that I am the most dastardly of villains, and that it was utterly churlish of me not to have called you a cab, at the very least,” he continues, his voice as soft as his fingertips, which are still gently brushing her hair, “I am sorry. I hope you’ll forgive me. As some small measure of atonement, I’ve fixed you tea; it’ll help with the hangover. Not quite as quickly as Hangover Relief would, but I wasn’t in any shape to brew this morning, myself. Do you think you can sit up?”

She nods, carefully. Her neck muscles are back under voluntary control, so perhaps this is real, and she’s sobering up. He hooks an arm about her torso, as he did the evening before, and helps her to lean up against the headboard. She accepts the steaming herbal tisane that he presses into her quivering fingers, and sips tentatively. There’s fennel, and mint too, and something floral lurking beneath the lemongrass and ginger. Her stomach doesn’t rebel, which is a very good thing: as long as she can sit here sipping tea, she doesn’t have to say anything. She doesn’t know what to say. Apparently he doesn’t, either.

But his arm is still wrapped around her shoulders.
Admissions

If a shower accomplishes nothing else, at least it rids her of the rank stench of ethanol clinging in her pores, washes away the shame of vomit. She’s hiding in here, now. The hot water charm is paying dividends, because it’s been at least half an hour, and the water temperature hasn’t changed a bit. It was a tricky bit of magic to do; most charms end when the caster stops maintaining them. She’d built a time delay into this one, the way you do with a ward. She’s proud of it, even if she’s not proud of herself.

She wishes she could convince herself that the steam is some purifying ritual, that she will emerge from here whole, competent, capable. But her mind is not flexible enough to accept that elaborate of a fantasy.

Snape is gone, but not far. He’s told her he would wait for her outside. She does, and does not, want to see him. Does, and does not, want to know why he has come. What was it he had said, that he’d been told off at great length and considerable volume? If he has come solely at the behest of Maddie and Cathy, he has surely done his duty. Why stay, why wait? He made his opinion of her clear. Unless Maddie’s right, and he is gay. But no, Harry had told her about every single memory. She grits her teeth. Bloody Harry. Harry, who is so self-centered that he can’t see when other people are in pain, can’t even imagine that they might be.

Well, this is not quite fair. He’d dragged her out of her bed. But she isn’t going to forgive him for failing to tell her what Ronald has been up to. It’s not important, he’d said. And she isn’t going to forgive him for subjecting her to literal hours of discourse on the subject of Severus Snape and Lily Evans. So what if none of the Weasleys were available, too locked in their own grief to coddle him? So what if he didn’t have anyone else to talk to? She hadn’t needed to hear it, hadn’t need to be subjected to countless renditions of Lily’s demeanour, unending queries as to whether she thought anything was truly serious between the pair. What does he mean, serious? She knows what he’s asking: d’you think my perfect mum slept with greasy Snape? It doesn’t even matter, does it? He died for her. That in itself means so much more than the possibilities that keep Harry up at night, and she doesn’t understand how he could be ignorant of it, why he chooses to ignore it. Except, of course, that Snape as a person is completely incidental to him.

She works some more conditioner into her hair. She’s been here long enough that it’s all washed out.

Perhaps Snape as a person is completely incidental to her, too. He exists in her mind as a possibility, no more. If he is mouldering in an unmarked grave, she is free to make a dream lover of him. If he is locked up tight with Lily, or Maddie, then he is something safe for angry, jealous daydreams. But if he is here?

He is here. And she is hiding in her shower.

Her sober self is humiliated by more than his dismissal of her advance. She is humiliated at having pulled the stunt in the first place. He has never, ever given her any indication that he sees her as anything more than a student. It is only in her own warped brain that anything else has ever occurred. Looked at from that angle, last night makes perfect sense. He’d said friends. And she’d heard – what?

She should apologize to him.

She needs to get a grip on reality and stop living in fantasies, because she’s starting to confuse the
two. Penance is called for. It’s as good a starting point as any, in this quest to reunite her skewed perceptions with objective facts. And this gives her a reason to get out of the shower.

There is a steaming cup of tea waiting for her, on the narrow countertop beside her stove. By the scent, it’s more of his hangover remedy. But she’s been in the bath for ages so – hmm. She extends a hand over it, and concentrates hard. “*Finita incantatem.*” It actually works: the steam ceases to spiral immediately. She really has to make an effort to learn some of these things, because she hadn’t known you could do heating spells wandlessly, either. Or, no. No. What she *has* to do, is find her wand.

After she finishes this tea. And after she apologizes to Professor Snape.

“Feeling more human?” He is waiting for her, leaned up against the boot of an automobile parked on the street outside her building. He folds up his newspaper, and looks at her expectantly.

“Quite a lot better, yes. Thanks for bringing that tea ’round. Is it hibiscus, the floral notes?”

“No, that’s more of a cranberry taste, a bit tart. I tossed a few in, but the floral, perfumed taste comes from lavender, which is also good for GI upsets.”

“It’s your own formula, then?”

“Recipe, rather. Nothing so precise and scientific as a formula. But I find it works better than pepto and paracetamol. Hasn’t got a touch on Hangover Relief, though. Someone should find a way to extend the shelf-life on that. There’s your next project, give those of us who lack foresight a helping hand.”

“Well, you had enough foresight to lay in three bottles.”

“Oh, that’s not foresight, that’s masochism. But! I did have the foresight to grab a Tube map for you. So maybe there’s hope I’m developing the capacity.” He beckons her over, and yes, he’s got a map of the Underground spread across the car’s boot. He’s circled parts of it with a fine-tipped felt pen.

“Victoria Line to King’s Cross St Pancras, and then the Northern to Angel. That gets you close to Grimmauld Place. If that’s where you intended to apparate last night, it’s a reasonable place to start looking.”

“That was my thought. Thanks, can I hang on to this?”

“No, of course not, I went to the trouble of bringing it just to taunt you.” He even rolls his eyes. “It’s very thoughtful of you.”

He gives her a narrow-eyed glare. “I’ll thank you to keep that kind of slander to yourself. Are you up to fish and chips?”

She’s not sure she wants to put anything at all past her tongue, let alone “Your idea of a healthy breakfast?”

“Oh of course not. And it’s after two in the afternoon. It’s hardly my fault you’ve slept right through breakfast. Oh, no, actually, I suppose it is. My fault.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m the one who poured the wine down my gullet. Sorry for being a shite drinking mate.”
“We’ll stick to beer, next time.”

He anticipates a next time? She swallows hard. “Umn, about last night.”

“Least said, soonest mended.” He nods sharply.

“I just wanted to apologize. I was wholly out of line.”

“You weren’t the only one. But if you insist on offering an apology, you can do so by helping me find a chippy around here. It may have escaped your attention, but people actually do need to consume things resembling food, on occasion. And yes, before you ask, I rifled your pantry. I was going to fix you eggs and toast, but you’ll have to settle for greasy potatoes and dubious battered fish of presumably marine origin.”

The notion of Professor Snape rummaging her cupboards should be disconcerting in the extreme, but his air of peevishness sets her laughing. “Well, when you put it like that, I can hardly wait.”

“Maybe we can even find a bench down by the Thames, get the proper atmosphere for it.”

“What, like over a drainage pipe?”

“That would be nearly ideal; the finest of British cuisine, al fresco – it demands a certain sense of style.”

Of course, there aren’t much in the way of benches along her neighbourhood’s stretch of the river – there’s a reason she apparates farther east for her walks -- but they settle with their takeaway in a public green. “It’s got a fountain, at least,” she says philosophically, although with the pump off for the winter it’s become a catchment for stray cigarette butts.

“Might be a bit too sophisticated,” he opines, “We’ve only got paper serviettes.”

Once she begins picking at her meal, she realises she’s hungry. And it is good, sinfully so. “Is this your secret vice?” she asks around a mouthful.

“I suppose. Cheap drink and bad novels being well-known vices, these days. And just casually buying a meal like this, that is a vice. You probably saw where I grew up.”

“Spinner’s End?”

“Mmhmm. Awful hole of a place; only having magic kept it livable. Magic doesn’t put food on the table, though, and you can’t trade it in for takeaway, more’s the pity. It might actually be good for something, otherwise.”

“Magic’s good for plenty of things, but I take your point. Don’t you miss being on the Wizarding side, though, even a bit?”

He regards a chip with an air of deep contemplation. “Sometimes. No, not really. On the balance, my having been there did neither me nor the wizarding world any good whatsoever.”

“You were integral in winning the war.”

“Because I told Potter how the game was stacked? Anyone could’ve done. Dumbledore could have done. Should have, really.”

Well. There is justice in this. “I don’t know why he didn’t.”
“Albus felt Potter needed coddling. Ever so much better to receive news that you need to die from the person you hate most, instead of from a surrogate parent-figure.”

“Which made no sense, really,” she puts in, “To imagine that Harry would trust you. I’m astonished he did, that he took your memories at face value.”

“So am I, if we’re being honest. Even with the memories I gave him. Though, it may have improved verisimilitude to have looked rather dead at the time. Still, telling Potter directly was a shite plan, and I told Albus so. Repeatedly. *My* plan was much better.”

“Go on.” Because she can see he’s keen to. His eyes are glinting.

“I was going to tell you.”

This admission catches her in mid-bite. She blinks, then remembers that she was chewing. Finishing this gives her the moment she needs. “Was that... was that why you commented on my work, why you kept writing to me?” It is such a horribly possible possibility, and certainly he is the sort who would lay a plan that deep. When had she begun working solely on polyjuice? Sixth Year.

“No. That was... not premeditated, on my part. And no part of it was a good idea, either. It was a risk, and I should never have risked Albus’ plans in so self-centered a fashion. But later, after... after the Astronomy Tower, I thought that, well, at least... If I ever got the opportunity to approach you, you’d have some small reason not to hex me outright. So, I thought, maybe it hadn’t really been a bad thing. Or not too bad.” There are points of colour on his cheekbones. He is looking away, as if he is admitting some terrible crime. There is nothing terrible, that she can see, in his wishing that someone, anyone – even a silly Gryffindor girl – might not think the worst of him.

And so when she speaks, it’s to this certainty. “I meant it. What I said. That I never truly believed you were really on Voldemort’s side. I’d have listened, if... Well, if I’d had the chance.”

“I was, though. On his side.”

“In the first war.”

“Yes. You would do well not to forget that.”

“I—I don’t think I am. But I know you. Or, I know... I know enough. I know enough to know that you are fundamentally someone who makes the right choices. Perhaps not the best choices, but ones that are right in one degree or another. And it’s our choices that define us. Harry’s always telling everyone that, apparently it’s a Dumbledore quote.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me, it sounds the sort. Personally, I never found a single bit of Dumbledore’s supposedly-sage advice that ever worked as well in practise as in theory. Often quite the opposite.”

“You don’t think we’re defined by our choices?”

“I think it’s an incomplete picture. Motive, motivation, and our intentions matter. Not just the outward effects of our having chosen something. Oh, and circumstance, the context – sometimes the only choice you can make is a bad one.”

She nods. “I know that too. Or I appreciate it, at least. I have made... some bad choices, you could say. And yet, I don’t know... I don’t think I’m a bad person. Or I don’t want to be, anyway. It’s complicated. Reality complicates things.”
“That accounts for why some people choose not to live there, I expect.”

“In reality?”

“Mmm.”

“Do you? Live there.”

He levels a sideways look at her, and a corner of his mouth twitches up, in what she thinks might be sly appreciation. She hadn’t really meant it as a barb. She is simply curious, because perhaps she is not alone in this affliction.

“Debateable, really. Sometimes.” His expression turns wistful, and he looks away over the park, “You can always tell when you are, or not, because those are the bits that hurt.”

“What are the parts that particularly hurt for you?” She is risking a lot, asking something this personal.

“Oh, lots of things. I could be facetious and say ‘waking up.’”

“Days like today, I could agree with you.” She is going to have to give him something in kind, if she wants a real answer. She’s not sure she does. She chews meditatively at her cod. “It hurts for me when I look up from what I’m doing. When I stop working on an idea, and look around, and realise I haven’t got anyone to share it with.”

“Why haven’t you forged professional networks? People speak well of your work, I’m told.”

She swallows. The chip seems to lodge in her throat. Or is that regret? “Ronald wouldn’t have… I didn’t want to make things tense. He… he was excluded from my work; I think he felt like an outsider.”

“So because he was a virtual outsider, you took it upon yourself to remain a literal one?”

“N-nooo, not exactly. I… It’s just that, it was a decision I’d made. To marry him. And I felt like, well, it was up to me to make some concessions. If I wanted concessions from him.”

“Very high-minded of you, indeed. And what concessions did the magnanimous Mr. Weasley grant you? I suppose he offered his unwavering support of your pursuit of …anything?”

She huffs a breath of laughter and pulls a sarcastic smile. “Not really, no. ‘Though, he did eventually stop giving me grief about scarpering off to the attic to work. And he let me keep the books. Your books, I mean.” She’s not about to tell him about the other thing that Ronald stopped giving her grief over. Because he never really did, even if he did take ‘no thanks, not tonight’ for an answer.

Snape is shaking his head, his mouth twisted in a disbelieving sneer. “It’s incomprehensible to me.”

“Er, what is?”

“Whatever animal magnetism it is that draws such profoundly incompatible people together.”

“Maybe… maybe people just look incompatible from the outside, maybe we don’t see the whole of who they are together.”

“Weasley and yourself?”
“Oh, no, that’s fairly incomprehensible.” She pokes a chip into her mushy peas.

“So what was it, then? Indulge my curiosity. It can’t have been his quidditch fame.”

“Oh, but didn’t you know? I’m the definition of a quidditch groupie. I very nearly snogged Viktor Krum, once.”

“Careful, I’m rapidly losing all respect for you.”

“Honestly? It’s embarrassing. No, strike that, it’s mortifying and humiliating, and I can’t believe I’m actually going to tell you. I married him because he got me up the duff.”

“Oh. I – I’m sorry, I hadn’t realized. Are you, d’you have, erm, visitation rights, at least?”

It takes her a bit to understand what he’s asking. “Oh, no. I… I miscarried. I… really, in retrospect it’s all for the best.”

“Retrospect. That’s a bitter pill, at times, isn’t it?” She assumes this question is rhetorical, and watches him chew another of his chips. She can’t recall ever seeing him eat, before. She supposes she’d never looked. Why on earth does this interest her now?

“You know, of course, that the frontal lobes of your brain aren’t fully mature until about age 25? We make fairly terrible decisions in our adolescent years. Although, evidence suggests your thirties aren’t all that much better.”

“Is that last to my direction as well?”

“Er, no. I was thinking of my own life, actually. Though, now that you mention, I have to confess it’s still sometimes a bit odd, thinking of you as an adult. What are you now, thirty-five?”

It’s sometimes a bit odd for her, too. “It’s impolite to ask a woman her age, didn’t you know?” She isn’t yet, but it is quite an adult age, isn’t it? And yet, she doesn’t feel like an adult. He’d already been corresponding with her via marginalia, when he was only a little older than she is now. Does this put something in perspective?

He makes a brushing motion with his fingertips. “Me? Impolite? Perish the notion.”

“When does a person really finally grow up? When do you finally stop making daft decisions?”

“When is it safe to finally rely on your sense of judgment, you mean? I’d direct you to that inimitable fount of wisdom, Albus Dumbledore, only he asked someone to murder him, which was clearly a daft decision, so perhaps your answer is ‘never’.”

“Oh good.” She picks at a chip of her own.

“On the positive side, consider the law of averages – everyone else is apt to be making stupid decisions too, so they probably won’t notice yours, as long as you’re within the average and not an egregious outlier.”

That is a bleakly optimistic way of looking at things. Still, she thinks she’d like to change the topic, if he’ll let her. Perhaps there’s a more painful subject they can discuss than her personal failures. “What was it, with Dumbledore?”

“What do you mean? It was a fairly standard killing curse, you would have learned about them in fourth year.”
“I mean, was he your friend? Was it hard?”

He busies himself with wiping the salt and vinegar from his fingertips before answering her. This is fine, she’d need more time than he takes, to compose herself to answer a question like that. “It was… shattering. You take every bit of pain, every ounce of anger you can summon. You pour that out, and in that moment, you must truly desire to cause harm.”

It must be the breeze that is making her feel cold and shivery. His words are so calm, so matter-of-fact.

“It has taken me many years to feel that I had any right to that anger. It horrifies me still that I found it, after so long a time. It depresses me that he knew I still encompassed it. And that he never truly forgave it, always held that in abeyance. Couldn’t ever admit culpability, admit that my anger was rational.”

She swallows hard. Something doesn’t make sense, in what he’s telling her. If only she can find the right question to ask… She wants to ask, why was he angry with Dumbledore? But she knows the answer – Dumbledore had promised to safeguard his childhood love, and had failed.

“He was not… not omniscient, and never perfect,” she reminds him.

“He was not.”

“Perhaps… perhaps in asking you to do that… perhaps that was an admission? That he understood, accepted your anger.”

“Hunh. That… Thank you, Miss Granger. That is… I had not considered that. It’s probably a whitewash; I know too well how he despised me. But on a cosmic level, perhaps it holds. There is some little comfort in that, I imagine.” He has leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, eyes cast at the brick pavers.

She watches as a passerby startles the nearby flock of pigeons into flight. She doesn’t know what else to say, doesn’t know how hard she can pry. Although, if she offends him badly enough, he will surely put an end to this, and that might be for the best. All things considered. Anyway, she’s thought of something that might be the right question. At the very least, it’s a question that she doesn’t really know the answer to. “You said, earlier: adolescence is a poor time to make decisions. What were yours? Why did you join them, the Death Eaters?”

“Are you asking me if I harbour any of their sentiments?” His voice is suddenly very empty, and his eyes, meeting hers, are dead-flat.

“No. I know you don’t.”

“What if I told you that I did?”

“I’d call you a liar,” she says evenly.

His eyes release hers. He’s looking down at his fingers, which are crushing the cardboard of his takeaway box. He chews at the inside of his lip. She wonders if it’s a nervous tic, or just something he does when he’s thinking. She doesn’t recall that he ever did it at school, although those performances were surely just that, and little more.

“I wanted power,” he says after a long while. “I thought they could give it to me. Your expression -- no, not real power. Not the kind of power that would do me any good whatsoever in life. What I wanted was the power to destroy. My dearest desire, back then…”
Was what? Lily. The power to destroy James? Does she want to believe this of him, that he could be so possessive and calculating, could be so viciously self-absorbed as to believe that Lily would have anything to do with him, if he’d been responsible for destroying the life she’d chosen—

“My sole motivation, from the time I left school, was nothing more than the complete and utter destruction of the Ministry of Magic, and of the Wizengamot. Especially them. I wanted to pull the place down, to crucify the bastards. Nothing would have pleased me more than to douse Albus Dumbledore in petrol. Not a simple killing curse. Fire. Fire and agony. How galling, to crawl back to him, to have to depend upon him as my saviour from Azkaban.”

It is somehow even more terrible that he says all of this in the lightest of tones, as if he is commenting upon the weather. Saliva keeps flooding her mouth.

“You look horrified. You should be. I am, myself. You asked, earlier, if I considered Dumbledore a friend. I did. He was. The last I had, really.”

“Are you… are you quite sure you know the definition of that word?” She is a bit shocked at her own audacity.

He smirks. “What, you’ve never wanted to set your friends on fire?”

She really, truly, should not find this funny.

“I never did torch anyone,” he continues, more soberly, “But through my actions, people nonetheless perished. Good people. And if some weren’t good, well, their crimes were not so heinous that they deserved to die.”

“Do you mean…” She trails off. Her footing has become so uncertain. She thought she’d understood his past, but does she know anything true?

“Potter the Rotter. His wife.”

“Why you turned back to Dumbledore.” She needs to clarify this point.

“I suppose. Some of it was coming to my senses and realizing quite what a mess I had gotten myself into.”

“But you cared for her.”

He nods. “She was my friend.” He seems to think she will understand this simple statement implicitly. When she doesn’t immediately respond, he expands: “Not then. Not for a few years, by then. But she had been. She was a last link with the past. I… I valued that. Without her, there was… just emptiness, there. Nothing true, anymore. A friend is… for me, rare. Someone who knows you, knows the truth of you. Because who are you, when everything is a pretense, everything built on lies and posturing?”

“I don’t know.” And she doesn’t. Her own adult life has been built of too many – if not lies, then certain omissions of truth. “The memories you gave Harry. At the end.”

He gives her a long, steady look. “Who are you, when everything is a pretense?”

“You were willing to die for her. Harry believed—”

“Exactly what Dumbledore needed him to. In the beginning, I was, maybe. Willing to die. Or at least, death seemed very welcoming. Death is easy. Living is hard. And yet here I am.”
“So what are you living for?”

“Because I’m a coward, maybe?”

“There’s a gap in that logic,” she feels compelled to point out, “A coward would die, if living is hard.”

“Then maybe… Maybe I live in hope. Except that sounds trite and stupid, particularly as I am doing nothing towards anything I might hope for.”

“Nothing?”

He shrugs. “I can’t be. Because there is nothing that I hope for. Or rather, the things I want are impossible things.”

She wants to ask him what they are, but she cannot. This is too raw, this gaping wound where her understanding of the world once resided. She also very much does not want to ask him what these impossible things might be. Because she knows that she is not one of them.

Masochism rules the day, if only as a whisper: “Why didn’t you kiss me back?”

He snorts, and his lip curls in disgust. “Tell me. Truthfully. Now that you’re sober, and now that you know these things – would you really have wanted me to?”

She has to look away from the bitter challenge in his dark eyes. She looks at her hands, instead. Does she owe him better than this, ought she to meet his eyes when she answers? He has given her truth. But she can’t. Can’t even answer, not properly. “I don’t know. I think, I think yes. But I don’t know.”

By rights he’ll stomp her now, now that she’s exposed this vulnerability. But he doesn’t. Instead, he’s now looking at his own hands. His fingernails are pressing little half-moons into the flesh of his palm. It has to hurt, but his face is tense and stony. The slightest edge of his lower lip is clamped between his teeth, whitened from pressure.

“So last night was, what, a pre-emptive rejection?” she asks. She’s desperate for him to say something, anything. If he would even move, ease this unbearable pressure. He’s going to draw blood soon, she thinks.

Enough. She reaches over and wrenches his hands apart. “Stop it.” With the pads of her thumbs she scrubs at the red crescents in his palm.

“Not a rejection, no.” He’s looking at her again, and this time she chances meeting his eyes. He looks bewildered, and some more parts of her world – not the very foundations or walls, just a buttress or two, but important parts nonetheless – collapse in this instant. He can never be Professor Snape again. Because now she reads terror and confusion, hope and hurt in every tensed line of his visage. Only Severus could be this lost, Severus this broken by disclosing truth.

“If you mean that, not a rejection, then do it. Kiss me now.” And she leans forward, closes her eyes in anticipation of him turning away. She doesn’t want to see it, not again.

But he doesn’t.

She nearly startles, to feel the soft heat of his breath on her face. His lips are dry, and his angle awkward. It’s clumsy, there’s no other word. She tilts her head, and they fit together a little better. Not well, though; there is too much space between their bodies. Before she can resolve
this, he has broken off, pulled away.

He pulls back entirely, his spine ramrod straight. Again, he’s not looking at her, he’s staring straight ahead. A muscle twitches below his jaw.

But he kissed her.

She told him to, and he did.

That means something, doesn’t it? She throws caution to the wind, shuffles down along the bench until their thighs are touching. Grasps his chin, and demands that he look at her, insists upon his attention. And she has it. His eyes are wide like something wild, and she gentles her grip, extends her fingers along his jawline, his sharp cheekbones, to softly cradle his face in the frame of her hands. She leans in, so close that they are inhaling the same air. Slowly, not breaking his gaze, she presses forward, touches her forehead against his for a long moment. "Severus," she whispers.

She begins at the corner of his mouth, where that mocking little smile so often lurks. His lips open, she feels him draw a sharp breath. So she slants her mouth over his, and gives him hers.
Disclosure

His eyes are closed, and she is entranced by the startling contrast of his lashes against his pale skin. She wants to study them, but her own eyes keep slipping shut. Kissing him is like a drug, or maybe her brain is running short of oxygen. Because her world has shrunk down to this microcosm of intermittent pressure and yielding, the feel of his teeth beyond lips that press, that soften, that open. She can feel his hands in her hair; her own are tangled in his.

And then he releases her, pulls back and away, and she’s completely lost.

But it’s his mobile ringing. He fishes it out of his pocket, and stares at it as if he has forgotten what it is, what he’s supposed to do with it. She sees his chest rising, falling, too quickly. His cheekbones are flushed, his narrow lips plumped from the assault she’s practised upon them. He blinks, rapidly. “Sorry, but—Sorry, I need to take this.”

She nods and settles back against the narrow slats of the park bench. Crosses her arms, crosses her legs. Tries not to overhear his conversation, which is impossible. She can hear a woman’s voice issuing, tiny and tinny, from where she’s sitting. Should she leave? She can’t, she has to talk to him. This isn’t over.

“Lindauer? Oh, you mean Roz! Yes, by all means, absolutely you should let her in. Tell her, tell her I’ll be there in—” he shoves his coat sleeve up to check his watch; she catches another glimpse of dark ink. “Half—no, best call it an hour, I’m across town. Get her set up with tea, would you? And there should be some bickies in the tin, up by the coffee.”

The other side’s response to this is quite audible: “I’m not your bloody hostess. Get a wife, go chase after Cinderella, why don’t you?”

“Maddie, could you please?” He sighs, taps the mobile, and returns it to his pocket. “Erm.”

She stands abruptly; her courage has completely fled. “Right. I have to—I have to find my wand.”

“And I need to head back to the Wick.” He stands as well, and readjusts his coat.

“Right. Right then. I’ll uh, I’ll see you, then.”

He nods, and then the points of colour across his cheekbones inexplicably spread over his face, until he’s blushing outright. “Let—let me know how it goes. With your wand. And... Er, if you wanted, erm, you could come ‘round to mine. For dinner. If—well—”

She exhales, finally. “Yes! Alright, that sounds great. I’ll see you this evening.”

“Right.” He nods sharply at her, turns on his heel, and strides off across the park.

She collapses back onto the bench. It’s the strangest combination: her knees won’t support her, and she’s overwhelmed by the need to squirm in utter glee. Unless she’s very badly mistaken, she’s on a promise. She has to cover her manic grin with both hands. But in moments, the feel of her fingertips against her face begins a spiral into reverie, remembering the feel of his mouth and his teeth gently scraping her lower lip. She imagines, as a soft lassitude seeps out from her spine, that her own fingertips are his, imagines his thumb stroking across her lip, imagines that she might, with the tip of her tongue, invite it into her mouth.

She takes a heaving breath, and opens her eyes fully. A park bench is no place for this. And she
does need to track down her wand.

It’s astonishing that she manages to navigate the Tube; it’s probably only down to the instructions he’d given her, because her mind pays no attention whatsoever to the automated voices calling out the stops. She’s too busy thinking: of the rough feel of his woollen coat contrasting with the smooth strands of his fine hair, of the earthy undertones beneath his pine-resin aftershave, of the slightly-salty taste of his skin, of the feel of his nose hard against her cheekbone as she plundered his mouth, touching her tongue to the inside of his lips. Of how his nose might feel pressed against more intimate places. Of what his skin might taste like elsewhere. Of what he might smell like, up close and in the dark.

It’s almost a relief to be back into the sunlight, with a sharpish breeze tugging at her hair. She breathes in deeply, of vehicle exhaust and notes of fried food, a touch of cigarette smoke. None of the odours that fill her nostrils or linger on her tongue remind her of bedroom scents, and this is a necessary thing, a blessing in her current frame of mind.

A brisk walk clears most of it from her system, and being met at the door of 12 Grimmauld Place by Harry’s brood does for the remainder.

“Auntie Hermie!” Lily clings to her legs and won’t be shaken free.

Jamie’s greeting is more circumspect, and actually a bit accusative. “Why didn’t you come for Christmas with Uncle Ron?” Al is nodding along; he has a selective mutism when his elder brother is around to do all the talking.

Ginny intervenes and chivvies the children off. “Hermione, you look, uh, you look well! Take your coat off, will you have a cup of tea?”

“Sure, yes, that’d be lovely. Sorry,” she confesses in undertone, “I didn’t think to bring anything for the kids.”

“They don’t need anything. Harry loaded me up with so much chocolate yesterday that the kids are well-set into next month. Those last ten pounds from Lily -- Harry seems determined to sabotage my ever losing them.”

“You don’t need to lose weight!” she dutifully responds.

“Urgh, I do though. Else I’ll end up exactly like Mum.” Ginny is rattling up the tea service.

“Could be worse things,” she offers.

“True, true. But let’s talk about you!” With a smart tap of her wand, Ginny stops the kettle whistling, and pours boiling water into the teapot.

“I’m not a terribly interesting item for conversation, I’m afraid.” Does Ginny know? How can she not? Those incredulous eyebrows she lifts in Hermione’s direction say a hundred words and more.

Harry’s arrival via the Floo interrupts whatever awkward conversational gambit Ginny is about to try next; instead, she busies herself with taking Harry’s cloak and briefcase. He seems briefly alarmed to see Hermione in his kitchen, but by the time he’s done greeting his offspring and overseeing whatever accomplishments they are evidently desperate to display in the sitting room, he’s recovered his composure. He sidles back into the kitchen, buffing his glasses on a shirttail, and favours her with a warm grin. “How are you, Hermione? Are you staying to dinner?”

She can only answer the second of these questions. “No, I’ve—I’m expected elsewhere tonight.”
Just how badly does she want to get into it with the Potters? Not very. She just wants her wand, so that she can apparate home, find something nice to wear, and maybe, maybe do something with her hair. Would Severus like to pull pins out? Her brain stutters to a halt on the vision of his hands gently freeing her curls, how they would cascade down her bare back. And then she’d lean over him, and her hair would fall across his naked chest, she’d drag it across his—

Er, yes. Wand. She is here to find her wand. “Actually, I’ve come ‘round in the hopes you’ve had a stray wand turn up here.”

“Pardon?”

“My wand. You haven’t seen it?” Her stomach is sinking.

“No, should we have?” They are both wearing equally perplexed expressions.


“Merlin!” Ginny exclaims. “Was it very bad?”

“No, no,” she hastens to reassure them, “I only splinched my shoes. And my wand. I didn’t even know you could splinch a wand.”

Ginny looks suddenly enlightened, holds one finger up in the air for a quivering moment, then darts out of the room. In seconds she’s back, triumphantly bearing, yes, the missing shoes. “No wand, though. These were fallen down the stairs in the entrance, I nearly tripped over them this morning.”

“Well, it’s out in the garden? Let’s go look!” Harry is immediately galvanized by this mystery. She tries hard not to be uncharitable, but it’s obvious he’s pleased she’s here for some other reason than to discuss Ronald.

She humours him, while he criss-crosses the lawn methodically, but by the time he’s pushing the rose bushes aside with a rake, she’s had enough. “Couldn’t you just summon it?”

“Uh, yes.” He looks abashed. “That is to say, Accio Hermione’s wand.” Nothing happens.

She sinks down onto their back step, a mournful “Damn it” escaping as a sigh.

Harry seats himself beside her. “You’re having a pretty shite week, aren’t you.”

Well, he’s gone and brought it upon himself, now. She takes a calming breath, but it doesn’t help much. “Thanks for your part in it, by the way. You could have warned me, what he was going to do. Instead I got totally blindsided.”

“I… yeah. Look, Hermione, I’m only going to say this once: I’m sorry. Things… things are complicated, and the Weasleys… I can’t pick sides in this. You have to understand that. Ginny, and my kids, they have to come first. I’m sorry,” he pleads.

Oh, she doesn’t want to deal with Harry’s emotions, too. It’s far too much work. “Fine. I guess it’s like an Elastoplast after all. Just rip it off and be done. Ronald and I…” She wants to tell him how deeply invested she was, for the better part of a fortnight, in reclaiming some fantasy of their lives together. She wants him to understand that she hadn’t truly given up. And yet, she no longer cares. Ronald is… she’s done with that. He kissed her, and that means something, and Ronald is so far from any of this that he has entirely ceased to matter. She sighs, because this is more than she can communicate to Harry, and it isn’t Harry she really wants to tell, anyway. It is herself,
maybe. “Molly led me to believe there was a chance we’d be reconciled, is all. I wanted that. So it hurt.”

“Is that… why you were coming here, last night?”

“To yell at you some, yes. How long did you know?”

He hunches in and scrubs at his glasses again. Fidgeting. Finally he replaces them, and contemplates his shoes. They are brown and nondescript, so surely they cannot hold his attention long. “I’ll keep an eye out for your wand; someone may have found it in the street, yeah? Maybe they’ll turn it in to the Registry. Where do you need to go, tonight? I’ll take you, side-along.”

So that’s the way it’s going to be. “Back to my flat, please.”

He ducks in to tell Ginny the details of this plan, and returns to offer her his arm. She takes it, because what else is she going to do? The apparition isn’t even that bad, enough practise on Harry’s part has evidently paid off.

He doesn’t depart immediately. Instead, he looks around her flat. It’s not in such bad order as it was the last time. Only her teacup, and her soiled dress robes, are evidence of the mess she was in last night. She frowns at the robes. She doesn’t remember folding them up, and her outer robes are in the heap, too. She didn’t have them in the taxi, did she? Had Severus — he must have done, must have found them along the street. “Can I fix you tea?” she finally asks.

He is studying Plant. Plant does not know what tea is, and would not want any, so she isn’t sure what answer he intends to find in the course of this scrutiny. She puts the kettle on anyway; by the time he’s figured it out, perhaps the water will be boiling.

“I didn’t want to talk about this at Grimmauld Place. Ginny… Hermione, you have to realize, she’s everything. I can’t… I can’t have her brought into this, and I can’t make her choose between me and her family. Hell, I can’t even really choose. Between the Weasleys and you, I mean. I wouldn’t… Hermione, you’ve been my friend through all the hardest, all the worst possible times. You were there when no one else was. Don’t ever forget that I know that.”

“Harry, talking like that is beginning to scare me.” Not really, but it’s getting stranger by the minute.

“You should be scared. Look, if it comes out that I’ve told you this, it’s… it’s not going to go well. But you’re right, it’s not fair that you’re going to be blindsided with it.”

“What? Damn it, Harry, come to the point already.” Now she is scared. Or at least, she thinks that’s what this sick clenching feeling in her stomach might be.

“Okay, so you know how wizarding marriages differ from muggle ones?”

So this is about Ronald’s petition for divorce. She nods; it’s a big territory, but she assumes he’ll expand on his point.

“Right, so custody. Umn, when the marriage is mixed, kids go to the parent with the highest blood status. Like, if Ginny and I split up, she’d get the kids, because my mum was muggleborn.”

“Harry, what is your point?” She hadn’t known about this bit of pureblood nonsense but it doesn’t surprise her. It also doesn’t apply to her, so she doesn’t see what he’s getting at, other than a lesson in hegemony.
“I’m getting there,” he says tersely. “So Molly’s a Prewett, right? That’s one of the oldest families, it’s older than the Potters, even. So Prewett ranks higher.”

“**Harry.**”

“I’m just trying to say – the Weasleys aren’t just a pureblood family. They’ve got high-ranking bloodlines, and Molly… well, you can never accuse her of being obsessed with her bloodline, but you can rest assured she knows it. Gin says they never made anything of it, it never really came up when they were kids.”

“Harry, please just show yourself out if you’re not going to come to the point in the next minute and a half.”

She can see him visibly grit his teeth. “Ron’s claiming sole custody of your unborn child; the miscarriage you had. And in doing so, that automatically means he formally acknowledges it as pureblooded. In discovery, when you go up in front of the Wizengamot to hear the charges he’s laying as grounds for divorce, he’s going to accuse you of having aborted it. So under wizarding law, that’s infanticide of a pureblood child.”

She sits down, hard, on the edge of the bed, and can only gape at him.

“So now you know. Try to look upset and surprised, I guess.”

“But that’s insane!” she finally manages.

“Yeah. This is ugly as fuck, and… I felt like you should know. That’s all.” He rakes his fingers through his hair.

“He can’t honestly expect to make that stick, he can’t! Harry, what do I do?” she wails.

“I don’t know. Get a good lawyer. Because if he wins this, the consequences for you are really shite.”

“But! Oh god, you have to believe me, I never did!”

“Hermione, I… No, I don’t think you did. But… I don’t know. It doesn’t matter what I think. It’s the Wizengamot you have to convince.”

She has dropped her head between her knees, because the room is pinching in blackness at the edges. She concentrates on slowing her breathing. Harry presses a hesitant hand to her shoulder. “Consequences. You said consequences. What consequences?”

Harry doesn’t answer her, but he doesn’t remove his hand, either. She chances a look up at him. The room is staying still now, so that’s something. She sees his Adam’s apple bob; he’s swallowed. “What consequences?” she reiterates.

“They throw you out of the wizarding world. And that’s the humane option. According to what Arthur was saying—” Wait, are all the Weasleys in on this? “—before the fifties, it was a straight-up Kiss. From the Dementors. I guess pureblood witches probably still go for that option, because they wouldn’t make it as muggles.”

“I believe,” she says calmly, “that I am going to throw up.”

She doesn’t, which is a mercy, because fish and chips surely will not taste as good the second time around, but Harry does leave her curled against the toilet, quietly crying. The bathroom tiles are
different, and so is the context, but this is a place she has been before. It is no more comfortable now.
Life Lessons

There are pubic hairs on her floor. She has been staring at them for a long time, now. And there’s sock fuzz tangled up with more socially-acceptable hair, lurking behind the porcelain base of the loo. Why hadn’t she thought to cast a few housekeeping charms, back when she still had a wand?

She needs to get up off the floor. She needs to go to Diagon Alley, and hire an owl, so that she can set up a meeting with Dawlings. Except she can’t go to Diagon Alley, she needs a wand to get through the archway. Maybe Neville or Hannah would let her through?

Could she make it, before the Post closes? Charing Cross Road isn’t the other side of London after all; she has even taken the Tube over a few times, for the novelty of it. Green Park, and then the Picadilly Line, straight to Leicester Square. It’s only twenty minutes with walking, tops. But it’s Saturday; they close early. She lifts her arm into her field of view, to look at her watch. Ten to five. Not a chance in hell.

But it is Saturday. Harassing Dawlings over the weekend won’t get her an appointment any faster than an owl sent Monday morning. She doesn’t think they even send out owls to business addresses after Friday, noon.

This means that she entirely lacks a good excuse not to show up in Hackney Wick as expected. What is she going to do, ring his mobile? Oh yes, sorry for leading you on, actually I can’t make it tonight, on account of feeling shitty because my husband is going to accuse me of aborting our child.

Foetus. It would never have been a child.

She hauls herself up onto the toilet, empties her bladder, and wonders if she should stop to buy condoms. The thought of anyone’s cock inside of her makes her queasy. But it’s not just anyone’s cock that populates her imagination, it’s Ronald’s. Purple and swollen, when he’d kneeled over her in bed and sprayed her breasts and face with semen, his alternative when she’d told him, No. Not tonight. And to think she’d been so pleased these last few years, when he’d given off insisting, all the time. She rests her head in her hands, elbows digging pits in her knees, and tries to bring back to mind the fantasy she’d begun, of tickling Severus’ chest with the fall of her hair. It’s like ashes, now. Cold and charred. She can’t imagine what his chest might look like, because all she sees are Ronald’s freckles, Ronald’s nipples poking out of ginger fur.

But she told him that she would come over. And it doesn’t matter how many deep and personal things he’s revealed to her, she’s not under any obligation to fuck him because of it. He invited her for dinner, and maybe that’s all it was. Dinner at his place does not necessarily translate to shagging. In fact, as precedents go, last night sets a pretty bleak one. She’s fine with that. And just because he kissed her today does not mean his designs upon her body mirror hers upon his. Maybe he was just testing the waters. Maybe… maybe he only did it because she told him to?

She won’t bring condoms. But she will bring a bottle of wine. Or, no, beer. He said they’d stick to beer, and she can clink a case of bottles down in his kitchen with a laugh, make light of whatever it was between them this afternoon. Look, here I am, promising to be on an even keel tonight.

Hah.

Her face in the mirror is blotchy, and her eyes are red. Who is she kidding? He’s going to take one
look at the mess she is, and close the door on her. She runs cold water, wipes her face. It feels better, anyway. Cosmetics? But she isn’t trying to seduce her erstwhile potions professor. Not anymore, or at least not tonight. She wipes her face again. Her hair, though. She should do something with it. She needs to look like she has her life under control. Having her hair under control is a starting point. She pulls it back in an elastic; this constrains it, yes, but the effect is not Competent Adult, so much as Practical Schoolgirl. And he can still barely conceive of her as an adult, he’d said. So clearly she needs to do a little better than this. What if she wraps strands of it 'round, jabs in a few bobby pins? If it makes a statement, it’s: Trying, At Least.

Earlier, she’d thought to wear the cashmere jumper again. It’s too feminine, too soft and stylish for how she feels now, but she doesn’t have any better idea. The old denims she’s already wearing are fine. Not nice enough for the cashmere, but that’s sort of the point. Finally, because she can’t think of anything else she can do to dally in her flat, she snags her satchel and the Tube map, and heads out into the evening.

Forty minutes on the trains, and she’s back at Hackney Wick Station. Do muggles ever become ghosts? Or do you need to have had magic to do so? She shrugs off waterlogged girls, and works on navigating the warren of warehouses. BOURgeois CUNts has a jazz band in tonight. She pauses to listen to the wail of a saxophone, and the sultry lament of the buxom woman who sways as if moving against a lover’s caress. She thinks she recognizes some of the patrons as denizens of the Hive, seated at one of the far tables. She herself doesn’t want to be recognized, doesn’t want to linger in case Maddie or Cathy are about. She needs to pay them back for the cab, but she is not up to fending them off tonight. If she has to endure their militant mutual sisterhood, she will quite likely break into tears, and there’s the Statute of Secrecy to consider.

She wonders how that works, if they boot you out. So they snap your wand. Once the worst has happened, what prevents you getting another? What prevents you continuing on as Severus has done? And for those embittered by the verdict, what prevents their breaking the Statute? She supposes that they could always threaten to sic the Dementors on you. She would not like her chances, wandless and solitary, against even one of those creatures, let alone a horde.

Now that she’s thinking about Dementors, she senses them in every shadow, feels their cold dead presence at the back of her neck. She doesn’t hesitate to knock at the door, because she wants to get away from the night far more than she wants to avoid having to talk to Severus.

He’s in shirtsleeves, and his hair is casually tied back. It makes such a difference that she’s momentarily stunned. He just takes her coat, as if nothing’s amiss. “Come through to the kitchen, I’ll introduce you to Roz.”

Who is Roz? In the chaos of this afternoon, she’d forgotten about his phone call. Roz must, of course, be the comfortably middle-aged woman seated at the island. She has a pen pinning her curly grizzled hair in a sloppy bun, and is tidying papers into a cumbersome binder and assorted folders.

“Hermione, Roz; Roz, Hermione.”

“Oh, always with the social graces.” The woman rolls her eyes and shakes her head. She extends a hand towards Hermione. “I’m working on the collections here, we’ve been trying to get dates down for the earlier pieces. It’s my dissertation work, museology.”

“Oh. Severus showed me the, uh, would it be called an archive?”

“Dry storage. It’s not halfway near annotated enough to begin to have pretentions towards an archive. Though, Tollerston’s nearly done with the Gracie Fenwicke pieces. Their styles are so
different. I keep expecting there to be communication between them, threads of common influence.”

“Well, but you’re working on the older boards, mostly.” Severus is doing what is apparently his part in tidying the documents.

“True, that. Say, what about this one? I know we’re running on, but do you have any ideas?” She holds up a paper-sized print. Severus reaches across the island, and takes it from her. Curious, Hermione sneaks a glance across his arm.

The image is furious, there’s no other word that encompasses the incandescent reds and yellows that proceed out from a central figure. His brawny muscles are sheathed in sweat, the light of smoldering metal and flames competing for the opportunity to lick his body. He’s wielding a hammer, Vulcan forging weapons for the pantheon. And the gods are present: in the shadows, she can see sinuous writhing forms, slits of reptilian eyes reflecting back the scene they gaze upon. Wyrms, they are. Not dragons, nothing so fierce and majestic, nor so controlled. These are the older sort, the wretched terrors that the earliest chapters of A History of Magic gave only scant sentences to. Cold, alien intelligence glimmering in their eyes. How can paint do this? She shivers, and looks away, to the title pencilled in beneath the image. Toby at the Forge, it reads.

“Well, it’s Tobias,” he says, passing the print back. “They were together, in the early sixties.”

“He was your father, wasn’t he?” Roz’s eyes are piercing.

“Yes. Later than this would have been painted. He stopped sculpting near the end of the fifties, I think.”

“This was painted while he was still working, then?”

“Probably. But definitely not after…after all that.”

“After he left Eileen for Gracie.”

“Yes, that. She wouldn’t have arsed herself to, I don’t think. It strikes me as one of her earlier pieces. This looks like a madder lake, here. Her work through the sixties tended towards kermes vermillion for the larger brushwork.”

“If you say so. I don’t know how you can see the difference. Was it sourcing issues, do you know?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Darn, because if it was supply-based, or something, that would give me brackets to work in. Well, it’s something, pre-sixties. It’s really too bad your mum didn’t annotate any of these. I’d give anything to have Tollerston’s folios.”

“No you wouldn’t, be honest. You like these too much.”

“Well, yes. They’re wonderfully subversive.”

“And everyone likes a sob story.”

“Oh sure, that too. Or a bit of mystery, rather. Alright, duck, I’ll leave you to your evening. You’ll let me know how you make out with all this?”
“If I turn up anything useful, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Can’t ask for better than that. Say ‘hello’ for me, would you? Solly and I really are going to get up there. By autumn if we don’t make it this summer.”

“I’ll pass the word.” He has fetched Roz’s coat, and helps her into it. It’s a strangely courteous gesture that is at odds with his casual attire, and at odds with the Severus Snape she knows of old, who never lifted a finger for gestures of courtesy. Well, unless you counted that irritated way he would flick doors open with a casual burst of magic. She thinks she remembers him opening a door like that in advance of McGonagall, once.

He escorts his guest out, and Hermione is left looking around his kitchen. Roz has left several binders, but she feels it might be rude to peruse them, so instead she makes a game of trying to identify the herbs he has growing on his windowsill: Coriander or parsley, sage, lemongrass, rosemary,

“You didn’t have to bring anything, you know.”

“Oh, well. It’s just beer. And you bought lunch, after all.” She shrugs and hopes she isn’t blushing.

“Fair enough. There’s a bottle opener in the drawer beside the fridge. I’ll fix our plates.” He lifts the lid of a wok, and a pungent spicy odour rolls out through the room.

“You even cooked?”

“No, it’s a takeaway, I’ve only reheated it, and improved it a little. I like more ginger. It’s red Thai curry – I hope that’s alright?”

“Sounds fabulous. Smells fabulous.” She cracks the tops on their beer.

“Good, good. I had this awful thought, after I’d ordered, that perhaps you were allergic to shellfish or something.” He takes the bottle she proffers, and hands her a wide bowl heaped with veg, chicken, and shrimp, swimming around a mound of rice.

“No, no allergies. I’m easy.”

With another casual gesture, the papers flutter up off the table, and sort themselves into a disheveled stack on one of the end tables in his sitting room. He lowers the lights manually, and they seat themselves at the island. Opposite each other. This is not intimate, she tells herself. It’s takeaway, and there’s at least four feet between them.

“I do apologise for takeaway twice in one day.”

“It’s fine,” she reassures him, “It’s delicious.”

“Curry’s a doddle, though, to cook from scratch.”

“Really? I’ve never made it. Oh, don’t with the eyebrows, I do know how to cook. I just haven’t, er, put much effort into it on my own behalf. My flat’s not really conducive, and, er…”

“At some point, you’re going to have to look around, and decide, ‘This is the life I have, and I’m damned well going to make the best of it.’” He takes a swig of beer.

She nods. He’s right. Life as a muggle isn’t… isn’t terrible, is it? Although, without her Order of
Merlin pension, it’s not going to be pleasant. Damn it, no. She’s not going to roll over for Ronald, she’s done with that. He hasn’t got a leg to stand on, and she’s surprised the rest of the Weasleys aren’t telling him so. Or maybe they are. Maybe she should go over to the Burrow and get the story straight.

She’s brooding, she realises. He didn’t invite her over to endure silence. “So, with your mum’s art. What’s Roz doing, anyway?”

“Trying to work out when they were all painted. The timeline matters to how they’re interpreting the body of her work. There are some that I know, but the ones from before I was born, and while I was at school – it’s guesswork.”

“Were all her subjects people she knew?”

He shakes his head. “Though she did tend to use people from the collective here, in her later work. You see some facial features reappearing, occasionally. And Gracie sat nudes for her.”

Alright, now she’s torn. Who is or was Gracie? From his conversation with Roz, she’d assumed one thing, but… But she also wants to pursue her original point. She’d been trying to angle around to whether his mother had ever made him a subject. She wants to see what he looked like, when he was young. Oh hell, low-hanging fruit: “Did she ever paint you?”

He swallows his curry, and chases it with another sip of beer. “If I admit that, you’ll ask to see it, won’t you.”

“I might.”

“And then I’ll be put in the uncomfortable position of having to show you.”

She nods.

“Finish eating, first. There are two boards that aren’t in the catalogue, and that’s one of them. I’ll have to take you back through to the collections.”

She’s drinking her beer too fast, but she needs it, to cut the heat of the curry. She bets he added extra chilies, too. As much as she’d like to hurry, her tastebuds aren’t up to the task. “When we were walking in Abney Park – thanks,” she takes the glass of water he passes her, “You mentioned your mother was part of a collective, here.”

“Well before this was a trendy place to do so, yes. The warehouse was up for sale, so they pooled their funds.”

“Was it always the Hive, then?”

“No, that’s only the past, oh, seven? Eight years, maybe. Turnover’s fairly high. It was just ‘Fenwicke, Prince, and Standish’ back in the day. Or so I’m told. I was up at Hogwarts, all through that era.”

“‘Fenwicke’ as in Gracie Fenwicke?”

“Go on, ask already. Or I’ll just tell you: I don’t know what it was with them. When I last talked to Gracie, before she’d passed on, she told me that one day she’d had enough of Toby, and asked if Mam wanted him back. I guess she didn’t; they hatched some madcap scheme to come down to London together, instead.”
This recounting is bizarre enough that it might even be the truth. Why is he so obsessed with sharing things with her, why does he answer her questions? She thinks of all the things she doesn’t want to share with him, all the questions she’d dodge, if he ever chanced to ask them. And she feels guilty. “You’ve told me a lot about yourself.”

“Have I? Have I told you anything of substance? Or am I just telling you enough that you think I’ve disclosed things that no one else knows?”

These are excellent questions. She rises to snag a second beer, and passes another bottle to him, as well. “I don’t think there’s anyone on the wizarding side who does. Barring your uncle, I suppose. McGonagall?”

“No. You’re right. Curiously enough, when you don’t have anyone to tell, you don’t tend to tell anyone. There aren’t any great mysteries, really. Inconsequential people just seem perplexing in hindsight, because you realise you don’t know anything about them. Just set your plate by the sink; let’s go back and I’ll show you the board.”

Two deflections for the price of one. Professor Snape was never an inconsequential person. But a friendless one? Perhaps. Probably. If he wasn’t having her on, earlier, about having once desired Dumbledore’s fiery death, then what miserable standard does he set for friendship? I know too well how he despised me. Had Lily despised him, too? After the incident at the lake, apparently. But had they been the dearest of friends, would one word uttered in a moment of abject personal humiliation have been enough to sever their bond? She thinks, as she follows him back into the dim hallway, and again into the climate-controlled chill of the storage room, that her own friendships had withstood far more than insults. Ronald had even abandoned them, left them to face the Horcruxes alone. And she’d still married him, the git.

Bollocks. She can’t think of this business with Ronald now.

Severus hasn’t had to consult a catalogue to find this painting. Or, this lack of a painting, rather. What he places in front of her is an empty panel. She tilts her head in a mute question, and wonders if this is intended as a jape.

“It’s under a concealment.”

Oh. “How come?”

“Because… oh, things that will take too long to get into. But it’s not formally a part of this collection. Maybe someday, once I’m gone. It’ll just turn up, a lost painting. A little mystery for Roz and her ilk, they like mysteries.” He extends his gloved hands over the panel, and the blank emptiness of it drips away like hot wax.

A dark-haired child is thus exposed. His face is a little thin; it makes his eyes seem slightly too large, where they’re not hidden by unkempt hair. This child is lying in autumn grass, ranks of straggly weeds and swaying seed heads to either side. And everywhere, crawling across his trousers, dangling from bent stems, emerging from his tattered shirt collar, everywhere: there are insects, worms, beetles, bugs. She almost feels revulsion, but it’s supplanted by wonder at their myriad forms, their splendid glittering carapaces, their jewel-bright colours, their multifaceted eyes and keen antennae, the delicate gossamer strands of perfect spider webs. Perched on the child’s upraised hand, and the sole focus of his attention, is a praying mantis. The two are arranged as if they are having a conversation. There is a tiny curve to this child’s lip: wonder or contentment.

She looks up at Severus, and sees this soft smile mirrored there.
He becomes aware of her attention, and gestures at the painting, “I’d have been four, maybe. I don’t even remember posing for this, I might’ve been sleeping. I doubt I sat still long enough, otherwise. It had to have taken her months to do this, all the detail work.” What he doesn’t say, but what she hears clearly, is, This is how I know she loved me.

She wants to offer him an arm around his shoulder, a bracing squeeze. “Thank you,” she says instead, as he re-conceals the painting and returns it to the depths from whence it came. “Thank you for showing me.”

“Oh, don’t mistake it for a goodwill gesture. I’ve every intention of pestering you to see your baby photos, now. I’m betting you were a chubby child.”

“Hah, not out of the ordinary. But I had a very gapped smile, and when my front teeth did come in, they were ridiculous. Mum called me Bucky. Bucky the Beaver.” There, she’s given him some ammunition. She feels better for it. She can tell, by the glint in his eye and the smirk which he’s doing a bad job of repressing, that he is going to remember it, too.

They retrieve their beer, and he gestures for her to settle in amongst the plants. “I’ll be back in a minute, I’ve just remembered I’ve got something for you.” What he returns with is a zipped plastic bag of soil and a clay pot, lemon yellow with white polka dots.

“For your friend on the windowsill. It needs potting up.”

She grins at the pot. “Mini-plant will enjoy the colour schema, I’m sure.”

“It came with a Cymbidium orchid I wanted. It did!”

“Oh, I don’t disbelieve you, I’m just relishing the thought of you walking home with a pot this cheerful.”

“What, I’m cheerful. I’m just overflowing with joy and laughter.” He scowls magnificently, and she laughs harder.

“Ah, I needed that,” she pants, once she has control over herself. He pulls another affronted expression which nearly sets her off again, but her ribs ache. “Today’s been such utter shite. I needed a good laugh.”

He seats himself, not across from her in his customary chair, but on the other end of the sofa. “I did see you were looking a bit under the weather. I didn’t want to pry. But, uh… how did it go, with finding your wand?”

She starts to press her fingers along her scalp, up through her hair, before she realises that doing so is going to muss it. She settles for a heartfelt “Urgh” instead. “It didn’t go. It wasn’t anywhere around Grimmauld Place. So I don’t know what I’ll do. Buy another next week, I suppose.”

He nods in apparent commiseration. “Pardon my asking, but can you afford it? Because if it’s tight, I could front you a loan.”

“I appreciate that,” and she really does, it’s an unlooked for bit of charity that sets her eyes smarting, “But I’ve got some savings. I’m living well within my means. I wish I’d done more practical work, though. It’d be nice to have earnings off of patents, or something.”

“Well, if you need anything, you’ll let me know?”

She nods, and contemplates her empty bottle. He gestures, casually, and the remaining two drift
over to where they’re sitting. “There, that’s something I need — I need you to teach me how you
do that. Levitating objects like that, without a wand. With a wand, that would be at least three
separate movements, and a verbalized spell.”

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

“I’m partial to strangulation, if killing curses aren’t in vogue any more. Teach me. I need to learn
how to do some things wandlessly.”

“You should know some wandless spells. Although,” he pauses as if in contemplation, but clearly
this is not the case, because his fingers twitch again, and the caps pop off their next round. “It
occurs to me that I don’t actually have any evidence that you were paying attention in Defense.
Given that you never once turned in a proper essay.”

“I did too! The very first one of the year!” She hoists a leg up to lightly kick his thigh.

He grasps her ankle. “My foot, now.” It’s undignified in the extreme, but so would kicking away
to freedom be. He continues, as if they are having a perfectly normal exchange. “Alright, I’ll grant
you one essay.”

“And I do know defensive spells. Shielding charms, concealment, even offensive battle magic.
But none of that is any good, day-to-day.”

“Well that’s because you’re not a Slytherin. We use concealment spells all the time.”

“Fine, concealment spells are useful. But I want to learn things like, oh, like that heating charm.
And however you’re levitating objects about.”

“I call it my phantom hand spell. Only it’s not really a spell. Hmm, let me think how to explain it.
I’ll bet you were good at charms.”

“Pretty good, yes.”

He sighs. “I was rubbish. I don’t think I ever met one of Filius’ lessons that didn’t give me a
headache. Oh, I figured it out, but it all seemed needlessly complex.”

“How so?”

“Let’s take levitation as an example. Think about it, there’s a variant of the spell for every kind of
material. And it only works on inert, inanimate objects, and won’t really move them about — you
need propulsion and motion charms for that. D’you have any idea how many charms there are,
that have to simultaneously function, on a broomstick? Quidditch is a magical miracle, when you
look at it that way.”

“But… how else would you do it?”

“Phantom hand! Look.” His eyes narrow in momentary concentration, and his fingers make a
slight scooping motion. The yellow-painted pot drifts up off the floor, where she had set it, and
hovers in mid-air. “It’s got some detractors. You can’t just set up a string of charms, and let them
go, you need to concentrate on what you’re doing, but I can count on one hand, no pun intended,
how many times I’ve ever had to do something more complex than this.” The pot spins in an arc,
and he snatches it out of the air. In doing so, he’s relinquished her ankle, but she doesn’t move it.

“I still don’t understand what you’re doing.”
“It’s two things, really. First, you impose brute force upon air, solidify it with your will. You’ll have no problem doing that, if you can muster the energy for wandless battle hexes. Then it’s finesse. I think about it as a literal projection of my hand. You want to lift the flowerpot? You imagine what it would feel like, in your hand, you imagine how heavy it is, and you just do it.”

“What about heavy things, though. Like all these papers,” she points at the stack, “You wouldn’t be able to lift them, with just your hand. Or just air, rather. No matter how solid it is.”

“Heh, no, that’s my other trick. I should exact some fee from you, for this one.”

“What kind of fee did you have in mind?” she asks. She lifts her other foot onto his lap. Does she mean to flirt with him? Flirting isn’t, well, it isn’t. It’s just flirting. That’s all.

“Hmm, yes, that’ll do nicely. Very nice addition to my foot collection. Do you like these shoes?”

“Why?” She’s wary, now.

“Because your plant hasn’t even seen its new home yet, wouldn’t want to shatter it teaching you how to do this.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose I could offer my shoes as casualties.”

“Excellent.” He works them off her feet, and sets them spinning in midair. “You must have learned the standard levitation charm? I think Filius still introduces it in First Year.”

“Oh yes! Wingardium leviosa!”

“That’s the one. It’s deceptively simple. But it doesn’t just move things upward in the air, otherwise you’d notice that heavier objects take more energy to lift.”

“And they don’t! It’s just as easy to levitate a rock as it is a feather! We only start with feathers, because, well, how much can a feather hurt when it falls.”

“Exactly. So how do you think it works, what do you think is actually happening?”

She purses her lips, and sorts through what she knows about the charm. This task is made more complicated by the fact that his hand on her foot tickles. Is he—? “That tickles!”

“Does it?” He draws a finger down the sole of her foot.

“Ah, don’t!”

“Then answer the question.”

“Does it, does it suspend gravity? No, it can’t, or there’d be weird effects of light around it. What about, oh, reversing gravity? Like antigravity!”

He’s gaping at her. “That took me… weeks to work out.”

“Well, how old were you, when you did? Is it, though? Antigravity?”

“I’d have been in third year, I think. Yes, it is. Or at least, there’s no other explanation that makes sense. It’s, unnm, maybe it would be better to say ‘anti-mass’, since gravity is just a consequence of space-time bending in around the mass of an object.”

“Sure, alright, anti-mass. Maybe: reversing all the charges on subatomic particles.”
“And their charm and spin, too.”

“Sure, why not?”

“Why not, indeed. So then, what I did, was I taught myself how to produce the energy of a levitation charm; then, when I’m lifting objects, I just douse them in that energy, for lack of a better expression, and then sort of push them along, with my phantom hand.” He glances at her floating shoes, and they fall to the ground.

“Right, I have to try this.” She closes her eyes, and extends her wand arm. Tries to remember the feel of it, the motions she would use. “Wingardium leviosa,” she murmurs. She peeks from beneath one eyelid.

“I think I might’ve seen it twitch.” The bastard’s laughing at her, with his eyes, ‘though the rest of his face is bland. Too bland.

“I’ll give you twitching,” she promises, as he runs his finger down her sole again. “Don’t, I need to concentrate.”

The fiftieth or sixtieth time, she finally gets it. Sweat is beading on her forehead, and she doesn’t even have the energy left to kick Severus when he tries to tickle her. But her shoes, both of them, are floating, a couple feet above the ground. “Now how do I move them? When you say you solidify the air, is that a transfiguration?”

“Exactly so.”

“Alright.”

“Picture your hand; you know how it feels. Just ball up some energy, and project it outwards, it’s not sophisticated.”

And it isn’t. She’s almost giddy, at how easy it is, especially compared to the levitation charm. No wonder he’d said that charms seemed needlessly complicated to him. She’d hop up and dance, except halfway through this exercise, his thumbs started doing something marvellous to her feet, and ooooh. “Mmm, that’s nice. Phantom hands are lovely and all, but I think I like your real ones better.” She feels something like a breeze stirring her hair.

“Are you quite sure about that?” he says.

Well no. No, she isn’t. “I need a nap. I feel like I’ve been wrung out.”

“You’ve done it, though. Do you have any idea how impressive it is to master that kind of magic, as quickly as you have?”

“Quickly? I’ve been at it an hour.” She checks her watch. “More, bloody near two.”

“You’re a ridiculous overachiever. Two hours? There are witches and wizards who wouldn’t manage it in two weeks.”

“Bet it didn’t take you two weeks.”

“Couple days,” he admits, “Between lessons. I had to hide from my dorm mates.”

It’s almost unfair, how brilliant he must have been as a student. And it’s certainly unfair, in an existential sense, that he’s not doing anything with all that brilliance now, except massaging her
feet in Hackney Wick. Not that she’s complaining, exactly. Her eyes keep wanting to drift shut. “Do you know how late the train runs, offhand?”

“You could stay, if you wanted.” His thumbs falter. She opens her eyes a crack; he’s starting to blush again. “I mean, you can kip on the sofa. Or I can change the sheets upstairs. I mean, of course I can. Absolutely. If Maddie O’Shea can kip here for the better part of two fortnights, I don’t see as there’s any harm in you doing the same.”

“Did she sleep on the sofa?” His stammering chivalry is amusing, somehow.

“Well, yes, but I was trying to get rid of her.”

She snickers. “Are you being nice, or do you really want me to stay?”

“Pardon me, who do you think I am, exactly?”

“Well, I’d say you were Severus Snape, but the foot massage is evidence to the contrary. Speaking of.” She nudges his hand with her big toe, and he resumes. Oh, to wield such power!

She really is about to fall asleep, she realises, as she pushes through a dreamlike trance of flying, phantom swirls of power holding her aloft above London’s sparkling streets. She shakes herself awake. “Say, question for you. They said, during the battle, at Hogwarts I mean, they said you flew.”

“I always wanted anti-gravity boots, or better, to swim through null-gee like on the space station.”

“Really?”

“Really as in, ‘is that really how you did it’, or ‘did you really want to be a spaceman’?”

“Er, the former, but, yes, the latter, too.”

“No, and yes. I had to levitate all my clothing for that one. And then drift along with the aid of my phantom hand. It was more controlled falling than anything else. But a good trick — the sort you save up your sleeve for that one time when it really matters.”

“Did you have protective spells on your clothes, too?”

“Naturally, why?”

Well, that explains why he didn’t bleed to death. “I had this pet theory that you were downing blood thinners, prophylactically.”

“You’re too smart for your own good.”

“Too sleepy for my own good.”

“Well, let’s see about fixing you up with some clean sheets, then.”

“The sofa’s fine.” She’s lost all desire to mount an argument that she should go home. If she goes home, she has to think about Ronald again, and she’d much rather not. Not just now.

“I’m trying to be a gentleman.”

“Don’t bother. I’d have to climb stairs. That’s too much work,” she yawns. You can show me your bed tomorrow, she means to say, but her limbs are so heavy. Mmm, and the quilt he pulls
over her is nice, it smells like laundry softener and springtime.

“The loo’s down the hall, first door on your right. Good night, then.” She feels his fingers, his real ones, brushing her hair back off her face.

“Don’t I get a good-night kiss?” Whoops, has she said that aloud?

Apparently. His lips press hers. He’s a lot better at it, this time. She’s not the only one who’s a quick study.
The smell of the night is all wrong, damp earth and leaf mould and some heavy alien perfume. It takes her a few moments to remember that she is on a sofa in the middle of Severus’ structured jungle. The streetlights glimmer through the dense mesh of leaves obscuring the myriad windows.

She can’t see her watch, but it is either very late, or more likely very early. Is there a clock in the kitchen? She glances over, and sees her host, standing at the kitchen sink. He is lit by the faint glow of a pulsating orb of blue light that hovers over his shoulder. Spread across the island and the kitchen counters are an assortment of twisty, weird shapes. As she pads closer, she can see that they are some kind of hanging plants.

He’s barefoot, in plaid flannel bottoms and an Iron Maiden tee, which is battered up enough that it might even be vintage. She wonders if it was one of his own, if he went in for heavy metal as a teen. Tear down the Ministry, indeed. It’s thoroughly at odds with the image he presents now, tenderly inspecting his plant collection.

The kitchen tap is running, but there’s no sound. He’s evidently using a silencing charm. If it’s not Muffliato, he won’t have heard her approach. Giving him a heart attack here in the dark is the furthest thing from her desires, so she backtracks to the light panel, and flicks one of the switches. He twitches around, and the silence suddenly ceases.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet.”

“No, I think I woke myself up, turning over. What are you doing?”

“Watering.”

She edges over, and sees that the sink is filled with spiky grey-green shapes. He has a mister bottle, too, which he picks up next, and applies to a profusion of strap-like leaves and trailing grey roots; the plant appears to be fixed to a gnarled piece of wood and nothing else. “Is this an orchid?” she asks.

He nods. “Sophronitis purpurata. Or, pardon me, it’s a Cattleya now, they reorganized the genus. It’s an epiphyte, fairly popular in Brazil. It hasn’t bloomed yet this year, but I think there are finally some floral spikes starting.” He points out a nubbin of tissue for her edification.

“And the ones in the sink, what are they?”

“Tillandsia species. I’ve got rather a lot at present; I usually sell the pups, the offsets, I mean, to hobbyists. There’s a bit of a rage for air plants, recently. But I’ve been holding them back for Martin; she’s using them in her exhibit.”

Ah. The bizarre little plants in le Jardin. “I take it you couldn’t sleep? Or does this need doing in the dead of night?” Well, anything’s possible. Plants are weird.

But no, apparently it’s just Severus being Severus: “Bad dreams. And too many thoughts.”

“I hope I’m not the cause of any of it?”
No. Not really, no. I won’t deny that you make me think of the past, but I do that anyway. No, mostly… Mostly something else. And I do need to tend to these before I leave. I wasn’t accomplishing anything else lying in bed, so I thought I would get a head start on it.”

“Before you leave?” No, he can’t go! Where is he going?

“Just for a few days. I’ll be back Tuesday night. But it throws the watering schedule off a bit.”

“Where are you going? And is there anything I can do to help you here?”

“You can take over misting, if you like. Just a fine spray, until the water’s just barely beading on the leaves. Start on this Oncidium, and then do the Miltassia, that big one on the island. The rest just need water — I’ve got a light fertilizer in the mister right now, use that up and then I’ll refill it with regular distilled water.”

“Practically like having a pet,” she mutters, as she sets to work.

“Pretty much. Only you can have a great many of them.”

There is that. She is suspending her verdict on whether this is a point in favour or against, but his collection of them is certainly breathtaking. He didn’t answer her first question, so she asks again, “Where are you off to? Unless it’s none of my business.”

“Up to Northumberland.” He answers readily enough, but the absence of further details makes her think that perhaps she shouldn’t press.

They work in relative quiet, but it is not uncomfortable. Rather, it’s soothing, and she finds herself wanting to talk to her charges as she progresses: there you are, have a drink, isn’t that nice? Tasty, tasty fertilizer. But Severus would laugh at her, so she keeps this dialogue within the confines of her skull. It’s one thing to chat up Plant and Mini-Plant, but she ought not to get familiar with other people’s houseplants. Meanwhile, he is returning those that are finished with their spa treatment back to their usual habitats. Finally, he plucks the air plants out of the sink, shaking them off and tucking them back into a wire frame. She leans against the far counter, admiring the way they look en masse. Maybe she’ll ask if she can buy a few of his extras, once Cathy’s finished with them.

“Well, that much is done. Did you want a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you, I suppose I should probably try to sleep some more.”

“Chamomile, then?”

“Oh, sure; that would be nice.”

He fixes cups for both of them, and then seats himself at the island. “Earlier, you asked me why I’ve shared things with you.”

“I did.” She settles onto the kitchen stool opposite him. There is something about his deliberate posture and careful tone that makes her think he has been rehearsing what he proceeds to tell her:

“I am not quite sure how to explain to you… how to explain my motivations in doing so. I think, first, I need to explain, that through your work, I have explored the recesses of your mind for years. I have watched you cogitate upon the strangest minutiae, I have seen you make conceptual advances that completely stagger others in the field. I have made a game of anticipating what you will think next. I have delighted in the products of your intellect.”
“That is incredibly flattering, I’m... I’m literally overwhelmed.”

“No, you misunderstand me. What I mean to say is, I know you, or parts of you, at least. You have already shared with me so many brilliant facets of yourself – but all unknowing. If we are to be on any honest footing, recompense is required. But I have nothing to give back to you. I cannot offer you such magnificent gems in return, only dirt and ashes, only the petty minutiae of who I am. It is a poor exchange. I am sorry for it.”

“But Severus!” She grasps his forearms, and silently wills him to meet her gaze. “How can you be so blind? How can you not see that everything I am, all the brilliance you cite — it’s down to your own influence?”

He shakes his head dismissively. “A few comments? Pointing you towards pertinent portions of the primary literature? Anyone could have done.”

“No. That’s not what I mean. The books. Your library. You gave me your library.” He still doesn’t seem to be getting the point; there is confusion writ in the angle of his lips, and self-deprecation in the arch of his brow. She tries again: “I took that to mean that you had faith in me, that you expected things of me. It was... I can’t begin to tell you, how much it has meant, to believe that someone I respected and admired thought that I had worth, that I could do something valuable with my life. There are no debts between us, Severus Snape, because you gave me the courage to try in the first place.”

He pulls his hands back, dislodging hers upon his forearms, but it’s only a readjustment: he folds her hands within his own, instead. His fingers don’t restrain hers — beyond one quick squeeze, his grip is gentle. She is free to pull away.

“I was not unique in that, Hermione. Everyone thought well of you; I don’t think there was a single member of the Staff who didn’t believe the sun and moon set on your shoulders.”

She realises that this is the first time he has directly used her name in conversation with her. Her heart skips a beat. It seems not to have been a conscious decision. Perhaps that is even more cause for jubilation? But she has to address what he’s told her, because she knows. She has always known. But it didn’t matter then, and he needs to understand that. “But I didn’t matter. Not then, after the war, I mean. Harry practically died – he thinks he did die. Ron and his family were grieving. And then there was me. I was just... Just Hermione Granger. Harry and Ron were all I had, and I didn’t have them, either.”

His fingers tighten on hers again, just for a moment. “I know what loneliness is like,” he offers.

“I know,” she whispers with a nod. “I was broken there, for a while. When it was finally over, it was like any direction I’d had for the past several years of my life, it was just gone. And there was no one to talk to. I went for a lot of long walks, during that time. Out in the country beyond the Burrow. Alone. I would ask, sometimes, but no one ever expressed any inclination to join me.” She makes a conscious effort to relax the furrow that has creased her brow. It’s a grimace against pain and a sense of her own inferiority, her worthlessness; she is uncomfortable with him seeing how much this still hurts.

His thumbs are gently rubbing the palms of her hands, now. The motion is slow, not unlike the way he’d pressed them into the balls of her feet, earlier.

“Your library changed that, the way I was then. Do you know—it was actually seeing a piece of parchment, scrap I think, tucked in one of them. Moste Potente Potions. You had some of my protein threshold equations written on it.”
“I—I remember.” He is looking away from her. Why? Perhaps he is trying to find that memory?
“I remember checking your derivations.”

“It reminded me. Reminded me of … this is trite, but— of better times, times when I took joy in
things, when it was about solving puzzles, when I could be clever just for the sake of it, and not
because someone was depending upon me.”

“That much I’m glad for, then.”

“You led me back to myself. However unknowing, however inadvertently. So I mean it: there are
no debts. And—” she squeezes his hands back, hard. “I know your mind as well as you know
mine. Your books — you gave me that, too. You gave me all your notes, all your experiments. I
mean, even that sheaf of papers you mailed — which reminds me, I should make you repair your
own lab books, although I suppose I’ll be stuck doing it, once I’ve got a wand back. But even
those papers: I was absolutely certain I could decipher them, because I knew the way you thought.
Reading them over, I even thought I could sense your despair, how frightened and alone you must
have been, she finishes in a whisper. She has been shifting her hands free of the embrace they are
conducting across the smooth wood of the island, and now she closes both over his left, and turns
it, palm up. She traces his tendons, down from his thumb, to settle her fingers over the black ink
that still stains his arm.

Seconds tick by, an eternity, in which they are trapped in each other’s eyes. Then, in one fluid
burst of startling motion, he pulls free of her.

Dismay: cascading, crushing.

But then he is standing in front of her, his hands on her shoulders pulling her to her feet, his lips
descending upon her. And she is lost, subsumed in the heat of his mouth, overwritten by the
obscure language his insistent hands etch into the muscles of her back. She presses herself close
against his body, as if she can sink inside his skin if only she tries hard enough.

She isn’t entirely certain how they arrive upon the sofa. There is locomotion involved, and she is
aware of pulling him down atop her, of his wrestling the tangle of quilts aside, as his knees knock
against hers. “Sorry,” he gasps between kisses. It’s too awkward in these narrow confines; she
scissors a leg up over his hip, so that they are lying on their sides, face to face. With their torsos
tucked so closely, she can feel the firm pressure of his erection against her stomach.

Yet his caresses are becoming slower, more languorous. He’s taking his time now, gentling his
lips upon hers. For long moments, he pauses to study her face, as if planning where to place his
lips or his fingertips next. She finds herself mirroring the delicacy of his gestures, savouring the
texture of his stubble, the softness of his hair, and delighting in the way he shudders as she draws
her teeth over his lower lip. She wants him, but there’s no great urgency.

His touch never strays beneath her collarbone, but when he traces its curve from shoulder to
midline, she feels as if she is burning. When he explores the hollows of her neck with his lips, she
quivers and can breathe only in shuddering gasps. And when he props himself on an elbow, and
surveys the contours of her face with fingertips that barely skim the surface of her features, she
experiences it as something holy, as if she is the subject of not only devotion, but profound
veneration.

She is only vaguely aware of the passage of time, and suspects she has been slipping out of
consciousness when his hands cease their memorization of her geography. “I should leave you to
get some sleep,” he breathes more than whispers.
She rouses herself to meet his lips again with a smile. “Is this how you say good night to all of your friends, then?” she chides.

“No. I… I didn’t plan this. If that’s what you’re asking. I am not entirely certain…”

“You don’t need to be entirely certain.” She can hear a new hesitancy, can see that there is a wrinkle in his brow. This wasn’t what she intended at all, she’d wanted him to lead her up to his bed, to explore the remainder of her body. “There’s no right way to do this.”

“Then there are no wrong ways, either. That is some relief.” His quiet words are wry, but she thinks maybe there is gentle humour lurking there as well. But still, he nudges her leg up, and they shuffle into seated positions. He keeps an arm around her, though, low at her waist and with his hand resting innocuously on her midriff. With the slight pressure of his index he tilts her jaw up, and she succumbs to his kiss once more.

“I shouldn’t keep forcing myself upon you like this,” he murmurs against her mouth, “But you could come with me. Tomorrow, or later today, rather.”

“Then Northumberland?”

He releases her now, and clasps his hands in his lap. “I recognize it’s awkward, my asking. But I wouldn’t mind the company.”

“Three days?” Three days in which all manner of things could happen, if tonight is any indication. To hell with Dawlings, she’ll send the owl Wednesday if she must. That will be early enough, surely.

“Forget it, it’s daft. It’s an awful position to put you in, I hadn’t any right, not at this juncture, anyway.”

“Severus. I was only asking to clarify the timeline. Don’t over-interpret my words. I’d quite like to go on holiday with you, I think. Friends should do that, shouldn’t they?”

“Friends. Heh. I don’t know if we’re friends.”

“Well, then whatever we are. Do we need a label? Because I could find a thesaurus. If you like.”

This actually earns a weak chuckle. “Argh, it’s just… it’s too intimate a thing I’ve asked, and what’s worse is I knew it before I said anything. Can we just pretend I’ve wandlessly obliviated you and we’ll start over again right here?” He presses his lips back to hers, in a quick parody of his earlier motions.

She laughs, and pushes him off. “I thought you said you knew me. Then you should know I’m tenacious. What is so terribly intimate about a holiday to Northumberland, of all places?”

“Oh, I know, I’m being silly. In addition to stubborn. A business trip, then.”

“Nor one of those.”

“I shall warn you now, my arsenal of investigative tactics includes snogging you senseless and refusing to let you up for air unless you agree to explain yourself fully.”

He sighs good-naturedly, and rakes his hair back with both hands. “On your own head then. How
would you like to come with me up to the border, and meet my mother?”

Chapter End Notes

First things first: if you choose to leave me any thoughts, thank you! Secondly, you should not expect a response to comments until Sunday — I’m going to [try to] save any comments this elicits as a birthday treat for myself. Thanks for reading!
Things look different in the daylight.

Sunbeams falling through the skylights are warming her quilt and caressing her face, and the scent of fresh coffee tickles at her nose. She stretches, cat-like, and works the kinks from her shoulders as she rises. Severus, of course, is already up. He’s seated at the island, a mug of coffee in one hand and a newspaper spread before him. His brows raise, a complementary quirk to his quiet greeting: “Good morning.”

“Morning,” she returns, before ducking down the hall to his loo. A glimpse in the mirror assures her she’s correct in not lingering just yet. Fright show. Her stomach clenches at the thought that her hair was probably just as bad, earlier. Well, if it was, it hadn’t stopped him kissing her. She stares at her face, and wonders if there’s anything different. She still looks like Hermione Granger. She does not look like someone who would kiss Professor Snape. And she does not look like someone Professor Snape would ever want to kiss in the first place.

But then, Professor Snape died in the Shrieking Shack.

And maybe outward appearances aren’t the important thing, here. Perhaps she is precisely the sort of person that Severus would kiss, and who would kiss Severus back. With tongues, no less. And nibbles. And those soft flutters of his lips and breath against her skin, a melody of desire performed in counterpoint to delicate patterns that his fingertips wrote in her flesh.

Lord, what would Harry say if he knew? Or Ginny, Neville? Ronald.

Fucking Ronald.

The warm little glow that has been kindling beneath her breastbone splutters, and is extinguished in the cold reminder of her husband’s …betrayal? The word doesn’t encompass enough territory. Treachery. That one’s a little closer, she thinks. Who is served, in this game he’s apparently playing? Does he hate her so much, that he needs to see her ground into the dirt? Or is this some idiot plot, an attempt to strong-arm her into …into what? Her imagination supplies half a dozen scenarios, but the one that seems hideously possible is a show of faux-gallant grandstanding, an offer to withdraw his accusations, if only she returns under his terms. Scare her into the wifely mold she would never otherwise occupy. Marital warfare, culminating in unequal treaties. But no, surely that’s too subtle and Machiavellian, too much at odds with his tendency towards petty jealousies and temper tantrums.

She thinks of his petulant silences. She thinks of the way his eyes had snapped fire, and his teeth had ground. For endless months, it seemed, after he’d found her huddled bloody and groaning against the ineffectual spasms rocking her body. I need St Mungos’, she’d told him, as cold chills of nausea or terror thrilled down her spine. He hadn’t said anything. Not then. Not until the very end.

Would things have been different if he had?

Perhaps she would have left, on her own terms. Years earlier. Why had she stayed? Because it was expected? Because it was easy? Because she was trying to make the best of things? All of these are reasons. And because she thought she owed it to him. This is also true.

There’s a stack of towels and flannels; she helps herself to one of each, and notes in passing that
Severus has hung his own to dry. Crikey, how long has he been awake? It’s only half-past six, now. She scrubs up perfunctorily, and borrows his comb, too. Lucky she has hairpins – binding it back up in a sloppy knot achieves something passable, if not wholly attractive. What’s next on the agenda?

Coffee. He pours her some when she returns to the kitchen, and she settles opposite, in what she decides is her place in his kitchen. She studies him surreptitiously, over the rim of her mug. He looks haggard, more worn than she has become used to seeing his visage. Quite like he did at Hogwarts, really. “Did you not sleep well?”

“Mmm? Oh, tolerably. Well, no, not much at all. If I’m honest. Though you needn’t concern yourself over it; I expect I’ll get caught up on the train.”

“I’ll make sure to bring a book, then.” She tries to smile gently, to communicate some of what she’s feeling without burdening the space between them with words that can only be imprecise.

But he’s barely looking at her, so the expression is wasted. Instead, he’s studying his hands or the mug they’re gripping, and his tone is supremely nonchalant. “You do know, you’re not in any way obligated to come. If you’ve had second thoughts.”

Bollocks to him, she’s already made up her mind. “Well that’s just silly, Severus.” It feels wicked to use his first name; she quite likes it. “How am I supposed to keep you company, if I don’t come along with you?”

“There is that.” He tilts her a tiny smile, which she reads as embarrassed gratitude. “Can I interest you in breakfast?”

“Sure. Though, I will have to stop home and pack some things, but that won’t take long.” She is suddenly uneasy. Maybe she has been misinterpreting things. Maybe he was trying to disinvite her?

He rattles up a skillet. “There’s plenty of time. And don’t worry about the ticketing, I’ll get it sorted for you. We’ll leave King’s Cross half after noon, erm,” he pauses to consult a ticket pinned to the refrigerator, and then retrieves a carton of eggs, “Platform 2. It’s the direct to Newcastle; I usually hire a car there, and drive the remainder.”

Relief. “You’re rather good at being a Muggle, aren’t you? Frankly, it’s depressing.”

“Because you aren’t? Know-it-all Granger never learned to drive?” His expression is so bland he could be made of wax.

She gives his eyebrows a long, suspicious look. They are just a bit too high, aren’t they? “Is that my title, in your head? No, ‘though Dad did try to teach me. I can keep a vehicle on the road. At slow speeds.”

“That’s how you start.”

She notices that he is leaving his ‘know-it-all’ crack alone. It’s probably for the best, although she does wonder at what point she became kissable, instead of just a nuisance. Should she ask him? Or save something to talk about on the train, once they can no longer escape each other. She is half-afraid that this tentative camaraderie cannot last. “What should I do to help?”

“Can you operate a toaster? It’s this fascinating Muggle technology that crisps bread between two ranks of hot wire.”
“Oh, you’re a riot.” She sets her coffee aside and proceeds to demonstrate that she is well versed in the subtle science and exact art of perfectly toasting slices of whole grain bread. “I’m actually fairly terrible at cooking with magic,” she informs him. “My mind wanders. Which is fine when you’re doing it the Muggle way.”

“It’s actually a decided benefit of the process, daydreaming.” He tips two fried eggs onto either of their plates; she adds toast while he freshens their coffee, and they reconvene at the island.

This is becoming alarmingly domestic, alarmingly fast. A memory falls into her head, between a bite of toast and a sip of coffee: Ronald and George, running sarcastic commentary behind Harry’s back, during one of his campaigns to get even a non-magical portrait of Headmaster Snape installed up at Hogwarts. “Imagine that mug, glaring down at you all day” and “No wonder Harry’s mum scarpered, she probably realized she’d never be able to eat breakfast again if she wound up doing it across from that.”

For her own part, she thinks having breakfast across from Severus Snape is a surprisingly pleasant experience. He has quiet table manners, and doesn’t pester her with Quidditch scores, which puts him leagues ahead of the other fellow she once routinely shared her mornings with. And he cooks.

“I was under the impression breakfasts here were limited to porridge,” she teases as she mops the last of her egg yolk.

“I refer you to my comments of last night: I was trying to get rid of her.”

“Can I ask about that?”

“There’s not much to tell. She and Martin were spatting about something. I try not to get involved in the sundry romantic dramas that play out next door. Healthier, that way.”

“I see. Well, I appreciate breakfast, in any event. I’d sort of fallen out of the habit.”

“Out of the habit? Of eating breakfast, you mean?”

“Yes. Usually I’ll just fix tea, then grab a scone towards noon.”

“Habit. Breakfast is a necessity, not a habit, Ms. Granger.”

“I thought I was Hermione, now.”

“Not when you’re being foolish. How do you expect your brain to function, without glucose?”

“So that’s why you always skived off breakfast in the Great Hall, Professor?”

“Dulled mental faculties made you lot bearable, yes.” He glowers into his mug, but she can see he’s fighting back a twitchy smirk. “Well, and also: I could barely face twenty students in the mornings, let alone a horde of several hundred.”

She nods in appreciation, and drains her mug. It’s surreal, this. He’s Professor Snape, who detested having to teach them, and Severus, who tends plants in the middle of the night, and whose mouth she’s stuck her tongue in. Severus, who not only has an Uncle Tibs, but a mother that he’s invited her to meet. She wants to ask, what’s the catch? Because of course there will be one. “So, twelve-thirty, then?”

“King’s Cross, Platform 2. I’ll get your ticket,” he reiterates as he stands, stretches. “I suppose I’d best get on with the watering.”
She leaves him filling a watering canister at the kitchen sink, and heads out through the Sunday morning fog and drizzle. If she doesn’t get fouled up with the changes, she thinks that she can make it to Diagon Alley and send that owl, with enough time to get a shower in at home before packing. She’s studying the Tube map, when Maddie O’Shea flops down on the transit bench beside her.

“Hullo, then! You’re back in our end of town.”

“Evidently.”

Maddie snickers. “And that attitude’s catching, I see. Tell me, is it transmitted in the usual way?”

Hah. Instead of rising to this bait, she asks: “What do I owe you for the cab, night before last?”

“Not a bob; Snape’s already paid us back.”

“Well, then I still owe you thanks. You and Cathy. I’m sorry for having put you out.”

“Eh, what’re mates for?” Maddie takes a long swallow from her paper coffee cup, and checks the arrivals estimate. “So… You’re out early.”

Is she angling for a spot of gossip? She seems the type. “So are you.”

“Eh, I was down surveying the damage. To Meenal’s pussy. Some arsehole’s shoved rebar right through it.”

That cannot possibly mean what it sounds like. “Erm, sorry?”

“It’s a performative piece. This huge papier mâché vulva.”

Oh, she remembers that. It had light emitting diodes. She nods for Maddie to continue.

“We brought it out to the demo. Gender violence.” She slurps her coffee again. “The idea was, or is, rather, to visually link it to a collective assertion of female empowerment. And then walk away, and see what happens. We’re photographing what people do to it. Or Val is. He’s got this amazing setup, like with the cameras they use for wildlife surveys. Meenal and I are going to pair it with high-def colour shots of all the damage. I’m thinking ’Pussy Trap’. For the title. It works on a lot of levels.”

“That sounds… interesting.”

“Pfft. If by ‘interesting’ you mean short-lived. I doubt it’ll even last the week. She should’ve had the frame welded, because it’s going to be completely trashed by next Saturday. Art’s fleeting, but it’d be better to have a diverse spectrum of interactions with it. And if we re-do it, then it’s like, I don’t know, more like a corporate street installation. Obviously purposeful, obviously intentioned. And therefore soulless. And it’s not art if it’s just a rendition of the original idea. Context matters, I keep telling them that.” She bins her coffee cup.

A bedraggled looking blond boy, in an outsized, torn jumper, has been eyeing them from across the platform. Instead of ignoring him, as Hermione has been studiously attempting to do, Maddie lifts a hand in a lazy wave. “Hey,” she calls.

He approaches until he can lean against the rubbish bin, eyes narrowed. “Hey. You that dyke, what’s friends with Snape?”
“Dyke’s a little categorical, but sure, why not.”

“Ain’t seen him around much.”

“I think he’s got a new hobby.” Maddie has glanced over at her out the corner of her eye, and smirks evilly. Thankfully, this is the extent of her expansion on the topic.

“Yeah, well. That sucks.”

“You doing alright?”

“Yeah. Fuck yeah. None of your business.” He’s on the defensive now.

Maddie’s pose becomes more insouciant than ever, in response. “Which one are you?” she asks, indifferently.

“What’s it to you?”

“Maybe I’m a connoisseur.” She is doing everything to project disinterest with her body language except examining her nails.

“That French for corporate twat?”

This finally gets a rise: “Nah, that’s French for ‘knows how to write arts grants’, arsehole.”

“Yeah, corporate twat. Like I said.”

“Sure, alright. Where’s your stuff at?”

“Vittoria Wharf, mostly. I’m Scymo.”

She grins outright, and sits up. “Oh yeah! The murder crow, that’s yours, right? I like that.”

He seems to puff up a little. “I’m thinking of doing another. Someplace high-risk.”

“Make sure you got lookouts you can trust, then.”

“I think I know the territory better’n you.”

“For sure”, she says agreeably. “In the meantime, I’m thinking someone should give Lord Napier over there a facelift. The place needs something new.”

“It’s staked. For Hackney Wicked.”

“Fuck that. You’re going to let someone tell you when you can art? Next it’ll be where.”

“Says you. We ain’t allowed to tag yer beehive.” The boy’s eyes are narrowed again.

“Fuck it, go ahead. But you know the cash will dry up if you do. That’s nothing to do with art, that’s business. Transactional.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He turns to look again at the building she indicated. “Maybe. I’d need more red, though.”

“You want a loan?”

“I don’t take money off corporate twats.”
“Snapey’s a corporate twat himself. He’s a landlord: he takes my money, he gives it to you. How ‘bout you take my money, I get reimbursed from him?”

“Yeah, maybe. Why you puttin’ yerself out?”

“For art, fuckhead. I like your crows. Here.” She extends a handful of notes.

He looks around, takes them, and disappears them into his pocket. “Not saying I’m gonna do it.”

“Nah, whatever. Just follow the rules.”

“Yeah. Half to food, no drugs, don’t tag the Hive. Later, bitch.” He slouches off at a fast walk, across the pedestrian bridge. Hermione loses sight of him as he jostles past an arriving crowd.

Is it darkly amusing, or a little horrifying, that Severus Snape appears to be a patron of graffiti artists? How does this fit in, she wonders, with the strict disciplinarian who had spy rings running through Slytherin House, who skulked about in the nights, alert to the faintest rustle of invisibility cloaked Gryffindors out of bed? Does he rebel against his past self? Or is it something else? Maybe, God, is it possible? Do his tastes run to the exuberant macabre monstrosities that line the streets of Hackney Wick? That can’t be it, surely – his home is so minimalist, so precise. In ways, the tangle of greenery that infiltrates his space is deceptive: it’s life, yes, but controlled, manipulated. She’s seen the stakes his plants are trained against, seen the cord and wire that guide their forms. The aesthetic he lives in has more in common with the detailed deliberation that’s apparent in his mother’s paintings. So why? “I take it Severus is financially supporting at least some of this.” She gestures out to the garishly decorated buildings. “Why, do you suppose?”

“Dunno. Ask him sometime. He told me that he thought there was a type, that needed something to belong to, and better they belong to themselves. Better than gangs, I suppose. We had one of ’em, a while ago. At the Hive. He started doing commercial work, commissions. There’s a good one, a café, on the other end of Fish Island. I’ll show you sometime, if you’re going to be hanging about.”

Will she be ‘hanging about’? She can’t begin to imagine where this might go, with Severus. For all that she thinks she knows him, she realizes again that what she knows are the twists and turns of his intellect, and that what they share are their pasts. And only a small slice of that, six or seven years, depending how you reckon it. That’s nothing. Nothing compared to the separate decades in which they have been and have become wholly different people. Within seven years, most of the cells in your body have replaced themselves. They are quite literally not the same people they once were.

Maybe… maybe compatible people, though. If those midnight kisses are anything to go by. Their brains are compatible, at least. And brain cells don’t get replaced.

Another thought strikes her, as she boards her train. She might not have a choice. If staying in the Wizarding world means striking some compromise with Ronald, or with the rest of the Weasleys, who might defuse him… It’s obvious which way she’ll leap. Yes, she can now levitate an object without a wand, but that’s not enough to keep body and soul together. She thinks of the Dementors, and revises her inner monologue. It’s not enough to keep herself fed and housed. She doesn’t have translatable skills. Without her pension, traits will be dire.

So what is she doing, in taking a trip to Northumberland, with Severus Snape of all people? Meeting his mother, ostensibly. Whatever this might entail, it’s surely more than a social visit on the part of a dutiful son, else why would he want company? He’d made himself vulnerable in that moment, she’s certain of it. It must be something to do with Roz’s catalogues. She nearly misses
the stop for her changeover, so engrossed has she become in trying to reconstruct the conversation she’d walked in on last evening. She wishes she’d paid more attention.

But it doesn’t really matter, does it? She’ll find out soon enough. She stares blankly out the window of the train into the darkness of London’s underbelly, nearly hypnotized by the staccato bursts of light in their regular intervals along the track. Maybe she should nip this in the bud, before it gets too large and sprawling, before she does find out. Before she sees any more of him laid bare. Before she accepts more of him than his lips and fingertips.

Lips and fingertips, or even some other parts of his anatomy, are not good enough reasons to embrace what Ronald is planning for her. She belongs here, she thinks, as she crosses the threshold of the Leaky. Not on a sofa, or even in a bed, in Hackney Wick. She does not subscribe to his nihilist philosophy of mere existence, she decides. All of the work she’s done, all of the papers she’s written, the theories she’s poked and prodded into shape – surely some small part of that was for herself, as well? It can’t all have been a silent gift to a dead man. Especially as she is no longer certain if she ever truly believed him dead or alive. The postcard existed, yes. But why had she given up looking? Why default to spinning theories and cooking Ronald’s dinner? It can’t all have been guilt and self-loathing.

“Hullo, Hannah. Could you see me through the arch? I’ve gone and lost my wand.”

“That’s awful – but it’s Sunday, you know, Ollivander’s won’t be open.”

“I know, I need the post. I’ll be back later this week for Ollivander’s.”

“Oh, I suppose you know how to manage as a Muggle. Gosh, I’d be so lost!”

Yes, well. Just because she can manage, does not mean that she is not lost. She pens a note to Dawlings, and nods, yes, she understands that it won’t be mailed until tomorrow. She includes in her envelope the Ministry note she’d received; it identifies Ronald’s lawyer as Blackwell, and surely that’s all Dawlings will need to proceed to whatever the next steps might be. She re-opens her missive at the last moment, to postscript that she will be out of contact until Wednesday morning. Because damn it, she’d made up her mind. And whatever this really is, he’d asked her to come, and she’d said she would. Her word must mean something, because it’s all she really has, anymore.

She buys condoms, on her way back to her flat.

Because she has her body, too.

Even if—even if she does ultimately abandon him to his plants and his novels and the ridiculous artists in his ant farm. Even if. That is all still in the future, and the future is unwritten, and therefore not reality, and no good reason to ignore reality. And besides, he’s a Slytherin; surely he will understand self-interest. Because her self is very much interested in becoming intimately acquainted with his self.

Her shower takes her rather longer than she’d anticipated: her fingers have gone roaming while her mind replays the sensation of his hands in her hair, his lips on hers, the hot bulge of his cock right there, and wouldn’t she have rather had it there, or better yet…

She holds off just short of completion. She wants to draw this longing out, she wants to finally achieve relief beneath his body, with his hair falling into her face. So instead, she picks up a razor, and carefully attends to her legs. Good thing last night had been only prelude, she’s all over stubble even though she’d charmed them bare for what she thought was a date with Ronald.
Urgh, and remembering *that* is like a bucket of ice water. Would she really have welcomed him, inside of her? That’s a stupid question; she knows she would have done. She always has. How can things have changed so much in only a couple days? Although, it’s true that it is only her perceptions that have changed – Severus had never been shagging Maddie, and Ronald had no desire to shag *her*.

Her brain is not a reliable judge of reality, she concludes as she towels off. Perhaps she ought to pay less attention to it.
She doesn’t know what to pack, she realises. Fortunately, her satchel has an extendable charm on it, so she is able to dump in most of her belongings, though she does first remove the bag of dirt and clay pot Severus had given her. Packing is done in a trice; she’ll figure out what’s appropriate once she sees what Severus opts for. She assumes Muggle dress will be called for, but at the last moment shoves in a bog-standard black robe, too. Just in case. What does she know about Eileen Prince? Nothing useful, that’s for certain. There was only so much she could glean from the announcements page in the *Prophet*, and Severus has told her… everything. And nothing at all, really.

She dampens the soil in Plant’s pot, and decides she has enough time to pot up Mini-Plant. “There you are, friend. I’m leaving, but just for a couple days. Going up north with Severus. I suppose you don’t know who he is. The fellow who came ‘round yesterday. He gave me this pot, for you. Hah, now you look stupendously cheerful indeed! Lovely. Have fun, you two. Photosynthesize, rejoice – it’s springtime, or nearly so!”

By the arrivals board at King’s Cross, it looks as though Severus is right about the platform. She finds him with his nose in a book, once she picks her way through the crowds. She feels a little less badly about the reprints she retrieved from the post, on her way out. If he’s brought a book, he can’t fault her for being bad company on account of bringing work. “What’re you reading, then? And would you like lunch, on me?”

“I brought sandwiches, actually. ‘Though you needn’t partake if you’d rather something else.”

“Sandwiches are fine,” she hastens to reassure him. More domesticity. It’s a bit frightening that she wants to give him a hug, for being baseline competent in ways that other males of her experience rarely managed.

“As to what I’m reading, I think it’s science fiction, although it has got elves. Sort of. Magically-inclined Mafia elves. And a flying lizard that’s not a dragon.”

“That’s odd, but elves makes it fantasy, no? I shouldn’t think you’d find them in science fiction.”

“Depends. Sometimes it gets stamped with ‘fantasy’, but the characters are actually just inhabiting an alien society. Clarke’s dictum: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

She puzzles this over for a moment, and thinks she understands what he means. Take mobile phones, for instance. Patroni and owls are practically inferior, in comparison. “Do you think,” she says in all seriousness, “That it holds for us? Is magic maybe a sufficiently advanced technology?”

“Gifted unto us by alien forefathers, or some such? I don’t know. Part of me would like to think so. Because technology can be reverse-engineered; you can figure out how something has been done. And undo it, sometimes.”

While she is considering this, he extracts her ticket, and passes it across to her. “There’s a hitch in the plan, though. Where I booked in to stay, they haven’t got anything separate. With separate beds, I mean. I called immediately I thought of it, but nothing doing. So if you’d rather not…”

Oh. So they’re not staying over with his mother? “That’s no problem, I neither kick nor snore, and I suppose you can trust me to keep my hands to myself.” Hah. He shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t.
“Well, likewise, I’m sure.” Bless, he’s blushing again. “It’s just, er, I didn’t want to suggest, erm, a lack of propriety and—”

She leans over and silences him rather thoroughly. This is starting off well; he even drops his book and loses his page. “Sorry,” she says, completely unapologetic.

“I hardly think King’s Cross is—”

“Probably not. You’ll note I’m sitting all the way over here now.” She crosses her legs, and smiles innocently. His scowl is more discomfited than upset, she judges, so she continues with an air of demure reflectiveness: “Although it would give us something to do, en route. Conversation is apt to be problematic, as I can’t imagine we’ll manage a privacy spell without tipping someone off.”

He rolls his eyes. “There are mundane things to talk about.”

The arrival of their train interrupts his explanation of this outré notion. “Not much like the Express, is it?” she observes, as she seats herself by the window. He’d gestured for her to do so, with a muttered aside about the probability of his falling asleep. But he doesn’t appear in imminent danger of drifting off, as they are whisked through London. “So what did you have in mind, then, to talk about?”

He almost seems taken aback. Damn it, is she being annoying again? She’d been aiming for effervescent, for cheerful. “I don’t know,” he says, “Books? No, wait, I’ve got an idea. What’s your favourite colour?”


“Gem colours, then.”

“Yes! Yes, exactly.”

“Well, and if you had to choose one?”

“Oh, but I can’t! Blue maybe. Although apparently I can’t wear it, so one presumes I shouldn’t be in a room full of it, either.”

“I don’t see why not. Ultramarine, something shocking and splendid. Although that Tyrian purple you wore Friday — that was quite becoming.” The tilt of his head and the intent way he regards her, more than his words alone, sends little shivers cascading down through her stomach, pooling hot between her thighs.

She needs a moment to recover her composure, so she deflects: “And yours? Your favourite colour?”

“Hmm. Earthier tones, perhaps. Gunmetal blues and pale woads. Sorrowful autumn skies. Although, no! You’re going to insist I pick one, so black. Because it’s all colours, together.”

“And it’s properly menacing,” she agrees with a grin.

“That too. Strike fear into the hearts of those who failed to finish their homeworks.” He smiles beatifically.

She nods, mock-sagely. “I always suspected as much.”
By the time he does nod off, she has learned: that he firmly believes there are such things as right and left socks; that he hasn’t decided on a favourite author; that he grew up on a diet of penny dreadful science fiction (which explains rather a lot); that his favourite time of day is sunset; that he likes his ferns better than his orchids, but she must never let that on, else they’ll riot and refuse to bloom in sheer indignation; that his birthday is the ninth of January, and yes, it’s too late to give him a card or cake, and completely unnecessary; that his favourite jam is raspberry; that he enjoys trying new cuisines, although he doesn’t think much of American fare – if you want greasy chips, Ms. Granger, they should be accompanied by cod, it’s only decent; that yes, his sundry tees are mostly left over from a misspent youth, though he’d gotten them in charity bins and not at concerts; and that he once created a drinking game to get him through marking their papers. “Not mine, surely?” she asks, but he’s either finally ignoring her or fallen asleep.

By Newcastle, his head has lolled onto her shoulder. She amuses herself smelling his hair, as she fails utterly to focus on the reprint she’s decidedly not reading. His eyelashes are so long. She’s entranced by them, and by the way his face has smoothed out in slumber, age and cares falling away in dreams.

But every journey ends, and as a droll voice announces Newcastle, he shakes himself awake. “Sorry, I expect I was sleeping on you.”

“I’ll make sure to return the favour,” she promises, with what she hopes is a coy smirk. Those points of colour are back in his cheeks, but he doesn’t respond to this directly, just bites his lower lip and rolls his eyes, fetches his luggage, and leads on to the rental agency, where he retrieves the car he’s hired.

Rain starts lashing down, as Newcastle gives way to tidy farms and stone walls, sheepfolds and heavy hedgerows of winter-brown gorse. There won’t be any sunsets tonight. Is it the time of day, she is about to ask him, or the setting sun in particular that he enjoys?

But before she can satisfy her curiosity about this crucial clarification, he drops an apparent non-sequitur into their mutual silence: “I never did introduce Lily to my mother. She asked, wanted to meet a proper witch, she said. But Mam wasn’t, wasn’t. Not even then.”

Oh. What does this mean, then, that she has been invited? But what she asks him is “What constitutes a proper witch?” When Ronald had used that phrase, he’d meant kitted out like a pureblood, and laden with sprogs.

“Well, using magic, to begin with. She rarely did. There were charms on the cooker, and the like, but she rarely performed any spells, and then only wandlessly.”

“Is it… impolite to ask why?”

“No, I suppose not. In large part, it was a repudiation of the Wizarding world. And, I eventually discovered, a practical lesson in subterfuge, that to my credit I absorbed fairly well.”

Right. That doesn’t tell her anything at all, does it? Should she pry? Can she perhaps not pry?

But he’s continuing anyway: “I don’t know everything that happened. But what I do know, is that it was important to her, to accomplish her work entirely through her own agency. I don’t pretend to understand artists in general, nor painters in particular. But she had a dread of magic touching her work. She took pains that every aspect of it came entirely from within her, or by her mundane agency, and in that way owned it utterly. Which has always made me wonder where she thought magic originated, if indeed she perceived it as something not wholly contained within oneself.”
She tries to imagine the pale, dour-faced girl from the photograph, hunched over a painting in the poor light of the musty sitting room from which she’d collected his library. Maybe she would have worked in the kitchen, instead. “Did you always live at Spinner’s End?”

“Yes. So it was easy enough to put Lily off. It was no good address; her parents would hardly have approved. And I could always tell her Tobias was about, ‘though he mostly wasn’t, by the time we were friends. The details were accurate enough, even if they were conveyed in a temporally imprecise fashion.”

So. He hadn’t allowed Lily as much access to the core of his identity as she’d assumed. He’d been constructing selves within selves even as a child. Who is the real Severus Snape, and how would she even tell? Just accept the surfaces he offers as the reality of him, or keep mining down, in the hopes that there’s some solid, inalienable truth at his core? “You didn’t really grow up with magic, then.”

“Not much of it. Although I had her old schoolbooks. And she did give me a copy of *Hogwarts, A History.*”

She beams outright. “Hah! I am fulfilled, finally someone else who’s read it!”

He gives her a sly smile. “The fellowship of the swots. Although I can’t say as it really prepares you for the reality of Hogwarts.”

“No, not as such.” She thinks about her friendless beginnings there, how she’d alienated everyone except poor Neville, who she suspected had only clung to her because she was a useful shield in Potions class. Was it just as bad for Severus? He’d had a friend in Lily, but they’d been sorted to different houses. “You said, the other day, that Lily was a link to your past.”

He nods, slowly. “She knew parts of me that no one else did, by then. So losing her was losing the reality of those things.”

“But you knew. Your past, and who you were.”

“All too well. Who I was, and the things I’d done. Maybe it’s that she knew a more innocent version of me. Maybe it’s that I convinced myself she would have been willing to believe that version of me had ever existed at all. Surely no one else could have, not by then. I don’t think even I did, not really.”

They are trending into deep waters, now. It wasn’t quite what she’d had in mind; she doesn’t want him bleak and discouraged. “Dumbledore did. He knew you were a good person.”

“Yes. Or he led me to believe he thought that, at least a little. I am still sick, sometimes, thinking that perhaps it was all cold utilization of my need to believe it of him, and my desire to do penance. But during that time, after the first war, I accepted of him that he saw enough worth in me that I could atone. Can you hope to achieve goodness, if no one believes you capable of it? I thought he had faith in me. I would have done — did do — everything he asked of me. Because I thought he could bestow worth, forgiveness, absolution. In the end? None of that. Only a sense of futility, and pain. So what am I, in the end?” There is a deep chasm in his quiet voice: hollowness, emptiness, and darkness that will consume them utterly.

“Severus. You’re just Severus. Just like I’m only Hermione. Just people. People are messy; we’re not entirely one thing or another.”

He nods again, ever so minutely. Quiet countryside miles slip away beyond the rhythmic swish of
the windscreen wipers. “Talking to you is rather terrifying,” he finally offers.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know what you’re going to say in return. Imaginary friends have the advantage of being predictable, where real ones aren’t.”

“Well, but that’s actually the perk. Of real ones.” Had he made an imaginary friend of her, gleaning facets of her personality from between lines of type, the way she’d made of him an imaginary mentor, first, and then a lover? “The other perk is that the real ones are a little more solid.” She reaches across to touch his forearm.

He smiles, finally, and his eyebrows relax. “Yes, there’s that.” He gives her hand a gentle squeeze before returning his own to the wheel.

She thinks the rain might be easing off, as their headlamps begin to compete with the lights of a town called Wooler. He doesn’t have to consult a map, just makes a series of casual turns, until they are coasting up to a large property of hewn stone, with a neat sign advertising itself as the Bridge-End Arms.

It turns out to be a bed and breakfast; after showing them to their well-appointed room, which is a frankly regal masterpiece of lush plum and satiny dark wood, their hostess smiles warmly and invites them to take a late tea. Severus asks the weather forecast (‘breaking overnight’), and receives a rundown of local politics alongside. Apparently he is regular enough that he could be expected to care about this. When he finally gets another sentence in edgewise, he uses the space to introduce Hermione as his friend. She isn’t the only one who hears the italics, but their hostess isn’t the least bit fazed, just takes it in stride and insists that Hermione is going to have a lovely time, up here in the Cheviots. Has she ever been up to the high country, gotten herself out of the London sewers before? If not, she’s in for a treat.

Yes, she says, laughing. She went to school in Scotland.

Well, then Severus simply must take her down to the Black Bull; they’ve got a pair of proper Northumbrian pipers up from Alnwick, and it’ll do her a world of good to hear some civilized airs, as a welcome contrast to those screeching bagpipes the Scotsmen are always murdering.

So they brave the wind and the rain, and it turns out to have been a good idea. It’s too loud in the pub to talk, so she is saved the embarrassment of unburdening her worries upon Severus. Worries that their hostess will think her a loose woman (she isn’t, she only wants to be), worries that Severus has no intention of sleeping with her (he’s gotten a distracted air about him, since they arrived), worries that his mother will hate her (perhaps she’s a harridan; someone had to have wrecked Severus Snape, and it can’t all have been Lily’s doing, or even Dumbledore’s).

The bed back at the Arms presents her with a slight dilemma. It’s situated with a pair of windows on one side the room, and the doorway on the other. She eventually chooses to sleep closest to the entrance; if she lies down she can’t actually see the door. And the loo is right next to this side, too; in addition to a solid door, it hasn’t got any windows. Severus is in there now, changing and performing evening ablutions, so she is able to work out these logistics in privacy. Decision made, she draws the heavy velvet curtains across the windows, and sets about unpacking her toiletries, and a few garments into the wardrobe. Finally, she shakes out her nightdress. It's a bit plain; she hadn’t bought it with seduction in mind, but it does have a nice tendency to slip off one shoulder. To think she’d considered that a defect, when she habitually went to bed with Ronald.

Severus emerges in neat grey pyjamas and a darker dressing gown. Are they new, or just for
travelling? Neither looks particularly lived-in. “All yours.” He gestures to the en-suite, and she leaves him sorting the sundry decorative cushions off the bed.

As she’s unpinning her hair and brushing her teeth, she entertains an unlikely fantasy of draping herself across the sumptuous bedclothes, and asking him whether he does, honestly, think that their Tyrian purple is becoming to her. She should do it nude, for best effect. But she pulls her nightdress over her head, and slinks back into the bedroom with her tail betwixt her legs. Severus is already in bed, and the lights are down. She takes one look at the contour of his back, and decides that the hat got it wrong after all. She’s no courageous Gryffindor. She draws her legs up under the sheets, and pulls the switch on the bedside lamp. The black of night contains all colours, so it doesn’t matter if Tyrian purple looks good against her skin and hair.

“I’ve set the alarm for six,” he informs her across the no-man’s land of cold sheets that accounts for intervening geography.

“That’s fine, if there will be time to shower.”


“I did.”

“Why is your mother here, then, in Northumberland?”

“This does not sound hopeful. “Er, is there anything in particular I should know. For tomorrow, I mean?” What kind of woman is she, who sits behind the paintbrush?

“Eh, no, don’t worry yourself over it. Just follow my lead. You’ll see soon enough how the wind blows.”

Wailing around the corner of the house, to play merry havoc in the barren tree limbs, by the sounds of it. It is a long while before Severus’ quiet breathing lulls her to sleep.
Façades

Chapter Notes

*Short chapter this time, on account of logical breaks. Enjoy!* 

She wakes with Severus’ arm around her torso – has she captured it in the night, pulled his body against her own? The sturdy wall of his chest rises, falls, against her back.

“Good morning,” he whispers, ever so faintly.

She nuzzles her head back against him in response. She is not ready for it to be morning, yet, not ready to relinquish the peaceful thump of his heart, the warmth of his body.

“I don’t suppose you’d consider giving my arm back?” He has tucked his face over her shoulder, to murmur these words in the shell of her ear.

She strokes her fingers along his forearm, contemplating his request. “I think I might keep it, actually.” With a grin into her pillow, she pulls his hand close up to her chest, cradling his limb possessively. “I suppose you can have my foot, in exchange.” She lifts the appendage in question, to trace his calf with her toes.

“Careful. We both know you’re ticklish,” he growls.

“Now why would you do a thing like that? I’m being ever so nice to your hand,” she says, petting his wrist and fingers. “I’d always take very good care of it. Surely you should do the same for my foot?”

“Well, leaving aside the proper care and maintenance of body parts, what good will having one of my hands do you?”

She turns onto her back, and lifts his hand to eyelevel. His fingers are as curiously delicate up close as they are at a distance, long and pale in the faint grey light. “Oh, I can think of great many things your hand would be useful for,” she opines as she examines the pads of his fingertips, then laughs outright when he flicks her nose.

“Well then! I can see this hand needs to be kept out of trouble!” In a fit of what must surely be insanity, she places his palm firmly down upon the swell of her breast.

He goes very, very still.

She relaxes her grip, suddenly afraid she’s taken their jesting to an entirely inappropriate level. But maybe she needn’t have worried – she feels him breathe again, deeply, and his fingers shift, to gently enclose her breast. And now it’s her turn to hold her breath, except that he’s asking her a question:

“What do you—this something you like?”

“Yes.” It escapes her with an exhalation, like a longing sigh, as he proceeds to lightly stroke her breasts through the fabric of her nightdress. She can feel her nipples tightening beneath his palm,
jutting up against the cloth. His fingers circle one in exploration. “Like this?” His lips brush her ear and the combination of these sensations sends a jolt of liquid lightening down through her navel.

Before she can answer him, yes, just like that, only more-so, the alarm rings.

He rolls away to silence it, and doesn’t come back. “Showers, I suppose. Did you want to go first, or shall I?”

What? No, he can’t, this was just trending in the right direction. “Go ahead.” She would much rather lie here a while, and fantasize about where his clever fingers might have gone next.

For instance: perhaps he might have lightly tweaked her nipple, the way he had her nose. Perhaps this would have segued into his rolling it between his fingers, tugging just a bit. Maybe he would have nibbled at her ear, and then kissed his way down her neck. Would he have paused at the base of her neck again, or continued on, down to the expanse of flesh bared by the sloping collar of her nightdress? Perhaps he’d have coaxed her into a seated position in the bed, half-lying back in his arms. It would free up both hands to test the weight of her breasts, to grasp and massage them. And she would tilt her face up, to mewl against the angle of his jaw, to pepper him with kisses there, and wordlessly encourage him to plunder her mouth, as his hands track further down, to the hem of her nightdress. Would he pull it up, and over her head? Or just drag his fingers along the trembling muscles of her abdomen, teasing her nipples beneath the confines of the fabric?

Her eyes have slipped closed, and she bites her lip against the tingling spasms and the slight ache in her vulva. She should stop this, stop this now before he’s done in the shower. But what if? Her fingers stray down, below the elastic of her knickers. Through the crinkled hairs, and into the slickness of her arousal. She is circling her clitoris and breathing harshly when he emerges from the en-suite, hair tousled and damp, and smelling of pine resin aftershave.

What the hell – it was a great line last night, even if she was too much a coward. With her free hand, she spreads her hair across the pillow, and pulls the coverlet up a little higher, although with her hips rising against her fingers, she is leaving precious little to his imagination. The motion is definitely not involuntary, and she lets her lips curve up in a coy smile. “Are you quite sure Tyrian purple is really a good colour for me?”

He looks stunned, and his dark eyes are riveted upon her. “Rather. Umn, yes, rather. Quite a good colour.” Is she a decent show, then? It’s sheer willpower that drags her hand away from her clit, Gods, she needs this, but in examining her slick fingers she’s had another idea. She watches him swallow, hard. He’s either going to start unbuttoning his trousers or run screaming from the room, if the expression on his face is anything to judge by. She pulls the collar of her nightdress down, so that she can cup the flesh of her breast. With her wet fingers she circles her nipple, teasing it taut, and then she grips it more firmly, squeezing and pulling in time with the way she’s begun to clench her thighs against the agonizing need that’s still throbbing there.

She can feel that she’s getting too close, and for all that she’s putting on a performance, she has no intention of getting herself completely off in front of him. With one last savage tug she releases her nipple entirely, wrenches her legs apart, and allows her arms and head to fall back into the bedclothes. “There, that’s also something I like. If you’re taking notes.”

She gazes up at him from beneath her eyelashes; the effect is sultry, she hopes. “I presume you’re finished with the bath?”

It takes him a few starts to answer. “Y-yes, quite finished.”
“Good.” She throws the covers back, and with as much demure grace as she can muster, gathers her toiletries, backs into the en-suite, and closes the door on him with a long, slow smile.

It’s turning back from the door, and seeing herself in the mirror that makes it fall off her lips. What the bleeding fuck is the matter with her, what has she done?

Riveted, or horrified?

Because his expressions can be read that way, too. If putting his hand on her breast was inappropriate, wanking in front of him is verging on criminally stupid. What if he is not aroused by her, but disgusted?

She disgusts herself.

She scrubs her body furiously under the viciously hot spray of the shower. She is mortifying her flesh, she thinks. Roughly writing her shame and humiliation across her body with the weave of the flannel. Stupid. Ridiculous. Perverse. What does she know about being a seductress? Her one effort in that direction was crawling into Ronald’s bed; thereafter proceedings had gone on entirely without her active participation.

She chokes back a sob, and tips her face into the spray; this allows her to pretend that the hot water does not contain embarrassed tears as it spills around her eye sockets and across her cheeks.

Finally she is forced to acknowledge that she is as clean as she will possibly become.

Was he… was he at all aroused, this morning when he touched her breasts? She stares at her reflection in the mirror, furrowed brow and pursed lips, hand suspended in midair where she has forgotten that she was in the midst of pinning her hair. She doesn’t know. Were their bodies not close enough? It’s possible, she thinks, reconstructing their relative positions in her mind’s eye. Possible. Probable? He’d been erect the other night. She wasn’t imagining that. Was she?

She meets her eyes in the mirror. This is a disaster, she acknowledges. Maybe he’ll have gone out to breakfast, by the time she finishes in here. She pokes through her toiletry bag as if uncertain of its contents. The lipstick applicator suddenly seems like some arcane device. She uncaps it, stares at the colour of it (which might be rosewood or brick, but is certainly red) and swallows.

Right. She is going to comport herself with as much maturity and dignity as she can. She’ll apologize for what she’s done, and hopefully he’ll let her put it behind herself. Or at the very least she can behave in such a way as to indicate that she understands her transgression. Behave like an adult.

She touches kohl along her lash line. Well, and what if he takes this as further evidence that she’s a Jezebel of some kind? He’d wanted her as a friend, and she’s been plotting his seduction.

Although…

She swipes the lippy in place.

Although. What kind of man doesn’t want a woman pursuing him? She’s a woman. Maybe not very good at being one – she is much more comfortable in her frumpy, plain robes, and she barely knows how to use these pigments – but still. She has her requisite parts in the right order. And Ronald had never complained. Much.

Yes he had.
She pulls wool leggings up beneath her skirt, and tucks in the hem of her starchy white blouse. Her bra shows through the front of it. Has she got a jumper in here, anywhere? A rummage through her satchel turns up one of Molly’s usuals, in mustard-yellow. Hurrah, that just screams attractive. She pulls it over her head. She is not trying for attractive, she reminds herself. She is trying for Competent Adult Human Who Is Not A Quivering Mass of Nerves. And only someone serene and calm can march out of the en-suite in mustard yellow. So as façades go, she’s just got to be on the right track.

He’s not gone. Instead, he’s sitting at the small table in front of the window, sorting through the catalogue, that binder Roz had left behind. He looks up as she re-enters the room. She wants to turn away, she doesn’t want to watch that sarcastic eyebrow creeping up his forehead. Doesn’t want to wait, unable to breathe, until he gives voice to whatever decimation he has prepared for her.

“Now, goldenrod. That is… definitely not your colour.”

She lifts a hand, helplessly, to pluck at the knit of her jumper. “Not…”

“Indeed, no. Unless I’ve missed my mark, that’s a Weasley jumper. You ought to bin it.”

She seats herself on the edge of the bed. He’d made it up during her absence. “Well, I would.” This conversation is verging on surreal, and not at all what she’d expected. “I haven’t got another with me, though, I don’t think.”

“Oh, no, suit yourself. I was only… er, making light, I suppose. Trying, anyway. It looks fine. You look fine. You could wear burlap and look fine.” He refocuses his attention on the catalogue. The tips of his ears are slightly red.

Does this mean they’re okay? There is one way to find out: “Lend me one of yours then, you seem to have an endless supply.” (It’s true, she’s seen him in at least three, now.) She pulls the offending yellow jumper off, and yes, he has definitely glanced at her chest. She tosses the jumper in the general direction of the wastebasket, crosses her legs, and gazes at him expectantly. Hah, he even does it, delves into his luggage and extracts a sleeveless jumper in a finely knit dark sage. “This might fit you well enough.”

It certainly does. She smooths it across her bosom, catches him watching her, and smirks outright.

“You have to admit that’s better than looking like a Hufflepuff groupie,” he says.

“Quite,” she agrees. “Although, should I be worried that the logical outcome of letting you choose my clothing is going to be finding myself draped in a Slytherin House banner?”

He looks up at her in what can only be consternation. His mouth opens, closes.

Damn it. “Bloody hell. Listen, I’m sorry. I’m making this weird. You must know I’m not really a saucy minx – it’s no wonder I keep getting this wrong.”

“Not really a… are you quite sure?”

She grimaces down at her clasped hands. “Pretty sure.”

“Well, you do an admirable impression.”

“Really?” Oh damnations. Does she have to sound so fucking hopeful?
He doesn’t answer her, but he looks thoughtful. After a moment, he beckons her over to where he has risen to stand at the window. He places his hands on her shoulders, and pivots her around to face the day.

“Oh! It’s snowed!” It’s done more than snowed, she realizes after a beat. Sometime in the night the rain had started icing, and where the tree branches aren’t holding up cushions of snow, they are rimed in a veneer of ice. The sunrise is breaking through the last of the clouds that linger on the town’s horizon; the fresh snow is swathed in hues of rose and gold. “That’s really pretty.”

“Isn’t it?” He has moved to stand behind her, and his arms have slipped from her shoulders, down to her midsection. He clasps his hands there, across her stomach, and leans his chin on her shoulder. “Out there, where it’s all covered in snow -- You can tell that there are structures underneath it all, and that fir is probably just exactly a tree, but out across the lawns, who knows what might be down there? Grass? Paths? Gardens, maybe with crocuses ready to burst up through the dirt? Who can tell? It’s all uncharted territory.”

Right, this is a metaphor, probably. “So there are two choices, then. You either wait for it to melt, to find out, or you go out and explore?”

“I suppose.”

“No, you’re supposed to tell me your preference, now, I think. That’s how metaphors like this are supposed to work.”

“Do you think so? Because I’m wondering if it’s not a false dichotomy, you see. There could be more options.”

“Such as?”

“Such as going down to breakfast.”

“Because that’s a necessity and not a habit.”

“Just so.”

At breakfast, she spreads raspberry jam on his toast, and wonders fondly how long it might take for the snow to melt away.
The literal snow is already melting by the time they’ve ventured into it. Trickle of water drip rhythmically from the eaves, and the street beyond the Arms is criss-crossed with little rivulets chuckling down between the tyrre treads. Her boots have a waterproofing charm on them that still holds, but Severus is not so lucky, and has had to beg a pair of wellies off their hostess. “And my feet will still freeze, because I doubt it’ll melt much up in the hills,” he complains. His demeanour is otherwise cheerful, though, as he accepts the packed lunch their hostess has assembled for them, a basket heaped with sandwiches, thermoses, cake and fruit.

“And do tell Eileen I’ve said hello!” she admonishes as they squish through the soft snow and slush out to the car.

Severus acknowledges this with a wave, and they’re off.

“Are we going up to those hills then, are those the Cheviots?”

He nods. “Northumberland National Park; we’re just going around to the west a few miles… Hopefully with the snow on the ground…” He doesn’t finish the thought.

The last of the houses of town fall away behind them, and she casts about for something to say, something to ask. But maybe it will be best to let him break the silence; she does not need to be always chattering at him like a magpie. Since she can’t think of anything that needs to be said, perhaps there is nothing. She gazes out at the high white massifs looming to the north.

“They’re andesitic, mostly. Volcanic.”

“That’s an odd thing to know.”

“Hardly. Hogwarts is situated on volcanic rock, too. It’s useful to know where the stuff is. You can’t truly hide something, make it wholly unplottable, if it’s on sedimentary strata – if you map the geology out, you’ll notice the missing rock right away. Steno’s principle of… lateral continuity, I think that is. But with volcanic rocks, it’s dead easy – or rather, it’d be impossible to know if something is missing from a geologic map.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.” Is it his own insight, or has she merely been remiss in not having thought much about unplottable charms?

“I’ve been curious.”

“About?”

“Well, there’s a place like that up here, somewhere. Unplottable, and secret-kept. Secret-kept by a portrait, no less, so it’s likely lost to eternity.”

“A portrait? I didn’t know such a thing was even possible, I thought the secret had to be contained within a living soul.”

“Apparently not. I don’t know much about it, honestly, but apparently something akin to a sentience is created when you mix the subject’s blood with the yolk of augury eggs – it’s how they’re animated.”

“Sorry, I’m not sure I follow. A potion?”
“Oh, no. I’ve been unclear. Magical portraits are painted in tempera – where the paint is a mix of ground pigment, water, and egg yolk. According to the late Headmaster Black, it’s blood and augury eggs that bring it to life, if the painting is a close enough likeness. Maybe there are more metaphysical things that happen too, with soul or memory or the like. I don’t know.”

She frowns, and chews thoughtfully at her lip. “Does your mother paint magical portraits?”

“No in the least. Never, to my knowledge.”

She feels like they are fencing around in circles. He’s answering her, but she’s not asking the right questions, because what he’s telling her are just pieces, and she can’t make out how they’re connected. “So there’s a secret-kept, unplottable castle back in those hills. And no one will ever find it, because of geology, and because the secret’s being kept by a portrait. A hostile portrait, one imagines.”

He emits a bark of laughter. “A hostile portrait. Quite. Although it’s not a castle, from what I understand. It was called Adderlinn Hall, and built in the 1870s, mostly. Although much of the rock was from old Roman works, and Iron Age fortifications. If anyone could ever find it, it might still be habitable; by all accounts it was nicely appointed back in its day, and with the right stasis spells and wards against vermin… You never know.”

“Have you been trying to find it, then?” Or has Eileen?

“No. Not really. I was only curious. I have had precious little to occupy myself with over the years.”

Hah. And is this an admission that a life of idle parasitism and bad novels doesn’t hold his attention quite as well as he’d like? They pull into a narrow drive, and past several outbuildings converted to houses, before she abandons her attempt to phrase this observation into a question. A flock of hens scatters in front of the car, and a leggy border collie, barely more than a pup, comes dashing around the side of one of the buildings, ears and tail flying as it herds the poultry down across the slope. Severus maneuvers the car around a series of puddles, to park in front of one of the converted buildings.

It’s a quaint, tidy place, all over with vines. The walk’s been cleared of snow, and it passes around behind the cottage, into what must be gardens: there are still ranks of dead foliage melting out, and she can even identify some of the stems as poppies, hollyhocks, and blazing stars. “What a pleasant little place,” she exclaims as she follows him up to the door. He doesn’t respond, just knocks smartly.

They wait. She studies the door’s peeling green paint. He knocks again, and sighs.

The border collie is back and apparently highly concerned by these interlopers into its territory. Is it barking at the car, or them?

“Hadaway, Guff!” A bent, weatherworn figure in greying flannel is trouncing up the drive. “Alreet, then?” he calls, as the dog ceases its shrill proclamation of their presence.

“Good morning, Walter!” Severus calls back, “Have you seen Eileen about?”

“Aye, she warss aboot orly, like, gaanin up ti the heughs, oot for a dandor, like, back te Carey Born, Careyborn Linn, like.” He has leaned up against the stone fence just below the walk, and takes a deep draw on his pipe. Curls of blue smoke drift up beyond his heavy mustache, escaping into the morning. “Yon’s a canny waalk, if ya haird it ti meend; nowt claggy as tis ayont the
Cheviot, like, up ti the Hen Hole. If ya divin’t meend the snaa. Or I cairn set ya up wi tea, doon at the hoose, wi Alice?” He looks at them expectantly from beneath his bushy white eyebrows.

Apparently Severus can understand whatever language this fellow is speaking, because he has been nodding, and answers at once. “Oh, I think we can manage a walk; it’s fine weather. Careyburn Linn, did you say?”

“Aye, g’is a minute ti deeks in at the hairns, like, forst, an’ Aa’ll shaa ya the mep.”

“I think I remember well enough: there’s a path up from the bridge, on the road that goes through to Langleeford?”

“Aye, that’s the peth. Luck ti ya.” He nods at them, touches his cap, and gestures for the dog as he turns away. “Howair, Guff, ya feckless donnart.”

“There’s a lesson to you,” Severus tells her, as they get back into the car, “Never complain in advance, and without certain warrant, about things like hiking through snow in wellingtons, because the universe is always listening for opportunities like that.”

“I take it we’re going for a walk?”

“Looks that way. I thought with it having snowed, she might’ve stayed in today. But apparently not. At least it’s not halfway down the Harthope Valley, or up in the Hen Hole. Carey Burn is just a couple miles. I can drive you back to town, if you’d rather not.”

“I’m fine, I don’t mind a walk.” Although it does seem strange manners on Eileen’s part, since he said he’d left word he was coming up. “I take it you’re used to not finding her at home?”

“So much so that I’m not entirely sure why she bothers renting. I told Walter, one time, that he’d be doing me a favour to puncture her bicycle tyres, but I guess he thought I was joking. She’s apt to break a hip or something, clambering about in this mess.” He pulls a scowl.

‘This mess’ must refer to the swaths of gorse, and the occasional tumbles of rock that poke out of the snow and sere grasses that are waving in the fresh morning wind. The Cheviots are rising ahead of them, and to either side: craggy-topped, rounded plateaus, the worn-down shoulders of ancient mountains. She sees sheep dotting the hillsides, and distant dark smudges that are probably coniferous trees.

Severus slows the car as they approach a picturesque bridge with bright white railings; he parks off the road, up against the wall of a stone sheepfold. There’s a powder blue bicycle already leaning there, and melting footprints leading off down to a narrow wooden gate just above the bridge. “Right.” He clicks the doors locked, and they set out on Eileen’s trail.

“This is the Carey Burn,” he informs her, gesturing at the watercourse chuckling off to the left of the path. “And the river it joins up with on the other side of the bridge is the Harthope Burn. Although they call it the Coldgate Water, downstream of the confluence. We’ve about a mile to walk. The linn’s just around Hart Heugh, Hart Hill.”

“What’s a linn?”

“Northumbrian word for a cascade, a waterfall. She’s partial to the aesthetic, I guess.”

“It’s not much like London.”

“Not much like anywhere. Like places in Scotland, I suppose. The moors up around the school.”
Certainly a long way from Devon and Wiltshire, and even Manchester… all the other Wizarding enclaves. His mention of Hogwarts has her thinking of the wizarding side. She isn’t aware of any older families that live up here. So who built and abandoned the invisible, unplottable Adderlinn Hall? Scots? She doesn’t know much about the Scottish purebloods.

“Northumbria’s an old kingdom; the Britons were facing off the Vikings up on the coast, and you can see the remains of old Iron Age fortifications if you know what you’re looking at. Up just to the east, there’s the Yeavering Bell; it’s just a crumbled ring of stone now, but it used to be walls; occupies a magnificent strategic position. And there’s even a henge, the Duddo Five Stones, not far from there. And then the Romans were here, of course. Once they left, the place went back to brigands and rievers. Now it’s just farmers, hikers, and sheep. ‘Though there are still goats.”

“Sorry?” She’s lost the track of what he’s saying, because she’s been thinking about early Britons, and wondering if any wizarding families trace themselves that far back. Now that she’s reckoning them up, it’s mostly Romans, isn’t it? Even Hogwarts is not so old, postdating the Roman occupation by three quarters of a millennium. Except, maybe… Maybe the founders of Hogwarts? Those weren’t Roman names. Were they upstarts, or scions of much older lines? Although, she does remember reading in History of Magic that there was always a tendency for Roman families to have distanced themselves from their magical relatives – maybe the opposite was true as well. It must’ve been very complicated, before the Statutes of Secrecy.

“Cheviot goats. Ferals, supposedly descended from the original Iron Age stock. They’re around; maybe we’ll see some. They come down into the valleys more in the winter.”

She does not particularly care about goats. “Mmm.”

“Watch yourself on the gorse up through here.” They’ve begun a slight ascent up around the toe of what must be Hart Hill. The path’s clear of snow, but narrow, and he’s right to warn her: the thorns catch at her leggings. He pauses ahead to stomp a few bushes out of her way. “Here’s another Northumbrian expression, ‘glidders’. The local word for scree; careful, some of this is loose.” He offers a hand to steady her as she picks her way up between the jagged stones.

They crest over the rise just at the corner of the hill, and the view opens out onto the Carey Burn rushing through a narrow cleft in the rocks to either side it, spilling over their jumbled faces. “Is that the linn, then?”

“Yes, and our quarry ought to be here, too.” He cups a hand above his mouth. “Eileen! Hulloa, Eileen?”

There’s a movement from down in the rocks, above the falls. A bright plaid arm is waving them forward.

No wonder Severus worries over her breaking a hip – Even when they’re not slick with meltwater and remnants of ice, it would be incredibly easy to twist an ankle in these rocks. They pick their way, slowly, down to where she’s sitting on a heavy sheepskin, with a pad of paper across her knees and a pan of watercolours perched on the rock beside her.

“Good morning, Eileen.”

She nods, but doesn’t look up from her sketch. “I’ve got the light down, finally. The way it bounces back off the water, and up through the ice. The cast shadows act strangely, I wasn’t sure I’d been doing it right.”

Hermione does not know what she expected, of Severus’ mother. She’s a thin, raw-boned woman,
with wind-chapped skin pulled tight across her high cheekbones. Her nose is a more refined shape than her son’s, but coupled with her heavy brows there’s certainly a resemblance. Her hair’s almost fully grey where it peeks from beneath her knit cap, but it trails on down into black through the length of heavy braid swooped over her shoulder. Witches and wizards do not age as muggles do, Hermione is forcibly reminded.

Eileen is staring fixedly at the paper in front of her. Finally, she dips the very tip of her brush again, and swipes another few lines of brown into the painted rills of water flowing across the lichen-crusted rock. “Hello, Mr Snape,” she says, once she’s accomplished this. She looks up at them with keen dark eyes set in deep sockets. “And?”

“Sorry. This is a friend of mine, from London. Hermione Granger.”

“I suppose you met at a posh club for people with excessive first names. Hermione. Is that Greek?”

“Er, maybe. Shakespearian, though,” she answers, suddenly discomfited. Severus is no help, he just has a wry half-smile on his face, as though he’s bearing through a toothache.

Eileen nods. “Shakespeare. Yes. I expect I know that. Or I did, once. Well, I hope you’ve enjoyed your walk this morning, Hermione.”

“Yes, actually. It’s sort of pretty here.”

“It’s nothing of the sort,” she says serenely, as she turns her attention back to her painting. “It’s dreary and desolate and bleak and majestic and broken and it sort of hollows you out inside.”

Well.

“But later in the spring, these hills will be positively ablaze with gorse and blackthorn, with heather. And there will anemones poking up, and later, lupins and pinks. And in the summer, bracken ferns swaying along the vales. Cold mossy hollows up by the linns in the Hen Hole. Cottongrass floating like feathers above the mounds of moss in the bogs.”

“That sounds lovely.” It does, she’s not just saying it.

“Oh, it has its charms. But there is very little that’s pretty here. ‘Pretty’ is… uninteresting. I suppose at first glance, the Cheviots are, too. Not so weird and raw and picturesque as the dales and fells down in the Pennines, Yorkshire, like.”

“It’s the loneliness of them, you said once.” Severus has decided to join the conversation, apparently. He’s gotten himself comfortable on one of the drier rocks, as if he expects they will be here some time. She follows suit.

“Did I? Well, in retrospect I don’t know what it is. But after Gracie took ill… maybe it was just me, where the loneliness came from. When I saw these hills, though, it felt… Familiar. Like someplace I’d been before. I still get that feeling, you know. Every now and then. A little ghostly tickle, like something remembered from a dream.”

“At the linns.” His voice is very quiet.

Eileen looks up at him, sharply. “That’s so. I forget how much I’ve told you, over the years.”

“Gracie mentioned things too. From your letters.”
She nods, and swishes her brush in the little jar of water beside her knee. “It’s funny. I thought I would have liked to have had her here. But she never fit in, somehow. You do, though. Strangely enough.”

“It’s the nose.” He says it quite soberly. “Sticks out just like these dirty great hills.”

She huffs a little laugh. “I suppose that’s true enough. From the pictures, he was no beauty, Toby. I always said Gracie could have done better.”

“Well, and she did.”

“Indeed. A studio’s a finer thing than a man, any day. How are things there? What do they call it now, the Hive?”

“Busy. Hectic. An awful mess, honestly. It’s not much like she left it at all, anymore. You should come back, come down to London in the winters.”

“Oh no. Give over; I don’t need the excitement, and they don’t need an old woman about the place.”

“On the contrary, I’m sure they’d fall all over themselves in delight. You’ve admirers there; they’re reading militant feminism into your paintings every other day.”

“And so they might. But admirers need to be kept at arms-length. When they see you taking tea like the other mortals, they’re quite offended, I find.”

“Fair. How about my other argument, then? Who’s going to keep tabs on you for me, once Walter and Alice give up the country?”

“Maybe I’ll thank you not to keep tabs on me. Although,” she sighs, “I suppose I can’t fault you. It’s what Gracie would’ve done. She asked you, no doubt.”

“Nearly the last thing she said to me.”

“I am glad, for her sake, that you were there. Twenty years and change is too long to have a wall of mutual disregard in place.”

“Yes. Well.” Severus is studying his hands. They are clenched quite tightly.

“She’d talk about you, on occasion. Do you remember Severus, she’d ask. Always hurt to have to tell her I didn’t. ‘Though it’s nice enough to know you now.”

He swallows, and grimaces more than smiles, but Eileen is not looking, and does not seem to expect a response. She is tidying away her paints and brushes.

“Give us a hand up, then, Mr Snape. My knees aren’t up for as much as they once were.” But her pace is spry enough, as she sets off back down the trail. “I don’t suppose you’ve brought tea? Oh, excellent, I could do with a cuppa. I was up here with the sunrise.”

There’s a cold, sick feeling growing in Hermione’s stomach, with every step they take back towards the car. She doesn’t think she’s misheard anything. Too, their interactions are only friendly, not close. Severus’ face is utterly impassive, and he doesn’t seem to realise that she’s trying to catch his eye. Indeed, he’s focusing most of his attention on Eileen, who clearly doesn’t need or want his help navigating the rocks and gorse.
At the car he extracts their packed lunch from the back seat, and sets thermoses and mugs out on the bonnet. “Bess at the Bridge-End fixed us up; she says to tell you ‘hello’. There’s tea, and coffee, too, I expect. Hermione, would you? I’ll just see to your bike, Eileen.”

“The front wheel’s on a fly,” she calls over.

“I remember,” he says, as he rolls it back to the boot.

It transpires that the red thermos contains coffee, and the blue tea. There are little packets of sugar, and some lemon wedges, as well. Hermione pours them cups, and leans uncertainly against the wheel-hub. Severus is taking his time, and plenty of it. She sips her coffee, and watches Eileen prepare her tea.

“So, Hermione. Are you teaching, like Severus?”

“Me? No. No, I’m... I work with theory, mostly,” she answers, warily.

“Ah. Chemistry, though?”

“Er, yes. And some medical applications.” Does Eileen think she’s a muggle? Damn Severus, what can be taking so long, in loading a bicycle into the boot?

Finally he’s back. “This cup’s mine, I take it? Thanks. So did you want to go back to the farm, Eileen? Or?”

“Well it’s a lovely day for it, but I reckon I’ve gotten my exercise in. We could go back down. I suppose you’ve brought Mrs Lindauer’s latest for me to look over, and perhaps I’ll show you what I’ve been working on?”

“I’d like that.” His voice is quiet, and she thinks his smile is perfectly genuine.

“So would I,” she puts in. “Severus has shown me a few of your paintings; they’re very intriguing.”

They settle back into the car; Hermione opts for the back seat. All courtesy aside, it seems safer.

“Which paintings in particular?” Eileen asks, picking up the conversation where it had fallen, as she buckles her seatbelt.

“The Faceless Girl.” Severus answers in her stead, as he backs the car around.

As much as she appreciates this, she can talk for herself, too. Even if her stomach is continuing its uncomfortable clenching things. “It’s a very curious way to represent someone.”

Eileen’s face in the side mirror looks thoughtful. “Yes, I suppose it is. I wish I could remember why I did that. There was probably some symbolism intended.”

“In the subject, or the representation?” Severus’ tone has gone idle, but she thinks she can hear tightness there, too, as if he is holding himself in check.

“Who knows?” Eileen says, with an airy wave of one hand. “What’re you asking me, for?” She half-turns in the front seat, to look back at Hermione. “I suppose Severus has explained to you?”

“Er, no. I don’t think he has.” She would narrow her eyes at his in the rearview, except Eileen is still looking at her. Follow my lead. What lead?
“It must be thirty years ago. More. I’d gone cycling to the shops, they say. This was back in Cokeworth. Before Gracie and I went down to the City. She’d already given Toby the boot; what year would that have made it?”

“In ’77,” Severus says tersely.

“So coming on forty years then, soon enough. Half a lifetime. I’d be forgetting it by now, regardless.”

“It’s your short-term memory, what goes first,” he corrects her.

“Eh, well, that’s what they say. Mine seems alright, although I did forget to pick up milk yesterday in town. But I was saying: In the autumn of ’77. I’d been down to the shops, and on the way back, they say a lorry knocked me off my bike.”

“And yet you persist in riding the damnable things.”

“Hush, so I can finish telling your friend the story before we’re up the drive. I woke up in hospital with a plate in my head, two broken legs, more bruises than I could count, and no idea what I’d been about. Oh, I knew my name, and the date, and I could tell you exactly how to grind kermes scale, but where I’d grown up? Gone to school? Who’d given me my first kiss? Who my family were, even? It took me days to even get Gracie sorted back in her proper place. And I never did find any recollection of Toby… So I reckon that must’ve made things that much better, between Gracie and me. He’s just one of them that never did come back. And The Faceless Girl is another. I clearly spent ages, painting her. Maybe she was a friend, when I was young.”

The border collie, Guff, is watching their arrival from Eileen’s front step. She stops to fondle his ears, before unlocking the door and gesturing for them to precede her. “Alreet, Guff, hadaway wi ya hyem!” She laughs, and flicks on the kitchen lights. “I think I’m getting the accent down, finally. Walter and I will be mutually intelligible to each other someday soon.”

“One wonders if Alice knew he was proposing, back in the day, or if the wedding came as a surprise?” Severus is smirking, with every appearance of renewed cheer, as he lays the remainder of their picnic out on the table.

Eileen sets water to boil on the stove, before pulling down a tea service, and a jar of mixed pickles. “Is that Bess’ Lady Balmoral cake she’s wrapped? I did up an angelfood, last night, too.” She slices into both, and lays them out on a platter for afters. “If there’s one thing I always have plenty of, it’s egg whites.”

Severus has brought Roz’ catalogue in with him, but makes no move to address it until they’ve finished eating. He clears away their dishes, and refreshes Eileen’s tea as she flips it open.

She looks at most of the pages with what seems to be almost disinterest, or at best idle curiosity. Severus is watching her closely, alert to every nuance of expression that passes across her face. Hermione, on the other hand, looks at her fingers. They’re Severus’: long and delicate, so certain in their every economical movement, a kind of grace that renders them utterly elegant. She’s an artist, how can she pay so much attention to the play of light on water, and so little to their hands?

“Hmm, and here’s the devil himself,” she says. Tobias Snape at his forge is before her. “He must have been a passionate fellow.”

“Yes, if by passionate you mean prone to petty, drunken rages.”

“Seems the type, and I suppose you’d know. I always did like cadmiums for those angry, fiery
sorts. I suppose I was quite a silly thing. Though surely Gracie was no better than I. No smarter, I mean.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a question of intellect,” he offers.

She raises her brow in mute acquiescence, and turns another page, and another. “This one’s wrong.” Eileen’s voice is suddenly sharp. “It is!” She snaps the rings of the binder open, and extracts the offending print.

Severus doesn’t react beyond a raised eyebrow. Yet he is watching Eileen with almost compulsive intensity, his eyes tracking every move. Whatever is so interesting to him isn’t apparent to Hermione, who decides she’d rather see the print, and shifts over in her chair. And immediately wishes she hadn’t.

The principal figures are situated in a stylish room with wood panelling, and lush drapes over high, arching windows. The older woman stands behind the younger. She is clothed in something smart and Victorian with rich falls of vibrant red fabric; her black hair is coiled up atop her head with strands of some crimson gemstones that blaze in the bright squares of painted sunlight that fall across the scene. She is holding a tabby cat in her arms, and scratching it beneath its chin. The younger woman – or is she just a girl? – is seated at a small angled desk. She holds a plant of some kind in one hand, and is sketching its likeness with the other.

And she is drowned.

Her sopping garments are clinging to her grey body. The peaks of high girlish breasts are only slightly shrouded beneath the white fabric, and her pubic mound, the same. There is water-weed tangled in the knots of her dripping dark hair, and a puddle is forming around her bare feet. Her face is hideously distorted, milky eyes bulging and leaking down lips and cheeks that fishes have nibbled at.

Eileen has been flicking through the pages with driven certainty, but now her hands slow. “I know it’s wrong. It goes here. Somewhere.” Her tone is uncertain, distant. “I don’t know why. I just…” She turns another page. The Faceless Girl stares out at them. “Maybe here. After her, I think.”

She clips the page into this new spot. “Maybe.” And then: “I hate this, sometimes. I really do.” She sighs, and takes a long sip of tea.

Hermione cannot bring herself to look at the next two prints Eileen comments upon. She needs more time to recover from dead girls in fine surroundings. But Eileen only moves them a page or two, and says “Maybe. Maybe not. I think I was doing a few things, all at the same time, there. Something tells me I couldn’t get the colours I wanted.”

“Speaking of.” Severus has finished washing up the dishes in the interim, and reseats himself at the table. “Did you have anything you needed grinding?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, you needn’t. I appreciate it, but I’m pretty well set. You did up such a lot of that terra verde last time. And the new vermilion is already at a nice fine.” She turns a few more pages. “Well, now, I wonder how Rosalyn worked this out.”

“Worked what out?”

“1971. The date on this piece, King’s Cross. I called it ‘Off to School’, God knows why.”

Right, that’s piqued Hermione’s interest. It’s King’s Cross Station, alright, but not Platform 9¾,
just near the entrance. There’s the usual mix of people, but among them are dark wraithlike spectres. Not Dementors, not quite, but they evoke the same greasy, unclean feel. They are leading small children by the hand.

“The year was my impression, actually. I remembered seeing this piece.” Severus is looking vaguely unsettled, in what is clearly a lie.

“Oh! I’ve just had an idea: did you attend a private school?”

“Yes.”

“Then that makes perfect sense, and the year would fit. I can absolutely see myself resenting Gracie, being able to afford such a thing, and extrapolating that into a systemic statement about class. Hmm!” She seems pleased with this analysis.

And if Hermione has had any lingering doubts, that Eileen does not recognise Severus as her own son, this certainly clears them away.

His continued under-reaction is positively painful to watch. She is sorry that she harboured unkind thoughts of him, while he was stowing the bicycle. Perhaps he needed the time to get his mask back in place.

Why on earth is he doing this to himself, why not make himself known to her?

Has it been years of this? How many? All of them?

Hermione gets up, eventually, and makes another pot of tea. It is better than sitting at the table, watching Severus watch his mother, who is trying to untangle who she might have been. And getting parts of it so very wrong.

“Well, that’s about as much help as I can be.” Eileen sighs again.

“Roz would like for you to decide on the pieces for the retrospective, too.”

“Has she set upon a date for that?”

“June.”

“Well, there’s plenty of time, then. Let her get this printed up, and I’ll think it over. Although she ought to be the one choosing them. From the early work, I mean. I’m just as much a stranger to whoever the artist was. But come, I’ll show you what I’ve been doing lately.” Eileen closes the catalogue, and rises from the table.

They follow her through a comfortable sitting room, and into a conservatory. It doesn’t house a single plant. Instead, it’s crowded with lamps and photographers’ umbrellas, endless ranks of paintbrushes and jars of powdered pigments, a glistening copper distillation coil, heavy easels, paint-spattered smocks, and board after board of neat swatches of colour in a multitude of hues and tones. She gestures them over to one of the easels.

“I am considering calling it ‘The Flesh Market’.”

A poised woman in vaguely Grecian garb is leaning against a white marble counter. Before her is a red-faced child, tears streaming down its cheeks. It is suspended in the basket of a weigh-scale, counter-balanced by a mound of gold coins. The woman — its mother? — appears entirely uninterested in it; she is speaking to a handsome man with flowing chestnut hair. But the creatures
below the counter are not uninterested in the least. They are grotesques: small humanoid figures with features a little too large, a little too uncanny. Lamp-like eyes, yellowing teeth. Fingers, that reach up to caress the infant, which have too many joints. They are something like goblins, and something like house-elves, and altogether rather decidedly ugly. And yet their expressions are kind; they are gazing up at the child with smiles that seem welcoming, and the one that is crouching along the length of the counter has her knobbly hands extended as if to placate its sorrow.

Severus speaks first. “This is… Well, I don’t know much about art. But it is disturbing. And quite beautiful.”

Yes. This sums it nicely.

“The counter and the scales? Did you use a particular reference?” he continues innocently.

Too damn innocently. It’s Gringotts Bank, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Eileen quirks a heavy eyebrow up. “No. Sometimes I do just paint. That’s the point of doing studies, to build some memory for how light sits on objects.”

“I see.” Hermione thinks he looks defeated, but the expression is gone almost instantaneously.

Eileen turns to her, with a crooked smile. “And do you know much about art? Do you know what you like?”

“I… I’m not sure. I certainly appreciate that you’re doing really genius things. This painting. It’s a metaphor, isn’t it? For class, maybe, and the subtle abuse of neglect…”

“You’re thinking about it entirely the wrong way,” Eileen tells her. She leans close, and knocks a knuckle gently against Hermione’s forehead. “You’re thinking about it up here. Don’t do that. Think here,” she taps her sternum. “Think here, first.”

The trouble is, she thinks in her cranium as she follows Severus back to the entrance, thinking with her heart hurts too damn much. If she thinks with her heart, the scene as they’re leaving will utterly break her.

“Take care of yourself, Mr Snape,” Eileen says, giving him a quick formal hug.

Hermione can see over Eileen’s shoulder that his eyes are squeezed shut, and his face crumpled. But his voice is perfectly even: “And you, Eileen.”

But this is no break in his composure, merely a crack. He’s completely expressionless again, once he’s seated himself and snapped his buckle in place. They roll down the drive in silence. She’s nearly ready to crack, and shake him, demanding he explain what the hell this is, when he finally speaks. “We’ve a couple hours left. Before sunset. Did you want to see some more of the countryside, maybe? We can drive up to Langleeford, there’s a decent view of the Cheviot from there.”

Fine. Whatever. Fine. “Sure, that’s fine. Whatever you’d like to do.”

They drive back across the Carey Burn bridge without speaking. Severus’ knuckles on the wheel are very white. She looks away, up at the sheep on the hills, and at the trees and low scrub, hanging over the river — What did he call it? The Harthope Burn? — that’s tumbling down to their left. The car slows, almost inexorably. He pulls off to the side of the road, and leans over the steering wheel.
“Severus.” She reaches out to touch his shoulder.

It’s the wrong thing to have done. He sits up straight, unbuckles mechanically, and hoists himself out the door.

“Severus, will you—”

He pushes the door shut on her half-formed question, and strides off, down through the blackthorn, down to the Harthope. His gait is stiff and shocky. She watches in paralyzed horror as he stumbles, falls, gets back up, and disappears beyond the trees.

Fuck this. She unbuckles, snags the key from the ignition, and gets out of the car.

She finds him kneeling on all fours, down in the gravel near the water. It looks as if he has thrown himself there, or fallen, and cannot remember how to get up. His hands are bloodied, and he grips the stones as if against an unseen current. She is afraid he is going to shatter his teeth, so tightly is his jaw clenched, lips pulled back in a rictus of agony. A wet, wrenching sound escapes him when she presses her hand to his shoulder. He gasps in, as if he is bereft of oxygen, then finally grinds out, “Can you not just fuck off for a bit, Granger.”

She grips the lapels of his coat, and yards him about-face. “No,” she says, and wraps her arms about him, guiding his head down to the crook of her neck. She can feel tremors along his spine and ribs, and random shudders of breath in her hair, along her collarbone. She pulls him over and down, until he is leaning against her within the vee of her legs. She raises a knee against his back, as if she can make a fortress for him of her limbs. She strokes his hair, and listens to his struggle to breathe. And watches her own tears fall along the sharp bones of his face. She cradles him, hard, against her body. Eventually, she feels his broken sobs reverberating through her breast.

She continues to stroke his hair, and rocks him, gently, long after he has sagged into quiet lassitude. Long after the sun has slipped beyond the hills, and until the sky begins to grey. A cold breeze is snaking down the valley, and she realizes they are both shivering. “Come,” she whispers. “Let’s go back.”

He allows her to pull him up, and silently takes her hand. She leads him back to the car, and opens the passenger door. “I’ll drive. I’ll go slowly, I can manage that.”

He collapses into the seat, shaking. She gets in, turns the heat on full.

It is only a couple miles back to the bridge, and a few more back to Wooler. She doesn’t get them killed, but it’s lucky there are no other vehicles out. The road’s much too narrow to pass in safety.

He has wrapped his arms about his torso, and is staring sightlessly out the windscreen. “I thought it would be easier.” His voice is cracking. “With an audience. With someone else here. But it isn’t. It never gets any better.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s entirely inadequate, but it’s all she has.

“I wish I had never let Gracie talk me into it. Into seeing her again. They were right, the Wizengamot. Right to have me keep away.”

The heat’s been on full. Why does she still feel so cold? “The Wizengamot? What do you mean?” She pulls the car up to the Arms, and puts it in park.

“It’s a euphemism, you know. When they say they’ll break your wand.”
“The Wizengamot did that. To your mother.” She needs to say it out loud, to confirm it. Or to dispel it, because maybe she hasn’t understood what he’s saying. Oh God, please let her be wrong, again.

“Yes.” He sighs, and seems to slump down, as if the tension that has been holding him upright is no longer doing so. “We should go in.”

“Why did—”

He shakes his head, and lifts his fingers slightly, a weak defense against her questions. But she does stop. Because she doesn’t want to know. Knowing makes it real.

“I will tell you. As much as I can. But we should go in.”

“I’m sorry about this,” he says when they are back in their room. The plum walls and decadent finishings seem oppressive, now. “It was poorly considered on my part. I… I am not usually this much a disaster.”

No. He is usually droll and sarcastic, but she understands that he means ‘usually’ to encompass his typical interactions with his mother. No, with Eileen.

“Usually I go walking. Up in the hills. Looking for Adderlinn Hall, maybe, as if I could just stumble across it. Someday that will be possible, you know. Neither protective charms nor portraits can last forever. Once the charms fail, anything might happen to her. Vermin, elements. A good lightning strike and a fire. Anyway. Gets my mind off it.”

She doesn’t know what to do. She wants to ball up under the bedclothes and shake with rage and terror. But she wants to be his friend, too, because God knows he seems to need one right now. Although she does not know if she is strong enough, to hold back his pain, to be his harbour. She does not know if she can do this, without breaking upon the rocks of this grotesque reality herself.

Practicalities. Things she can do something about. Their clothing is damp, and they’re both cold. He’s just sitting there on one of the spindly chairs, staring at his hands. She wishes she had some of his dittany, that she could minister the scrapes and gashes, as he had her own last Friday.

Gods, last Friday. When her biggest problem was thinking he didn’t want to fuck her. Well, and being served with divorce papers. But that’s the same problem she has now; the only difference is that now she is beginning to understand what it means.

Or maybe she isn’t. She reminds herself that her brain’s twists and turnings are not reliable. You don’t know anything yet, she tells herself, as she shucks out of her coat, and peels off her leggings. You may be overreacting. She moistens a flannel in the sink, and goes back out to him. Kneels on the floor before him, and takes his hands in hers.
They're not that bad. Clean enough, once she clears the dried blood away. He doesn’t flinch or comment. She gets the impression he is sinking deep inside his mind, pulling himself in, erecting walls. So she takes some down. Unfastens the buttons of his coat, pushes it down his shoulders. Undresses him like a doll. He makes no move to stop her, nor any to assist. But when she peels his shirt back, and refastens his nightwear in its place, he leans to press his forehead against her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“Come.” She pulls him up, pushes his pyjama bottoms into his hands. He nods, strips down. In any other context she would probably have found this erotic. Now, she just turns away to give him a modicum of privacy, and discards her own clothing, pulling her nightdress over her head. What happened today was more intimate than a glimpse of skin or his hand on her breasts or his eyes watching her stroke herself. It was deeper and more personal than any sexual act she can imagine. She is shattered by it, and by the certain knowledge that her flesh alone comprises so very little of the reality of who she is. Today she has learned that you can be a perfectly functional body, with all your faculties and skills intact, and still not be yourself.

“Leave that,” she tells him, when she turns back to see that he’s folding his clothes. “Come crawl into bed.”

Again he complies. It is faintly horrible that he should do so. She does not want to see him broken and lost. Because then that means they both are. She turns the lights off, and lies down beside him, tucks an arm around his chest.

The dark anonymises them. There are no expressions to read, no masks to uphold. In the dark they are transformed into two heartbeats, and quiet breathing. He feels solid, and safe. Maybe her body does to him, as well. In the darkness, they can lie to each other about what they are.

“He called me out of Transfiguration. Dumbledore did. It was a Thursday. October. I’d never been to the Ministry before. There were Dementors in the courtroom. They were everywhere, by then. The ones Voldemort was using, ‘though no one would admit he was, not officially. And the ones from the Ministry. And you couldn’t tell the difference, which in retrospect summed up the entire ugly affair. The war.

They told me like it was almost an afterthought. That they’d broken her wand. Even then, a fucking euphemism. They’d broken her. Dumbledore explained it. They strip out every single memory of magic. They can’t kill the magic itself, but anything in your mind that it’s touched. Gone. Just gone.

It’s a potion, probably. I found that much out, later. A potion and a spell. It’s what they do in the Department of Mysteries. Figure out how the mind works, figure out how magic works. Test to destruction. And then apply their research to any little problems the Wizengamot susses out. They call them Unspeakables. Because that’s what they do, unspeakable things. But the one I got my hands on, he was useless, he had no idea about the mechanics of it. I looked everywhere in his head, but that’s all I got. For all the fucking work on Voldemort’s behalf, that useless nothing was all I got.

And Albus. That cunt. I begged him, pleaded. And he told me that I already owed him favours. ‘Ask me again when I can be sure of you’, he said. Bastard. I’d slaughter him again if I could. In a heartbeat. Aren’t you horrified? Why aren’t you run screaming, Miss Granger?”

“Because I’m not Miss Granger. I’m Hermione. And I’m staying right here.” She couldn’t run screaming if she wanted – there is nowhere she can go that will allow her to escape this knowledge.

“I’m sorry about today. I don’t know what I expected. That it would carry on as it often does,
civil and distant. That it would be easier to hold myself together with you here. I don’t know. Maybe I just wanted you as a distraction.”

“Maybe you wanted me as a friend. It is not a terrible thing to want that, Severus.”

He rolls over in bed, and wraps her in a fierce hug, like a drowning man catching at his only chance of salvation. “Thank you,” he says into the side of her neck. His grip eases after a moment, but he doesn’t pull away. She’s glad. She rubs his back, down between his shoulder blades. He relaxes infinitesimally beneath the pressure of her hands, breathes a little easier.

I’m here, she wants to tell him. Tell me what you need me to do. It’s what she would want to hear. That, or, I can help.

But that last one is a lie.

She cannot help him, and she cannot help herself. What she can do is hold him close and knead the tense muscles of his back.

“I am sorry, though. I didn’t think… I didn’t think it would be quite as awkward as it was. I suppose Gracie has been on her mind. She died about this time of year. Eileen couldn’t get down to London, at the very end. There’d been heavy snow.”

“Explain to me again, who she was.” Outsiders are a safe topic, she senses.

“Gracie Fenwicke? Mam’s friend. Eventually. I don’t know, maybe before, too. Before she took up with Tobias. ‘Though I had the impression Mam was actually pleased he’d left. He drank away all the egg money, pissed it out in the gutter.’ He sighs, and doesn’t continue for a very long time. “Gracie was better off. A better mark. Not wealthy, but she did commercial work, advertising. Watercolour. Mam always despised watercolour as a formal medium. Or the blowsy way Gracie did it, at least. Watercolour’s utility was limited to plein air sketching, in her view. But Gracie was like the way she painted: Larger than life, and rather imprecise in the details. Full of ideas, always scheming up grand plans. She’d come over for tea, and they’d get into terrible rows about ludicrous things, Cezanne and Van Gogh. And she’d come at night, too, with black eyes or a split lip. And I was such a shit, back then, because I was happy it were her and not Mam.”

His sentences have been getting more elaborate. It’s distance, she’s figured that much out. He seems calm, but it is not the deathly terrifying stillness from earlier, the heedless compliance that repulses her with its wrongness. The precision of his usual diction is still lacking, though, she thinks. *It were her* has a Mancunian twist to it that she has only heard occasionally, hovering at the edges of what he says. His performance is typically close to immaculate. But now he has paused, perhaps to see how she will respond to his continuing revelations of his younger self’s nature. Instead of plotting him out on a moral compass, she is thinking about his grammar. She supposes that’s the answer to his silence, right there: She does not care who he was.

Except: “That’s why you joined them. The Death Eaters. Because of what happened to your mother.”

“Yes. No. Lots of reasons. In the beginning, it was as simple as the fact they were opposed to Dumbledore, perhaps. Was it appropriate, for him to be leaning in the Minister’s ear one day, presiding over the Wizengamot the next, and then spend the week after meddling with the Board of Governors? If he wanted public office, there should have been a vote. Not that I cared about any of that. It sounded good. Justified my loathing of him in less personal ways. I’d seen what else he was capable of, why not imagine him pulling all the strings in the Wizarding world, the grand puppetmaster?”
“You said you wanted to set him on fire.”

“It was a full council. All seven members of the Wizengamot. They need all seven for executions, doesn’t matter what kind. It has to be unanimous, or else it’s Azkaban. Did he think he’d made up for it, when he voted in my favour, later? Are lives interchangeable?”

“Why did they do it?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there for the trial. Just… The aftermath, I suppose. Her property, anything held on the Wizarding side, it devolved to me. Which in practical effect, meant it was my job to clear Spinner’s End of anything magical. Legally, she’s a muggle now. And it fell to me to maintain the Statute of Secrecy. I had Friday, and the weekend. To go through the house. There wasn’t much. Some of her school things, some old robes. Any evidence of myself. And the last painting she was working on. She’d only just started it. She was using augury eggs.”

“Is that… could that have…?”

“Have been why? Doubtful. I think… I don’t have any evidence for it. Just a feeling, you understand. A suspicion. I think it was something earlier. I think she ran, that she was in hiding, and they found her.”

“But… No, Severus, that doesn’t make sense. The memories Harry saw—” He didn’t have them anymore, he’d given them to Harry! “—She took you to King’s Cross, to catch the train! If you’re right, why would she do that? There’d be wizards all over; someone would’ve recognized her.”

“That was later. What I meant is, I think they found her before I was born. I think I’m the reason they delayed… fuck. I hate saying it, ‘breaking her wand’. It’s so fucking inadequate.”

“Stripping her memory.”

“Thank you. Stripping her memory, then. Because there are laws, you know. About children born in pureblooded lines.”

And here it is, kicking her in the teeth again. “No, I don’t know. I’m muggleborn, remember?”

“It’s all tied up with status and inheritance. It doesn’t have much to do with purity. Or it doesn’t have to, necessarily.”

“The Princes were purebloods, that’s where you’re going with this?”

“Are. There’s still Tibs. He hasn’t had any intention of procreating, though. It’s something to spite his aunt. Stepmother. She was Gretchen Prinz. Fuck, let me see if I can get the genealogy out in a way that makes sense. Supposedly the Princes go back to the Roman occupation. Later, they were tied up with the Percys and the Gaunts, muggles and magical both. When those families fell out of favour, the Princes on the muggle side mostly wound up in Yorkshire, and the magical side emigrated to the continent.”

“Ah! Because I read they were European.”

“You’ve made a study?”

“A little. But go on.” Talking seems to be good for him. And she would rather hear ancient family drama than think about what his words mean.

“Maybe you should tell me. Having observed your penchant for research, you probably know
more than I do. No? Well, anyway, they took back up with the other Roman lines, and generally kept their noses clean. Nothing interesting, outside of alchemical patents. The story gets vaguely relevant again with my, let’s see… Great-grandfather. Severus Tarquinius Prince. Go ahead and laugh, it’s fucking ridiculous, the airs they put on. He emigrated back here in the 1850s. Blood purity matters, legally, more here than it does on the continent. All the ‘Great Families’ and that bullshit. And here’s a foreigner waltzing in like he owns the place, not least because he halfway does. Nothing tackier than the *nouveau-riche*.

Genealogy became a bit of an obsession with him… I don’t know how accurate any of it is. Tibs says he traced us back to Geta, at the beginning of the Severan line, which should go some way to explaining the affectation, but really — that many generations ago, who *cares*? There’s no genetic legacy left. But. Desperate to be just as obnoxiously upstanding as his peers, he reclaimed his supposed ancestral homeland, built Adderlinn Hall, and produced a rather disappointing heir, Severus Fabius, who cared more about brewing potions than playing politics. To top it off, Fabius the Feckless had the gall to go and marry one of the continental cousins, Emilie Prinz, instead of the nice Black girl his father had picked out. And then, when she died giving birth to my mother, he repeated the crime, by marrying Emilie’s youngest sister. But Gretchen was alright by Tarquinius, because she was a proper sort of social climber. I met her once. Frightful hag. Her own sons and daughter were killed in the war. Grindelwald did for two of them, and the Third Reich the other. But it didn’t matter, Tibs – Severus Tiberius, if you’re keeping track and need a laugh – he was the heir-apparent anyway. *If* he’d had an heir of his own. Tarquinius had gotten smart, and decided to specify pureblood matches, but he hadn’t specified pureblood offspring. Legal loopholes being one of Tibs’ enduring passions, I suspect he spent a lot of time looking over the family’s wills. For fun and profit. Tante Gretchen loathed him — he was nothing short of social embarrassment to her: gay as a butterfly, and utterly sanguine about it. But she did enjoy that her own children were in line to inherit, so I think Tibs and Eileen weren’t much interfered with, growing up. She probably had little accidents planned for them, in some convenient future. But then the war happened, and all her plans were upset, leaving her with no stones upon which to sharpen the axe of her ambition.

I’m guessing at some of this, you understand, especially what happens next. Eileen getting pregnant off some dirty muggle must’ve seemed like a miracle to Gretchen, because it was instant disinheritance, except too late: her own children were dead, and Eileen had been her last hope of salvaging the Prince line. But here she is, turned up outside of Manchester with a bastard halfblood. And here we get into the legalities, and this bit I do know, I learned it when Tibs showed up to offer me an apprenticeship: He’d claimed *me* as his own heir, when I was born, which meant accepting me as a pureblooded scion of his line. Which he absolutely could do, under the laws – they only state that the senior-most living member of the ranking bloodline has to claim a child, and hurrah, it’s instantly a legal pureblood. It’s a codicil that was put in place as a way of ‘cleaning’ the offspring of halfbloods, or muggleborns I suppose, who’d been brought into pure lines through marriage. No one in their right minds had ever used it for a halfblood child before — I checked — but then, no one has ever accused Tibs of being in his right mind.

Anyway, Fabius having died, Tibs ranked senior, and cut Gretchen entirely out of everything except her annuity, by the simple expedient of claiming his sister’s child as his heir. Remember, I said Tarquinius didn’t specify that the offspring had to be pureblooded? I bet Uncle Tibs laughed himself sick. Gretchen didn’t, though. Eventually, she holed herself up in Adderlinn Hall, bolted the doors, and told her portrait the secret. So I guess she got the last laugh after all. Though I think Tibs did it more for amusement and spite than the property, and in that case, his effort was amply repaid.

Except: and here’s my theory – what if claiming me to the Prince line wasn’t anything to do with
Gretchen? What if it was for Eileen? Legally, a woman can’t be executed if she’s pregnant with a pureblooded child. For the legal definition of pureblooded, you understand. I think she got a stay on her sentencing. I think I was her shield, and that she knew what was coming. It makes sense of some things. It makes sense of Tobias. It makes sense of how she eschewed magic, how she feared its presence around her work in any way. She knew what they were going to do to her, so she made damn sure to build up memories of a life without magic. Because otherwise — think: what would you know, if you lost everything that had ever happened to you, which was in any way connected with magic? For a muggleborn like yourself, you’d be eleven years old again.” He says it almost blithely, as if it is a purely academic question. Which, for him, it is.

“But for a pureblood, that’s an entire life. So I think she worked to protect what was most important to her, her art. And the other thing: my theory puts that last painting in context – the one she’d been using augury eggs for. It was a self-portrait. She’d definitely have finished it by the time I turned seventeen. I think that’s when she was scheduled for sentencing, in January. But someone, whoever was monitoring her, I suppose, must’ve discovered she was painting a likeness of herself. It would’ve had her memories, some portion of what they intended to rip out of her. I think they found out, and moved the timeline up.” His arm around her has stiffened, as if he is preventing himself from pulling away. Or from clinging closer? She squeezes his shoulders as firmly as she can manage from her position, and feels him relax a little.

His next words are heavy once more. “But you asked me about the Death Eaters. And I gave you family history. Yes, that’s why I joined them. Why would I not oppose a regime that would do something so horrific, to the woman who, for whatever faults she had, had still been my mother? Later, even when the propaganda started ringing hollow, when it encompassed things I couldn’t align my conscience with, I still stayed, took the mark. Because I’d seen a way forward, there. I was useful to them, and in their own way, they were useful to me.”

“Useful.” She has often wondered what he did for them. A low-level nobody, had been Harry’s impression. That he’d gone running with the information about the prophecy, desperate to curry favour and climb his way up. But did he go on raids? Attack Voldemort’s opponents? Muggle-bait? Rape? These latter possibilities don’t exactly square with the man who nurtures muggle artists, and blushes at the thought of sharing a bed. Maybe he brewed potions, Veritaserum and the like.

“Riddle was a prideful shit. He was always so convinced he could see to the very depths of my mind. Never even suspected I could hide things, because I’d learned to do it properly, years before I stepped foot in Malfoy Manor. He liked to laugh about it, humiliate me in front of the others. Here’s a Legilimens, who can’t even keep Bella out of his head. Deadly useful to them on one hand, because legilimency is so rare, and a walking liability on the other. Which was fine. It meant I stayed on the sidelines until they wanted me. Like having my own bodyguards, really. Nice feeling, that. Inconvenient the second time ‘round, when they stuck me with Pettigrew, which was a fucking insult, but I did reconcile myself to the notion he’d make good cannon fodder.”

“You performed legilimency for them.”

“Performed legilimency. Doesn’t that sound respectable? I cracked people’s heads like so many eggs. I ripped into them, tore them open, and found every secret thing they tried to hide from us. You can’t topple a regime or fight a war without data, and by Merlin, we were going to have data any way we could get it. And did I give a fuck?” He heaves a great sigh. “Yes, eventually. I only ever got my hands on that one Unspeakable. But even if they’d given me a dozen, I was sickened by it, long, long before then.”

She can’t imagine what it would be like, to have someone rummaging through your mind. If you
haven’t got anything to hide… But that’s not the point, is it? It’s like a kind of rape, maybe, invading the sanctity of someone’s thoughts. But what does she know about it? What Harry’s told her. And Harry tells her what he wants to, and in his own damn time. Harry’s unreliable, like her brain. “What is it like? Legilimency?”

“To perform, or to be subjected to?”

“Both.”

“Have you ever felt your thoughts spinning out of control? Felt yourself fixating on something unpleasant, forcibly told yourself to think of something else, and not been able to do it?”

“Yes, I… yeah, I know that sensation. Being fixated.” Like when she’d imagined Maddie kneeling between his thighs.

“That’s what it feels like, when someone is in your mind. Doing it, though, that’s different. It’s colours, mostly. When you’re in your own head, you don’t notice them. Fish don’t notice water, maybe. But when it’s someone else’s thoughts, it’s their own colour palette – it’s because emotions are tangled up with colour. Same region of the brain that fixes memories interprets light, so maybe that’s why. But once you figure out that someone equates jealousy with ochre, for instance, or maybe puce, then you know how to find thoughts, sensations, memories of events that are associated with that emotion. You follow the threads of that colour.

It’s exhausting. And disgusting. The things I have in my head now. Because it’s not like watching memories in a pensieve: there’s no way of telling, from the outside, how real any of it is. Could’ve happened, could be a memory. Or maybe it’s a fantasy. Or maybe it’s something they read in a book. So you have to keep going back, have to keep looking. First you need to learn them, figure out how their mind works. Then you need to figure out how much of it is real.”

The things he has in his head. What things, she wants to ask. He’d been one of the villains. It was the side of light, whose minds he’d pilfered. How bad could it have been? She nearly laughs at this facile analysis, how wretchedly simple the dichotomy is. She is not really under any illusions about human nature. Not anymore. So maybe she doesn’t want to know.

What sorts of things are in her head? Ronald. The war. She is not sure which would be worse. Maybe the war. The things with Ronald are not truly horrible, only depressing and painful in turns. And terrifying, now. What colour is fear? Perhaps the faded madder of the carpets at Malfoy Manor.

“Does it disturb you?”

She doesn’t know what to say to him. Yes, maybe. But whether she is disturbed by him or for him, she doesn’t know. But he is expecting her to answer, she senses. So she pulls away from him a bit, leans up on an elbow. She needs a better angle. But she can feel him tensing, even as he loosens his arms around her. Damn it, even when she doesn’t say anything, she still manages to communicate badly. She searches for the angle of his jaw, trails her fingers up to his chin. Tips his head, drops her lips to his.

His response is nearly savage, lips and teeth clashing with hers, his hands digging in at her shoulder blade, her hip. She feels herself drifting free. The only thing that matters is his body half-beneath her, his hair clenched in her fists, his voice, low and dangerous, rough with emotion: “Hermione. Hermione.” It’s like a chant, an incantation.

“Severus,” she whispers back.
The darkness is not anonymous after all.

But even if she is not anonymous, she remains duplicitous. She will take, of him: his pain, his need, his words, his kisses. Because if she fills herself up with him, there is no place left for her. For her thoughts.

He sags back into the pillows, gasping shallowly. “I am afraid of you,” he says.

Because she is not an imaginary friend. She does things that are unexpected, aberrant. And she is going to keep doing so: she leans close, softens her lips, and presses them to his brow. With tender fingertips, she pushes back clinging strands of his hair, traces the arch of his eyebrow. “I’m afraid of me, too,” she says.

He reaches to stroke her cheek with the back of his hand. “Or maybe I’m afraid of me. And how badly, how desperately, I have wanted to sabotage any possibility of...”

Of them? Of succor? Of absolution? These last two are like a vicious blow: is she a replacement for the women he cannot have, mother and childhood sweetheart? She wriggles down in the bed, lays her face against his chest, and wonders if it matters. She is not going to last long enough for it to hurt too badly, anyway. “Can I ask you something?”

“No, it’s nothing too hard.” It is – but for her, because she does not want to know. “I didn’t know what it really meant. The euphemism. Is it always? Because Hagrid said they’d broken his wand.”

“Maybe they couldn’t, with him. Because he’s half-giant. Or maybe they hadn’t developed the process yet. I don’t know. Dumbledore impressed upon me I was never to speak about it, that I should be deeply ashamed to have had such a thing happen in my family. The way he said it, something like, he doubted my miniscule standing in my house could ever recover from such a blow.”

“Lovely.”

“He was. He knew how to twist the knife. Always.”

“But then… people just generally don’t know? I didn’t. I thought… There are so many things I don’t know. Because they’re just not in books.”

“If they do, they don’t talk about it. I’m sorry, I can’t tell you with any certainty. I am in many ways the same kind of outsider you are. Despite my efforts.” He sighs, and she feels him running his fingers over her hair. “Maybe Uncle Tibs would know. I think he suspects I go to see her. We don’t talk about it. Fewer things for him to have to occlude, and no doubt someone’s still keeping tabs on him, making sure he doesn’t contact her. Must be a boring life, for whichever Auror gets tasked with that. Mine used to intercept my mail, the letters I’d get from Gracie. The ones accusing me of being a terrible son. And later, begging me to be reconciled. I don’t know what she thought, that we’d fought or something. But she was furious with me, abandoning Eileen the way I did. How it looked from her perspective. I’m glad she was there. Gracie.”

She has been concentrating on the steady thud of his heart. It is consistent, and something to cling to. Who will put her back together? She does not have anyone like Eileen’s Gracie. She squeezes her eyes shut. There’s Severus. But he is tied up with her magic – there is no space in her head where she understands him without reference to Hogwarts, and to the Wizarding world. She will
have, what? Parts of this trip to Northumberland? A few days without her wand? Rare glimpses of summers, those times when she abandoned her spellbooks to hare off with her father in search of the macabre?

She thinks he may have fallen asleep, he is so still and quiet. Should she withdraw, build some walls? It seems a kind of cruelty, to subject him to more loss.

“It probably should not affect me, the way it does.” Ah. Not asleep after all, only thinking. “She’s happy. She talks more than I remember. We have conversations now, sort of. And she laughs. I never heard her laugh, before. So in some ways, it’s not… not terrible. For her.”

Yes it is. “It’s terrible for you.”

“But better, too. I… she’s lost to me, as a mother. But she still exists as a person. And that’s the best thing. About being dead, I mean. I can see her again. And if it hurts, well, that is my problem. But it is good, too. To hear her laugh.”

She can’t. She cannot take this anymore, she cannot lie here through rationalizations, atop everything else.

“Hermione?”

She can’t answer, she is trying to hold her sobs in check. She can feel him sitting up in bed, behind her. He reaches across, to where she has turned away on her side, knees scrunched to her chest.

“Hermione. Shh, don’t. You’re shaking like a leaf. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She can’t even work her jaw to tell him, Nothing. He pulls her into his arms.

“Tell me. Please.”

It’s his plea that does it, makes her dissolve utterly. It washes over her like a crimson fog, her bitter fear, her hatred, her futile rage. She doesn’t know what she is saying, between wrenching gasps, between the wails she tries to stifle with her teeth cutting into her knuckles. When it passes from her, she is lying in his arms again, spasms of hiccoughs pulling at her diaphragm, and interfering with every fresh burst of tears. He is wiping them from her cheeks with his thumbs, kissing her and repeating her name, calling her back to herself.

She sniffles, hard, and tries to explain: “It’s what they’re going to do to me. Execute every part of me, except my body and soul.”

“What? I’m not following… Why? You can’t be serious, what could you possibly have done?” The darkness hides not a single iota of the raw horror in his voice.

“It’s Ronald. In the divorce. He’s going to lay charges that I aborted our child. A pureblooded child. The laws you were talking about, about claiming them.”

“He can’t. That’s… that’s insane, it doesn’t work that way. I don’t think it works that way.”

She sucks back her next sob. “Are you sure?”

“No.” He sounds dazed. “No, but I don’t think… The lineage claiming, that only works with a living child, not a miscarriage. There’s… yes, there’s laws against abortion. But they mostly apply to purebloods. Damn it, Hermione, I just don’t know. But… But it shouldn’t matter. He can claim it all he likes, he can’t prove it. Or… can he? Did you do it?”
“No.” She turns, to bury her face against his shoulder, and surrenders the last of her lies. “Sort of.”

His hand doesn’t cease its travels down the fall of her hair. “What does ‘sort of’ mean?”

“It means I’m not stupid enough to have used something that would’ve shown up in the foetus. The abortifacients listed in *Moste Potente Potions*, all of them. They used goldthread.”

“And its magical signature, its half-life, is about six months. In the mother’s body, too.” His voice is only considering, she doesn’t hear the note of condemnation she’d been waiting for. Maybe… He interrupts her thoughts: “What did you use, then?”

“In one of the early studies, on the Draught of Living Death. Part of the distillation process, when they were using magical flames, instead of gas. They got the wrong structural analogue for the sedative component.”

She feels him nod. “Yes, I remember reading about that. There was some thought that the analogue could be used as a hypnotic; they did trials of the isolate, but it… It was teratogenic. It interfered with germ line differentiation, neural crest tissues, if I recall. And it turned out to be incredibly long-lived, even after the primary hypnotic effects dissipated. Three or four days. When they found out it could be transmitted sexually, that it passed in the semen and could be absorbed into a partner’s body, they shut the trials down indefinitely. Destroyed most of the research notes, too. *Moste Potente* is probably the only place you’d even find reference to the study, now.”

Shall she confess all her sins at once? She feels curiously cold, and empty inside, now. “But that didn’t matter, the chemistry’s straightforward. Wasn’t hard to work out at all. Phthaloylation of a glutamine. You can even do it with some anti-emetic potions. I bought them straight off the shelf, just had to tweak them a bit. Andisen’s has phthalic acids in it. Then heating it with ammonia, or urea, that condenses the active component. You’re supposed to take Andisen’s Solution hot anyway. No one even blinked — and, bonus — it did help the morning sickness. But I didn’t think it had actually worked, thought I’d gotten something wrong with the chemistry. The spontaneous abortions had all happened early, according to *Moste Potente*. I must’ve taken it too late, or at too low a dosage. I was nearly two months along, by the time I worked it out.”

“But it did. Work, I mean.”

She tries to laugh, hollowly, but it comes out sounding more like an ugly whimper. “Oh yes. Eventually. I have nightmares, you know. They let me see it, at St. Mungo’s. I wish they hadn’t. I wish they’d shown Ronald, instead. Then he wouldn’t be able to think of it as a baby.” She pulls away from him, and turns on her side, facing the wall. It’s better than waiting for him to reject her. Although she does not think she will even really care, if he does. She feels dead inside already. Maybe, like Eileen, she’ll be happier, afterwards. She won’t remember these damning details.

“Hermione.” He lays a hand softly on her shoulder. “Hermione. Tell me what I can do, tell me what you need.”

But there’s nothing he can do, is there? “Nothing. There’s nothing. Unless… Would you? I need you to fuck me. Pound me right into this mattress.”

He does not respond immediately, and when he does, his tone is dry. “Pardon my ignorance, but I fail to see what that would accomplish.”
“I’d feel alive again, maybe.”

“Do you often need to have people violently imposing their bodies upon your own, in order to feel alive?”

She sighs, and pulls the covers up. “Don’t you have a way with words? Maybe you’re right, though. About people, how did you say it, imposing their bodies upon me. That’s how this miserable mess started.” She feels a tear leaking down her nose, which is odd, because she’s too cold inside now to cry, she thinks.

“Will you let me hold you, Hermione?”

“Suit yourself,” she sniffles.

He does. He draws her up in his arms, and tucks her head beneath his chin. “I’ll listen. If you want to tell me what you meant. About how this started.”

Does she want to? No. “I went there, went to him. Let him, let him put himself inside me. Except I didn’t. I said for him to stop, I changed my mind, but by then it was too late. But I said! I said for him to stop!” She’s bawling with convulsive abandon again, repeating these words amidst her sobs.

The firm pressure of Severus’ hands rubbing slow circles into her lower back makes it worse, if anything. She can’t seem to get control of herself while he is attempting to comfort her. She pushes away from him, finally, shoves herself over so that she flops back against the pillows on her own side. “I said for him to stop,” she says again, weakly. “But it doesn’t matter what I say, what I want. I didn’t want him to fuck me, and he did, anyway. I want you to, and you won’t.”

He reaches through the darkness, across the gap between their bodies, and traces her lower lip.

“You don’t need me to… to fuck you, Hermione. What you need is a plan.”
Discordance

Reality feels disconnected, or she feels disconnected from it. There is the cool smoothness of the bed sheets, the muffled rush of the shower, and the accusatory red glow of the clock radio, glaring at her from across the hollow Severus’ body has left in the bed. But she feels detached from these things, as if they are seen in a photograph, or a memory; as if she is a loose collection of molecules a million miles distant. She sits up, draws her knees to her chest, and gazes blankly at the grey ing windows. She hadn’t closed the curtains, but it appears night passed without incident.

Well, no.

But it passed all the same.

Severus emerges from the en-suite with his hair wrapped up in a towel. It’s so obvious and unthinkable that it jolts her beyond wakefulness and into a spiral of doubt. Is anything real anymore?

“All yours.” He gestures back into the glowing yellow rectangle of the doorway with one hand; the other is buttoning his shirt.

Good morning, she should say. But it seems out of sync in some fundamental way. So she nods instead, and retreats into steam that swirls like primordial fog.

Sudsing her body feels like a foreign action. Even untangling her hair is a curiously distant procedure. She watches Hermione Granger’s hands in the moisture-beaded mirror, unpicking Hermione Granger’s tangles, and wonders why the tugging at her scalp doesn’t hurt more. It seems as though it should.

“Are you up to breakfast, or would you rather stop for something en route?” He poses the question matter-of-factly, as he flips the coverlet up over the mound of plumped pillows on their bed. What she hears is Ronald’s good-natured whinge: why bother fussing over the bed if we’re only getting back into it? If we’re only leaving. She rubs her eyes, and refocuses on what he’s asked her.

“En-route is fine. I expect you’d like to be back sooner rather than later.”

She feels a sharpness, a suddenness, in the glance he throws her way. She doesn’t know what it means, because he doesn’t offer any verbal expansion, just sets about zipping his luggage.

The Cheviots don’t exist this morning. She keeps glancing out the window, and back in the side mirror, but cannot affirm their reality behind the sullen wall of fog that greys out the countryside, swallowing the town of Wooler, disappearing the hedgerows, and looming vast and unknowable where the road vanishes into it ahead of their car. Every so often Severus flicks on the wipers, and moisture that she had only been subliminally aware of is lashed off the screen.

Is the fog muffling everything between them, too, obscuring the truths they shared? It’s as good an explanation as any, for the muzzy bleakness that clings in her throat, for the numbness she feels in her face.

He stops to procure coffee before she settles on something to say, something to cast like an arrow through the haze. “How are you, today?” she asks, revelling in the bitterness that floods her mouth: a single sensation that is finally as it should be.

The corner of his mouth turns down, in a wry, inverted smile. “Functional. More or less.”

“The trick to being successful in your endeavours is to set the bar low enough,” he says, cryptically.

She isn’t sure if she should take solace in this, or begin to nurture a little flame of frustration. They seem to have backpedalled into an obscure game of fencing. Surely they know too much, now, for that to work? Or maybe it’s something he needs: to build distance, to push her aside, to disengage. And if this is the case, she can’t ask him without being combative. She notes, with detachment, that her fingers are clenched tight around the seat belt. She consciously relaxes them, busies her hands by warming them on the paper coffee cup.

He doesn’t owe her anything, she reminds herself. Probably he feels like he stepped into a hornet’s nest, where she is concerned. But surely the reverse of this is true as well? Although his situation and hers are not comparable: he has not begged salvation of her, only salve for wounds that he acknowledges cannot be healed. And barely that – if she wrapped him in her body, if she held him close and encouraged him to weep against her neck… that is a decision she made, and not actions he demanded of her.

She feels petty and small.

Her coffee is cooling; she finishes it before it becomes undrinkable.

“I… I don’t imagine the details hold much interest for you. Considering.” He offers these words hesitantly, and she turns back from her renewed perusal of the formless grey of the countryside.

“Go on,” she says, because he seems to be waiting on her permission to continue.

“Yesterday morning, I placed one page conspicuously out of order. And she knew it. When she looked through the catalogue.” He says it as if asserting a line of evidence.

Which he is, she realises. “Some part of her remembers. And the Gringott’s counter, in her painting.”

He nods. “I don’t know if it’s leakage from behind a spell, or if they missed something, removing the memories. I keep thinking, someday I’ll crack it. Someday I’ll understand how it was done. I think… maybe it is mostly an academic exercise at this point.”

“It doesn’t seem overly academic to me.” She hopes he reads her tone as merely dry; she doesn’t really intend sarcasm.

“No, I suppose it doesn’t. But Hermione –” he reaches across, and fumbles his fingers over hers. “You’re a long way from that. I am hard-pressed to believe Weasley would go to such lengths, or if he did that he’d be at all successful. What I mean to say is, and don’t take this the wrong way, but… he’s just not clever enough. Er, actually, erm, I suppose there’s only one way you could take that, but… well, he was a blithering idiot when I taught him, and I doubt he’s improved much.”

He releases her fingers well before she would have liked him too. It felt good, to be touched. It isn’t safe to drive one-handed, she tells herself, to counter the little sting of disappointment, and turns her mind to addressing his critique of Ronald. “That may be. He was lazy, anyway. At the time… I enjoyed the attention. I thought it mattered, that I was smart, that I could help them. That they would value me, for what I provided them. But… that doesn’t make sense, does it? What value would they find in something they didn’t care enough to do themselves?”

“Do you want me to castigate you, for having possessed an adolescent brain, at one time?”
“No. I’m fairly good at doing that myself, thanks. I have had plenty of time to practise.”

“Good. I’m not up to the hypocrisy, just now, so that’s really for the best.”

She nearly laughs, and she does join in his self-deprecating smile. But a shared expression isn’t enough to hold grim realizations at bay. “I don’t think it’s Ronald that I have to worry about, though. It’s… this is… it’s smarter than him. The vindictive feel of it, if he really knows what it means, breaking wands… that maybe fits. Maybe. If I weigh up all the petty grievances, all the tantrums, all the nasty asides, over years and years of making each other miserable. It balances, maybe. But nastiness aside, it just seems too deliberate.”

He seems to know what she’s getting at: “Well, but can you blame her? You’ve wronged her child, in her mind. And stolen a grandchild, too, if Weasley’s taken that tack in her hearing.”

“What do you mean, can I blame her? This is,” she bites her lip, because she can feel her voice rising. She swallows, breathes, and continues evenly, “This is completely out of proportion.”

“Is it?”

“What are you saying?” she asks, very deliberately.

“I’m not censoring you, if that’s what you’re inferring. Far from it. But I am suggesting you look at the bigger picture. The Prewetts are an old family, and they’ve been on the right side of history every time in the past three hundred years or more. And where has it gotten them? Molly’s a laughingstock in her class, a powerless degenerate who sold her family name to the lowest bidder – what could Arthur Weasley offer her? Him the second son of a halfblood.”

“How would you know that?”

She doesn’t even know that about her father-in-law.

“Believe me, lineage is something that formed a cornerstone of casual conversation amongst my former compatriots. I assure you, I knew the details of everyone higher up the social ladder than I was.”

Oh. Oh.

“You can get a certain distance on your own merits. But you can also fall a certain distance, on the basis of your choices. And it is hard to see how far that fall might be, when you’re looking at it from above.”

“So… What you’re saying: that I’m a threat to Molly? That… I make her — no, her family — look bad?”

“A little more than that, I think.”

“Spell it out for me, then,” she huffs, “I’m clearly no good at thinking sideways.”

“You’re selling yourself short, but what I mean is that Molly Weasley has devoted a substantial portion of her life to rubbing peoples’ noses in their expectations of her failure. She refuses to conform, refuses to embody the ‘blood traitor’ rhetoric they’ve thrown at her, at her family. She refuses to be beaten. She’ll change the very parameters of the game, if it means she can win. And look at what she’s accomplished: the Weasleys are an important family now. Catch anyone mocking them these days. If you think her unwavering support of Dumbledore was granted without first considering her family’s standing…”

“That’s particularly Machiavellian, that last. As if joining up with the Death Eaters would have
kept her family safe!

"Reductio ad absurdum, and you’re better than that. At any point the Weasleys could’ve kept their heads down. The sidelines are a fantastic place to situate oneself during covert wars fought principally through ideology and only later through terror. But her brothers joined Dumbledore’s cause early, and she would have lost face if she hadn’t dragged Arthur into it, too. Weasleys were every bit as good as Prewetts, you know."

“I thought I suggested you spell it out for me.”

“I’m doing so. Let me give you the thesis statement, then: Molly Weasley built a dynasty. Wholly up from the ashes of her slandered name. The Weasleys are a premiere family, and a large one. And what’s telling is that there are no abject failures amongst them.”

“Except Ronald.”

“Except for him – or rather, except for what you’ve done to him.”

“He threw me out!”

“I’m suggesting Molly’s perspective. You should have been the gracenote: Harry Potter’s best friend weds a brilliant muggleborn, and their fairy-tale union illustrates to the entirety of the wizarding world that bloodlines matter not a whit. You are unmaking a crucial part of her story. And that you would do it by embracing something utterly taboo in the wizarding world… In some ways, it’s a boon to her, to paint you a deviant, to cast you as criminal. She nearly has to do it: It’s not her son’s fault, if you are twisted, evil, almost incomprehensibly vile.”

“Do you even like me at all?” She rolls her eyes, and returns to looking out the window.

“Quite a lot, actually. Very much so.” His fingers sneak over hers again, and when she looks back, she sees that his lips are twisted up in a crooked, embarrassed little smile.

“Thank you?”

“Erm, thanks might be going too far -- I don’t think it’s necessarily a point in your favour that one Severus Snape thinks rather highly of you.”

She closes her fingers over his, squeezes gently. “Surely I ought to be the judge of that, don’t you think?”

“Your judgment is highly suspect, from evidence.”

“Well. Yes,” she sighs. Country miles slip by, and he returns his hand to the wheel. It doesn’t feel like abandonment this time. Very much so, he’d said. Rhymes with, I love you? Not quite. But it soothes the roiling panic, the jittery, acid fear that keeps wanting to pull her into its depths. If he understands what she is, and accepts her, cracks and flaws and all… But does he?

He cannot possibly begin to fathom the weeks of cold deliberation, or the black horror that followed. When she would wake every morning, to peer at her distorted body in the mirror, and think, Die. Why won’t you die? Or the unending sleepless hours, imagining a twisted, alien collection of tissues devouring the nutrients she consumes, weakening her bones, jerking her emotions about like a marionette on a string. The slow, choking realization that it’s not going to die, that it’s going to rip its way into the world, attacking her body in retribution, and shackling her to it forever. The sublime relief borne on tides of crimson agony, knowing that she has at least escaped this last fate. The unholy thrill of solace, as she examines hands slick with blood: maybe
she will die, maybe it will kill her, but at least she will not have to face it.

Except they’d made her look at it anyway.

“I would have done it differently. If I could have found a way.”

“Done it… the foetus, you mean? Terminating it?”

Terminating. The more syllables a word has, the further removed from the sweet metallic smell of ‘killing’. She nods. “If I’d never said anything to him, just nipped off to a muggle clinic. They even have pills now, although I think you have to use them right away.”

“‘Muggle’ is a gender-neutral noun,” he offers, obliquely. “Why do we still say ‘wizarding’, instead of ‘magical’?”

“Norms are entrenched in language. Or language reflects entrenched norms?”

“Either way.”

“Yes. Witches have value in that they produce wizards.”

“A reduction, but it’s probably accurate on some level. Social progress sputtered to a halt when the Statute of Secrecy was raised. Embracing progressive mores is largely equated to muggle-loving. It lowers status.”

“But that’s hardly the whole of it. It’s the statistics that win arguments.”

“Indeed. There was a resurgence in that rhetoric during the second war, wasn’t there? I’d forgotten that; I suppose it was more prominent in the first one, or I paid more attention. I was distracted, the second time ‘round. Not much spare time for The Prophet.”

No, she doesn’t imagine he did have. His extracurricular activities ran to cheating death, when he wasn’t fulfilling Dumbledore’s orders. She’s not surprised to learn the stats were brought up during Voldemort’s first ascendance, though. The data goes back nearly a century, and there’s an obvious trend: “Isn’t it true, though, that birth-rates amongst purebloods are lower?”

“You’re married into the Weasley clan, and you’re asking me that?”

“I rather suspected they were a statistical outlier.”

“Indubitably. But I doubt there’s anything fundamentally biological driving it. If anything, I would expect to see fewer children born to muggleborns and half-bloods: they have ties to the muggle side, they have access to barrier methods and contraceptives.”

“They fail, though. Contraceptives. Muggle or magical, doesn’t matter. There’s a theory that they stop working earlier in muggleborns, even.”

“Because their magic is that much more potent? Give over. If an argument doesn't work for the purebloods, it doesn't work for anyone else. And in a decade and a half of teaching, I never once saw a difference in expressed capability. You get geniuses and prodigies on either side the cultural divide, and squibbish, bumbling dolts in equal measure.”

“Then what’s your explanation for it?”

“I don’t have one. But I am leery of any theory that invokes blood status as an explanatory variable.”
“But birth rates. You have to admit the evidence is there.”

“And how does blood status explain anything that socioeconomic standing doesn’t? If bloodline plays into it at all, it can only be that in some cases, it’s a female line bringing the higher status to the union – and what cossetted princess of Slytherin wants to be flat on her back popping sprogs for half her adult life?” His delivery is perfectly deadpan.

She snorts at the mental picture of Pansy knee-deep in nappies. He’s got a point. …And she had never considered herself to have much in common with Pansy Parkinson, before. It’s eye-opening, or feels like it ought to be. Maybe it’s a disavowal of this new insight that spurs her next confession:

“It’s not a decision I came to right away, you know. I didn’t just miss my period, and decide what to do about it right on the spot. I told Ron, and he told Molly, and before anything, I was being frogmarched into wedding dresses, and mostly I just didn’t care. I… I don’t know how to describe it, even now: how lost and empty I was, how adrift. I didn’t know who Hermione Granger was anymore, and even if I could’ve figured that out, she didn’t seem to be a very important person to be. But Hermione Weasley. People cared about Hermione Weasley. And I wanted that. I wanted to matter. To someone. Anyone.” She can’t go on; humiliation strangles her voice in her throat.

Their arrival at the train relieves her of the need to continue to debase herself. The more she talks, she suspects, the more he will regret having said very much so. He doesn’t know her, not really, and she should be trying to keep it that way. She hoists her satchel from the boot, and follows him on to ticketing.

Her traitorous mouth runs on, as they make their way to their platform. “But I’m not Mrs Ronald Weasley. It ate me up, it consumed me. Whatever me was left, whatever part of Hermione Granger was still hiding in the corners, she was being devoured by this thing in my abdomen, by all these ridiculous fucking expectations, by—” She breaks off, because she really can hear how selfish it sounds, how raw and petulant and cruel. She’s come full-circle: she’s no different to her conception of Pansy after all. Well, and is there anything wrong with Pansy? Or her mental picture of Pansy, because hell, for all she knows, she could be knee-deep in nappies.

“Do you think you could have been a good mother?” His tone is light, but she perceives in it a goad.

“Clearly not.”

“Please — don’t take umbrage. I’m asking, honestly: do you think you could have?”

She thinks about the frustration she’d felt, having to set aside her work to cook Ronald’s dinner. She thinks about her annoyance with Harry’s children tearing her house to pieces during their typical weekend rampages. She thinks of her ennui when she must smile and nod as various Weasleys regale her with the accomplishments of smaller Weasleys. She thinks of the mechanical way she’d sought to manipulate her husband, doling out sexual favours in order to keep domestic peace, in order to sway his attention from demanding offspring of her. She thinks of her self-loathing, and how filthy and violated she’d felt, trying to get the feel of his hands off her that night, trying to rid her bruised channel of the sensation of his organ inside her. She thinks of retching over the toilet, when she’d realized how unsuccessful she’d been in that endeavour. She thinks of the years she spent lying beside him, lying to him, silently repenting her actions in unfeeling deed, while idly wishing he were someone else.

She settles into her seat at the window, beside someone else. Turns to him, soberly, and finally
answers his question. “No.” She looks hard at him, as he absorbs this word; she is watching for condemnation, watching for disapprobation.

He only nods. “Then you did the right thing. Or a right thing.”

She breathes in, and exhales the terror that has been coiling hard and hot in her chest.

But he’s continuing: “You don’t need me to tell you that, Hermione. You have lived with this, and owned your decision your entire adult life. Don’t give me that kind of power, the power to cast judgment upon you. Don’t give it to anyone. You went through hell to reassert yourself, to resurrect a version of yourself that embodies values and traits that matter to you. Don’t… don’t surrender that. Not for any reason – because there is no one, nothing, that can ever fill a hole where your self used to be. And what kind of person would want, or be content with, the mere shell of you?”
Honesty

It feels good having a wand back between her fingers. Granted, she doesn’t feel that tingling sense of comfort, that subtle electric quiver that accompanied her old wand. You never do, she knows. Only your first wand imprints that way: once you know magic, once it’s a part of you, your experiences of it overwhelm the simple kinship that is possible between wand and witch when her magic is still naive. A wand learns with you, grows with you, and becomes imbued with your sense of self as you discover it.

If there were some new field she could master with it, or another war to be fought. Another life to live… Then, maybe then, it would start to feel right. But it does not feel wrong, exactly. Only different. Only unsatisfyingly inert. But it is prettier than her missing vinewood: where her earlier wand had been smooth and stark, this one has carved twists of decoration running the handle. She can’t tell what they are, precisely: insects or flowers or just random nubs. Clarifying details are submerged beneath shellac, and unified with dark stain. Her thumb and forefinger have a tendency to travel over them, her fingertips wondering away at their mystery before stroking down to the honeyed shaft of polished linden.

It will do.

Any wand is better than none.

She pokes the air with it again, and the paper aeroplane she’d constructed of Dawlings’ reply makes another circuit of the room before its flight path intersects with the coat stand. Damn. The nose is bent, now. She could straighten it – she’s a witch, haha – but it seems like that would be a step too far.

Do something, she tells herself. No, her self replies. What’s the point?

Dawlings won’t meet with her until Monday, next. There’s nothing useful to accomplish, between now and then. Now that she’s bought a new wand, her to-do list is sadly bereft of meaningful action. She’d waffled on turning up at Grimmauld Place, but Harry was right, in one degree or another: this shouldn’t involve them. Or at the very least, she can maintain some facsimile of the moral high ground, and keep it from doing so. They are not a ménage a trois, she, Ronald, and Harry. Their triumvirate fell apart years ago, if it existed at all. Harry isn’t part of this business with Ronald – maybe if she respects that, she’ll still have him as a friend when this is over.

She watches her fingers crumple the aeroplane entirely. When this is over, chances are she won’t know who Harry Potter even is. Her friends will comprise… who, exactly? Sherlock Holmes, she supposes. Well, there’s Colin, Mary, Martha and Dickon, but they’d always seemed too neat a set; she’d felt an outsider despite an occasional wander down through their overgrown garden paths where Mary was nurturing little spikes of green poking through the matted grass. But that redheaded orphan girl who made up imaginary friends of the echoes in the woods. She’d seemed a likely sort – if she could envision imaginary friends, surely she didn’t mind being one? Eleven-year-old Hermione had had to cast off Mr Holmes when the Hogwarts letter arrived. Mr Holmes only sneered. But Anne had gone with her, up and into the fantastical castle. She and Anne had gone walking by the lake, had marvelled at the library, and had shared a particularly withering glance of venomous scorn when that rude Weasley boy with his smudged nose dared to mock them. She sighs. So Anne won’t be there, any more than Harry will, on the other side of a broken wand. A broken mind.

It’s not going to happen, she assures herself once more. This rings just as hollow as it did the last
time, and the dozen times before that.

When Severus says it, she believes him.

But this is not a good reason to make a nuisance of herself, to be underfoot at the Hive more than she has been.

She catches herself dwelling on thoughts of his chest, rising and falling at her back, and how solid he’d felt, even wrecked and broken. She lets these thoughts play out. They’re harmless. Sort of. Or at the very least, they’re not dangerous the way the others are, the thoughts of his fingers brushing her face, his hands grasping at her hip, her waist. Those are the thoughts that spiral into his weight atop her, of her own hands caressing lean muscles slick with sweat, her tongue flicking along the length of those slender fingers, tasting where they’ve been on her body.

Dangerous thoughts. Because however compelling they might be, she recognizes that they aren’t good reasons, either, to be underfoot in his life. In fact, they’re terrible reasons. Friends, he’d said with his lips, and his body hadn’t offered a genuine argument.

You need a plan, he’d told her. ‘Plan’, to her, usually connotes lists of actions and their ancillary requirements, ticky-boxes of books that she needs to consult, spells and magical artefacts to learn and gather, compendia of obscure facts arranged in neat hierarchies of likelihood of their relevance. ‘Plan’ is something she performs under her own power, not this endless waiting on others to fit her into their schedules.

She is not a patient person. It is far and away her preference to settle upon an action, perform it, and see its results immediately manifest. When you have to wait… well, things — situations — tend to mutate in ways beyond your control, in ways you never intended.

She smooths the letter back out. Monday. What kind of a mess of her life can she make, between now and Monday?

She’s going to the Burrow, tomorrow. She’d decided it earlier, and even laundered her dress robes. Maybe something can be resolved face-to-face — and it’s not as though she’s had legal counsel suggesting she not speak to her husband. They used to be able to talk to each other, didn’t they?

She runs through the list of transactional nothings that she remembers as typifying their exchanges. It compares badly to frivolous intellectual jousting she’s performed with Severus, and even worse when held against the halting, pain-wracked admissions they’ve shared in liquid eyes and hesitant touches, their words almost secondary to the immediacy of those connections. It’s not only in her head; she knows it isn’t.

To hell with this. She’s given him nearly two whole days free of her and her problems. She’s just eager, not clingy. Right? She pulls a cardigan on, grabs her satchel and umbrella, and apparates to an alley behind BOURGEOIS CUNTS. It’s not raining here, yet, but it’s London so it’s inevitable. Still, there’s an evening crowd making the most of the spring weather.

“Oy, Cinderella!”

She pastes a sick smile in place, and turns to embrace the trial of making small-talk with Maddie O’Shea. Cathy’s there, too, and a reedy, twitchy fellow who strikes her as familiar. And Severus.

He looks comfortable, is the only word that fits. They’ve arranged themselves at one of the outside tables (or the assortment of repurposed construction materials masquerading as such), and he’s
leaning back against the grimy brick, an indolent smirk peeking from behind his glass of ale. He lifts his fingers in a languorous wave, and gestures to the seat at his side as she approaches.

“Cinderella?” Damn that quirk of his eyebrow.

Her face is reddening, but maybe it doesn’t show in the poor light. “Because I’d lost my shoes.”

“Ah. I’d wondered.”

“What’re you drinking, Cindy?” Maddie is querying her handbag.

“You’ve already got a tab started, lovey; your card’s up at the bar.”

“Have I? Am I a fecking moron? Kevvers, why aren’t you buying my drinks?”

“D’you want another, then?” His tone is almost painfully earnest.

“No, she’s already had plenty, and I’ve got plans for her.” Cathy motions him back into his seat. She turns to Hermione with a smile, “Well, are we calling you Cindy, then? What will you have?”

“Her name’s Hermione,” Severus stresses the syllables, “And I’ll get her drinks, thanks. A pint? Or something stronger? You might need it, to tolerate this lot.”

She assures him that a pint is fine, but it’s debatable whether he can hear her, under the paroxysm of giggling that’s broken out around the table. It’s a declaration of undying devotion, apparently, that he’s offering to reach into his pocket on her behalf. Would Maddie want to help her pick out place settings, if she knew he’d bought her fish and chips? Thank all the gods, and Merlin for good measure, that they don’t appear to have been apprised of Northumberland.

“She’s clearly a tequila girl, Snapey,” the redhead is insisting, as she dabs away evidence of having sprayed her drink. “Or no, mezcal. With hair like that? She just has to be!”

Oh God. What did she tell these idiots, that night?

But Severus sets a pint in front of her. “One, I shouldn’t like to presume without warrant that you’re staying the night here in the Wick, and two, I know a better place to taste tequila anyway.”

Has he just invited her...? “Would that better place be your sofa, by chance?”

He blinks. Damnit, why is she always reading him wrong? And then he smiles, just one half of his mouth. It’s not a smirk, it’s too warm and slow. “Perhaps,” he says. Like a promise?

Motion across the table breaks the moment: Maddie is snogging the earnest bloke within an inch of his life, and he doesn’t appear to realise he’s in danger of asphyxiation. Cathy cuffs her. “Do you mind?”

“What? Love isn’t a finite resource, I’ve plenty for everyone! Severus, you need some love!” She ducks beneath the table, but Cathy hauls her back by the collar of her coat.

“Perhaps the adults here will take themselves elsewhere,” Severus suggests.

“No need, we’re off.” Cathy’s voice is grim: “This one ought to be locked up.”

“Ooooh, with the manacles, maybe?” Maddie seems entirely too pleased at this prospect, and Hermione is just as happy that she can’t hear the response, as the trio weave off to the bar to clear their tabs.
“Imagine,” Severus says, “what Argus Filch would think of that.”

She spits her drink quite as inelegantly as Maddie had. “Damn you! Argh, God, now that’s in my brain!”

“You’re welcome.”

She rolls her eyes, and wishes she could tell, oh, George maybe, that Severus Snape appears to have a filthy sense of humour – she has a feeling he’d appreciate the finer points of this circumstance. “You like them.” She gestures in the direction they departed. “I mean, you genuinely like them.”

“Maybe. They have innocuous expectations about what I am. So maybe it’s not so much that I like them, but rather, I like being who they think I am. People we surround ourselves with are mirrors, eh?”

“And if there are no people?”

“Then we make our identities of the memories of their perceptions, I suppose. Or if we are very masochistic, we consider how we understand ourselves.”

“Why would that be masochistic?”

“People who don’t have access to our heads are generally kinder in their assessments.”

“Ah.” Yes, he is far kinder to her than she deserves. But had anyone ever been kind to him, barring these muggles? Lily, maybe. His mother? “Well, it’s nice to see you’ve got people you can relax around.”

“Sometimes it’s a relief, being able to don an affable persona. For a little while, I can convince myself…”

“It’s not a persona, though. You’re not – it’s not like you’re making yourself up as you go. Even I know that. Every role you ever played drew upon a part of yourself. It was an authentic performance because it wasn’t one; you just suppressed the other facets of yourself, the ones that didn’t fit the role.”

His face has gone immobile, just his dark eyes boring into her. “And you’re comfortable with that assessment? It brings you pleasure, to think of me as the kind of person who enjoys making schoolchildren wet themselves in terror, for instance?”

She issues him a challenging grin. “Surely, they’d all learned to control their bladders by age eleven, no? As to being a bit of a bastard… Damn it, yes. I enjoyed watching you eviscerate people who hadn’t been arsed to prepare for class, or who weren’t taking the subject seriously. D’you have any idea how often they got away with that shite in other classes? I swear Harry and Ron used to literally sleep in History, and then they’d put up such a nasty whinge if I didn’t lend them my notes. It felt good, seeing them get some comeuppance in Potions.”

His lips have been twitching, and now he smirks outright. “‘Know thyself,’” he quips. “Hermione Granger has a mean streak, does she?”

“Are you surprised?”

“Not terribly.” His eyes have gone half-lidded, and his lips have relaxed into a soft smile. “Too, I’ve long suspected you of a kind of ruthless pragmatism.”
Which he doesn’t seem to find particularly off-putting. “It gets me in trouble, though.”

He nods, slowly. He’s thinking of a particular kind of trouble, isn’t he? And now she is, too. She swallows another mouthful of ale, and reflects on her aptitude for dragging a conversation into the blackest hole imaginable.

“How have you eaten?”

She shakes her head; she doesn’t trust her voice.

“I’ve got leftover chicken tikka back at mine. Although I suppose I should offer you a proper dining experience.”

“Leftovers sound perfectly fine.” Alright, her vocal chords are working. And it is perfectly fine. Preferable, really. Intimate, in a way that a veneer of public posturing never could be. “I appreciate that, you know. That you welcome me into the boring, unglamorous parts of your life. It’s honest, I think is the way to describe it.”

“Hmm. Or maybe I’m just trying to put you off.”

“Then you need to try harder,” she informs him.

“Is this trying hard enough?” he asks her, once they make their way to the Hive. There is a violent cacophony of sound flooding into the night, and scintillating points of coloured light dart in the darkened windows. “It’s enough to make you appreciate chamber music,” he says acidly, as he unlocks his door.

The raucous ‘music’ follows them into his home. “Would you mind casting a silencing charm at that wall?” he asks her. “My version takes about seventeen minutes and can’t be performed until eleven o’clock.”

A few wand flicks, and silence reigns. “What’s your version, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Calling the Met.”

“Oh.” She favours him with a belated chuckle. “Y’know, I’m usually the one making the muggle joke that no one else gets.”

“Was it very odd for you,” he asks her, as he retrieves tupperware from the fridge, “having an open muggle heritage? Did people mostly ignore it, or were you like a zoo exhibit?”

“Were they curious about muggles the way Arthur is, you mean? No, growing up, most of the muggleborns were too thrilled with magic to talk about anything else, and the purebloods never asked. I don’t think Harry and Ron even knew I was muggle-born ’til Christmas, my first year. But you know, sometimes I’d say something muggle-ish, and the Weasleys would look at me like I’d sprouted a second head. Over the years, I mean. Where do you keep the plates?”

She sets their places while he microwaves dinner, and thinks back on her casual slip. Harry and Ron. When had she started thinking of him as Ronald all the time? It had crept on, hadn’t it, after he’d come back to them with a jaunty click of his deluminator. It had only been in her head, at first, a reminder to separate his treasonous reality from her lingering impressions of him as a loveable goof. No, ‘treasonous’ is too harsh – that’s what she thinks now. She doesn’t know what she thought then. Memory’s an unreliable mush.

“I always admired Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy,” Severus says, apropos of nothing as they take
their seats. “Not the people they were, necessarily. But how they were together. They could finish each other’s sentences. It was more than that, though. I think I eventually figured it out: They knew each other down to the bones. If you watched them, there wasn’t any sly posturing, no secrets, no little games of hauteur between them. You got the sense, after a while, that they were absolutely naked, to one another. It’s a terrifying notion. And beguiling, too. That thoughtful acceptance.”

Does this put something in perspective? Is honesty the pinnacle of Slytherin courtship? “Do you think it was nonjudgmental acceptance of one another, or that they were secure enough in themselves and each other that they could hold and share their true opinions?”

“If a tree falls in a forest… I don’t know. Maybe those are stages along a continuum?” He passes the naan across to her.

“I guess I wouldn’t know. Ronald and I never had anything like that.”

“Why did you stay?” And there it is, lying there between them like a dead fish swelling in the sun. She shrugs, and mops at the sauce on her plate. “Why would I leave? What else was there?” You never sent me another note, she wants to tell his frown. But she doesn’t, because she likes having his good opinion, his kindness, his words of affirmation: very much so. And he wouldn’t gift words like that to someone as desperate and pathetic as the admission would make her sound.

She can almost pinpoint, by the way his face smooths out, the moment he chooses to leave it alone.

“I’m going to the Burrow, tomorrow,” she blurts.

There, that frown’s edging back. “Is that wise?”

“I have no idea.” She follows him up to the sink to rinse her plate. “My thought was, perhaps I could gain a sense of whether they really intend the worst for me. I think I’m not supposed to know what’s coming… No, here, I’ll be honest: it was Harry who told me, in strictest confidence, the charges of fault Ronald’s intending to levy against me.”

“In strictest confidence, eh?”

“You don’t count, clearly. Who would you tell?” She rolls her eyes at his smirk.

“I wonder if Potter would see it that way? No, go on, I’m just baiting you. You were saying that you aren’t supposed to know.”

“I don’t know why. Maybe so I won’t have time to prepare anything, or so my lawyer will be blindsided, or something. But that’s stupid, because I’ll find out at disclosure, and there will be weeks, maybe months, between that and the judgment, won’t there?”

He’s shaking his head at her as if he’s disappointed. It’s just a smidgeon off the faux-pitying way he’d surveyed particularly execrable potions from the Slytherin side of the classroom. “Don’t you think it’s a more parsimonious conclusion to presume you’d do a runner, if you knew what was in store?”

Er, yes. “If I were guilty. If they could prove I was guilty. And besides, I could ‘do a runner’, as you put it, any time after disclosure, couldn’t I?”

His lips are pursed tight, and dinner sinks into an uncomfortable knot in her stomach, when she hears the bitterness lurking beneath his reply: “Good luck with that. They put a tracer on you, if
you’ve been charged with any criminal violations. It’s not unlike the spell they use to track underage magic; they can monitor everywhere you go, everything you do. Or, if you choose not to consent to the tracer, you have to surrender your wand.”

“Oh.” She supposes she is lucky, having a friend who’d endured the wizarding world’s judicial system. “That… Yeah, that limits options.” But she could survive without a wand, couldn’t she? And live off of what, she asks herself sarcastically.

“It’s putting the cart before the horse, though. It won’t possibly get as far as criminal charges,” she insists (to an audience composed of herself?), as he passes her a glass of wine and settles on the sofa beside her. “He can’t get me for, what was the phrase, ‘infanticide of a pureblood child’, because it bloody well wasn’t a child. Might-haves and could-haves don’t mean anything, legally.”

“As I think I mentioned a while ago, he’s probably just out to make a scene. Or Molly is. Whoever.”

She inclines her head grudgingly. “Yes. I know. I’m tense, is all. I stress about things.”

“Really. I hadn’t noticed.”

“That’s not nice.”

“Ah, forgive me, I wasn’t aware I was supposed to be ‘nice’. And what would a ‘nice’ fellow do, in such circumstances?”

“Distract me from my brain.”

“Hmm. Do you suppose it would be suitably distracting, were I to conduct a bit of research as to where else you might be ticklish?”

“Aha, I see why it’s sauvignon blanc, tonight. So it won’t stain when I spill it everywhere.”

“A cunning plan on my part, no?”

“Stop it.” His hand has been travelling up her calf, and she honestly hadn’t realised before that the back of her knee was ticklish. “That’s not quite what I had in mind, when I asked for a distraction.”

He affects a pout. It looks ridiculous, and adorable, and she leans forward to kiss him. Maybe that’s what he’d been angling for; he’s quick enough to set their glasses aside and participate. “That’s more like it,” she purrs against his jaw. “Another quarter-hour of this and I’ll be nicely relaxed.”

He pulls back a bit, and weaves his fingers into her curls, lifting them around her face. “Relaxed, now, is it? I thought you were aiming for distracted.”

“Relaxed is better, I changed my mind. A nice fellow would distract me from my brain and find a way to relax me.”

“And, presuming of course that I have any interest in being a nice fellow, how would one ideally set about relaxing you, madam?”

She grins impishly. “Well, a shag would relax me just wonderfully, I’m sure. If there’s one on offer.”
“Er, should there be?”

She knows for a certainty that she hasn’t imagined the sudden flare of emotion in his eyes, because the calm blankness that succeeds it is nothing like the genial humour that had lurked there moments ago. He hasn’t jerked away from her, nothing so obvious as that, but his hands are still.

She places a kiss on his cheek as if she hasn’t noticed that anything is wrong. “I’m joking, really. Sorry.” She’s not, but his fingers move again, brushing her hair back, so she is. Joking. Absolutely. Because that’s what she is, a joke. She shifts, to lean her face against his shoulder, and tries to seem comfortable – telegraphing her embarrassment would only give the lie to her attempt at smoothing this over.

An unexpected bonus is that she can’t see his expression from this position. So because she doesn’t know what to make of “Well.” when he says it, she merely waits until he continues, “If relaxation is the order of the day, I think I’ve got a fairly good idea of how to accomplish it. Budge up a bit.”

He rearranges them so that she is seated in front of him, not exactly in his lap, but tantalizingly close, with her back towards him. He pushes her hair forward over her shoulder, and the faint brush of his breath against her bared nape makes her feel shockingly vulnerable. She can feel his fingertips ghosting along her spine, before coming to rest against the sides of her neck, gentle braces against the press of his thumbs.

She feels a sigh with her whole body, as the edges of his thumbs knead slow circles into the muscles along her neck, and then as his hands cradle her face, tipping her back to lean against him while his fingers work magic in her temples. It’s sublime, and she’s nearly reeling from warm waves of contentment that are warring with the visceral, needy reaction building between her thighs. It’s not the way he’s touching her – his movements are so precise, so purposeful. It’s the sheer attention he’s levelling at this task, as if there’s nothing else competing for his regard, as if he is wholly focussed on her body.

She shivers, when he lifts her cardigan over her head. And not because she’s cold. He unbuttons her shirt, but doesn’t remove it. It’s so that he can move his hands beneath the fabric, she realises with disappointment that sharpens to a knife’s edge when his fingers don’t even stray across her breasts, as he repositions his hands on her back and shoulders. But she isn’t disappointed long. His deft hands seem to find every bit of tension that’s been keeping her upright, and she can feel herself slowly collapsing into a puddle in his arms.

“I take it we’re relaxed now, are we?” His voice is barely more than a whisper, and so close that she’s certain she can feel the vibrations of it all the way through to her vulva.

“We are very, very relaxed.” It’s almost as if she’s been drugged; her tongue doesn’t seem to want to make sense of the shapes of words. But talking is beside the point, because he’s tracing her features again, delicate little flutters of fingertips along her browline, and over her eyelids. He seems to like doing this, she thinks, but isn’t sure what this thought connects to. She lets it vanish, and concentrates instead on the paradox of how his hands caressing her face can set off tiny electrical tingles at the base of her skull, which creep so deliciously up along her scalp.

She returns to herself slowly, and gods, yes, she’s relaxed. “Thank you,” she tells him in all sincerity, “I think this is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

He drops a light kiss on her brow, and she knows she has a stupid grin on her face and doesn’t care. Would he let her reciprocate? Another time, he says. It’s getting late. He kisses her again as she’s leaving, and it’s telling that she walks half a dozen blocks in a light drizzle before
remembering that she’s a witch and can apparate.

Her blissful languor spills over into the morning. She’s grinning like a loon in her tangle of bedsheets, and even the thought of tracking a Weasley into his Burrow doesn’t quite wipe the self-satisfied smirk off her face. Laszlo gives her an exaggerated wink, as she pays for her coffee, and hell, he’s not wrong, if that’s what he’s thinking. Not entirely.

She catches sight of her smile in a shop window, and makes a concerted effort to school her features into a more appropriate expression. Is she glowing? What is glowing, anyway? She wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn it’s this pleasant little bubble where going back to Hackney Wick to snog Severus Snape makes ever so much more sense than apparating to Ottery St Catchpole.

Luck’s not on her side. Ronald is right there, in the garden, and she doesn’t have the first clue what to say to him. The Potter children are there too, though their parents don’t seem to be in evidence. They’re helping Uncle Ron de-gnome the potato patch, she is earnestly apprised.

She smiles helplessly. “Really? That’s awfully good of you, Lil. Are your brothers doing their share? Or have they been chasing the chickens all morning?”

James and Albus blush red in full confirmation of their Weasley genealogy, but Lily take pains to assure her that they’ve been chasing Mr Wiggles, because he’s been chasing the chickens, and is she going to stay for lunch, because Gran’s made a cake the size of Granda’s whole muggle shed and… “No, Lil, sorry; I’m just here to talk with Uncle Ron for a bit.”

And then there’s nothing else for it.

He leads her off down the lane. “Little pitchers,” he says, and she agrees.

Their pace slows as they approach the fieldstone wall at the bottom of the yard. Ronald turns, and shades his eyes to look back at the children. Their dog seems to be retrieving nearly as many gnomes as they throw over the garden fence.

“You’re actually not horrible with them, you know. But you never once seriously intended to have kids, did you. You just led me on, for years and years and years.”

She keeps her voice low. “I don’t want to argue with you, Ron, that’s not why I came here. But I think it’s for the best that I never got pregnant again, don’t you? I’d have been a terrible mother, probably. I was a pretty terrible wife.”

“Yeah, but… you had the instincts for it, you know.”

“What, because I’m female?”

“Not just that. You really liked it when I sucked your jubblies, you know you did. You didn’t fake that, at least.”

Her jaw is somewhere down by her feet. “Oh. My. God. You think – you actually think! Just because I have erogenous zones in my breasts, that I’d be happy with some squalling brat hanging off them?” She’s digging her nails into her upper arms, because the alternative is flying apart in rage and horror. If he’d calculated it, she doesn’t think he could’ve found anything surer to make her feel filthy and defiled. Had that been the only reason he’d ever--?

“You might’ve. If you could’ve got over being a vicious cunt, I suppose.” He says it like a statement of fact; there are no narrowed eyes, no cruel edge to his voice. He could be talking about
the weather, the way he’s describing the woman he married.

Somehow that makes it hurt more.

“I know I’ve hurt you,” she says, sinking down the stone wall until the dried weeds there are at eye level. “We’ve hurt each other. For too long.”

“Too long is right. When do you think it started, hey? A year ago, five? Tell me, Hermione, what conclusion have you come to in that magnificent brain of yours?”

Alright, here’s the beginning of what she’s been expecting. She takes a deep breath. “At the very beginning. When I miscarried. You’ve never forgiven me for that.”

She cringes as he hauls off and kicks the wall. A scatter of stone flakes fall free. “Oh, don’t you even fucking *start* down that route, Hermione. Don’t you even.”

“What do you mean?” She keeps her voice quiet and soft, as if she is placating something wild. She is.

“You’re going to make this out that I’m being a bastard about a miscarriage? If it even was. You have some nerve. No, you know what this is about, Hermione? This is about the fact that you couldn’t even let me grieve.” He kicks the wall again, as if for good measure, before slumping down into the grass as she has.

There’s a fly droning away somewhere in the stacked stone. The sound seems all-encompassing. It’s there, right in her ears, she’s sure. Or maybe in her head, because there aren’t any thoughts there, and it makes sense that’d it’d be flies, underneath all the usual noise she tells herself.

Ronald is staring at his clenched fists.

“I… I know it affected you, Ron. I know it was hard.”

“You fucking *DON’T*!” He snaps his jaw shut on whatever scream of rage was going to follow this, and draws in a deep breath. “You don’t. Don’t pretend like it even bothered you, it didn’t. He didn’t. He was just some thing to you, wasn’t he? ‘It’. You were always so goddamn careful to say ‘it’. *His name was Fred.*”

He presses his face into his knees. She can’t tell if he’s crying, or just trying to recover some semblance of his placid façade. She doesn’t know what to do. She reaches out, hesitantly, and gently squeezes his shoulder.

It’s like being struck by a snake. He moves so quickly she barely understands what’s happening as he slaps her hand away. “Now? You can’t possibly be serious. Go fuck yourself Hermione. I’d have taken even a teaspoon of comfort from you years ago, but did you offer any? No, you always had other priorities, didn’t you?”

She stares at him wordlessly, clutching her arm. Her brain doesn’t want to connect the sharp pain there with this man, this man she slept beside for years, the laughing boy she’d grown up with, *her friend.* “You hit me,” she says, needlessly.

“Be glad it’s not worse,” he says, between gritted teeth.

“But it is worse,” she reminds him, “You’re divorcing me. As a party at fault. Because why, Ronald?” But she knows there’s no use in it, so she isn’t surprised when he doesn’t respond. So she continues; maybe he’ll listen, maybe he won’t. “You’re not the only one who was affected by
what happened, Ron. I’ve had nightmares forever, you know I did. I’d wake up and I’d be so sure it was still inside me — Him. I know you want me to say ‘him’, Ronald, and I’m sorry. I wish you’d seen. It — h-He. He wasn’t anything like a baby. You don’t have any idea how hard it was, how scared I was to ever have that happen again.”

“So you never even tried, is that it, Hermione? Now it’s going to come out?” His voice is just dripping sarcasm.

She swallows hard. “I tried.” It’s not exactly a lie. She had tried, just not the way she means him to take it. She’d tried to apologize to him a hundred times over, her lips around his cock, her legs around his waist. “So we never had kids. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that didn’t work for us.”

“Sorry. Who cares if you’re sorry.”

“I tried to be good to you, Ronald, I tried to give you everything I could. I gave you my time, my energy, my heart, Ron. It wasn’t always bad, I know it wasn’t. I thought we were doing alright, that we could be enough for each other. I gave you everything I could; every part of me you wanted.” Why doesn’t he understand how much effort she’d put into it, how hard she’d tried to make things work, in spite of it all? How sorry she was. Not about kids, no, but about... about that.

“Merlin’s hairy ballsack, Hermione, your head’s as swollen as it ever was. What the bloody hell would make you think I’d rather have you than a real family? You talk about giving me your precious time and energy. You spent your time and energy with Snape’s fucking books, you know you did. What about me? What about everything I gave you?”

“Tell me what you mean. Please.” Her voice sounds very small to her own ears.

“I gave you my bloody dreams, didn’t I? You think I wanted to be everyone’s Uncle Ron? I wanted my kids to go to school with Harry’s. Freddie, he was going to be Jamie’s best friend, they’d both be sorted into Gryffindor and they’d try out for Quidditch and they’d sneak off to Hogsmeade just like Harry and I always did.” He takes a deep gulp of air. “But you ruined that. You ruined every possible chance of that. I gave you the best years of my life, and you gave me what in return? You.

Like you’re some brilliant fucking prize. Here’s news for you, Hermione: There’s not a single part of you that even begins to come close to what I’ve lost.” He heaves himself up to his feet. “See you at the Wizengamot. And don’t you dare come here again.”
The Bostock Lion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She watches Ronald retreat back to the house. They’re a contrast, his broad shoulders and firm stride, against the rickety, slap-dash look of the Weasley home. If you didn’t know where to look, you’d never guess which the repaired bits were. You would think, in a family of wizards as large as theirs, that someone would have fixed the way it always seems to lean – they can’t all be incompetents. It looks like a ruin, the chimney and peaked gables on the attic poking up into the sky like a bad parody of a gothic steeple.

She hauls herself up to her feet, and shakes out her robes.

Clearly, she shouldn’t have bothered with her clothing. It takes a few tries (she is still getting used to her new wand, or her hand is too shaky), but she does manage to transfigure the robes to something more appropriate for muggle London.

Thinking of steeples has given her a possible answer to ‘Now what?’ – or if not an answer, then a way to stall the question until her brain is ready to work again.

It’s wrong from the moment she passes through the heavy pillars at the gate. The sunlight washes out the greens of emerging daffodils and new grass, and there are birds trilling high up in bare branches, and amongst the first flush of chartreuse leaves. But she goes on anyway, because the ivy and the moss are the same, and if the sunlight throws the ranks of monuments into sharp relief, then it also hides some in shadows.

She can re-calibrate her expectations for the lighting, but it is a more difficult trick when it comes to other people. She flinches from the energetic dogwalkers who weave past her, and hunches in against overhearing the conversation of two volunteers armed with rubbish pikes and bags. She doesn’t make it into the depths of the place, where the trees are spreading protectively over the headstones nestled amongst their feet, where the stone angels are shrouded in lichen and vine. She sinks, instead, onto a simple bench, and wonders if she knows any spells to make other people invisible. If she sits here staring blankly long enough, perhaps their aggregate movements will fade from her attention. They’ll be like the birds that flutter about in the branches, something that she can identify and then ignore.

“Yer in my seat, you know what?”

She looks up, startled. She is being addressed by a bald-headed scarecrow with a can of lager in one hand, and a dog leash in the other. There’s no dog in evidence.

“’Cos I like to sit ‘ere, roll meself a spliff. Nah, nah, don’t get up. I can share. Don’t mind Eddie, tho, if’n ‘e ever comes back. Don’t ’spect he will; Colleen she never did.”

His dog, perhaps? Has he gone through two of them? She smooths the fabric of her coat. It doesn’t seem to want to remain felted wool; it keeps going soft and pliable down where she’d reduced its length. So if there’s been two of them, dogs, does he carry around the same leash for both?

“Colleen, she took my kids. You got kids?”

Oh, so not a dog. Or at least one of them isn’t. It is probably a bad idea to encourage him, but she
can’t exactly run away. It’d be rude. So she shakes her head, No.

“Nah, figures, you ‘ardly look the sort, eh? Bet you’ve got one them new flats and some poor bastard like me who brings you roses and don’t know what ‘e’s in fer. Life. That’s what he’s in fer, you tell ‘im I said that, ‘cos that’s what kind of bird you are.

My Colleen, I took ‘er fer the same, but she took me fer a run, and she took me kids, and ‘ere I am. I ‘ave me an analyst now, and Eddie, ‘cos you need sommat to come ‘ome to, don’t matter who you are.” He has been constructing a joint while imparting this history. He pauses to lick his rolling paper, then tucks his makings back into a pocket. “But who gives a shit, eh? It all goes back to shit in the end and there’s naught left, all fucking crumbles up and then they come an’ draw willies on yer ‘eadstone.”

He fumbles out a lighter. “Hard fucking thing, ‘tho. You wake up every fucking morning and sommat else hurts, and alright, death’s a cunt but a few more years of this and you’ll fuck the whore and prob’ly like it. But I think of me kids, and Christ. I got Eddie when Mike… when ‘e…” He takes a drag on his joint and scrubs at his face. “When ‘e turned ten. Colleen, I ‘eard from ‘er slut sister, how she baked ‘im a cake and ‘e had all ‘is mates from footie and I didn’t even fucking know he played footie. ‘Cos ‘e was still shittin’ ‘imself when I saw ‘im last. And now Eddie, he’s so stiff in the mornings ‘e pisses ‘imself, trying to get a leg up to do it proper. Reckon he could squat like a bitch, but ‘e won’t ‘cos ‘e’s got ‘is pride, but we’re all going fer wormfood, and what’s it all for. That’s what I want to know: what’s it all for?”

“I don’t know.”

“You ever find out, you let me know.” He subsides into silence, and sucks contemplatively at his joint.

He’s finished talking to her; she’s free to leave. She stands, brushes at her coat. One of the buttons has started silvering back into her waist-pin; she corrects it with a little nudge.

“Back there, that’s where the shirt-lifters go,” he calls helpfully, as she slinks off along an overgrown path.

She doubts it, it’s the middle of the afternoon. But there is an assortment of trash, heaped in between the monuments. She sees broken glass, used condoms. A doughy woman in a reflective yellow vest and heavy gloves is wrestling plastic bags out of the shrubbery. “Full time job, it is. People!” Hermione just nods, passes by.

People. That’s the problem, on every possible level. A concealment charm prevents their talking to her, but despite her efforts in self-delusion she can still see them: middle-aged ladies walking their dogs, an old man raking dead leaves off a grave, a wino sprawled in a patch of sunlight, a volunteer pruning branches and ivy away from the crooked ranks of crumbling headstones, a gang of truants shoving each other and leaping from the war memorial catacombs. Where is the solitude, where is the lonely stillness of it, the haunting, magical grace that she experienced at Severus’ side? She understands, now, why he came in the rain.

If she wants to be alone, this is the wrong place to have come.

But she does not have places to be solitary. Solitude was a condition she endured, not one she sought. In the library at Hogwarts. Along the country lanes beyond the Burrow. Staring at the ugly paint in her yellow bedsit.

She fetches up at the derelict chapel again, and leans her elbow on the crude wooden hoarding that
surrounds it. There’s a panoply of vaguely hieroglyphic figures painted across the front of this putative deterrent – and faces on its reverse, illustrating that the graffiti artists aren’t deterred by a five-foot fence. She thinks even she could vault it, but why bother when apparating five feet is nothing.

She looks at the faces. They probably have stories attached to them. There is probably a story in the caricatured owl and its attendant figures on the front of the hoarding, too. But she has a surfeit of stories already, she does not need any more. And besides: She will concede it a home in the Wick, but graffiti does not belong in graveyards.

She turns to the wrought iron that bars the carriage entrance, and peers into the gloom. It doesn’t look as if it is about to collapse down upon her. And if it does, well, then she’ll know the answer to What’s it all for? —Nothing.

The crunch of rubble beneath her feet echoes as she passes into the cell. Up the walls, where the vandals haven’t added their colourful touches, she can see where soot has grimed the brick, and what remains of the plaster. Chinks of light fall in through the high windows, and the occasional gap in the roofing, to illuminate the ravages of fire.

Her footsteps slow to a halt, as she cranes her neck back to gaze up at one of the rose windows. It still has a broken fringe of coloured glass in it, the pieces held in a leaden fretwork. The colours are too joyful, brilliant carmine and ultramarine. Surely there should be something more sober, to better reflect the grim reality buried nearly up to the foundations? Or, no. Because these are only bodies — their souls are supposed to be somewhere else.

It’s quiet here.

It suits.

A pew or two would improve the experience, but a few fallen bricks, once enlarged, serve well enough as a rude bench. She settles on it, and rests her elbows on her knees. Down here, near the ground, her angle of view is better, and looking up at the window doesn’t hurt her neck.

It is some time after the sun stops glowing through the broken glass that she notices she’s lost control of her transfigured robes entirely. Smart pewter sheath and double-breasted coat have resumed their original identities. Ah well. It’s too much thought and effort to go to, fixing it.

Her brain is curiously empty, her mind devoid of its usual chaos. It wasn’t flies down here at the bottom after all. It was nothing.

She echoes, inside, like this broken chapel does. So perhaps it is best to stay still. To be silent.

It’s fully dark, by the time she makes up her mind to go looking for the lion.

The cemetery is supposed to be closed, but deterrents like walls and padlocks are only an agreement made between people who subscribe to a system of values predicated on supper at six, after a day in the office. Since she has been flouting these norms herself, she supposes she ought not to censor those who choose to lurk here with the dead. They must have their own reasons for doing so; perhaps they are hollowed inside the way she is. She avoids them all the same.

The orange glow of the City filters down through the branches, illuminating the pale stone of angels’ wings, of spires, obelisks, columns, crosses. And yes, the Bostock’s lion. He’s a magnificent beast, reclining on his haunches, his proud, strong chin propped on one extended paw, eyes gently closed in perpetual slumber. There’s a nobility to his broad forehead that was never
evident in any of the lions that adorned their tower. She thinks back on the pageantry of their symbols, and is ashamed. The Hogwarts crests of her memory seem like repulsive mockery. She lays her hand upon the stone, seeing with her fingers the fine details of its form that are lost to the night. In this way, groping like someone blind, she makes a circuit of this sleeping stone guardian.

She does not know at what point she begins to cry. It feels good, though, to rest her head beside his, to feel the cool marble beneath her cheek.

She thinks of her son. Of a clear-eyed boy with a tangle of brown curls, who would have come home in June this year brandishing his Hogsmeade permission slip. He wouldn’t have wanted to wait on the August owl that will bring a list of set texts, she thinks. He’d have pestered his teachers into telling him what books they’ll use ahead of time, so why not get a permission slip and save the owl a journey? She doesn’t know if he would’ve been friends with James, the way Ronald would have it. Had Ginny and Harry held off, those extra years, in deference to their friends’ loss? Ronald might know; perhaps his fantasy is grounded in investigation, evidence. Hers is not. But then, she has no practise with fantasies like this.

Because it is a fantasy, and nothing more. She thinks of her son, and she thinks of the reality of him: The barest hint of limb buds, and the beginnings of cartilaginous blueprints. Neural tissues differentiated into brainstem, spine. No obvious eyespots yet. Pharyngeal folds, like gills.

She thinks of her son, and she recognizes that she killed him whole months before what was left of him was cast from the mausoleum of her womb. She thinks of his remains: the flipper-like limbs, the cyclopean socket where unfused frontal bones cleft in. The misshapen chest, the organs nestled there outside of skin.

The ears were perfect, though. And this is the truly terrible thing, because sound travels in water and maybe it does not matter that it was too early for the tiny bones of the inner ear to have ossified. In her nightmares, this thing that could have been her son can hear her. It knows her terror and her repulsion, it knows that she is picturing what she has done to it, it hears the guilt in her voice when she looks at her swelling abdomen in the mirror and says, Die. Please, please die.

She thinks of the morning they opened the gifts. Belated recognition of their nuptials, it was supposed to have been, because Molly has an elastic view of time, where a couple weeks is plenty for a wedding, but decency compels that people have the better part of a month to consult the registry she’d drawn up on Hermione’s behalf. So, fine. They did need plates. They didn’t all have to match, but if you had a choice, why not? But the first thing she opened wasn’t diningware. It was a bassinette. She made herself smile at her mother-in-law. It hurt enough to do it that perhaps it was an apology for taking another calm sip from her doctored mug of anti-emetic solution.

She thinks now, lying against the lion’s paw, that she could have spared a moment, somewhere amidst the bassinette and the garish red-and-gold collection of body suits and tiny jumpers, to have said, I’m sorry to the little salamander coiled in the soft darkness of her belly.

“I’m sorry,” she says now. But she is in a graveyard, where only the remains of things are stored. And she has apologized to the remains of things before (I’m sorry, she said, Please die.); it didn’t do any good then, and it doesn’t now.

So she lifts her head up, and wipes her tears, and goes walking, back out to where the living are.

Chapter End Notes
Abney Chapel has undergone some restoration, so if you chanced to go on a wander in the Park, you would not have to break into the chapel the way Hermione did. The graffiti she encountered on the front of the barrier existed, and was by the artist Dscreet.
Nosce te ipsum

It should probably not surprise her when the streets become familiar. She has not had a destination in mind, particularly, but she is here now, so she weaves through the construction and makes her way to stand upon a doormat that reads ‘unwelcome’. She cancels her disillusionment charm when she hears him sliding back the bolts.

“Out of curiosity, what would you have done if I hadn’t come down to open the door?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Gone home, maybe. I didn’t really plan to come here. I was just walking, and… I suppose I let my feet carry me here.”

“Right, well, it’s three o’clock in the morning — is there any chance your feet would be willing to carry you up a staircase, too? Preferably before I’m actually awake?” He half-covers a yawn. “Or did you want the sofa? I do not want the sofa, if that factors into your decision.”

She blinks. Is that supposed to be a joke? “Chivalry died, did it?”

“Chivalry is asleep, the way sane people tend to be.”

The glowing ball of blue light that she is beginning to think of as his night-light charm bobs above them as she follows him up the metal staircase; the light makes weird shadows of the plants that parade along the rail. From up here at the top, the wall of leaves is nearly a solid curtain, trailing from near the skylights; it’s so dense that she hadn’t realised it obscures an open railing that runs the length of the loft.

There are shelving and wardrobes against the far wall, but it is mostly open space, save for a writing desk and chair to one side, his bed on the other, and haphazard piles of books everywhere else. She’s reconsidering now: she likes walls, and the screen of greenery doesn’t constitute. And then there are those blatant skylights, their steel bars dissecting the glowing London night.

Severus has begun stripping pillowcases.

“Oh! You don’t have to change the sheets,” she hastens to assure him.

He shrugs, and retrieves some clean linens from the bottom of a wardrobe anyway. “Are you sure? You can have a clean pillowcase, anyway.”

“Yes, it’s fine. Thank you.” Too late for cold feet now.

She’s fumbling with the waist-pin of her outer robes when he passes her a set of neatly folded pyjamas — the ones he’d worn on their trip? It seems likely. “Thanks. I could sleep in my robes, though, if…”

“I honestly couldn’t care less.” He finishes straightening the sheets, and resumes what is evidently his side of the bed, facing the hanging garden.

She’s obviously crossed a line into genuine imposition; she should leave, apparate home. Instead, she finishes buttoning the pyjamas, and settles into bed. The sheets are still warm, and she can smell a lingering hint of his aftershave in the bedlinens. Clean, floral notes of laundry softener greet her when she lays her head on the pillow, to stare up at the skylights. She thinks she would’ve preferred the scent of his hair. It feels like he is miles away, just the ghost of him echoing in the darkness. “I’m sorry. For imposing, and for over-stepping—”
He turns over in bed, and reaches to press one long finger to her lips. “Shh. Let me tell you a bedtime story. Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a surly professor who couldn’t sleep. And do you know why he couldn’t sleep? Because every time he drifted off, some miscreant would be up out of their beds, causing trouble or getting into scrapes. And after a decade of this, the professor, who had always been surly, you understand, was surlier — in fact, he became downright grumpy. Irascible, even, which is quite a word at three o’clock in the morning.”

“I take your point.”

“Wonderful.”

The quiet hangs heavy between them for long minutes, but her brain won’t take a hint, won’t shut itself off. “I have a question for you.”

“Is it important?”

“Dunno. Yes. Dumbledore — was his the only life you’ve ever ended?”

“Yes, but I’m contemplating smothering you with a pillow right now; does that count for anything?”

“Fine. I just…”

“If this is about murdering Weasley, I’m game, but can we discuss it in the morning like sensible people? Unless this is a setup that culminates in your asking me to help hide the body, in which case you really should have turned up earlier. Supper’s the ideal time to dig a grave; any time after ten, people start wondering what you’re up to, out there in the dark.”

Does he think he’s funny? Probably. It grates in exactly the wrong way. “I don’t know why I’m even here.”

“Aaaaaand now the existential questions.”

“I meant, I don’t know why I thought this was a good idea, knocking you up out of bed.”

“Well, because you’re a crazy person, obviously. I meant it about the pillow.”

“I’m sorry. I just… I didn’t want to be alone right now.” She can’t help the edge of black futility in her voice.

He sighs, and she hears his head fall against the pillow. “Granger. You’re not alone. Go to sleep.”

She tries; it’s easier once his arm sneaks around her waist.

Waking up hurts. It’s not the softness of the sheets, nor the golden sunlight; it’s not the quiet sounds of morning traffic outside, nor is it the tantalizing aroma of frying sausage mixed with coffee. Waking up hurts because she remembers why her eyes are puffy, and once she recalls this, everything else floods back. Waking up hurts because for a few instants, she has wondered to herself: what lovely things might today bring? She pulls the pillow over her head, and wishes she’d taken Severus up on his offer of suffocation.

Maybe there’s still hope – she can hear his tread on the stairs. The bed dips, and she’s fairly certain he’s surveying her with that sarcastic eyebrow at full tilt. She lifts the pillow, peeks. Yep. But he’s holding a mug of coffee, too, so she doesn’t immediately burrow back under.
“Good morning. While this establishment does not, as a matter of principle, offer breakfast in bed, I have relented so far as to bring you coffee. I’d thought to lure you out of the bedsheets with it, or make caffeine conditional upon your joining me downstairs, but I see that would be genuine cruelty on my part.”

“Thanks. Is it quite late, then?”

“After ten.” He does not inform her that he’s been up ages already; he doesn’t need to.

“I’m sorry, for turning up like I have. I was a bit of a mess, last night, and—”

He’s stalled her with those raised fingers, again. “I’ll forgive you outright, no questions asked, if you come down to breakfast, or at least let me retrieve my own coffee.”

She inclines her head at the justice of this, pulls on the dressing gown he tosses in her direction, and follows him down to his kitchen. Breakfast is waiting beneath his heating charm.

The genteel click and scrape of utensils looms loud in the space between them. She doesn’t know what to say, just spears another fried mushroom. Finish eating, take her leave of him, drown herself in the Lee? It’s as good a plan as any she’s had lately, and she is not at all certain she can withstand further mortification, additional pain.

“So.” Severus says. Is he taking pity on her, opening a conversation? He takes another sip of coffee, and regards her over the rim of his mug. “You went to the Burrow.”

“I did.”

“And then you came here. Distraught. May I presume that Mr Weasley was gracious, kind, forgiving, and courteous, as one would obviously expect him to be?”

“Hah.”

“Monosyllabic conversations are always such fun. I’ll assume, then, that he said something cutting and terrible, that he devastated you with twisted half-truths designed to scar your psyche.”

“He… yes. He said things like that. He knew what would hurt. I… I wasn’t expecting him to know how to hurt me.”

“You should have. He’s known you for years. When you allow people in, you make yourself vulnerable, you open yourself to the possibility that they will use that knowledge against you.”

“So, what? Keep barriers in place forever, never let anyone close?”

He spreads his hands, as if inviting her to see him as an example of this thesis. Well, yes. He has a definite point. She rests her face in her hands, and wonders if she has any energy to confront the truths that hurt more than Ronald’s words ever could have. Not the half-truths in his words — the truths she’d found inside herself.

“It wasn’t Ronald. Why I came. I… He hurt me, yes, but I deserved some of it. The parts that were true, I guess. You asked me, the other night, about why I stayed. And I don’t know why I couldn’t tell you, except maybe it’s because I’ve tried so hard to hide it from myself. Some of it was me. And some of it was guilt.”

“Because you chose to abort your foetus.” His words are entirely uninflected, but she senses there is a question there. Not an opinion, though. His stance seems to be more academic.
“You say ‘your’. Ronald always says ‘his’. His son, his child… I guess I think of it as his, too. His semen, his… Anyway. Yes. I thought I owed it to him, staying. Because of what I’d done.” She picks at the remainder of her breakfast, and wonders how much she wants to tell him, wonders if she wants to expose herself in this way. If he understands Ronald as her antagonist, then surely he is on her side? Blurring up those roles can only be dangerous. “In the beginning, when I first knew I was pregnant, he was completely horrified at the prospect of having a child, but somehow – I guess I wasn’t paying attention – sometime that changed, and he… he was so… He cried. He’d look at me, and all I could see was pain, it was like his eyes had forgotten how to laugh. And I was sorry. I couldn’t give him what he wanted, I’d ruined that, but I could — I could give him me. Like an exchange. Or… payment, maybe. Like a debt I owed him.”

“And you felt miserable, the entire time.”

“Yes. When I thought about it. I didn’t let myself think about it much.”

“Would it be fair to say, that because you punished yourself, you thought you were making meaningful atonement?”

He doesn’t say the rest of it, but she hears it all the same: She’d been selfish. In her need to excoriating herself, she’d never once really looked at Ronald. She’d taken pleasantries as happiness, she’d taken orgasms as love. Brushed aside his insistence as petulance, ignored his opinions as temper tantrums. What did he have to complain about? She was making sacrifices, stifling herself to give him what she thought he wanted in a wife. Grudgingly, yes, but giving herself away to him all the same.

And the pieces that remained of herself? Those parts she didn’t give to Ronald, she gave to Professor Snape, to the ghost who bled red ink.

Is there anything left of her to give to the man?

Is there anything he would even want? Honesty, maybe.

“At the end of it all what’s so painfully ironic is just that – I’m so stupid, I was so self-absorbed, that I thought I was something worth having. I thought I could give myself to him, but it was always like those school assignments; he didn’t want me. The things I was, the things I am, they’re completely valueless to him, but I didn’t know that, Severus, I didn’t know. I’m worthless, and I always have been, and I didn’t even know it.”

She can’t look at him. She stares at the woodgrain of the island’s surface, instead. She hears him stand, eventually, and he slides her plate out of her field of view. Water runs in the sink, accompanied by the clatter of silverware and plates. She knows she should get up, help him wash dishes; she is being a terrible guest. Guest, hah. She is not exactly here at his invitation, is she?

There is something surreal in the sight of Severus Snape doing the washing up in a pair of aquamarine gloves. It must be the colour which is creating the cognitive dissonance, because she’s seen him wash cauldrons, and a frying pan is not so very different. She plucks the tea towel from the oven handle, and sets about drying plates.

She has replaced the towel, and he is putting away the last of the dishes, when he finally speaks again. “I hope you realise, Hermione, that the reason you didn’t know you were worthless is because it’s not true. As for atonement… I gave myself over to Dumbledore, in the hopes of achieving some kind of absolution. It doesn’t feel like I ever did. There are things, once done, that cannot be undone. That’s just the reality of it. Wanting to atone is wanting, at the core of it, to unmake some choice. Anything short of that will always feel hollow. You learn to live with it
after a while, to accept reality as you find it, and as you have made it. It’s literally all you can do. And make better choices, I suppose, the next time they’re in front of you.”

He refreshes their coffee while she is thinking this over, and beckons her into the jungle of plants. She places her mug squarely on a coaster, and tests the waters: “The thing is… I don’t think it was necessarily the wrong choice. I think… bringing a child into my life, our lives, that I didn’t want, that I’m not sure I could have loved… I don’t know. Maybe things would have been different. But maybe everything between Ronald and I would’ve been just the same.”

“I don’t disagree with you, Hermione. I asked you before, on the train back from Newcastle, I think? Whether you thought you could have been a good mother.”

She picks up her mug again, and studies the way her fingers curl around the handle. “It’s a kind of moral failing, isn’t it?”

“Knowing yourself? Being honest about who you are, where your priorities and values lay? I would hardly qualify that as a moral failing.”

“No… I mean, I guess I mean being unwilling to even entertain the idea of being maternal, trying to love—”

“Oh please, stop. You Gryffindors have this perversion for self-sacrifice. Oh, you call it courage, but at the heart of it, it’s the belief that sacrificing yourselves is noble. The sheer dogged persistence of this mindset would be enough to make me question Darwin’s premise, but enough of you manage to reproduce, and instill that belief in others, largely on account of the fact there simply aren’t enough good opportunities to get yourselves killed in some overly-dramatic fashion. Instead you make do with making yourselves miserable. And everyone else, too.”

“So you’re saying, what? That being maternal is incompatible with a Slytherin perspective?”

“No, don’t be deliberately obtuse. I’m saying that I don’t perceive any value in maternal posturing if it’s incompatible with what that person wants. If you don’t want to be a mother, or a father for that matter, there’s no value in sacrificing what you do want in order to produce offspring. Let me rephrase it: some people value the idea of having children. They should do that, then. Some people do not. So they should not. Value is a concept that is intrinsically individual, and it derives from knowing who you are. If there are moral failings — and I think there are, I just disagree with you about what constitutes — but if there are, they derive from an inability to accept the realities of who you are as a person: your strengths and your flaws.”

“Then the ideal Slytherin is someone who doesn’t lie to themselves?” Just everyone else? This strikes her as darkly amusing, but Severus is nodding.

“Precisely so. You can’t know what you want, if you don’t know who you are. Once you know who you are, you’re immune to having external expectations — like bravery,” he sneers, “imposed upon you from without.”

“You honestly don’t believe that there’s value in self-sacrifice? What Lily did—”

“Was not brave. It followed very logically from what she valued: her son, and his life. It was a sacrifice. But it was not performed for the sake of being courageous – it was performed out of knowing that she valued her son’s life more than her own. It was perfectly selfish in that regard. She had no way of knowing that placing herself in front of the Dark Lord’s curse would have any other effect than ensuring her death. She would rather have died than see her son murdered before her eyes, and she bloody well did.”
“Right. No. You’re doing my head in, Severus. Harry’s mum was *selfless*, that’s literally why it worked.”

“So we know why it worked, now? Colour me surprised, because I’ve long been under the impression that even Dumbledore only had a theory. Selfish or selfless are value judgements that are externally imposed. The reality of it is that Lily Potter didn’t know she would accomplish anything at all by her actions. Whether they were consciously courageous, or the base instinct — yes instinct! — to protect her offspring, doesn’t matter. Suppose Riddle’s curse hadn’t rebounded? Then her sacrifice would have been in vain, and we’d be living in a very different world today.”

“But the curse *did* rebound, Severus. You can’t… oh, this is infuriating! You can’t “What if?” things that have already happened, because they bloody happened!”

“Hah! And there’s my earlier point, stop dithering over what might have, could have happened between you and Weasley, or you and your hypothetical offspring. But hear me out, because I feel like you’re missing what I’m trying to say:

Lily’s death, in the Gryffindor canon, is held up as an example of personal courage, and she is deemed to have bravely died, sacrificing herself for her child’s life. *If* her son had then died, her own death would have been for nothing. Yes? Breathe a little, and just follow along, alright? Because she couldn’t have known that her death would lead to the Dark Lord’s downfall, it would have also been courageous to live, and to fight him another day, in the hopes of vanquishing him. Allowing him to murder her can be seen as an act of cowardice, depending upon your perspective. Now — honestly, breathe — my point is: courageous or craven, these words are value judgements that are being imposed *externally*.

You asked me about the ideal Slytherin, which is what precipitated this discussion, I think. To a Slytherin, it shouldn’t matter what judgements their peers or history make of their actions — the only thing that matters is that their actions are consistent with what they themselves value.”

“Nothing wrong with any of those things. Not inherently so, not if they’re pursued… ah, no, I think I see where you’re going with that remark. When you Gryffindors hoist up courage as a byword, you’re getting it confused with conscience. You know it’s a universal condition, don’t you? It’s a natural result of empathy – only sociopaths lack it, and there aren’t any more of those in Slytherin House than any of the others.” He runs down on this remark, his lips pressed flat and brows contracted.

Somewhere in all of this she has clutched one of the sofa cushions to her chest. She fingers the piping along its edge.

“Do you want your coffee reheated?” He takes his own off to the microwave, and stands, hands clasped behind his back, apparently content to watch the mug revolving inside.

She relinquishes the cushion, and tastes her own. Alright, it is too cool. But — she *does* have a wand. She taps the mug surreptitiously; there’s no need to rub it in. Maybe she should have offered? God, she can’t even untangle herself within the rules of etiquette, and he thinks she can follow his arguments on ethics and morality?

He reseats himself. Across from her this time, in the chair. It feels like a rebuke. “Look, I’m not in any way saying that Gryffindor House’s ethos are inherently inferior, or that there aren’t problems that arise from simplistic definitions in other houses. There are, absolutely. What I am
trying to say, is that… when you construct a system of values based around mythic interpretations of other people’s actions…

No, let me make this even simpler: Gryffindor extols the virtue of courage — oh, and what are the others, daring, nerve, chivalry. Quixotic knight-errantry. No? I think that’s funny, but alright. Bravery and courage, then. These are virtues that depend upon reflection and perception: in every instance in which someone acts with courage, they are not making a conscious choice to be courageous. They are acting reflexively, and doing what they perceive as the best possible thing, or the only possible thing, in that instant. ‘Courage’ is a value judgement of those actions. ‘Courage’ is not a choice you can make, consciously, the way you can choose to be kind, or to be generous, or to be thoughtful, or… Do you see what I mean? What you can choose, is to sacrifice yourself, to falsely equate self-sacrifice with the ideal of courage. And this is where the problem is, as I see it: self-sacrifice is antithetical to the maintenance of self. And it’s my perception that this does more harm than good.”

“What if… Severus, I don’t disagree with you, about self-sacrifice. In my own case, well, it clearly didn’t do either Ronald or I any good, and considerable harm, but… about courage. What if you define it as choosing to do the hard thing, the necessary thing? Instead of taking the easy route?”

“If a thing is necessary, then it isn’t a choice.”

“Alright. Say you have two choices: one is hard, one is easy. You don’t know which will be for the best, you don’t have that kind of information. It’s brave to make the hard choice.”

“And sometimes it turns out to have been stupid; can we say then that it is masochistic to make the hard choice? Brave doesn’t mean good, any more than ‘hard’ does. What makes a choice ‘hard’? You can phrase the entire dichotomy another way: one choice requires you to act in a way consistent with your strengths, and another allows you to act in a manner that employs your flaws. They’re just words, Hermione; they don’t mean anything except in retrospect. Until you know the outcome of that choice, you can’t make a value judgement about how you arrived at it.”

“If you know the outcome ahead of time…”

“Which is to say, if you know that adding urea to an off-the-shelf anti-emetic will turn it into a crude abortifacient — that’s what you’re asking, isn’t it, Hermione? You want to judge yourself by some external metric. I’m telling you there is none. If you have made your choices in a way that is true to yourself, then you have done the best you can. Only you know yourself. No one else can.”

She sighs, and surveys him across the coffee table. He says she wants judgement, but does she? She’ll receive it regardless; the Wizengamot has precedents and laws that are clear external metrics by which she will be judged. There will be no ‘self’ left to know. So maybe it doesn’t matter, if she never does. Perhaps it’s even better that way?

“Why now? I had the impression from you earlier that this was a decision you made, consistent with your understanding of yourself.”

“Y-yes. But I think… Severus, what if I don’t know who I am? What you describe… It’s not like I sat down and evaluated my entire system of values, when I ended my pregnancy. I think I was reacting, more than anything else. So how much of who I am now, and what I believe about myself — how much of that derives from trying to excuse something I did?”

“Maybe all, maybe none. Why does it matter? We’re mutable; we change. If you were at ease
with your conscience then, when you made that choice, then it was consistent with your values. Perhaps it no longer is; maybe you’ve changed. Or perhaps you’re struggling with something else entirely, and using this to deflect?”

She nearly laughs. She means to. If she could laugh, she could pretend that this discussion is nothing more than philosophy, a game of words and silly nothings. But the sound that works its way free of her larynx is half a sob, and she knows he recognises it for what it is. “Deflect? No. I don’t think so. Maybe I deserve it, what Ronald is trying to do to me.”
Well, m'dears, I hope some of you are still out there. It has been a terribly hard slog, getting back into the appropriate headspace for this piece. I hope I'm doing justice to it, and I hope this chapter makes some small amends for the previous one, and for having had Real Life intrude upon my output here. If you're still reading, thank you.

“I suppose that must actually work, occasionally, or you wouldn’t try it.” His eyes are tracking her face, but his gaze is a sudden arctic chill, his expression shuttered.

She looks at his hands. They are resting on his knees, so very deliberately relaxed. It feels like there is static in her ears, a sudden lightness in her head. “I—I don’t know what you’re saying. Wouldn’t try what?”

“Your attempted manipulation. I tell you to judge yourself, to know yourself. And you spiral immediately to a whole-hearted embrace of one of the ugliest and most draconian legal precedents in existence. Gryffindors: you really are all the same.” His lips press flat, and in the silence that steals her words — her very breath — he rises to stand at the window. He has turned away from her, arms crossed, and his next words are directed to his plants: “Step forth into thy martyrdom then. Try not to let any of it splash back on me.”

His dismissal is nearly a physical blow: the terse bite in his voice catches her right under her ribs. She draws in a shaky breath, and tries to think past the static, past the tendrils of crimson terror and pain dancing at the edges of her vision, strangling her vocal cords.

They’ve spoken today of Lily. His friend.

Did he love her? She doesn’t know anymore. He calls her his friend. As he calls her ‘friend’.

“Severus,” she whispers. She cannot speak it louder, cannot give voice to the panicked plea that batters at her insides.

Perhaps he hears the undertone anyway. His head turns, fractionally.

“You told me once that friendships were rare for you.” She is bemused, mildly astounded, that once she begins speaking her words are so calm, when every part of her feels as if it is about to fly apart. “I understand, I think. Or I am trying to. The people you regard as friends are those whom you trust to hold parts of yourself, to know the truths of who you are. You let them see your realities, and… you seek the reality of yourself — or an aspiration, maybe — in how they behold you.”

She’d started well enough, the thread of it had gleamed so clearly, but now when the words drop into the still air between them, it seems a hopeless muddle. But she pushes on, heat rising in her face, and a swell of misery threatening to choke her. “You said others could be our mirrors. Finding who we are in how they see us. But you believe, too, that our ethics are formed by knowing fundamentals of self, by knowing inalienable truths about our own identities. So… two selves, maybe, or two levels of identity: who we truly are, and who the world reflects back to us.
And friends – for you, they’re the people we trust to reflect back to us our true selves, they’re the people we entrust with the realities of ourselves as we honestly know them.

“You trusted Lily that way. And Albus Dumbledore. And… me. And you have seen that gift cast aside, you’ve seen your self denigrated, manipulated, and devalued. You’ve given your self to people who were unworthy of it, who failed to comprehend what they held, and whose abandonment left you in shattered pieces. Tell me, Severus, am I speaking truly?”

The tension has fallen out of his shoulders while she’s spoken, and his posture now is nearly a slump. He turns, meets her eyes, and inclines his head, a spasmodic jerk of assent.

“You said that Gryffindors are all alike. I hope… I hope that isn’t true. The things I know about Dumbledore – I hope that in his position I would have made smarter choices. And Lily. I don’t think I’m very much like her at all. At least… I should hope I would be a better custodian, of the gift of your friendship.” He’s resumed his seat on the sofa, and she reaches, now, to take his hands within her own. His fingers are cold. He doesn’t pull away, and she’s glad.

“When you said we’re mutable — what did you mean?”

He speaks to their entwined hands, more than to her. “Not the core of you. The… the fabric of you, your strengths, your flaws; those stay the same, I think. You grow into them in different ways, but the potential is always there. Your experiences exercise it. And your experiences change your system of values, I should have said. The way you perceive the world changes with your experience of it, and that will affect what you value.”

Then maybe that’s it. She is not fundamentally a different person, only one recently undergone a cataclysmic shift of values or perception. Can that alone explain how uncomfortable she feels in her own skin? Or is it a kind of casuistry? She does not really think she learned to see the world differently, at the foot of the Bostock Lion, but rather herself.

She grasps at something that is floating up to the surface of her thoughts: “You talk of knowing yourself. Motherhood, though — you become responsible for more than yourself. You have to stop, and consider this whole other person, to whom you are custodian, guardian, caregiver… and really, I guess it is probably like holding their self in trust for them. Helping them to establish their system of values, and, until they are able, making their choices for them.”

Now he does pull away, to straighten with a sigh. His posture is open, and she reads a studied nonchalance in the way he crosses his ankles and leans back into the cushions. “That’s an interesting insight. I don’t think I had really put it together like that, before. I think… perhaps I believed I had some duties in that regard, as an educator, as head of house. But you are speaking of something more fundamental – not guidance, merely, but… what was your word? Custodianship. Having the keeping of another living being, holding them in trust for their future selves. That is… hmm.”

He is looking past her. Looking into the past, his next words reveal: “That is, in some ways, not unlike Dumbledore’s role, in my existence. There is something incredibly pleasant in making another person the arbiter of your actions. It’s very freeing, that abrogation of the necessity of choice. It’s what you wish of me, is it not?”

They have been having two separate conversations. She thinks she can see the shape of his, but asks anyway, “Could you explain what you mean?”

“If you will listen, because I will only say it once.”
She nods, and he begins. His tone is quite as detached as it ever was, explicating orbitals or stoichiometry. “Weasley finds you worthless to him, maybe he always did. So you conclude that this is the truth, and you offer it up to me as such — you demand I negate it. And of course I do; it’s a ridiculous notion. But it’s not enough — you insist that I stride forth and do battle with your desire to self-immolate, to tell you that the whole of who you are is worth preserving, that you are of value. As if it is something you doubt.

You are asking me to take the choice away from you, so that you can stand before the Wizengamot, secure in the knowledge that the preservation of your self is worth more than Weasley’s need for justice or revenge on behalf of a terminated foetus. And when you stand there, when you cleave to the lie of a miscarriage, will you do it because you are certain you are worth more than Weasley, or a putative child? Or will you stand there and tell yourself: Snape values me. You ask me to give you value, to hold the whole of your worth. I cannot. I will not. Because I have too rich a history, to see that for anything more than imprudence. I gave myself to… But it’s only ashes, at the end. And if some broken shell of you can be resurrected from amidst the cinders… No.

You say you are not like Lily — but if you cannot find the core of your own worth, if you would be ever swayed by others, if you would let them define you, if you would let them end you, through their need or malice (there is no practical difference), then you are the same as she ever was, in any meaningful respect. And I will not be the owner you, I will not allow you to give yourself to me as a possession. The dead do not hold property.”

She bows her head, and wonders if she hears correctly what he isn’t saying, behind what he does. Know thyself, he’d told her. This is the core of what she has wanted to communicate to him, that she is actually beginning to, finally.

“You fear that I’m going to throw myself away, and in doing so, also the pieces of your own identity that you’ve shared with me, that you’ve trusted me to hold. How can we hold each other’s truths, if we’re not autonomous, if we fail to preserve ourselves; how can we mirror back an honest reflection of another, if we depend upon them to construct our identities for us? Am I wrong?” She can see by the narrowing of his eyes, and by the clench of his jaw, that she is not.

She closes her eyes, breathes in the cool green scent of the room, exhales soft realisations, half-formed and nebulous. “I want to think better of myself, than to imagine I sought to manipulate you. But I have often thought myself a good deal better than I suspect I am. When I say I might deserve… no, not the whole of it. But something, surely. Perhaps seeing myself clearly is appropriate punishment.

I don’t think my existence is worth less than Ronald’s desire for vengeance. That’s what it amounts to, at this juncture, because there’s nothing else that’s served. And I don’t mean to say that I think I deserve punishment for having made the choice I did. But maybe… maybe for how I made that choice. Choices. Because there were so many.

There was a room, in the house I lived in. With Ronald. It was supposed to have been the nursery, but I’d made it up as a guest room — I used to escape there. Or to the attic. That was where my study was, and the books. I went there to work. I went to the guest room to get away from Ronald. It was like a metaphor, a place where I asserted that he couldn’t touch me, couldn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to. Couldn’t make me be anyone I didn’t want to. It was lovely; I did it up in white, which Ronald said was stupid, because if we ever did have guests they’d probably spill tea on the bedclothes or something, but I liked it. It was clean. I felt clean there. Only… I think now that perhaps it was a place where I went when I needed him to be my enemy. It was supposed to have been the nursery, but I made it into a blank slate. All in white.
When I look at who I am, and that choice I made… The truth of it, Severus, is that when I chose, I chose for me. I thought about what I wanted, and I thought about this thing, growing inside me, this thing that was Ronald, and I didn’t want him taking me over. But… it was… it wasn’t Ronald. It was the encapsulated potential of a whole other person. And I never… when I made that choice, I never stopped to think, what about this other person? You asked me if I could be a good mother. I never once asked myself that. I never thought about it that way at all — could I do right by the child that was forming inside of me.

You asked me if I could have been a good mother, and in doing that, you offered me a way out. But I don’t deserve that.” She swallows hard. Severus hasn’t even twitched. She can sense his eyes upon her, but he seems disinclined to interrupt. It’s just as well; she is on the verge of losing her nerve entirely. She calls to mind the sensation of hot tears tracking down her face, wetting the cold marble of the lion’s paw where they pool along her cheek.

“I realised something. Last night, before I came here. There were two ways to have made the choice I did. I could have asked myself if I could love my child, if I could care for him, if I could give him the care and attention he would need to thrive. I could have looked at myself, then, and seen how unready and — and unsuited — I was to provide a safe haven for another person, to nurture them, help them grow into their own identity.

But I didn’t ask myself any of that. I looked around at my life, and I saw what was happening to me. I didn’t want to be Mrs. Ronald Weasley who changed nappies, and collected casserole recipes, and knitted jumpers. If I spared any thought for this other person at all, it was only in terms of the ways in which my own life would change.

Would I, could I, have made a different choice? If I had a time-turner again… No, I don’t think so. But I… I am ashamed to have made that choice the way I did.” She will not cry, she promises herself, as she closes her eyes once more. To cry in front of him would be to beg for him to soothe her. She will not ask that of her confessor.

“And if I had a time-turner, that’s perhaps not even the choice I would want most to unmake. Maybe…” Maybe that night she’d given in to jealous rage. “Maybe in the beginning, before we’d married, even. I know he had to have felt as constricted, as powerless, as I did. But I never even considered asking him, or telling him about muggle methods. I wish… maybe he would have been willing, maybe I could have trusted him, and we could have kept a secret together. But I don’t trust people with my secrets. Only… only you, really, because you’re one of them. One of my secrets.”

“It’s unfortunate,” he finally remarks, “that self-awareness is too often out of pace with a time-turner’s window of potential.”

“Unfortunate. Yes.”

The silence ought to be absolute, but of course it isn’t. She can hear faint scuffles of aimless industry from deep within the Hive. A long minute or two ticks past. Severus glances down at his watch. “I’d thought to go to Tesco today. If you’re going to be about, you could come with, and help carry groceries.”

“Oh. I could help, sure. I-I don’t mind.” She is still wearing his pyjamas. It must be well after noon. “Do you mind if I shower?”

“Go ahead. I’ll sort you some towels.”

He passes them to her when she returns from his loft, dress robes charmed clean. He’s slow in
releasing his grip on the towels, holds them a fraction too long. He looks down at his hands as if perplexed by them. They are acting beyond orders, perhaps, because they steal up to rest upon her shoulders. “Hermione,” he says, and she looks up, snared again by the depths of his dark eyes.

“Perhaps I was incorrect, or took too narrow a definition earlier, when I said that you cannot choose to be courageous. Perhaps it needs courage, to make yourself vulnerable.”

His arms tighten around her; crushing her to him for one splendid instant, his chest slowly rising beneath her cheek, the tickle of his breath in her ear. It’s a sensation she carries with her, beneath the spray of the shower, through the interlude of good-natured ribbing they receive from Maddie and Val as they set out into the afternoon, and until they jostle their way onto the train. There, it is replaced by another sensation: his fingers, hesitant, seeking hers, down in the shadowed folds of their coats.

Hackney Central is only a short ride, but it has been long enough for the gears of her mind to start meshing against one another again. “I do think, or I very much hope, at least, that you’re right, that he wants a scene,” she tells him, as he picks over the scotch bonnet chilies.

He adds celery to the basket, and she tells him how it shook her, to see his rage up close. “He hit me. I don’t think he meant to, really. I had put my hand on his shoulder, and he just lashed out. He’s never hurt me before. Physically, I mean.”

“It doesn’t matter if he meant to or not, there’s no call for it.” He hefts a bag of onions, but sets them back, and selects instead a few from the loose bin.

“It was… vicious, the way he said things. I didn’t expect it. I know I should have. He means to tear me down, he wants to see me hurting the way he is.”

He selects a handful of shallots, consults a list from his pocket, and plucks up a few tomatoes.

He is perusing the poultry case when she finally decides what she really wants to tell him. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?” He tucks a package of legs and thighs into the basket.

“Of… of making mistakes. I always have been. I wish I’d gotten comfortable with them, back in school, back when it didn’t matter. I’m scared I’ve made a mistake somewhere, that he knows something, that I’ve missed something. I’m scared I’m not as clever as I like to think I am.”

He gives her a long, sharp look, then leads away to the bakery section. “Croissants or bagels for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Oh. I probably shouldn’t stay over. I’m meeting Dawlings tomorrow. But thank you.”

He shrugs, picks out a selection of bagels. “I assume you’ll come for dinner. Or at least to tell me how you make out at Dawlings’.”

Of course she will, she assures him, as they make a circuit down the aisles. Rice, beans, lentils. A package of bread flour. The basket ought to be heavy, but she suspects him of using a levitation charm. “I feel guilty, though,” she says, as they saunter up past the biscuits. “I did think — I mean, I recognize now that I was wrong, but I did think I was doing the right thing. In trying to make our marriage work. Trying to give him what I could. And now… He told me he wanted his children to have grown up with Harry’s. He has this whole fantasy about what his life ought to have been like. He accuses me of preventing it coming true for him. I was never going to bear him children, but perhaps… perhaps I should not have tried so hard, to make things work. Perhaps
it would have been a kinder thing, to let him go. I feel guilty about that.”

Severus’ lips are pursed tight. He snags a box of biscuits off the shelf, turns it over to read the label. “I think you have mis-characterized the situation,” he muses, quite acidly. “Suppose someone is offered ginger biscuits. Good manners dictates they thank their host the first time, but if they really cannot abide ginger, surely the onus can’t be upon their host, to read their mind and know they’d prefer chocolate. You are borrowing heavily, to assume the responsibility of making Weasley’s decisions for him. He hasn’t got much right to berate you for ginger biscuits; he could’ve said ‘No thanks' at any time in the past decade and more. Speaking of, do you like them with tea?”

She quirks a disbelieving smile. “Ginger biscuits as a metaphor for marriage. That is a novel perspective.”

“But my question still stands, and tea is far more important than Weasley’s culpability in his own destiny.”

“Yes, I like ginger biscuits. And I take tea with lemon, no sugar.”

He places the biscuits in his basket. “There, good. Those are the important things: the important things in life, and the important things to know about oneself.”

“Although,” he says, as they wend their way back into the depths of the Wick, “I think you’re right to be chary of your own cleverness. Particularly as, to my way of thinking, you have indeed missed something rather crucial.”

The bottom falls out of her stomach. “Tell me.” It’s a minor miracle she can make her tongue form the words.

“A backup plan.” Simpleton, his eye-roll says.

“Oh.”

“If… if you would trust me, and trust to my instincts…”

“Yes?”

“You understand, there’s not much help I can offer you. But there’s one thing.”

“Yes, go on!”

“If you’ll stay to tea, ginger biscuits and all, I’ll ring up Uncle Tibs. There’s a thing he can set in motion. A favour I can call in.”
Chapter Notes

*Caveats: I'm not a lawyer. But neither is Jo Rowling. So that makes us even in this one particular regard. And I don't like her world-building re: the wizengamot. I have thus substituted my own.*

But Severus seems intent on taking his time. He puts the kettle on to boil, and by the time it’s steaming up, he’s assembled an array of vegetables and herbs across his countertop. “The chicken needs marinating overnight,” he tells her.

She smiles wanly. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Not in the least. I think I’m very nearly set, I imagine all this will take a quarter-hour, or so.”

She settles back onto her seat, and tries not to seem impatient. Fifteen minutes is nothing.

“I’m going to put him on speaker. Uncle Tibs. It drives him quite mad. Don’t say anything aloud, please.” He’s fished his mobile from the pocket of his denims, and yes, he’s dialling a number. He props the mobile up on the windowsill, against a terra-cotta pot of sage.

A disembodied voice says “Well,” after the second ring.

“Water,” says Severus Snape. “Roman. Or are we not doing word associations? Artesian!”

“You’re a pox upon our house.”

“I do try.”

“Rather too industriously, I should say. Have you got my voice projecting, again? There’s this awful tinny echo.”

“Of course I do, I’m in the midst of fixing tea, needed my hands free.”

“It’s rather distracting, is all. I, ehm, presume that it would have been too disruptive to have better timed your afternoon, such that you could contact me when your hands were not otherwise occupied?”

“Hmm, I suppose, although then my brain would’ve been occupied. I’ve got a new Neal Stephenson in.”

“Oh, well, we mustn’t interrupt our leisure reading for such trifling matters as familial duties, must we?”

“That was precisely my thought, I’m so pleased you agree.”

She can hear Tibs’ *tsk* of vexation, even over the patter of water into the sink, as Severus warms the teapot.

“I must say, I’d thought to hear from you weeks ago. Have we been… busy, perhaps?”
“Hmm? Not terribly. Although some of my tenants have a show coming up, I might go to that.” Severus dips the tea infuser down into the pot, and clinks the lid in place.

“While I’m positively certain you have endless capacity for utter stupidity, the practise thereof is really not all that becoming. I meant the manuscript.”

“Oh. Well, you could have said as much.”

“I just have.”

“So you have.”

“Severus, you do try a person’s patience. Have you been in touch with her?”

“Should I have done? Why? It seems straight-forward enough. It’s a rather clever idea, if I do say so myself.”

“Why? You ask me ‘why’?”

“It’s either that, or assume the worst of your motives, Uncle. And as I’m the very soul of charity, I wouldn’t like to be accused of such crass behaviour.” He says this with sublime serenity, and begins peeling an onion.

“Any reasonable person… No, m’lad, don’t even begin constructing a counterstatement to that, there’s no use in my finishing the sentiment. Have you contacted her?”

He sighs, halves the onion, and slices it to ribbons with a flurry of economical pivots of his chef’s knife. The staccato sound definitely transmits to Amsterdam.

“Every time I ask, I’m deeply sorry I have. What are you doing now?”

“Chopping an onion.”

“For tea.”

“Of course not, I’m fixing a marinade for chicken; I’m going to do up a Caribbean brown stew tomorrow. I don’t know why they call it a stew, though. It’s more like chicken in sauce. But the method’s rather interesting, really, you have to burn muscovado sugar – just to caramel, not really burnt – in oil. It’s so important to use a good grapeseed oil; it needs a high smoke point, or it will completely ruin the flavour. And then you add the meat to it; once it’s cooked through, you reduce off the liquids until you’ve got a thick glaze, and crisp that onto the chicken – again, I really can’t overemphasize the importance of using grapeseed oil. Once it’s browned, you add water or stock, and the reserved marinade, and simmer it down to a clinging sauce. Quite excellent with coconut rice.”

He’s gotten through the scallions and tomatoes during this rendition, and scrapes his vegetables into a bowl before beginning to grate ginger-root.

“I am sorry I asked.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You haven’t answered me: did you contact her?”

“Well, yes, now that you ask. I did. Sort of.”
“Severus. I would, ehm, appreciate your being a little less… yourself. Just for once. Because I try not to make a habit of drinking before dinner, you understand. My liver’s stood me in good stead for a great many years, and I should prefer to remain on friendly terms with it.”

“That’s an admirable goal, Uncle Tibs. I commend you on it.”

“What, precisely, does ‘sort of’ mean, Severus?”

“I’m assuming, since you’re asking me, that she hasn’t sent back revisions yet? Oh, don’t sigh at me. I posted her all of the pertinent pages from my lab books, is what ‘sort of’ means.”

“And that’s all? I’d hoped…”

“Yes. You are always hoping, aren’t you.” He rattles down a pair of cups, pours their tea, and perches a lemon slice on the side of her saucer before delivering it to her at the island. She tries to offer him a smile of thanks, but thinks he probably missed it – he’s off in pursuit of the ginger biscuits.

Tibs finally picks up the conversation from where it had fallen between them. Somewhere in the North Sea? “You have too much talent, and too good a brain, to be doing absolutely nothing with it. I know, I know. You’ve no interest in my machinations, no particular desire to… But Severus! Leave all that aside, let’s. Can I not persuade you, that there is an entire world in which to stretch yourself, to—”

“No. I’m done. I’ve done my tour of duty, I’ve had my fill of it.” He sets the plate of biscuits down with a bit more force than necessary. She suspects it’s not quite intended as part of the act.

Tibs’ next words are cool and business-like, “Very well then. Capital. You may continue wasting your life, and I shall continue despairing of it. If you can spare a few more moments from your, ehm, dense schedule, I should appreciate your opinion on why Ms Weasley has yet to return her manuscript. She is usually so very prompt.”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion. Were her reviewers quite elaborate in their suggestions?”

“I don’t expect they will be. It’s quite a nice little paper; I hope she’ll expand it to some structural hypotheses for the encapsulation methods. Did you send her your experiments?”

“The whole lot of it.”

“Well, perhaps that’s the hang-up. Your lab notes were always… excessive, I should say. Because ‘indecipherable’ is bordering upon apt, and we are on good terms, are we not?”

“Are we? Am I forgiven the rug?”

“On the contrary, it’s such an old and well-worn bitterness that I’m quite able to nurture it alongside my affection for you, Nephew.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.” He begins seeding a scotch bonnet, and idly muses, “Ms Weasley, did you say? I thought she’d been using Granger again?”

Tibs sees through his affectation of disinterest instantly, if that purring note in his voice is any indication. “Why, yeeeeesss, you’re quite right. Old habits. I understand she’s divorced, or about to be.”

She can’t read anything at all from his posture, and his tone continues bland: “Maybe that’s why
your revisions are delayed.”

“I suppose that might be the case.”

She resolves to ask Severus if his uncle was sorted in Slytherin, too, although she suspects she knows the answer. If it weren’t so infuriating a spectator sport, she thinks she might appreciate their remarkable display of verbal jousting; she can’t tell which of them is closer to winning – probably when they disconnect they’ll both have decided they’ve come out on top, having got an extra touch or two on the other.

“Look, I’ll come clean.” Severus says it with an air of annoyance, as he tips the chicken into the bowl and squeezes lime over it. “I’ve heard some things, via the grapevine. It’s shaping up acrimonious, between her and her husband.”

“Oh. That’s rather unfortunate.”

“It’s more than unfortunate, from what little I’ve heard.”

“Ah, you’re taking an interest in it, then?”

“I assumed you’d be curious, yes.”

“Well, I am. ‘Acrimonious’ is…”

“Word is, he intends to level some kind of criminal charge at her.”

“Oh dear! You’re quite serious.”

“I only know what I’ve heard. And my information, these days, well, it’s suspect, maybe.”

“Perhaps. It’s suspect, ‘perhaps.’”

“Yes, thank you.”

The conversation lags, and Severus finishes stirring the chicken into the vegetable marinade he’s created. Tibs’ voice, when he speaks again, sounds distracted, “It is such a shame. I wish there was some assistance I could offer. Surrupetitiously, you know. It wouldn’t do, otherwise, I’m so entirely loathe to meddle, but she’s such a bright young thing…”

“There’s something, maybe. Perhaps. Since you’ve taken such an interest in her. That ring, with the engraved emerald.”

“The Malfoy ring?” Sharply.

“Yes.”

“I-I would hesitate there, were I you. Honestly, m’lad, you never know when something like that might be genuinely useful.”

“Look, Uncle Tibs, it’s past time to give up on it. I’m not coming back. It’s really as simple as that. I like being dead, and I’ve got absolutely no interest in changing that state of affairs. Except to improve upon its verisimilitude, if you keep insisting otherwise. So that ring is accomplishing nothing at all, except gathering dust in one of your curio cabinets. You care about Ms Granger, and I owe you, so let me pay some debt this way. And it’s better someone got the use of it. No?”

“Do you really think… it’s a bit extravagant, is it not? Calling in Malfoy’s debt for something like
“Who cares? Would you care, if I had died?”

“I suppose I wouldn’t. Yes. Well, how shall I address the letter?”

“Hmm. Let me think: ‘Draco Malfoy, Esquire, Gringotts’ Trading and International Acquisitions. Mr Malfoy (with all appropriate salutations), as Mr Snape’s executor, I do the honour of returning to you the enclosed token. I should appreciate you render whatever assistance you deem worthy of it to my protégé – yes, you’d best put it that way, he’s liable to be touchy about her; he used to be, anyway, ‘to my protégé, Ms Hermione Granger. Yours, and cetera.’ That fits the form well enough, don’t you think?”

“Yes, that’s very… well, it’s a waste, but that seems your style, so who am I to suggest otherwise. Very well. I’ll send it along in the morning.”

“Maybe some good will be done by it. Perhaps, I mean.”

“Perhaps.”

“I don’t suppose…” Severus is cleaning his prep area, but doesn’t make any effort to pick up the tail of the dialogue once he turns the tap off.

“What don’t you suppose?”

“That I’ve engendered any excess of good will, in providing you with some assistance? In mitigation of the rug, I mean.”

“I’m afraid not. It was an absolutely priceless antique, which you well know.”

“And yet you kept it on the floor. Most people, if they had centuries’ old Moroccan rugs, would hang them on a wall.”

“Part of truly appreciating artefacts like these is the tactile sense of them – the feel of the fibers beneath your feet! The accumulated history of use, the stories that are encompassed by patterns of wear, the—”

“Well, then I confess I don’t really see the problem. Think about it this way: now you’ve got a story encompassed by a rather large stain.”

“Oh, indeed, yes, I’ll have the Maestros over for cocktails, and tell them, ‘And this is where my dunderhead nephew decided to bleed out’.”

“Can’t deny it’s a story.”

“You, Severus Snape, are exasperating in the extreme.”

“I know. My physician tells me it’s chronic.”

“I should imagine. Take care of yourself, boy.”

“And you, Uncle.” He still has the traces of a fond smile about his lips when he seats himself across from her at the island, and attends to his tea. “There you are, Ms Granger. Assistance secured. I think you can trust Draco Malfoy, but I wouldn’t necessarily be entirely honest with him, were I in your place.”
She is not entirely honest with anyone, anymore, she reflects, when she is once again seated in the oak-panelled office at Dawlings’ and Partners. Except with Severus. Is honesty a finite resource? The more she gives to him, the less she has to spread about? Or is it merely that she’s keeping poor company, these days, Slytherin behaviours rubbing off? Whichever the case, she has no intention of being entirely honest with Dawlings, either.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Weasley.” He sounds smug, and lingers a bit on her name. Mrs Weasley. Not for much longer. Her nails are pressing into the palms of her hands. “I see, from your owl, that Blackwell’s got the march on us.”

Well, it’s still ‘us’, so that’s something, isn’t it? She nods, mutely.

“It’s a pity. I was sure my docket was ahead at the Wizengamot; if we’d filed immediately… well, what’s done is done. I suppose I may presume that you’re uninterested, at this time, in further attempts at reconciliation?”

She moistens her lips. “That’s correct. It’s… I’m committed to the divorce now.”

He pushes his spectacles up his nose, and peers at her case file. “It’s interesting, that he’s charging fault, instead of simply asserting demands. It would be less splashy, in the press, I mean, if we could hammer this out in mediation. ‘Though, that is Blackwell’s shtick — as much noise and rancour as possible. Can’t let us get on like civilized people. I think we shall go about this by having his charge dismissed at disclosure. If the Wizengamot will rule that we move to mediation, that suits us very well. It would be more complicated had you any demands — I’ll assume that hasn’t changed since we last spoke?”

“No. No, I just want it finished. But… is it that easy to get it, er, dismissed? What Ronald’s going to accuse me of?”

“Probably. Adultery is the usual. We can have a character witness on hand, just in case. The Wizengamot is usually entirely uninterested in letting cases like that proceed, wastes everyone’s time. Unless he’s got some firm evidence?”

“Uhm. No, not at all, I mean… What I mean to say is… Sorry, where am I sitting, legally?”

“Pardon?” He looks up at her over the rim of his glasses, his watery blue eyes finally alert.

“If I had heard, from a mutual acquaintance, hypothetically, what he was going to say at disclosure… If that were the case, would that be something I should tell you now?”

“Oh, indeeeed,” he breathes. “Hypothetically. If one were hypothetically certain about the veracity of their information. Counsel-client privilege: anything you told me would be confidential.”

“Right. I had a miscarriage, at the beginning of my marriage. I understand that he’s going to lay charges that I ended my pregnancy.”

“An abortion? How many weeks along were you, if I may ask?”

“Nearly twenty weeks. Does that—”

“Matter? It might. Although your case, as a Mu-muggleborn, is a little more complicated. Abortion is a criminal charge, but it applies to purebloods under current legal precedent. And while your husband certainly is, you… Were you admitted to St Mungo’s, by any chance?”
“I was, yes.”

“Good, very good. Now, Mrs Weasley, if your suppositions, or your information, are correct, may I be so indelicate as to ask how you intend to plea?”

“Not guilty. Naturally.”

“In that case, Mrs Weasley, I think… Your case is very intriguing, from a professional standpoint. May I have leave to discuss it with Misters Cassius and Celsus Dawlings? I think we shall want their counsel in the course of this matter.”

*Three* lawyers? The junior guard, and not the partners, but still. Maybe… maybe he thinks it will be instructive to them? Or does it mean something, that he wants to hold this close, in the family, as it were? She realises he’s still waiting for an answer. “I trust to whatever you feel is the best way to proceed.”

“Excellent.” He taps the edge of her folder briskly against the desk, straightening the papers as he levers himself out of his seat. “I’ll be some minutes, Mrs Weasley. Off-the-clock, just now. May I have Parvati bring you tea? Coffee?”

She defends herself against these courtesies, and sits back to stew over what his abrupt exit might portend. It does nothing for the worried little knot in her stomach, so she forces herself to think instead about Hannah Longbottom’s gossipy offering on her way through the Leaky: Donatella Edgecombe is blustering about Diagon Alley this week; Hannah thinks it’s on account of unregistered Floo powder, but Hermione’s hard pressed to lend credence to the idea. Sure, it’s theoretically possible to make your own powder, unladen with the searu-torche pollen the Ministry uses. But importation of the ingredients themselves is so tightly regulated, it’s impossible from any practical perspective. Well, very highly improbable. But it is exactly the sort of thing Rita Skeeter likes to rile people up with: *Vast criminal conspiracies using the Floo network!*

Rita’s going to have better stories soon, she thinks, and consciously stills the nervous fidgeting of her crossed legs.

It’s a relief, when Dawlings opens the door again, and gestures for his sons to precede him into the room. They set about conjuring chairs for themselves, and when Dawlings Sr closes the door behind himself, they launch into whatever conversation had been interrupted by their passing down the hall to his office.

“What I don’t understand, is what he can possibly be about. Blackwell. Something this stupid, it’s career suicide. He’s bloody daft, but he’s not daft enough to possibly think he’s going to shoehorn this in under *Justicia v. Flint.*”

“Celsus is right, Father, because the cleansing precedent only holds for a live birth. Or a viable foetus, I suppose you could stretch it. But a miscarriage is basically a squib.”

“And squibs are under the maternal domain, that’s been clear for three centuries.” Dawlings Sr is making desultory notes in a slim notebook, finely bound in calfskin. “That precedent is unequivocal. Cass, if it comes to it, I’ll have you put in the Mungo’s requisition.”

“Right, Father.” The lanky one (Cassius, she supposes) jots himself a note.

“Say, d’you think… am I chasing unicorns, here? Is it just possible Blackwell’s angling to expand the definition for abortion?”

“To squibs? *Really?*”
“Nah, Cass, use your head to think sideways, once in a while. We all know the muggles have legalized abortion. Here in Blighty, anyway. What if Blackwell’s getting a march on the muggleborns? You can’t tell me it never happens.”

“Be careful, Celsus, not to cast aspersions upon our client, in your fanciful little rambles,” Dawlings Sr interjects.

The younger of them has the good grace to blush, and nods an apology in Hermione’s direction. “Sorry, Mrs Weasley. Nothing implied. Theorizing, you mustn’t mind us.”

“No harm taken,” she says, with a tight little smile. “A suggestion, though: I’d rather Ms Granger. What’s the protocol for changing that?”

Dawlings Sr looks relieved. “Oh, we can register a change of name immediately, that’s nothing at all. Certainly. Ms Granger.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Erm, as it concerns me rather closely… Am I correct, in interpreting your ‘theorizing’ as you call it, that Mr Blackwell is… from a cultural perspective, umn, leery of how muggleborns do or don’t adapt to wizarding norms?”

“Is he a bigoted pri—”

“Celsus!”

“Cass! It’s true, he is. By the way, Ms Granger, I remember you being sorted. I was Ravenclaw, Seventh-year prefect.”

She manages a weak smile. Subtract the goatee, and yes, she thinks he’s a familiar face.

“Still get on with Harry Potter?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Good, we’ll bring him along to disclosure as a character witness, can’t ask for better than that, eh, Dad?”

“That… if it could be managed, that might be wise. Ms Granger, assuming cooler heads don’t prevail, and knowing my colleague Mr Blackwell, I have doubts of that happy outcome… Well, you should be aware that this is a capital charge.”

“Capital as in executions?”

“Er, we shouldn’t like to put it that way. And as you may have surmised, the law is in no way clear where your case is concerned. Your blood status works in your favour. But this… it could be a test case. I will say that much.”

She will not hyperventilate, she tells herself firmly, and draws a long, deliberate breath.

“I should like you not to concern yourself with outcomes, at this stage. I have every confidence we can have this dismissed. Not at disclosure, alas. I expect it will have to come up before the Wizengamot, simply owing to the nature of the charges, you understand. Wheel of justice grinding slow, they say, and it certainly does. No, why I bring this to your attention, is that a capital charge imposes certain restrictions.”

“Oh.”
“Typically, the accused may be offered a choice of tracking or sequestration; in some cases, they are asked to give up their wands for the duration. As an oath of good faith, you understand. You should be prepared for any of these options.”

“Alright.”

“Good, very good. Well, Ms Granger, we shall certainly be in touch; I would like to meet with you just prior to disclosure—”

“Father, I think you should suggest it. Just to float the idea. I think it’s best.”

“It’d be a hell of thing to accomplish, you know. Dad, I’d work free, I really would.”

They both look far too keen. Dawlings levels a grimace in their direction, but they don’t lose a bit of the tension keeping them on the literal edges of their seats. “Very well. Ms Granger, we have discussed… well, an avenue of recourse. You are under no obligation to consider it, and as your counsel, I will naturally support any decision you make, and would advocate that you take a period of time to think over the matter, if you are inclined to consider proceeding under Cassius’ suggestion — yes, Cassius! Cels, you’ve put your oar in enough today. These two are sometimes over-enthusiastic, and fail to consider their clients’ state of mind, and for that I do apologize.”

This last deflates them.

A little bit.

“Ms Granger,” Cassius leans towards her, smiles. It’s a somewhat predatory expression. “Generally, cases where capital charges have been laid are set before a full panel, seven members of the Wizengamot.”

Oh yes, she knows how this one goes. All seven for executions. Azkaban if it’s a majority vote but not unanimous. She nods along, as he explains it.

“… And in cases where the wizengamot fails to reach a unanimous verdict, there follows another round of voting, as to sentencing. Five years, ten. In Azkaban, I mean. Now, in the normal course of things, these deliberations can go ‘round any number of times. Following disclosure, we — Dawlings’ and Partners, I should say — will have an opportunity to vet the wizengamot you’ll go to trial beneath. We suggest six members, Blackwell suggests six. Right of veto on three. Whoever the final six end up, they’ll pick their seventh, who will preside. Now, you can see this is all very tedious.” He smiles again, as if encouraging her.

“It’s… complex, yes.”

“Complex! The very word. Now, there are those of us, in certain philosophical circles, who are of the opinion that veritaserum could be used to very good effect in a court of law.”

“But there’s a counter-agent.” This is her own territory. It feels very, very comfortable. She’d looked it up in fourth year, hadn’t she? Harry’d been so paranoid about it, she’d done it just to shut him up. Fiendishly tricky to brew, and unstable within two days, so she’d put her foot down there — she wasn’t about to give up all her free time to extracurricular brewing just because Harry thought Professor Snape was going to dose him up with truth serum. Honestly.

“Yes, there certainly is. Now, in certain philosophical circles, the suggestion has been raised that if a defendant were to subject themselves to sequestration prior to trial — and, fully under guard the entire time — give their testimony under the influence of veritaserum, well… the historical precedent is that the wizengamot’s vote can be dispensed with entirely.” He beams at her.
Veritaserum. Her mouth is dry.

“Thank you, Cassius. Ms Granger, I can neither fully recommend nor caution you against such an approach. It is something you would have to decide for yourself. There’s no doubt it’s an elegant solution to a very ugly problem, but it is also entirely possible that… well, we would of course demand that opposing counsel submit a list of questions, but there are no laws prohibiting them asking others. It is very possible that you could be subjected to a line of questioning quite outside this matter. We would of course seek to limit excesses of that nature, but there are no guarantees that the wizengamot would sustain our objections.

Anyway, I hope you will think on it. If it is something you are interested in pursuing, I might suggest… well, that we utilise it as a… more advanced strategy. These two don’t quite fathom the enmity they’ll engender within the profession, by leading with something like this. It implies… certain opinions about the impartiality of the Wizengamot, and the judicial system as a whole.”

“It does more than imply,” Celsus mutters out the side of his mouth.

“Yes, well. Ms Granger will think on it. And we will be satisfied, will we not?”
She walks to her kitchenette three times before she manages to fill a cup with water. Distracted is too kind a word. She’s gone brainless.

The shakes wore off on the Tube, but that’s because her mind switched off after the Picadilly transfer to Green Park. She looks now at the cup of water in her hands. Hadn’t she been intending to fix a mug of tea?

No, fool, to the windowsill. She’d intended it for Plant and Mini-plant. She manages to keep hold of this thought long enough to moisten the soil around their stems. They’re doing well. Of the three of them, she knows who’s in better shape.

She reseats herself on the foot of her bed, and considers making a list. Things to Do. Dragons to slay.

She is a poor knight.

And she’s not a very good damsel, either. They are usually beautiful, virginal, and pure of heart.

Well, but maybe the dragons don’t need slaying?

She wonders what really did happen to the wyrms. Bred out of existence, the history books said. Subdued, Professor Binns had intoned. ‘Subdued’ sounds like a euphemism. Like a broken wand. Maybe Severus knows what really happened.

Severus. She wonders what she’d say about him under Veritaserum. Can you tell the truth about something if you aren’t even sure what the truth is?

Fuck. That was a series of sequential thoughts, wasn’t it? She’s not sure she actually wants her brain working again, necessarily – she thinks she may have stumbled into why most people seem so happy: neurotransmission that just peters off to nothing, mid-synapse. It’s a working hypothesis, anyway.

A cup of tea does help, but she finds herself staring, nonplussed, at the trembling, incoherent lines that issue beneath her biro, as she tries to fix the details of today’s meeting in ink. She’s in no shape for this, she thinks, closing her notebook with a tinge of disgust. In no shape to apparate, either, probably. And since she’s expected in Hackney Wick for dinner, she had best change and get about it, or she’ll never make it in time via the Tube.

When she looks up from scrubbing her face at the bathroom sink, she catches herself wondering:
will she recognize her adult self in mirrors? Stop it, she thinks repressively. Worry turns to panic, and panic shuts your brain off, and you’ve just got it working again.

She grabs her satchel from beside the bed, tosses her nightgown and a change of clothes into its depths. Dashes back into the bathroom, to sweep in a handful of toiletries. Her eyes fall on an innocuous blue box, tucked back behind a lotion bottle. ‘Extra safe’, it says. Safe is rather beside the point, now. And if she wanted to be really safe, she ought to be trying Eileen’s trick. Supposed trick. She catches herself shivering, and realises that she’s not quite being ironic within the confines of her own skull. Just how terrified and hopeless would you have to be to do that?

It’d be damn near sociopathic, floating a notion like that past Severus. And besides, he’s dead. And a halfblood. Although maybe that cleansing precedent the Dawlings mentioned… that must’ve been what Tibs… No, it’s still a shite plan – unworthy of her, vile, and ridiculous, because he’s dead and perfectly happy staying that way, and his uncle is the nominal head of the Prince family anyway and she’s just now thought this through much too far to pass it off as a sick joke and really, hasn’t she got enough to be ashamed about?

She closes her eyes. BREATHES in deeply, feels her chest and abdomen swell. Exhales. PICKS up the box, and very deliberately consigns it to her satchel. He hasn’t invited her to spend the night, except— he rather did, didn’t he? And that implies something. Doesn’t it?

She doesn’t know. She doesn’t know anything where he’s concerned. One minute, she thinks she understands what’s going on, and then the next he’s rebuking her for trying to manipulate him, when all she’s trying to do is get her head around being honest. Because it seems to mean something important to him. Despite, or because of being Slytherin? Her preconceptions are constantly being upended, and it’s clear she doesn’t know anything, anymore.

Well, alright, she knows one thing.

That one thing she absolutely does know is: she’s in the position where her best hope is trusting to Draco Fucking Malfoy for some miraculous salvation. It is therefore probably prudent, at this point, to make every possible effort to jump Severus Snape’s bones while she still has the capacity to appreciate the experience.

The trains are the first stumbling block in this plan. There’s a delay on the line, and it’s fully six o’clock when she finally arrives in the Wick. Someone’s left the top off the ant farm; they’re milling about around an unmarked cargo van. It’s no business of hers, so she just tosses them a little wave when they call greetings, and heads around to Severus’ door.

There’s no answer when she knocks.

Bugger. She stares across at his window box and wonders what to do now. The little spikes of green that were poking up before have turned into clumps of nodding white narcissus blooms and the occasional pale pink hyacinth. It’s absurdly charming and doesn’t square with dungeons and glowering in the least bit. She knocks again.

Maybe he’s over at the Hive?

It’s an unusual level of activity, compared to other times she’s been here. Not that everyone is particularly active. Maddie is leaned up against the railing, doing little more than offering what appears to be unhelpful commentary. The Slav and the Muslim fellow are straining beneath the weight of a crude crate – rough wooden lumber forming a cage around something wrapped in heavy bubble pack. “Careful, careful! Watch your fingers,” Val cries as they ease their burden into the van.
“What’s going on?” she asks Maddie.

“The boys are packing up their show. I didn’t think Jahmshid would have his painting done in time. Fellas, you haven’t forgotten you need to crate that panel too, have you? Better leave space alongside, or you’ll never get it in.”

“We know, we know. Honestly, Mads, this isn’t our first time ‘round the block.” Val shoots her an exaggerated sneer.

“Not yours that’s for sure. You’ve got a regular circuit, don’t you. ‘Round the block.”

“Ha ha ha. Aren’t you clever. Because comparing people who make money off their art to prostitutes is always the pinnacle of wit.”

“Is photography art, though?”

“Bitch, go home.”

“I am home. You go home.”

“Just… could you – Oy, Alojz! Not that one, do Male Seven next; let’s get the tall ones at the front!”

Maddie shakes her head, and evidently decides to leave them to it. She turns, and asks, “Want to see what they’ve been up to?”

Not really, but she wasn’t quick enough answering, and maybe Severus is inside somewhere.

There are far more of the wooden crates than she thinks are apt to fit into the cargo van; they must be planning two trips, at least. Brian the bomber is hard at work, stapling slats around yet another mass of whatever, swathed in plastic and foam.

“Here,” Maddie calls, beckoning her forward through the disaster zone. She gestures magnificently towards… a wooden… something. A statue, Hermione supposes. It’s a vaguely humanoid shape, with some parts rough-hewn and scarred over with chisel grooves, and others smoothed in perfect musculature. The one behind it is similar, only it has sections covered in plaster, which have been painted over in an adventure-comic style, haphazard panels of spandex-clad women with improbable anatomies. Both the statues have windows recessed in them; behind the panels of glass are black and white photographs. Of… skin, she realises. And blushes, when she places that particular texture.

“They’re calling the entire show ‘This Clay’. The body in apposition to conceptions of the body. Alojz has been carving these for nearly a year. Come see Jahmshid’s painting!” Maddie hauls her deeper into the Hive; she’s practically effervescent in her enthusiasm, rolling up on the balls of her feet as Hermione takes in the long panel of figures.

Every piece in the show? It must be. She can see the theme of them now, this multitude of carved wooden statuary. Some seated, some reclining, some in abstract action poses. One is swathed in what looks to be a tattered dress of fashion photographs, another is arranged as if suspended by chains sunk in its chest, although she can tell that it’s probably the metal armature keeping it in that falling-Icarus pose. Some are scrawled over in graffiti, another has henna designs, one is charred as if it’s been in a fire. They’re united by those windows, but here in the painting they don’t contain extreme close-ups of flesh, but rather faces: soulful eyes that stare out, as if challenging her: see me.
“Wow,” she says. It’s inadequate, but she can’t seem to fumble anything else out of the rattled mess inside her cranium. “Are these all of the statues, then?”

“Mmmhmm. Jahmshid’s been working like a slave on this, because Alojz and Val couldn’t make up their damn minds which ones they were going to put in the show, so he had to hold off until nearly the last minute. Not sporting of them, really.”

“Is it somewhere around here, then? Their show. Severus mentioned something about going, I think.”

“Yeah, it’s over in Globe Town. Not far. I can check the address! — You should come too.”

“I’ll see when Severus is planning to go, I guess. Speaking of, is he around here somewhere?”

“Not that I know of, why?”

“Oh, I knocked over at his side, but he didn’t answer. Maybe he’s stepped out.”

“Did you try the latch?”

“Er, no.”

“Eh, he probably just didn’t answer the door. He’s like that, sometimes. Go try the door, I’ll bet he’s just ignoring everyone. Around here, you learn to just let yourself in.”

“You’re serious? Of course you’re serious,” she mutters. There’s a vision blooming in her mind, of trying a trick like that down in the dungeons, just waltzing into his office without invitation. They’d have been hexed three ways from Sunday before they could blink. It would’ve been a week in the hospital wing at minimum.

“Sure. He barely even complains when I stop by to help myself to coffee anymore. ‘Though, he was in a snit about the biscuits. I only snagged a *little* handful.”

It transpires Maddie O’Shea is perfectly correct: his door certainly is unlocked. She knocks again for good measure, before poking her head in. “Severus?”

“Oh good, I was wondering if you were coming this evening.” Well, she’d like to, she decides. He is sprawled the length of his sofa, and looks entirely comfortable in worn corduroy trousers, and a dark blue button-down that may have looked crisp when he put it on, but has come untucked now. He flips another page in his book. “Have you had dinner? It’s Caribbean stewed chicken, if you’re interested, although you knew that. I’ve got a warming charm on.”

“Dinner sounds lovely, I’m excited to try it.” Her smile seems wasted. He hasn’t looked up from his book. “What’re you reading? Ream-dee?” She tries sounding out the word on the cover.

“Oh huh. Neal Stephenson. It’s not bad, so far, although I’m worried some of his plot might be built around islamophobic precepts. Which would be disappointing, because I liked Cryptonomicon. It wasn’t mind-altering, or anything, but a decent, fast-paced read. Sometimes your brain just wants candy.”

“Oh, I know that feeling! I used to read the worst books, sometimes. But there wasn’t much fiction at Hogwarts, so I guess I fell out of the habit. What’s this one about?”’ Ghah, she’s being annoying, now, because if he’s anything like her at all when it comes to books, there’s nothing more tedious than explaining a plot.
But he doesn’t seem to be taking it amiss. “Hmm. Not entirely sure, yet. Rich Yankees with guns, a terrorist cell, an aeroplane hi-jacking, and culture wars in an online gaming platform. On the internet, I mean. With computers.”

“I know what the internet is. I mean, I confess I’ve only dabbled with computers, but…”

“Remind me to get you addicted to it.” He turns another page. Apparently he lied to his uncle; he seems perfectly capable of conversing and reading at the same time.

She’s wondering if she should take a seat, make herself comfortable (or better yet, go and look through the titles on his bookshelves), when he sets his novel down with obvious reluctance. “So! Dinner, and you can tell me how it went with Dawlings.”

Dinner is amazing. Naturally. “You realise,” she informs him, as she dishes herself a second helping of chicken, “that if you keep insisting upon feeding me so well, I’m liable to move in.”

“But who’d look after your plants?”

“Oh, I’d tuck them in around here when you weren’t looking. You’d never even notice.”

He laughs, and the sound makes her toes curl. “Oh, I’d notice eventually. It would take a while, though.”

“By that time, I’d have endeared myself.”

He doesn’t offer any disagreement with this supposition, just tips her a little half-smile, and asks if she’d like pudding. Her half-hearted protests dwindle instantly at the sight of cheesecake – yes, he’d gone out to the bakery earlier today, he admits.

He’s gone to trouble on her account. She can’t help the giddy little grin that creeps out, past the wall of worry and woe that she’s just barely ignoring in an effort to be good company.

But perhaps the calories are mellowing her out, because she feels peaceful, calm, through a recitation of her own day’s events. He listens attentively, doesn’t say much, except for a couple asides about the junior Dawlings. “Cassius, he was a Hufflepuff if my memory serves” and “The youngest one, Celsus — bright enough, but distractible”.

He scowls furiously, though, when she reiterates what Dawlings Sr had told her about the immediate effects of Ronald’s placing capital charges before the Wizengamot. “He didn’t tell you what sequestration is?”

“No, isn’t it, umn, house arrest, maybe?”

“It’s Azkaban.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“That’s—that’s complete and utter bullshit. Pardon my language. Fuck. How can they do that? That’s inhumane, what if you’re not guilty? What if – Severus, did you? Did they—”

“Yes, I did a holiday tour of Azkaban’s finest accommodations. They’re not supposed to sequester anyone there for more than three months. I was lucky, Dumbledore was head of my trial, and moved mine up in the docket. I think I was there a little less than two months. It felt like two
decades.”

She stands, and moves to place her arms around his shoulders, to press her face against the hollow between his shoulder-blades. “I’m sorry, Severus. That they did that to you.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. And I surely deserved something in the way of punishment; you don’t know the half of…”

“I do, though. You told me.”

“It’s different, telling, than seeing it first-hand, than really knowing.”

She doesn’t have anything to say to that, just tightens her arms. His shirt smells nice, she thinks. Because that’s easier than thinking about the next thing. The big, looming, ugly thing.

But he asks her, so she goes on, tells him about the veritaserum proposal. They share a wry smile: Dawlings Sr was right, it’s elegant. It’s also completely unfeasible. “So I suppose I’ll tell them no. Because all Blackwell would have to do is ask ‘did you really have a miscarriage’, and I’d be sunk,” she finishes.

Something else occurs to her, as they repair to his sitting room, and settle into the sofa. “They suggested I’d have to be under sequestration, prior to taking the veritaserum, anyway. Azkaban. God.”

“Or kept in a cell, lower level. With a dementor or two to stand guard. That’s the way they kept us during our trials.”

She shivers. “I hate this. I hate that this is my life, now.”

“Shush, you’re not out of options yet. And the Dawlings boys are smart. Erratic, a little, but clever. And there’s Draco too; there may be some help there. No sense fretting yet.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you, last Friday was it? That worrying is what I do.”

“Yes, and you’re in frequent need of distraction on account thereof.” He says it slyly, but it takes a moment for his tone to register, and by that time it’s too late.

He pounces, pins her down, and proceeds to tickle her until she’s close to sobbing with laughter. “Severus! Stop, Severus, I’m going to pee myself yet!” She finally manages to land a solid kick, and he desists, laughing at her as she struggles to sit upright.

She wipes her eyes and sags against him, into the circle of his arms. “Honestly! What is it, with the tickling?”

“You. You squirm so enchantingly. It’s terribly amusing.”

“You're terrible; why on earth do I like you so much?”

“Excellent taste.”

“I suppose. Maybe. I think you might be an acquired taste, though.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“I guess not. Well, here’s a bigger mystery – why do you put up with me?”
“Excellent taste.”

“Hah. No, but really. Back in the beginning, why’d you take the time to send me notes on my papers?”

He’s quiet for a while, and she closes her eyes, concentrating on the slight rise and fall of his chest. When he speaks again, she can feel his voice vibrating up through the bones of her skull. It’s peculiarly intimate. “I can give you a lot of answers. Because you were too smart for your own good. Because you needed someone to challenge you, you needed some direction. Lots of reasons. But the one that matters, I think, and what you’re asking… It was because you reminded me of myself. I saw some of the same mannerisms and tendencies, and… maybe I wondered what I’d have been like, if anyone had ever given a damn about me. So it was an experiment, perhaps. I thought I would put an end to it, once I took Defense, but everything was lurching there on the precipice of ruin, and I could see it all coming, and… and it made me happy, being able to forget about it all, even just for a little while, just put the world away and work on that paper with you. I suppose I was lonely. I was certainly very alone.”

“And have you been lonely since? Since you’ve been gone?”

“I suppose I must have been. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I am.” She shifts to place a kiss along his jaw. She understands what he’s saying. And what he’s not saying, too, perhaps.

And perhaps what they don’t say — what they don’t have to say — are the most important things.

She snuggles in against his shoulder, and he leans his chin on the top of her head. The quiet’s comfortable, like his arm is around her torso. But she’s not sure she wants comfortable this evening.

“Are you done with your idle fretting?” he asks, as she repositions herself.

“Probably not. But for just now, yes,” she hastens to add. “I don’t need more tickling, thanks.”

“However shall we pass the time, then? Did you bring your manuscript? You could finish that, and I’ll just go back to my book.”

“Actually, I have a more interesting idea.”

She plants a knee on either side his thighs, and presses the palm of one hand to his chest, as if to steady herself. To hold him in place, really, just like pressing her lips down to his is a certain way to shut him up. He looks as if he’s about to offer an argument, and frankly, she isn’t interested. There are much more fascinating ways in which his tongue and lips can be employed. It’s a thought that makes her want to grind her hips down, to test the feeling of his trouser placket against her mons, but no. She’s going to manage a proper seduction, not the rushed, half-arsed business that typified encounters with Ronald. Don’t think of Ronald. Not now, not here. She slips her tongue past his lips, gently probing.

Yes, alright, he’s decided to participate. She moans a breath into his mouth, delighting in the smooth feel of it, imagining his tongue doing wicked things like that between her thighs. Enough for now, ease off, draw this out. She breaks away to trail kisses up along the faint stubble of his jawline, and slides her fingers into his hair, pushing it aside so that she can nip at his ear. That produces a gratifying twitch of his hips. She’ll have to remember that.
He’s breathing harder than is warranted by the little bit of kissing they’ve done thus far. “Hermione!” It’s a warning note, not exactly the enthusiasm she’d hoped for.

She captures his lips again, softly now, tenderly. “Hmm? Something the matter?” she asks between lingering caresses. But she doesn’t let up the pressure long enough for him to answer, and if he had objections, he seems to have abandoned them. His hands trace up along her ribs, as he returns her kisses.

But she’s the one setting the agenda tonight. She straightens up, and rolls her shoulders. It’s perfectly deliberate that this movement gives him a spectacular perspective on her cleavage. She smirks, proud of the sight he presents, his hair splayed wild across the white cushions, his lips plumped and slightly parted, pupils dilated. She presses the pad of her thumb lightly against his lower lip, then as his eyes begin to cross, she brushes down, over his chin, a faint tickle of her fingers along his jaw as if she means to grasp it, but no, she has designs even further down. Her hand comes to rest on his chest again, and she adjusts her stance so that she is leaning directly into his field of view, both palms against his pectorals, fingers splayed to his shoulders. She lets them dance there, as she whispers her plan: “It seems to me, Severus, that I owe you a massage. Some other time, you said. Tonight seems like a good time, don’t you think?”

He swallows, but she’s already at work on his shirt buttons. “If—if you like,” he finally manages, and by that time, she’s pushing his shirt down to his biceps. Maybe she’ll leave him like that; the fabric constricts his movements, and that might be interesting for this next bit.

He has a nice chest, she thinks. It’s not the first time she’s seen him, but it is the first time she’s stopped to appreciate the landscape. He’s thin, of course: now she can see his ribs, but she’d certainly felt them before. His skin is nearly translucent, she can see faint traces of blood vessels, especially there, along his collarbone, dipping to flat terra cotta areolae shadowed by a sparse crop of black hair that thickens down the midline of his abdomen. She tests the texture, not down there, not where she’d like to run her fingers, but higher, where his chest hair spreads across his torso. It’s a little coarser than the hair on his head, and thinner than she’d thought. Deceptive, because it tends to long and only slightly curling. His nipples are peaking. Her lackadaisical explorations, or a chill in the room?

She presses her hands down firmly, long strokes up across his pectorals. If this gives her the opportunity to feel the tight buds of his nipples beneath her fingers, well… It’s not quite by design. She does have every intention of giving him a massage.

And if her pelvis tends to inadvertently thrust up against him as she kneads the tense muscles in his shoulders, well, that’s not quite by design, either.

She has good intentions. Good-ish. And yet her ministrations aren’t relaxing him. Some parts even less than others. It probably doesn’t help that she has discovered she can press kisses along the paths her hands take. Perhaps she’ll give up on this massage idea after all — it’s too much fun undoing all her efforts to ease the tension in his body. Every one of his muscles seems to stiffen when she flattens her tongue over a nipple, draws it into her mouth. He emits the faintest, keening sigh, and when she lifts her face from his flesh she sees his head is thrown back, long muscles of his neck standing out in sharp relief. She ducks her head to visit her attentions to the other side, and adds some light pressure from her teeth. A full groan this time, splendid progress. She laughs and pushes him down, halting his sudden struggles against the fabric of his shirt.

“Going someplace?” she purrs, lengthening her torso out again so that she’s once more pressed there, right against the hard heat of his arousal.

“What? No, yes, Hermione! I-I don’t think—”
“Good,” she says.

“What?”

“Don’t think. It’s overrated. Tell me, do you like this?” She rolls a nipple between index and thumb, and considers herself answered when he falls back into the cushions, panting as if he’s bereft of oxygen.

Now she does go exploring along the path marked out in black hair, drawing her tongue down towards his navel. His hips have made a tense arch beneath her, she could probably get her arms entirely about his waist, so high has he arched his back. She’s never particularly wanted to pensieve anything at all, but if she could have this to watch again? She’d do it in a heartbeat.

He’s in such an obliging position just now that she really can’t help herself — it’s the work of moments to unbutton his trousers and hike them down his thighs. And if his briefs go with them, who is she to complain? In fact, complaining is the furthest thing from her mind just now.

She must have the stupidest grin across her face, but she doesn’t care, because here, right before her eyes, are a thousand fantasies coalescing: Professor Snape’s cock jutting from a nest of crinkled hair, twitching beneath the heat of her breath, the flushed tip of his glans glistening where it nudges out of his foreskin. She dips her head, to feel the texture of his skin against her lips, to feel for a pulse in that vessel with the edge of her tongue.

And everything goes entirely to hell.

She thinks his knee connected with her sternum, and her back likely connected with the coffee table, but what she knows for absolute certain is that nothing hurts worse than the look he gives her, full of rage or horror or disgust or loathing, before he turns on his heel to stride away down the darkened hallway beyond the staircase.

She crosses her arms over her knees, and lets her head fall forward. Defeat presses hard, or else the gravity in the room has suddenly been dialed up to eleven. But instead of the tears she expects, it’s anger that washes over her. What the bloody fuck is his problem?

Fury propels her to her feet, drags her down the hallway. She can see by the crack of light beneath the door that he’s in the loo. It sounds like – is he fucking crying? He hasn’t got anything to cry over, she’s the one who’s been shoved off, spurned. She grasps the doorknob before she can think better of it. No, she is thinking better. Better than she has been all day. Snivellus, she thinks, incandescent, as another choking sob reaches her ears, followed by a heavy thunk, like a fist against the wall.

Well, one of his fists. And his forehead, too, she sees. His other fist is occupied at his waist. Her lip curls at the sight of him, slumped against the wall, his trousers pooled around his legs. He’d rather his right hand than her, is that it? Every pass of his fingers along his cock elicits a wet, strangled sob; he tips up towards the wall as if he’s in pain, smashes forehead and fist against the plaster. And then she realises he is. In pain. His hand is already sticky with ejaculate, but his grip is completely relentless.

Why? Why is he doing this?

She doesn’t understand what’s happening here. She doesn’t want to understand. This, whatever it is — it’s too much. It’s beyond her capacity. She has troubles enough, she doesn’t need this. She backs away from the door, back into the darkness of the hall. Back out to the sitting room. Where
the hell is her satchel?

By the door. Good, that’s the right direction.

She makes it exactly as far as the concrete step at the main door to the Hive. Where is she going? Why? Why go anywhere, anymore? But she can’t sit here on the concrete long; it’s cold, and she’s not dressed for it.

What had Maddie said? Around here you just learn to let yourself in?

She makes her way, by slow, careful steps, back to where the blue lights of televisions or computer screens are glowing. Drawn, like a moth, to where they’re sprawled. Maddie and Cathy and Val. She remembers when she thought they were abnormal, strange, fantastical. Now it occurs to her that perhaps she is the oddity — because if everyone else seems insane, maybe the problem isn’t everyone else.

“Hi, Cinderella,” Cathy says. “Are you okay, babe?”

“I don’t know,” she answers. Honestly.

“Sounded a little loud over there. Just now.” Val is staring at her intently.

“I guess I’m okay. Not… not what you’re thinking. I mean, my head’s a little out of kilter, I think.”

“That goes around,” Maddie says, philosophically. “Want a hit? Val, get the girl some skunk, that’ll set her right.”

Skunk? Marijuana. “No, that’s fine, I don’t think…”

“You want a beer then?” he asks. “Seeing as I’m already stood up?”

“Alright.”

“Grab some chair, Cindy. Er, bean bag. But it’s like a chair.”

She seats herself. Accepts the bottle Val passes her. Watches the curious ritual the two women are performing. Maddie has a knitting needle, or no, a crochet hook, perhaps, and is twisting it in and out of Cathy’s dreadlocks. Maybe that’s how you make them? Or maintain them, she supposes.

“So what’s done in your head, lovey?”

“Just… everything. Everything is abruptly too complicated.”

“You want I should go and shout at him a bit?” Maddie offers.

She starts to smile, but the expression dies midway. “I don’t think that would help this time. And he’s not… not everything. Just part of it.”

“Want I should go and shout at someone else?”

She has a sudden ridiculous vision of this little urchin screaming blue murder at Molly Weasley, or stabbing Ronald with her crochet hook. One good hex would put paid to that, though. “No. But thank you.”

“How about: would you like to talk about it?” Cathy asks.
Does she? Which part of it? Is it the same as everything? “My husband’s divorcing me. He’s
telling everyone I had an abortion. He thinks it’s true, probably. He hates me.”

“What a bloody wanker!”

“Ow, watch that hook, Maddie dear!”

“Sorry, Cath. What a fecking pig, though. And so what if you did?”

So what. God, she can’t even begin to explain ‘so what’ to these muggles. She shrugs, instead.
Tests her beer. “He wanted to have kids. I didn’t.”

“And? It’s your fecking body. If he didn’t like it, he could take a walk, eh?”

She rubs her fingers into her eye sockets. She’s got the start of a headache coming on, she thinks.
How did everything go to such utter shite, so quickly, so thoroughly? With Ronald. With Severus.
“T’ll think I must be prone to making terrible decisions when it comes to men.”

Val reaches over to pat her knee. “Me too, sugar, me too. But men don’t just have pricks, they are
pricks. There are no good decisions when it comes to men. You just have to make the least bad one.”

Hah.

Val is contemplating his own beer bottle. It’s empty. Maybe he doesn’t feel like getting up to get
another? “You know what, ladies,” he says slowly, “We should do the wall. Yes, absolutely.
Let’s go do the wall.”

Can it possibly be a good thing, if Maddie O’Shea is excited about it? “Oh my god, yes. We
haven’t done that in ages. A month or two, at least.”

Hermione shoves her misgivings aside. She’d done plenty of stupid things following Harry and
Ronald; how much trouble can three muggles get her into? They’re pulling on coats, so she
presumes that ‘the wall’ is outside. What use they intend to make of the crates of empties they
pause to collect, she has no idea. Maybe they’re just taking them out to the recycle bins, on their
way past.

But no, they don’t spare a glance at the neat blue bins. Their object is around the far side of the
Hive, where it butts up against the demolished bones of what was probably another warehouse.
Now, it’s an empty lot, strewn with rubble, and lit by an accusing spotlight.

“Isn’t it grand?” Maddie asks. She spreads her arms like a circus performer: *Hoopla!*

Across the wall, in heavy chalk letters, are the words *THE PATRIARCHY* – surrounding them, like
a cloud, or a whirlwind, or a swarm of angry hornets, are more words: wage gap, pornification,
misogyny, you should smile, separate spheres, boob jobs, mansplaining, child brides, gendered
clothing, tech bros, manliness, page 3, thinspo, men’s rights movement, pink is for girls, domestic
violence, pubic waxing, real men don’t cry, catcalls, slut-shaming, genital mutilation, PMS,
virginity, friend zone, asking for it, harassment, homophobia, no means yes, ‘non-consensual’, date
rape, gang rape, *rape, rape, RAPE…* and names. Lots and lots of names.

Cathy pulls a piece of chalk out of her pocket, flips it in the air, catches it. *Montrose*, she writes on
the wall. “I know it’s nearly a week, but I’m still so infuriated. He had no call pointing out my
sexuality. It didn’t have anything to do with the show, and it’s no business of his who I sleep
with.”
“My turn.” Maddie snaps her fingers until Cathy passes over the chalk, and then writes *ladette* in bold, sure strokes. “I fecking hate that word. Here, Cinderella, write up your woes. Externalise!”

She rubs her thumb down the length of the chalk, and walks slowly up to the wall. There’s a clear brick, just here, at eye level. *Ronald* forms beneath her fingers — hesitantly, at first, but by the time she’s closing the ‘d’ her hand is steady as a rock. She selects another clear piece of brick, and draws a firm ‘S’ there. And stops. Hears again that strangled, hitching sob, sees his fingers clenched — she scrubs out the letter with the palm of her hand. Steps back, passes Val the chalk.

He adds *that bitch Angie at M.A.C.* to the wall with a flourish, flips the cap on his new beer bottle, and raises it to his lips. Maddie and Cathy begin chanting: “Chug, bitch, chug!”

And he manages it in one go, too, although he staggers just a bit as he wipes his mouth. Or, no — he’s hauling his arm back, and —

**SMASH**

— the glass shatters to a million pieces, tinkling down the face of the wall. He raises his arms in a victory vee, and lets forth a primal shout of jubilation. Cathy and Maddie are echoing him, fists pumped in the air, and empty bottles of their own at ready.

The first throw she tries is too low; it produces only a poor imitation of the showers of glass the others achieve. Her second is better. Her fifth is perfect, she manages to hit the *Ronald* brick precisely.

They are clearly lunatics, screaming here in the night.

It’s glorious.

She cheers Maddie’s aim with a wild whoop. Drains the remainder of the beer she’s been working on. Winds up, lets fly. And laughs, exalted, as it fractures against the brick, splinters of glass starring off into the darkness. Wipes her streaming eyes. And laughs.

And laughs. Because nothing matters anymore. And because it’s beautiful.
The kind of bricks she really wants to christen with broken glass are the kinds she can’t write here, though. Not ’The Patriarchy’, but purebloods. The Wizengamot, the Weasleys. Maybe, while she’s violating the Statute of Secrecy, she could do the lot of it. If she started with Voldemort, how long would it take to write up every ugly thing she’s experienced in the wizarding world, every quiet hurt, every sickening injustice, every numbing moment of terror? How far would she make it, before she ran out of wall? Into the ‘Ls’? ‘L’ for Lestrange, Bellatrix. ‘L’ for Lily.

Lily. She doesn’t think it’s all jealousy, on her part, but she wishes she’d pressured Harry, asked to see those memories herself. Because what she thinks she knows might not be the truth; maybe she has maligned Lily too often in her mind, maybe… But it’s irrelevant, isn’t it? What Lily did, or didn’t do. What had she told him yesterday, that she didn’t think she was much like Lily? The objective truth of who Lily Evans was doesn’t matter; Lily is a dead woman, and exists for her only as a standard to measure herself against.

She had promised him, hadn’t she? That she’d be a better custodian of his friendship than Lily ever had.

She doesn’t know if she’s pleased or dismayed that the doorknob turns beneath her hand. “Hello?” she calls, faintly. “Severus?”

“Hullo, yourself,” he eventually answers from within the darkness. His voice is nasal. From crying, she thinks. Her own always goes that way.

“Can I… Is it alright if I come in?”

He seems to make a try for his usual flippancy, but it’s entirely flat: “As you like.”

She fumbles for the light, and manages to switch on one of the fixtures in the kitchen. It’s enough; she can see him now. He’s sitting on the stair, hair wet from the shower and his dressing gown pulled tight around his knees. He must realise that it constitutes poor armor, because he crosses his arms about himself, hugs his knees up to his chest.

He folds into too small a space. It is so very wrong, somehow, that this should be the case.

She moves to seat herself on a step below him, but it was the incorrect orientation of their respective bodies last time, so perhaps not. Beside him, then. He doesn’t offer any argument. He’s studying the leaves of one of his trailing plants, and doesn’t bother to even look at her, let
alone make eye contact.

She doesn’t know what to say. Perhaps saying nothing is a good option. After a while, she sneaks an arm around his back.

Later, she lays her head on his shoulder.

Later still, he rests his face in her hair. “Why did you come back,” he whispers. There is no inflection in his question; it is as if he is not expecting an answer.

But she has one for him all the same: “Because I have done some awful things. Lately, and over the years. Over too many years. And I want to like myself again, at least a little more than I do now.”

He gives no indication that he understands or accepts this response, but neither does he pull away.

It’s enough.

Isn’t it?

She listens to his breathing, feels the firm warmth of his muscles beneath her cheek.

“It’s late,” he says at last. His tone has a certain finality to it, and he lifts his head, rolls his shoulders. Dislodging her.

“I know; you’re right. Could I… may I come back? Sometime?”

Until this moment, she would have thought her heart would break if he said ‘No’, but here in the void between her words and his answer, she is only still. If he is deliberating, there will at least be some relief in justice served.

“Forgive my pointing out the obvious,” he says, “but there is a bed upstairs.”

Except it wasn’t obvious. Not really. Not with everything that’s happened.

Just like it isn’t obvious what she’s supposed to do now. She turns her back, pulls on her nightgown. Carefully inserts herself into her side of the bed, draws the covers up neatly. He is picking through a heap of novels, and when he finally joins her, it’s to prop himself on his elbow, and open the book at random.

She closes her eyes, makes a game of waiting to hear the brush of his fingers against paper, the faint ffflip of a turned page. Maybe it’s a half hour of this, maybe it’s more. But he eventually turns the light out, and eases his body down into the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Thought you were sleeping. As to sorry, I should be the one saying that.”

She reaches over to lay her hand on his shoulder. Within a few moments she feels his hand atop hers. She gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze, just her fingertips, and in response he pulls her arm down across his chest, and cradles it there. Embracing her limb the way he’d like to embrace more of her? She eases over to test this hypothesis.

He opens his arms, pulls her close. It’s terrifying, how good, how right, it feels to be here.

“Maybe we can both say it,” she says into the soft cotton of his tee. “That we’re sorry.”
“Alright,” he says. “I’m sorry for this evening, anyway. For… Are you hurt?”

“My pride, mostly.”

“I shouldn’t have… I struck you. I could have really injured you.”

“I’m hardly about to pillory you for actions taken in self-defence.”

“Self—? I’m physically stronger than you, you can’t possibly—”

“And I’m the one with the wand; I imagine I could hex you to jelly, if I so chose. Give up. I’m fine, no lasting damage. Are you, though? Are you, erm,” she swallows, then says in a rush: 
“From what I know about male anatomy, stimulation after, umn, anyway, pain is a warning system, and you might have done yourself real harm, and—”

“It’s fine.”

“Severus, are you sure, because—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Severus…” She clamps down on the slight whine in her tone. Enough.

“Look, can we just — let’s just go to sleep. Alright?”

Enough. “Alright.”

But sleep is elusive quarry, too fleeting and wary to be wooed into the tangled mess living in the confines of her skull. She wants to cry. She wants to lie down on the white bed in the white room and be clean and empty and formless and absent in ways that she knows are beyond her now. For now.

Maybe…

She opens her eyes to stare up at the skylights and the sullen glow of London’s night sky. The things she sees with her eyes closed are scarier, more unsettling. Not least because they do not horrify her quite as much as she is very certain they ought to.

“This. Living, life, figuring it all out. It’s too hard sometimes.” Severus is not sleeping either. “I did warn you. Right back in the beginning, the first time we met. That I didn’t have a script for this.”

“Life doesn’t need a script.”

“Life needs a plan, though, and I don’t have one of those, either. Being dead doesn’t need any plans. That’s one of the advantages.”

She doesn’t know how to respond to this. She wishes she could see his face; anything, really. She needs more information than the grey horizon of his chest. His muscles have tensed up, and his breathing shallowed. Is there a way she can touch him, uninvited, that can be interpreted only as offering comfort? She tries: a slow, stroking caress, up over the swell of his ribs, down towards his flank. She feels his breath escaping in a silent sigh, a slight shudder running down his body.

“You, this… Whatever this is, I can’t seem to figure it out, and every time I think I know where I’m at, it’s as if I blink, and there’s just more. More than I expected, more than I’ve prepared for.”
He sounds lost, she thinks. “What did you expect?”

He takes a long time answering. “I don’t know, rightly. I thought… I thought you might want me as a mentor. I don’t think I ever expected…” This? “When I first saw you again. We hadn’t said more than two words to each other, probably. I don’t imagine you even remember. But you reached out, you touched my arm.”

He’s wrong. She remembers perfectly, the steady rhythm of his pulse twitching beneath her fingertips.

“I’m not someone that people tend to voluntarily touch. I don’t…” He swallows the rest of what he might have said. Don’t know why?

Her stomach clenches when she remembers the swell of euphoria at being scooped into casual embraces by her housemates at that first quidditch match. Hugging Harry, being hugged back. How normal she’d felt. No, not normal, exactly, but as though she really belonged. There’s nothing wrong with me after all, she remembers thinking. I’m just like everyone else. More or less.

And she remembers, too, when touch was withheld. That last cold handshake with her parents. Wanting, so badly, to feel their arms around her again, wishing she’d known that the last time was the last time.

She tightens her arms around Severus’ torso, and he responds in kind. She thinks of the way he touches her — hesitantly, sometimes. Playfully, like he did earlier. Gratefully?

“And then, later, I told you I’d decided you were a friend, and you thanked me for it, like it was a gift, and I — like an idiot, buoyed up by aimless hope without foundation… only… I don’t know what friends are. I don’t think I do it the right way.”

“I don’t think I do, either. If that helps, any.” She shifts up in bed, so that she’s sharing his pillow. She can see a faint gleam, reflection from the skylights, mirrored in his open eyes. Strands of his hair dissect the pale outline of his face. She reaches, takes gentle liberty, and pushes them back, tucks them behind his ear. Rests her hand there, at the angle of his jaw.

He leans into her touch, and she feels his breath, warm against the base of her palm. Lightly, just her fingertips brushing across the surface of his skin, she reciprocates the caresses he has bestowed upon her. His eyes slip closed. The skin there is so fine, so soft, and the butterfly tickle of his fluttering lashes makes her smile. For a moment. “I told you to kiss me. In the park, after St Valentine’s. I told you to kiss me, and you did. Did you…” Did you want to, but she can’t ask him this, because she suspects she knows the answer and she doesn’t want to yet. Not for sure.

“I did. ‘Pre-emptive rejection’, I think your turn of expression was.”

“You didn’t really want to. You don’t like… any of this, kissing me, or…”

“I do, though. I like — well, no, some of it is too, what I mean to say is — damn it all, why does this have to be so complicated? I am always mis-stepping where you’re concerned. Please, don’t go, let me try again? I like you, Hermione.

“I—Can I explain? Except, I don’t know if I can… but what I’m fumbling around saying is that I need time, I need to process this, and work myself up to things, and I’m sorry, Hermione, because you deserve better, more. Only I’m not sorry, because an apology should only be given when you know you’re never going to err that way again, and damn it, it’s not simply erring; I can’t change
“Can’t change what? Please, Severus,” she says to his sigh, “I think this is important, that I try to understand what you’re telling me. What can’t you change?”

“This. Me. Needing time. Being generally bad at this.”

“Maybe… maybe if you can’t change, maybe I can? If—if you just want me as a friend…”

His voice, when he speaks again, is very small. “I don’t know what I want. Whatever you want. I’ll try. I can try. Whatever you want.”

And she hears the echo of a friendless child, clinging to the only person who might tolerate him. Hears the quiet desperation, the certainty of inferiority, the willingness to give until there’s nothing left inside. Hears it in his voice, or in her head? Hears it. And resolves to be better than the last person who might have.

“I can try, too, Severus. We can try together. If you want to.”

They are each of them a great many things, she thinks. And whatever they are together, well, she’s not sure of any of it, except this: that they are okay again. Or they will be. And it’s enough.

“I do. I do want that.”
Severus has sprawled away from her sometime in the night; she wakes to find herself utilizing his outstretched arm as a pillow. By his deep breathing, he’s still asleep. She wonders how long he stayed awake, and wonders too if she can extract herself from the bedclothes without disturbing him.

His Mark is in sharp relief, in the somber light of day. She’s never seen it this closely before; he is still careful to keep it covered, more often than not. It’s not a large design, barely the width of three of her fingers. Delicate, really, and the lines of it could even be described as elegant, simplistic and almost hieroglyphic — she can see in the coils of the serpent the Möbius, eternity. And the skull: could it have been intended to evoke sentiments akin to memento mori? It’s a new thought, this — what were Riddle’s intentions, when he created this symbol? He could hardly have imagined he might win hearts and minds through horror; it had to have been originally intended as something nobler, more intellectual, than what it ultimately became. The serpent emerging from the skull’s mouth is a reference to parseltongue, surely… Could it be that he meant to encode the message that within his own hereditary powers were to be found the discourse between death and eternity? It is grandiose and self-important enough, but otherwise seems too neat a concept to sell to the masses of his followers, and where in it is the pureblood rhetoric that had so inflamed them?

Maybe that came later. Here’s another new thought: perhaps in the beginning he’d meant to mark those he could account devotees of his particular cause. As to causes more generally, she understands they were united by Venn overlap as much as anything else: politics of the moment, pureblood ideology, devotion to their Dark Lord, vice, avarice. Revenge. They were by no means a monolith.

And yet.

For all the credit she’s willing to extend the slumbering man beside her, she cannot so easily forget the drawing room carpet in the Malfoy’s manor house.

These are all thoughts much too deep to entertain without caffeine, she decides.

She eases up out of bed. Severus stirs, but doesn’t wake, and she lingers a moment to pull the covers up over him. She wonders again who he really was, when he submitted to this brand. She wonders if it hurt. Perhaps not as much as the injustices he’d perceived it a rebellion against. Or an antidote for.

She reflects, as she tips coffee beans into the hopper of his old-fashioned mill, that she probably still has only an incomplete picture of his earlier self’s motivations. Eileen, of course. But from the way he’d answered her questions, his dislike for Dumbledore had already been entrenched. Perhaps tendrils of politics growing throughout the Slytherin common room had found fertile ground in the mind of a boy angry that his aggressors were always in favour with Hogwarts’ Headmaster — by dint of sorting, or of birth? Potter, Black. Old names, important names. She is beginning to truly understand that old names matter in ways that transcend the simplistic boundaries which the schoolchildren they once were had perceived as Light and Dark.

She’ll ask him some day. Not today. They’ve had enough honesty; they need some quiet ground on which to regroup.

A militaristic metaphor is curious: What battles are they waging, against which opposing force?
Surely not each other? Or not all the time. Last night…

She pours a cup of coffee, and seats herself in the square of weak sunlight that washes across the island.

She understands what she’s doing: she’s constructing puzzles, framing this… whatever it is… in terms of nebulous intellectual curiosities, rhetoric and history, politics and philosophy. It’s not unlike the way he talks her into circles by way of offering emotional support. The truth of the matter is, she doesn’t want to dwell on last night. Least said, soonest mended, he’d told her once. In the aftermath of that first disastrous overture on her part, wasn’t it? She’s apparently prone to them, where he’s concerned. She scrubs at her forehead. This is the antithesis of not-dwelling on things.

She reaches, resolutely, into her satchel and withdraws her neglected manuscript. She’s revised most of the introduction by the time the cafetière is empty. Severus has still to make a showing; she hasn’t heard him stirring, but it is coming on ten o’clock, so perhaps she’ll fix breakfast and wake him.

His stove is a straight-forward gas affair, and by now she’s sussed out where he keeps everything. There’s part of a crusty loaf in the bread box, and plenty of eggs; soon she has French toast in the works. A couple apples, diced, heated with sugar and lemon, and sprinkled over with cinnamon make a nice addition. It smells good. Her apologies usually do: breakfast as conciliation is a ritual she’s performed more than once.

He arrives in the kitchen as she’s pressing a fresh pot of coffee. “Good morning. I was going to accuse you of being up early, but I see the fault is mine in sleeping late.” He accepts the cup of coffee she pours him with a grateful nod, and moves to peruse her papers while she plates their breakfast. “When I was in Amsterdam, after… After, anyway. I slept ‘til noon most days; it was glorious. Don’t tell me you’re still working on this?”

“I am, yes. I’ve been preoccupied. I suppose,” she watches him flipping over to the next page, “that you want to say something sarcastic now?”

“Always.” He favours her with that twitchy little smirk. “What are you working on after this?”

“I hadn’t given it any thought. Processing some ingredients by fungal fermentation, maybe. I suspect I’m going to be rather mired in this mess with Ronald.”

He nods judiciously, and shuffles her papers back together.

“Did you have thoughts on it? Being a co-author and all?”

“I wouldn’t share them even if I did.”

“Er, why? Oh, no, let me guess: because you’re leery of Dr Prince drawing inferences, is that it?”

“He can be annoyingly persistent in pursuit of his goals.”

“Which are?”

“Often vague and inscrutable; ‘though, in this instance, his cunning plan may be limited to merely having me back on the wizarding side. Thank you for cooking breakfast; I trust you found your way about easily enough?”

“Oh, yes. Your kitchen’s logically organized. One thing I don’t understand—”
“Just one?”

“A thing I don’t understand: You’re in his power in some respects; he could just take out an advert in the Prophet: *Severus Snape is Alive.*”

“Not for long, he wouldn’t be. Severus Snape has no qualms about suicide, in that unhappy event.”

The French toast she’s just swallowed seems to stick in her throat. Is it only a trick of her mind, that she thinks she can feel it making its slow way down her oesophagus? She stares at him, unblinking, until he raises his eyes. They’re bloodshot still.

“It’s not… imminent, or anything. Just that I won’t. Won’t go back.”

She lowers her gaze, fixes on her coffee cup. Raises it. Her hands aren’t trembling; perhaps she seems perfectly normal. Her voice sounds that way, anyhow: “I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone propose suicide as a rational choice, before.”

“Call it euthanasia, then. A precipitate demise, compassionate in that it circumvents additional suffering.”

Well, his vocabulary is back in evidence. This is usually a good sign. “I’d be lying if I said I’d never entertained… It’s a notion that’s only occurred to me in the depths of self-loathing.”

“For my part, you would better consider it as deriving from self-love. Or self-acceptance, anyway. I like myself well enough to never want to be subjected to that degree of misery ever again.”

She nods dumbly. She does understand. She just doesn’t want to.

Because…

Because what about…

He gathers their breakfast dishes, and she moves to join him in the washing up. “Go off to your shower if you’re of mind to. I’ll manage.”

And so he does. By the time she’s dressed and groomed, he’s progressed past cleaning the kitchen to messing it up again, and is industriously savaging a peace lily. “It needs dividing, I take it?”

“Yes. Or potting up into something larger, but I’ve already got two big specimens. So I rather thought I’d make three or four small ones out of this.” The root mass gives way beneath his fingers with a spray of dirt.

“Did you like Herbology, when you took it?” How is it that she’s never wondered before, which classes he enjoyed?

“Well enough. Better than Potions. I hated the way Horace taught that. Although Potions was far superior to Magical Creatures — I dropped that, after fourth year. But Herbology… yes, it was a good class. I liked the way Atherstone taught it — he retired, hmm, I was in second year, maybe? Third? Can’t remember. Sprout’s lessons were a good deal more practical. Which was boring, though I did learn useful skills, evidently.” He plucks the peace lily’s dismembered parts into fresh clay pots, and sets about filling them with new soil. “What are your plans for today?”

“Plans. I should have those, shouldn’t I? I need to look up some references. Even with extendable charms, I can’t lug your library everywhere.”
“You’re off for home then.”

“Mmmhmm. Maybe an afternoon in the café; Laszlo will be wondering where I’ve got to.”

“Erm. If you’re interested. Tomorrow evening. There’s a pre-show. Of an exhibit, I mean. From next door.” He is very, very interested in wetting down his multiplied plants, and doesn’t turn to look at her in the course of this invitation.

“Oh! Yes, I saw some of the statues, and there’s a painting that one of them has done. A pre-show?”

“For press, and potential buyers, and whoever. Mostly, I think it’s an excuse for them to pass out invitations, and then everyone who gets one can feel superior for an evening. But I was thinking of going; less of a crowd.”

“Sure, I’d like to come. I’ve never been to an art show before. What should I wear?”

“Black? A cocktail dress, something simple.”

“Alright, I can transfigure something easily enough. What time?”

“By eight. They’re opening 7:30, so eight will be fashionable. Although you’re certainly welcome to come earlier, for supper here. Or we could go out, I suppose.”

Dinner out with Severus? Rather like a date, all this. He’s still not looking, so she gives her facial features permission to smirk as broadly as they want to. And yet, invitation aside, she suspects he’d be a good deal more comfortable if “Oh, let’s eat in; less fuss that way. I’ll bring dessert, shall I?”

He assents with alacrity, and she knows she’s made the right choice. She’s learning.

As she’s taking her leave, he scoops up one of the plants, and presses it into her hands. “Here. Your Dieffenbachia need company. And as you can see, I’ve got plenty of them myself,” he says, forestalling any contradiction she might have offered.

She laughs instead, and thanks him. “I wonder why they call them peace lilies?”

“Because ‘they’ are idiots. Its proper name is Spathiphyllum, and it’s not a lily at all, it’s an aroid.”

“Spathiphyllum. Spoon-leaf?” she tests the etymology.

“For the bract. The inflorescence is a spadix, here, look. In aroids, bracts are called spathes; they’re usually showy. These white flags — like a truce, or a surrender — I suppose ‘peace’ sells better than ‘surrender lily’ — anyway, it’s just a modified leaf.”

“Hmm! Well, thank you. Do I need to do anything special with it?”

“Water it? Honestly, they’re about the hardest thing to kill.”

“Good. That’s about my pace.” She re-adjusts her grip on it, and reaches for her wand.

Severus flings out a hand to halt her before she even begins to visualize her flat. “Don’t! Don’t disapparate from here.”

“Er, why?” She can certainly manage a plant — it’s no harder than apparating with all her clothes intact, and she’s only splinched the once. She’s about to tell him all this, when she realises he
looks far graver than would be warranted by concern for her abilities.

“Paranoia probably, but just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you. *Priori incantatem.*”

Oh. “D’you think they’d check my wand, then? At disclosure, or at the trial?”

“Doubtful. But you might be asked to give it up, in which case it wouldn’t be in your own control.”

“And anyone might be curious. Right. Still, they’d only see that I *had* apparated, not where to. Or disapparated from, as the case may be.”

“I’d rather not bet on what kinds of spells might, or might not, have been developed by the Aurors since I last intersected with them.”

Fair enough. And since he’s determined to remain deceased, she’d rather he limit it to this kind of dead, and eschew the other. It’s not like she *needs* to apparate back to her flat; the train exists. But… She frowns, sets the peace lil—aroid down, and rummages in her satchel for her day planner. She’s just thought of something horrible.

She scans through the past two weeks: Valentine’s. Splinching. Then Northumberland. She’d fetched her new wand Wednesday. Gone to the Burrow Saturday. Apparated back where? To the Ministry point in Stoke Newington. Hang on, where had she been the night before, Friday? Here. But she’d apparated behind *BOURGEOIS CUNTS*, so that’s alright. And then Sunday, and yesterday evening. She’d taken the train both times. Good, good.

Severus is watching her closely. He hasn’t interrupted, but he clearly wants her to enlighten him. “I had this awful thought, that maybe I’d apparated directly here. But I haven’t. The closest I’ve come was that coffee bar, a few streets over, and just the once. I wonder how far back *Priori incantatem* will go?”

Severus shrugs. “Test it out. There’s almost certainly a limit.”

“Yeah, and then just add spells until I’ve exceeded it. Oh! I could ask Harry about it, too. *Obliquely* — I’m not stupid. But he’d know, he probably uses that spell all the time.”

She is not at all certain that Severus approves of this plan, but he grumbles out a ‘Fine’, when she explains the unlikeliness of her and Harry having a casual conversation about his work anytime soon. “If it comes up though, if there’s an opening.”

If she makes an opening?

She needs to talk to him anyway. She thinks she knows what he’ll say about being a character witness, but she clings to the faint hope that he, raised with muggles the way she was, still doesn’t know what it means to have your wand broken. If she could go three decades and change without learning, he could just as easily.

But she doesn’t have the courage to attempt it today — her willpower sees her to the café and no further. It’s just as well; she has every suspicion that she won’t escape Severus’ sarcasm a second time, if she fails to get this manuscript turned around soon.

She makes it through the results section, and redraws all of her figures in good copy over the course of the afternoon. Captions are straightforward, and she finishes dashing them off just as the streetlights are coming on. A solid day’s work. She eyes up the Esterházy torte in the dessert
display, but she can wait for her reward. Laszlo assures her he’ll box two slices of tomorrow’s
torte and have them waiting for her at 5 o’clock. Severus had declined the marzipans here (not
much for sweets, he’d told her), but she won’t mind the least bit if he turns up his nose at almond
sponge and buttercream. More for her, and she’ll deserve a double portion, what with delaying
gratification today.

Transfiguring a set of black robes into something approximating a cocktail dress doesn’t meet with
the same kind of success as her revisions have. She’s surveying her fourth attempt in the mirror,
and despairing of the enterprise entirely, when an owl taps at her window. It won’t come in, just
drops its letter abruptly, and swoops off back into the night. She scowls, and stoops to retrieve her
letter off the floor.

Except it isn’t her letter. The handwriting’s cramped and messy, but the first name clearly begins
with a ‘D’. Greengrass, she thinks the last is. Daphne? It has to be. Odd, she’s never gotten an
incorrect owl before, but she supposes she can see how it might happen. Greengrass written badly
has some points of similarity with Granger.

Well, she’ll stop by Diagon Alley and drop it off at the post tomorrow. She’s not going to be
doing revisions anyway, unless she is extraordinarily lucky in the muggle shops. It’ll be all
morning trying on dresses, because they are, by all available evidence, beyond her skill or
imagination.

Hannah Longbottom suffers from being the sort of person who was endowed at birth with equal
measures of good cheer, friendliness, and hospitality. It makes avoiding conversation with her
unnecessarily difficult, and Hermione always feels as though she’s been inadvertently rude, even
when she’s trying to be pleasant. Not that she is, really; not today. She has shopping to do.

“What kind of shopping?” Hannah asks.

“Oh, I need to buy a smart black dress. For an art exhibit I’m going to.”

“Art? Paintings? Why do you need to dress up to see portraits?”

“Er, no. It’s a muggle thing, it’s more in the line of modern art.”

“Oh. Muggle paintings are so odd. I suppose you’d be used to them, not moving. But I can’t help
wondering, what are they even for? You can’t talk to them, so they’re not even good company.”

“But you can look at them. Muggles like just looking at things, I suppose.”

“Poor muggles. They have got nice fashions, though. Parvati— She works at a law office down
the far end of the Alley, did you know? —She lends me her magazines, sometimes. I like their
dresses.”

Magazines. Perfect! She can snag one from the corner store, and use the pictures as references.
She’s so delighted with this plan that she shares it with Hannah at once.

“Hah, so you don’t need to go shopping after all! There’s your morning free, what say I put on
some tea, and we can get caught up. Neville will be asking after you, when I tell him you’ve been
in.”

It’s nice not to have to fib: “Oh, I’m sorry Hannah, maybe on my way back through?” Or maybe
not; you can still disapparate from within Diagon Alley. “I have to go down to the post; I had an
owl deliver Daphne Greengrass’ letter to me by mistake.”
“You’ve been lucky twice over, Hermione! Because guess who’s staying here, the past week?”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Daphne’s been doing bridal fittings, and she says it’s too much hassle apparating back and forth from the country. Stay here just one minute, and I’ll see if she’ll come down for her letter.”

Bridal fittings? Hogwarts’ resident potions professor moves quickly. Or else his default setting is ‘outrageous flirt’. Could be. Daphne Delgado. It’s got alliteration in its favour, at least.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” she says brightly, when the incipient Madame Delgado swans up to her with an air of limpid grace.

Daphne smiles, ever so slowly. She moves like a sleepy snake, uncoiling itself from a warm rock on a cold morning. “Thank you. I intend for matrimony to treat me very well.”

Maybe that’s the right attitude to have, going into it. On a lark, she shares this thought with her, as she sorts through a sheaf of papers for the envelope. Hannah overhears it, and smiles, but Daphne looks serious. “Oh my, yes. It’s paramount, you see — a decision like marriage isn’t undertaken lightly. The right attitude, as you say, is critical. Know yourself, know what you want. Else, you’re only wasting time and energy, aren’t you?” Her steady gaze is discomfiting, and Hermione is just as happy to hand over her letter and be done.

Slytherins. Severus is so… not normal, never that… but familiar? She’d forgotten what the rest of them were like.

She tucks her papers back into her satchel.

“You’ve missed one,” Hannah points out helpfully, as she bustles past. The lunch crowd is starting to trickle in.

She certainly hasn’t missed one of her papers, and this certainly isn’t her envelope on the floor. Even if it has got her name on it. It looks like a perfectly innocuous bit of muggle mail, even down to the stamp, but it could only have been dropped here by Daphne Greengrass.

She waits until she’s back in her flat to examine it. Diagnostic charms don’t show any latent hexes, so she carefully slits it open along one edge.

It’s Floo powder. Enough for one use. Resting inside the envelope is a small rectangle of paper, an appointment card. She plucks it out, carefully tapping it free of the glittering green crystals, and reads:

Friday 16:37, no earlier
Suite 403, International Acquisitions
Gringotts’ Bank

Smoke begins to curl up from the edges of the paper, and she’s lucky she has a pen to hand, to scribble down the time and room number. The mysterious Mr Malfoy, she presumes. Why on Earth is Daphne playing postmistress for him?

She glances again at the Floo powder. It’s a little too strange, that. She can go to any old public Floo; it’s only five sickles to use the network, the Ministry sets the rate.

The Ministry.
Bloody fucking hell. If she puts a sample of this under a microscope—do they have microscopes at the Hive? Cathy might. But she already knows what she’ll find. There’s not going to be any searu-torche pollen in this particular Floo powder. If anyone could manage to circumvent Ministry import restrictions on the base ingredients, she’s pretty sure someone who worked in Gringotts’ International Acquisitions would answer to that description.

He doesn’t want there to be a Ministry record of her visit.

This… this is maybe a good thing. She folds the envelope closed, and fastens it with a bit of sellotape for good measure.

Severus can account for Daphne’s involvement, when she tells him about it over their torte. “He was affianced to the eldest Greengrass girl, Astoria, since he was five.”

“Really? I thought no one did arranged marriages anymore.”

“It wasn’t binding. Only that if they didn’t make any other match, and found each other agreeable, they’d consent to joining their families.”

“But why the eldest, why not Daphne, then?”

“Because property and consequence devolve to the eldest in most cases.”

It’s cold-blooded, but she can see Malfoy having stood for it. And if Astoria is anything like her sister, cold-blooded could as easily describe physical traits, so perhaps she needn’t be surprised. The matrimonial affairs of Malfoys are of least concern anyway. What’s more pertinent now is “What if he’s actually doing something illegal, though? I mean, something truly criminal.”

“Criminal? Like aborting a foetus, you mean?”

“That’s different. That’s — on the muggle side, it’s perfectly legal, and you know very well what I meant to say.”

“I do. And my point is, so what? Do you want his help, or do you want to rain down fury and justice, on the off-chance he might be up to something more untoward than a little financial prestidigitation?”

“Pragmatism or principles. Right, well I don’t suppose there’s any harm in just meeting with him. And you’ve got a point, I haven’t got any real evidence.” Just the Floo powder. But she will take a sample of it, hold it in reserve. Leverage. Rhymes with ‘blackmail’. Did real Slytherins get house points, if their housemaster found out they’d been that clever? Although it’s ten to one that Malfoy could’ve imagined she’d take exactly these precautions, so… “What is he really trying to accomplish, sending it to me? Why send me something that would incriminate him? He could meet me nearly anywhere. No one pays any attention to the muggle side.”

“It’s a peace offering. Or an assurance. He’s giving you something that would incriminate him — or no, probably he has a good explanation that will allow him to shift the blame to someone who’s become a liability or a nuisance — but he’s giving you this information as a means of establishing equal footing. You can trust him, he’s telling you. And he’s detailing the extent of assistance you can expect.”

“Hunh. Anything up to and including illegal, unmonitored Floo calls? No, I’m only joking, I get it,” she says soberly. “Too, what makes him think I’d be able to parse all of that out of nothing more than an envelope, an address, and an appointment time?”
“Oh, I don’t imagine he expects you to see the whole of it; I’m sure he’ll make every effort to explain the nuances to you. In excruciating detail, no doubt.” He says it with considerable resignation.

Draco Malfoy, lost cause? Draco Malfoy, the Slytherin who had to look up ‘subtle’ in the Oxford? She won’t snicker, but she wants to. “No doubt you’re right. Why is it that people just become more themselves? You’d think they’d improve as they got older.”

“Why, have you done?”

“Ha ha.” But the question’s apropos. She thinks about the unregistered Floo powder, safe in her satchel, and rather suspects the answer is No.
Fairy Godmothers

Chapter Notes

This one’s going out to everyone who’s stopped reading. No, I’m kidding – but I do miss hearing from you, and I wish you’d tell me when things rub you badly. I can’t get better at this if I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. To everyone who’s still along for the ride, thank you! Your support means the world to me; I literally wouldn’t be writing if you weren’t here.

She changes upstairs, but winds up interrupting Severus’ shave for help with her dress.

“Don’t you have a magic wand?”

“If you think I’m going to cast any kind of spell at a dress that’s already more transfiguration than silk, you’re completely mad. Just zip me?”

“Let me finish this first?”

She leans an elbow on the towel bar, and watches as he tilts his head, draws the blade along the underside of his jaw. It gives her agreeable little shivers. She’d liked watching Ronald shave, in the early days before he’d gone the beard; there’s something erotic in observing a man’s grooming rituals.

He wipes his face with a flannel, and dabs on aftershave with brisk efficiency, but she’s transfixed now and there’s no helping it: the mossy, pine-resin scent isn’t a love potion, but it might as well be, for the throbbing she feels in her vulva. She reaches, slowly, to explore the freshly-smooth skin of his face. Those exquisite eyelashes flutter, and she holds her breath as he moistens his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“Now don’t you two scrub up nice?” says Maddie O’Shea from the hallway beyond the open bathroom door. “Cinderella, you’re half out your dress, and it’s only a quarter to eight.”

“I need a zip,” she mumbles, mortified.

Severus lifts her hair aside and performs this service; she hopes, by the tone of his voice, that he’s levelling a particularly cold glare at “O’Shea, did we not have a long discussion, not two days ago, about wandering in without knocking?”

“Yeah maybe. I wasn’t listening, to be honest. ‘Though I did knock. Not my fault no one answered. Lock your door if you fancy a shift, then, why don’t you? Only not just now, ’cos Cathy sent me by to see if you want to share a cab over.”

“Yes, fine. We’re nearly ready.” He waves them back into the hall, out to the sitting room, as he turns down the lights.

“Right-o. Cindy, d’you need some rocks? We’re all going in Gwen’s things.”

“Sorry?”
“Jewelry. Statement stuffs.” She raises her wrists to show off heavy silver …bracelets? Vambraces?

It’s a friendly offer, and she’s reminded of that time Lavender had helped her do her face, the night of the Yule Ball. “Er, sure, why not?”

“What do you think for her, Snape? Something sparkly on a long chain, so everyone’s staring down her dress, eh?” But Maddie is entirely uninterested in their opinions (not that Severus renders one – he’s trying yet again to impart that “Her name is Her-my-oh-nee. I know that’s more syllables than you’re used to, but—”) and waltzes out in a clatter of boot heels. “I’ll be back in a sec!”

“Just tell her off; she’s impervious to anything more subtle than a brick,” Severus advises.

She doesn’t need to, though. The necklace Maddie returns with is extraordinary, a riot of small labradorite and moonstone pendants in swirls of silver and glistening chain. She has only a moment to study it, before Severus scoops it out of Maddie’s hands, to fasten around her neck. She thinks his hands linger a bit more than is entirely necessary, but she’s certainly not averse.

“That’s very handsome,” he says, openly admiring whatever picture she makes. “Tell Miss Parsons I said so. Or is she coming tonight? Ask her to find me, if you see her before I do.”

Maddie looks between the two of them, and falls into a long silent leer.

She suspects this is a thing she’s happier not asking after. The gods are kindly disposed toward her state of blissful ignorance: Cathy knocks to inform them their cab has arrived, before Maddie can expand on whatever she’s thinking.

She doesn’t know what she expects of an art show – maybe something like the hushed museums she’d followed her mother through, standing or sitting quietly while her mother cocked her head and idly sucked an arm of her glasses, as she stared long minutes at paintings or sculptures. So perhaps she expects to trail after Severus like a forlorn puppy, a bit confused and mostly bored.

The scene they enter is nothing like a museum. Severus proffers an invitation card at the door, and they’re waved into a miasma of plaintive jazz and darkness. He moves languidly, apace with the other patrons, but isn’t loitering to take in the gently-lit statuary. “Let’s see about a glass of something,” he says, low and close to her ear.

She nods. Good plan.

Val is near the bar line, holding court. He flutters his fingers at them, but doesn’t give up his audience. She catches snatches of what he’s saying, but it’s something esoteric about religious iconography and she can’t figure out the context. Maybe Severus has heard it before; he nods a couple times, evidently following the discussion that breaks out. She is herself just as happy to have a glass to occupy herself with.

Val runs down, and she feels Severus’ hand at the small of her back, slight pressure as if leading her in a dance. “Crowd’s clearing out by the door. They set up the space in a particular fashion, you’re meant to see the show in order.”

She nods agreeably, and lets him lead her in a slow tour around and through the partitions that divide the expansive room. She can’t decide which is more intriguing: the art, or the way his hand remains firmly situated at her back or upon the flare of her hip. His thumb moves in occasional unconscious strokes, and she isn’t so sure it’s the press of the crowd that causes him to
draw her closer against his body as their wine glasses empty. She’s beginning to thrill when he ducks his head to share some observation. The feel of his breath along her neck is a sultry counterpoint to the rich tremble of the saxophone; her heartbeat not unlike the bright piano notes that trickle through the low hum of conversation.

She finds herself staring at her companion quite as much as the art. His microexpressions speak as loudly as his words: the faint pursing of his lips, the twitch of an eyebrow, the way his forehead relaxes as he’s thinking about each piece. Perhaps he’s watching her the same way. She catches him glancing down at her, every so often. She’s sure he’s watching her face, and not treating himself to a view down her cleavage, because he never looks away from her, just holds her gaze a moment and nods slightly, before returning to his own observations.

There’s nothing overt, nothing at all sexual, really. But still, she feels flattered. She feels *pretty*.

And somehow that makes it worse, when she discovers in the ladies’ that her knickers are drenched through.

She wants to cry. How is it that her husband fingering her could barely get her damp enough to penetrate, but Severus Snape’s hand on her bloody *hip* has her dripping down her thighs? It’s not *fair*. She wants to be good, she wants to be what he wants tonight, she doesn’t want to be this *mess*. Even the scratch of the tissue makes her clit burn. It’s wrong, it’s *vile*, frigging herself here in the cubicle, and maybe that’s why she can’t get over the crest, can’t just *finish*. She sags against the cubicle wall, wipes her fingers, wipes her cleft again, and grits her teeth against the sob that’s trying to fight free of her throat.

*Fuck.*

She’s washing her hands, and taking a series of deep, calming breaths, when the Crisis Bints arrive.

“How’re you liking the show?” Cathy asks, as she adjusts her blazer and touches up her lipstick.

God, she doesn’t want to make small-talk, she just wants to find Severus and stare at some abstract shapes and smile inscrutably or nod and go home and wake up tomorrow. “It’s interesting.” She can hear Maddie peeing. “Severus is far more a connoisseur than I am, so I’m mostly enjoying his insights.”

“I’m enjoying the show too,” Cathy says, with a peculiarly mischievous smile, before clarifying, “You and Mr Snape. You’re just adorable, the two of you.”

“So cute I could puke,” Maddie puts in cheerfully, above the toilet’s flush.

She can’t. She really, really cannot.

Cathy’s frowning at her now, and even Maddie’s grin falters. “Babe, what’s happening? Talk to us.”

“Nothing. Nothing’s happening.”

“Cindy, you are clearly having A Thing. Spill.”

“Come on, have a sit and tell us what’s the matter.” Cathy snatches her hand and drags her toward the antechamber, with its arrangement of powder-pink settees and vanity mirrors.

“Pink is so… yeeeuuch,” Maddie says, clamping down on Hermione’s other arm. “I actually feel
sorry, taking you prisoner in a place this garish.”

Not sorry enough to allow her to flee, though.

“So what’s the deal with you and Snapey? Aside from being absolutely nauseating tonight, I mean.”

On the upside of everything, this has definitely cooled her ardour. “We’re not. I want to be, but we’re not. He doesn’t… he’s not interested, not like that.”

“You’re mental.” Maddie shakes her head. “He’s been feeling up your arse all night, and you don’t think he’s interested?”

“He hasn’t, he’s just had his hand on my waist. Like when you’re dancing.”

And now Cathy’s doing the slow, pitying shake, too. “Listen, Cinderella. Hermione. Blokes who aren’t interested don’t drop £350 on a necklace on a ruddy whim.”

“Wha—?”

“Your choker. He’s gone and bought it from Gwen, and wouldn’t take a cut rate, either.”

“We were totally lurking, just to overhear. We do an excellent lurk, Cathy and me. Which you wouldn’t expect on account of her being so tall. But it’s a talent.” Maddie examines her fingernails. “He’d have shelled out, whatever I brought over, is what I’m thinking. Bloody good thing I’ve got taste, eh?”

She touches her fingers up to the necklace and stares helplessly at them. “You’re serious. Oh God. Look, I should get back, he’ll be wondering what’s keeping me.”

Maddie tugs her back down onto the settee, and pulls a mobile out from her cleavage. “No he won’t. I’ll text him. ‘Dear Snapey, we’re holding her hostage in the ladies’. Bring wine.’ There, problem solved. Now tell us why you think he’s not interested. I thought the two of you were at it like rabbits by now, haven’t you been staying over?”

“Or do you mean he’s not interested in the kind of relationship you’re interested in?”

She lets her head fall back against the wall, realises she’ll ruin her hair sitting like that, and straightens back up. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. Argh, do you have any idea how horrible the two of you are? You’re basically my worst nightmare, Lavender and Parvati come again.”

“Who?”

“My dorm mates. I was in a boarding school. Where Severus taught. That’s how we know each other.”

“Oh nice! Kinky!”

“Not like that. Lord. Not at all like that.” Exactly like that. Well, not at the time. But only because she hadn’t really thought it through.

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much. You totally crushed on him, didn’t you?”

She vents a sigh from between her teeth. “Maybe.”
“Totally did.”

“A little. But he’s Severus, not Professor Snape. He hasn’t been Professor Snape for years. And anyway, it doesn’t matter, because he just wants me as a friend.”

“A friend that he’s buying baubles for. Uh huh. Pull the other one.”

“Well I said, I don’t know.”

“Do you snog?”

“Yes?”

“Yeah, okay, ‘friends’. Look, I don’t know about you, but I don’t routinely snog my friends. Oh, no, actually I do, but, like, Cathy here – she doesn’t routinely snog her friends. Most people don’t.”

“Hah, see, that’s what I’m doing wrong, I shouldn’t be trying to kiss him at all. Because people don’t do that with friends. Only what the hell do I know, I ended up marrying one of my best friends. I clearly have no idea what I’m doing in that department.”


“Except I’m not. Not shagging him.”


“Because he doesn’t want to? I’ve offered. He’s not interested. He’s so completely uninterested that—” No. No, she can’t tell them that. “Look, it’s just… it’s complicated. And I’m always going about it wrong, and maybe you’re right and eventually he’d be up for something more than just friends, only we’re not there yet, and I want to be, and I feel like I’m going crazy, because I’m always getting it wrong with him, and I like him, I’ve liked him forever, because he’s so smart, and he’s sarcastic and makes me laugh, and he likes that I’m smart, and we have the best conversations, and I’ve never had a friend like him before, and he makes me think, and he’ll talk to me for hours, and he’s just as flawed and broken as I am, and he’s got the most beautiful eyes, and I even like his nose, I bloody fantasize about his nose, I have for years, and I used to think about what it’d be like, shagging him, used to think about it when I was lying in bed with my fucking husband, and I’m such a fucking mess, and oh god, I haven’t gotten off properly in months!”

Maddie pats her shoulder. “There, there?”

“Maddie, m’love, you are so defective, sometimes. Listen to me, Cinderella. Don’t you dare turn on the waterworks. Not even a bit.” Cathy jerks her face around with a firm grip on her jaw. “If you start crying, you’ll ruin your makeup, and I’m not equipped to help you fix it, and you don’t want Maddie doing it. Ever.”

She blinks rapidly, and sniffs hard.

“Good girl. Now look, I’m not going to pretend to know the first thing about whatever it is, between you and Mr Snape. But he’s clearly smitten with you, and you’re head over with him, so I am entirely confident the two of you will sort this out sooner or later. What’s the issue, sex? Look, sweetie, I’ve got five brothers, and I can assure you, at least one of them is a sensitive soul who isn’t raring to go every half hour. So I speak with authority when I assure you they exist. Just because he doesn’t want to shag you now doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to eventually. And even if
he doesn’t, what’s the problem? Sex isn’t the end-all. I can think of half a dozen people I’ve had sex with, with whom I wouldn’t want a relationship. Or even a weekend in Majorca. And Maddie, shut it, or I’ll add you to that category.”

Maddie spreads her hands in surrender. “I weren’t sayin’ noffink, guv’nor.”

This should be humiliating. Strangely, she actually feels better, because it sounds so stupid, out there in the open, that she’s not entirely certain why she’s so worked up. “I felt pretty, earlier.”

“You are pretty; you’re very nicely turned out tonight.”

“No, what I mean, is… I felt… I don’t know. ‘Pretty’, like… innocent. Desirable. Clean. Wholesome. I don’t know. Simple. Not this mess in my head. Just pretty. It was nice.”

“And what’s changed, then?”

Wanting him. Wanting so much more than he does. Wanting his cock inside her, wanting to feel his body beneath her. Wanting to stare into his eyes when he goes completely to pieces, wanting to see him shatter, wanting to hear him gasping her name. “I don’t know.”

“Liar.”

She fixes her gaze on the floor tiles. “He turns me on. I can’t help it. I’m not even trying, it just happens. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Cold shower?”

“Maddie…” Cathy’s sigh is long-suffering.

“Okay, no, look. You want to shag him. He doesn’t want to shag you. Or you think he doesn’t want to shag you. Have you tried bloody talking to him? I know it’s a lot less angsty and dramatic, but really, I always find I get further with people if I just tell them what I’m up for. And vice versa, you know.”

“We have talked. I told him I’d ease off, go slowly.”

Maddie rolls her eyes so hard it’s astonishing she doesn’t concuss herself. “You don’t just talk once, you eejit. Tell him you’re up for some petting, ask if he wants a handjob. It’s not that bloody hard. God! You people. You muppets. How have you even been alive this long?”

“…Well, I do have an academic career. So, you know, I’ve been doing that. Instead of figuring these things out.” And her adolescence got rather thoroughly interrupted by a war, but she can’t tell the muggles that. And then she’d done the unthinkable, and fucked Ronald Bilius Weasley, or let him fuck her, or suffered him to fuck her, or whatever it was, it amounted to the same thing, in the end…

She sighs.

Cathy and Maddie echo her. Maddie pats her shoulder again. “There, there.”

An imperative knock sounds at the door, and Severus’ arm pushes it open. “Hermione? Are you in need of a gallant rescue?”

“Aww, look, Cinderella, it’s Prince Charming, come to sweep you away. Did you bring wine?” Maddie calls over.
“Absolutely. Send out your hostage, and we’ll do an exchange.”

“You didn’t bring wine, did you.”

“No.”

Maddie sighs again. “Well, this pink is doing nothing for my skin-tone, what say we go adventuring and find our own libations? Men being completely useless on that front.”

She sees, upon emerging, that Severus looks worried. Or rather, he looks like he’s trying very hard not to look worried. He offers his arm, and steers her back out into the show. “Are you alright?”

She tries to smile up winsomely. “Fine. Having a heart-to-heart with my new fairy godmothers.”

This earns her a black little chuckle. “I hate to tell you, but you’re probably stuck with that nickname forever. Or as long as they’re next door.”

“It’s alright. They’re growing on me.”

“Like mould.”

“Rather.”

Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, though, so she does try out Maddie’s advice later, in their cab back to the Hive. “I’d like to stay over. If you want me to. I like falling asleep beside you.”

He has been holding her hand, and now he interlaces their fingers. “That sounds entirely agreeable.”
Residue

They are reading from separate dictionaries, with conflicting definitions for ‘falling asleep’ and ‘agreeable’. She’d tried the coy smile, the low voice, the Look from beneath lowered lids. “Help me with my zip again? And the clasp on this necklace — I understand it’s expensive.”

That was probably her first mistake, because he seems to feel the need to explain. “Those two are the worst gossips, aren’t they? The stones are all well-matched, though, and it’s a good turn for Parsons.”

“A good turn?” Another mistake.

“She can list the sale price in her portfolio. It gets her into better boutiques, working with better designers, if she’s selling high.”

Oh. The economics of patronage, and not just because he thought it looked nice on her. She notices that he’s economical in unzipping her, too. Just the barest touch on one shoulder, holding the fabric so that it doesn’t catch. Just the ghost of a touch.

And naturally he ghosts down the stairs before she can even begin the slow undressing she’d planned. Cufflinks and waistcoat are an incurious audience, and when she nudges aside the curtain of greenery, she can see that their owner is perusing his reading material. Rocket ships or a striptease, and trust Severus Snape to choose the former.

She shakes out her transfigured sleepwear with a grimace. It’s not skimpy, but it is clingy and shimmering and elegant in ways that Hermione Granger simply isn’t, or should not attempt to be. Dare she try transfiguring it back? It’ll unravel back to her ugly, practical nightdress on its own within a couple days. Bugger it; she’ll just crawl into bed before he comes back, and he’ll probably never spare her a second glance.

But of course he does.

She’s unpinning her hair when he comes tripping back up the stairs. “Goodness, you’ve certainly gone in for dressing up.”

“Yes. Well.” Her face is flaming; she looks down, but that seems to draw his attention.

“Erm, sorry. I’ve put my foot in it, have I?”

“Forget it. It’s nothing. I was just… It was a whim. I went to the effort of transfiguring a dress, and… Don’t laugh at me. I’ve never had pretty night things. I bought a magazine, for a reference, you know, for the dress, and there was a spread of negligees, and I suppose I just got carried away. Don’t laugh!”

“Oh, I have to! Your peculiar brand of obsessive insanity is entirely endearing. I’m remembering the fortnight or so when you took it upon yourself to charm all your dishes in the Great Hall to Wedgwood — what pattern was it, ‘Countryside’? That was during your house-elf manifesto, I think.”

She’d forgotten that. Mostly. “Well, it was something to do during meals. When I wasn’t eating.” Another horrid thought follows: “I’m perpetually fourteen in your head, aren’t I?”

“No, not in the least. Am I Professor Snape, in yours?”
“No. Not really.” As she watches Professor Snape’s long fingers unbuttoning his shirt. Right, time to be getting into bed, then. She pulls the covers up to her shoulders, and turns to face away.

Hah, he’s put on his neat grey pajamas. “You’ve certainly gone in for dressing up,” she mimics back to him.

“I thought the Pink Floyd tee might be hitting too casual a note,” he says with his quirky little smile, the one that seems like it’s not quite at home on his lips. “Don’t sass, or I’ll let slip to O’Shea that you’re afflicted with a heretofore un-indulged passion for peignoirs and the like. She’d have fun, dragging you ‘round to the shops.”

She shudders delicately. “As threats go, I don’t think I’ve heard one more efficacious.”

“My specialty. You’re welcome.” He unfolds a pair of reading glasses, and readjusts the bedside lamp.

Should she take a stab at it? “I enjoyed myself, this evening. Thank you for inviting me.”

“My pleasure. I’m sorry if they made you feel uncomfortable. About the necklace.”

“No. Not at all.”

“You looked a little… Disconcerted, maybe, is the word.” He flips a page. “It does look nice on you. And I thought you could use it as an excuse, if anyone ever questioned that apparition into this general vicinity. You could say you’d been buying jewellery; matched stones like that are exactly what one wants for latent personal wards. Decorative and defensive. And buying them from a muggle, you’d know they were free of any spell residue.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that. My brain’s gone to mush, but you’re right. Hunh.”

He flips another page. “Of course I’m right.”

She swings her legs out of bed, and rises to where the necklace is gleaming on his writing desk. “Thirteen pieces of labradorite. And… let me guess, 52 moonstones. Hah. I suppose you were counting them when you put this around my neck?”

“There were seventeen steps up to 221B.”

“And the seventh creaked.”

“Careful, now, I’m halfway to falling in love with you.” But he says it far too sardonically, and follows on with “If it bothers you, accepting a gift like that, I won’t take it amiss.”

“No. No, I’d be honoured. Thank you, it’s… It’s definitely too much, but the workmanship is beautiful; I’ve never had anything so delicate, and, er… Thank you. What do you think I should enspell them with?” she finishes, a little desperately. She wants to kiss him, wants to thank him that way, because her lips are more eloquent when she isn’t trying to talk around this confused little glow.

She’s offered an interesting enough problem that he sets his book down. “Hmm. You could use the labradorite to hold the energy, and distribute the activation complexes into each series of moonstones. So you could do a four-tiered ward.”

“Or four separate spells.”
“Concealment for one of them, then. Recharging the labradorite will only show up as energy expenditure, if anyone looked at your wand. You could make the trigger for concealment nearly anything, a word, a gesture. I had a spell like that in a ring I used to wear.”

“That black opal? Oh, you must have guessed by now that I perved over your fingers,” she says to his raised eyebrow. “No, I took note of it because you didn’t usually wear any rings on days you weren’t expecting to be called. So it was a barometer for what Riddle might’ve been up to.”

“You don’t miss a trick, do you? Should’ve had you planning the entire affair, we’d have got him sorted the summer after the Triwizard Tournament,” he grumps, as he puts his book and glasses away.

“Probably.”

“Anyway, yes, to answer your question. Black opal is about the best thing there is for long-term defensive wards and spells. Fire opals are better for offensives, but they won’t hold as many spells.”

“And with opals, you don’t need a focal stone; charge and focus all in one.”

“Precisely so. And it doesn’t need to be a large one, ‘though that certainly helps. That stone I had was in the Prince family for a few generations; I gave it back to Uncle Tibs. The labradorite will work very well for you, though. I always found it held charge longer than corundums: sapphires and rubies.”

“Hauser, isn’t it, who argued corundums are better, on account of not having a cleavage plane?”

“Eh, I never put much stock in Hauser.”

“No, it was always clear enough that beryls like emeralds work just as well, and they’ve got imperfect cleavage.”

“Just so. What might hold, is relating cleavage to the sheer amount of charge a stone will take up. But unless you’re heading off to battle, I’d spring for duration every time. And I haven’t seen labradorite bested by anything short of opals on that front.”

“And using the moonstones as foci, it’s practically like the single-stone effects for opals, because you’re keeping it in a feldspar class.”

“Yes, a nicely cohesive set of spells; you won’t have to recast on the foci, unless you want to change out the spell.”

“So, concealment. What else? Maybe one for detection? Aural flares?”

“To detect magical signatures in a person or object, or to detect spell residue?”

“Spell residue. I could see that being useful, knowing where someone has cast something.”

“You wouldn’t want that functioning all the time, though. You’d want to be able to turn it on and off.”

“Right. It’s a low-energy spell, but I’d go mad, seeing flickers all over. Especially on the wizarding side. What else do you suppose?”

“A very large dose of Finite Incantatem.”
She laughs, but he’s serious.

“I mean it. Being able to wipe out any charm, spell, or ward in your immediate vicinity is a fantastic way of levelling the playing field. And if you work it out so that each focal stone in the series can be discharged separately, you can modulate the effects. After all, you never know when someone’s tagged you with a delayed hex, or a tracking charm or something of that nature. Good hygiene to have *Finite* handy, and you may not always have a wand, or be in a position where you can cast a verbal spell.”

That makes perfect sense. “I’m getting the masterclass in spycraft, am I?”

“Tomorrow night, we’ll do skulking about in the shadows.”

“If ‘skulking about’ is a euphemism for something, you could turn the light out, and we could practise now.”

He snorts, but reaches over and douses the light. “Practise like this, you mean?” He traces a finger down her bare arm.

“Or maybe like this.” She brushes a thumb across his lips, and then places her own there. His mouth softens, opens, and she feels his fingers along her neck, and twisting in her hair. It’s languid, slow, and gentle – altogether perfect, especially when he trails his hand down her back and she goes all to shivers.

She’s not even disappointed, really, when it doesn’t progress any further, because just this is so nice, so… *so agreeable*. She smiles in the darkness, kisses his jaw again, and snuggles down into the crook of his arm. “Goodnight, Severus.”

He’s still holding her when she wakes with a scream in her throat. “Shhshhhshhhh. It’s alright, it’s only a storm. You’re safe, you’re safe, Hermione. Shhh.”

She tries to relax in his arms, panting and sticky with cold sweat, concentrating on his hands which are petting her hair. Another crack of thunder brings the smell of blood, the vision of Colin Creevey’s exploded entrails. She burrows hard against his chest, and he tightens his arms about her. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

She knows she is.

She’s digging her fingernails into his back, she realises after a moment. Unclenches. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He’s kissing her now, hard. “Shh, don’t cry. You’re safe.”

She knows she is. But so many others will never have a chance to be safe again. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She can’t breathe. “I’m sorry!”

“Come on. Up, up, up. Let’s get some air, eh? Can you walk with me? Lean on me?” But he ends up carrying her down the stairs, to deposit her on the sofa. He turns on lights, and props open a couple windows.

She can hear the rain now, smell the ozone.

She stares up at the plants, watches their leaves and tendrils twitching in the occasional gust of cool air.
“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“It happens to me too,” he whispers back, his hands once again toying with her hair, his thumbs working circles at her temples. “Not as often as it used to. But it was ten years, at least, before I could go into the forest. I got the shakes even then, but eventually I really could do it without pissing myself. And before that, it was enclosed spaces. The loud noises… I did go a little shocky for a while. But there were always too many other things in my head… I suppose I should be thankful that the worst of it is nothing common. And that Azkaban did definitely cement in the worst of it.”

“I see them. On the battlefield, at Hogwarts. It’s like I’m there.”

“I know.”

“And I can’t breathe. When it happens. Or I feel like I can’t.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.” She closes her eyes, concentrates on the lingering scent of his aftershave, on the warm firm pressure of his hand, stilled now, on the back of her head.

“Sorry. ‘Sorry’ is an inadequate word, isn’t it. Don’t be sorry. Be calm, breathe. Be alive. Be alive for everyone who can’t be.”

And have a cup of tea, too. She marshals up her Gryffindor courage (hah), and manages to pad into the kitchen after him. Her legs are still shaky, but it’s the muscle fatique from adrenaline, and no longer debilitating terror. He fixes them both cups of English panacea, and routs up some ginger biscuits for good measure.

They’re silent through most of their tea, by unspoken accord. She can hear rain gurgling in a downpipe, tapping on the windows. It’s early for a storm like this. His window box must be taking a beating.

“Probably. Although I imagine the beans and tomatoes have the worst of it.”

“I didn’t notice you had any.”

“Up on the roof; they’re not much more than seedlings, yet. You haven’t been up there, have you? We’ll have to remedy that. And if you suffer me into summer, I’ll feed you tomatoes warm from the sun; you’ve never had anything so good.”

“‘If I suffer you into summer’? Severus Snape, if I’ve any choice in the matter, I think you’ll be the one suffering.” She leans close, and presses her lips to his cheek. He turns his head, and it becomes a mutual affair for some minutes. She’s grinning foolishly when they break off, and tucks her head into his shoulder to hide her expression.

“Suffering, hmm? Perhaps I’m a masochist after all.”

Perhaps they both are. Does eschewing another attempt at sleep, in favour of watering plants, qualify? To be fair, she has every intention of napping, back at hers, and if misting the Dendrobium interferes with her sleep schedule, it also shoves the battlefield back down into the grimy crevices of her mind. Perhaps it’s telling that it’s not until she’s mounting the stairs to her own flat late the next afternoon, that it occurs to her to wonder what ‘the worst of it’ was for him.

He’s talked about the things in his head before, hasn’t he? When he’d told her what he did for
them.

She frowns. The expression deepens as she fights with the lock on her door. It’s sticking; it’s never done that before. She’ll have to call the landlord, she thinks, as she sets her satchel down on the bed.

She fetches a mug of water, and heads to the window to lavish some attention on her own photosynthetic flatmates. Mini-plant is turned the wrong way, she’s been trying to encourage it to get bushier on this side. And Spathy… what the hell? The dirt at its base is all disturbed, and she knows she damped it down again once she brought it home. There are little crumbs of soil along the ledge, and there! Down on the floor, along the baseboards.

She sets the mug down, walks directly back to her satchel, pulls out her mobile, and dials. “Hi. Someone’s been in my flat.”

To his credit, Severus begins issuing instructions immediately. “Go back to the hall. Don’t touch anything you don’t have to.”

“Right. Just taking my satchel. I had set it down on the bed. I did pick up a cup, and I ran the taps. Didn’t touch anything else.”

“No ill effects?”

“No, nothing. What now?”

“Fetch Potter. And wait outside. Just in case.”

It takes her a few tries to summon her patronus. It’s been years since she’s had to, and the old memories of Harry and Ronald, or holidays with her parents, or notes on her potions essays, don’t work anymore. She calls to mind Severus’ hands instead, his quirky sarcastic little smiles, the taste of tea on his lips, the solid warmth of his chest. “Expecto patronum, expecto patronum,” she whispers in a litany, eyes closed. One of these memories does for it, and white light flares across the inside of her eyelids.

Harry’s prompt. “I guess I’d forgotten you’ve been here before, I was expecting to see you walk up,” she says, when he appears from thin air with a handclap of displaced molecules. “You’ve got a good memory.”

“Nah, it’s a habit, taking photos of everywhere you might want to apparate to, in the course of an investigation. I just do it by default, now.” He retrieves a notepad from a voluminous pocket and flips to the back for her edification. He’s taped in reams of wizarding photos, of alleyways, entrances, offices, staircases.

“It’s smart, anyway. And it means you got here quickly, which is all to the good.” She gives him the rundown of her deductions, as he follows her up the stair.

He pauses on the threshold of her flat, and whips out his wand. “You can follow my lead if you want. Revelio occuli aurae!”

It’s a residue-detecting spell, and when she casts it herself, the knob on her door seems to flicker with a net of sparkling mauve wires. “So this is how they came in,” Harry says, “Forced your lock with Alohomora. Did your key stick?”

She nods. Stupid, to have missed it. She’d harped on Ronald about sticking the locks at their house how many times?
He gazes around the room, then beelines to the window. There’s a muddy orange pool frothing on the floor beneath it. “This is a vanishing spell. _Evanesco_, I think, or something like it.”

“Makes sense. They knocked my new plant over; there’s some dirt they missed along the baseboard.”

“Probably bumbling about in the dark; look, there’s this film over the window – we do this neat window-shade charm to block light, it has a residue like this. I bet they were in here last night, didn’t want anyone seeing the lights on.”

“Could be.”

“Except… Where were you, last night?”

“Having a panic attack on a friend’s sofa. Moving on, then.”

“Fancy explaining that?”

“No. So they came in, knocked over Spathy, charmed the window, cleaned up. Then what?”

“Then whatever they came for, I imagine. Wherever you were, last night, can someone corroborate?”

“No. Muggles. What, they’re people too.”

“I just… Never mind. You’re not exactly outgoing, is all. Wouldn’t expect you to have muggle friends.”

“Or any friends. Say what you mean.”

“Yeah, well. Let’s just get on with cataloguing this, okay?” He recasts the detection spell and she follows suit. It really does run down fast. The film on the window coalesces again, but Harry is calling her attention to yet another spell: web-like strands of something faintly yellow, swirling like congealed smoke, lingering in the darkest corners. If she squints, she can see them wherever shadows are falling.

Harry adds it to the list he’s been constructing on his notepad. “Hmm. I think this is a listening spell. Not one of yours, I take it? Right, well then, I’m cancelling it. Yuck, it’s everywhere, even in your loo.” He pokes at the spell strands with his wand, and she sees them flare. “Definitely an active spell. I’ll try shutting it down bit by bit so I don’t disturb anything else; I see you’ve got a charm on the shower?”

“Yes, hot water charm. If you can, I’d appreciate that being left intact.”

“I’ll see what I can do. No promises.”

“They rummaged through my trunk, too,” she calls across to where he’s performing finicky little cancellation charms.

“Summon anything?”

“No. Just stirred it about, I think. There’s no spell residue.”

“Nothing missing?”

“Don’t think so. It was just school things in here, and clothes I wasn’t wearing anymore. Odds
and ends.” She closes the lid, and glances over at her carpet bag, which is just nudging out from beneath her bed. “Oh, bloody fucking hell!”

“What? What’s the matter? Oh.” Harry scoots the bag out with the toe of his shoe, and they both stare at the milky glow of “At least one summoning charm. Maybe more. What’s in there?”

“My library.” She recasts the revelio charm.

Harry scribbles another note, and recasts his own. “Your library. Snape’s books?”

“Yes.”

“Anything, er, Dark?”

“It’s potions, alchemy, theory of magic. Anything can be adapted to ill purpose. Remember Romilda Vane’s love potions?”

“Yeah, you’ve a point there.” He’s prodding at the carpet bag with his wand, and the glow begins to diminish. “Only one ‘Accio’. Looks like they knew what they were after.” He jots another note on his pad.

“Can’t you tell what they summoned?” She feels violated. Her library. Severus’ library.

“No, only which spells they’ve cast. Unless the spell reacts with a protective hex or a ward, there’s nothing to go off. Don’t you have, like, a library charm or something?”

“Harry. I study the molecular and magical underpinnings of potions. I’m an alchemist, not a librarian.”

“Okay, okay, I just thought… you’re usually so organized, is all.”

“Yes. That means I put my books back where they belong.”

“But what if you can’t find one, or you lose one?”

“Harry. I don’t. Lose. Books.” She pinches the bridge of her nose, and gives him the most scathing glare she can manage.

“Well you’ve lost one now. Crikey, you keep that expression up, and your face will stick that way. Ron used to say spending time with Snape’s books rubbed off on you, and boy, I can believe it.”

Snarling something profane at him will only confirm that impression, so she bites her tongue. Harry wisely does not expand on the subject, instead turning his attention to completing his list.

List. “I have an itemization! A list of all the books. If we went through, and tried summoning each one, we’d eventually hit on whatever was taken!”

From the expression on Harry’s face, he’s expecting something more like a shopping list, and not the fat notebook she retrieves from the depths of her satchel. “Oh, relax, half of this is lab equipment.”

“Only half?”

“Professor Snape’s library alone was about eight thousand volumes, and I’ve added to that.”
“…So what you’re saying is, I should let Ginny know I won’t be home for dinner.”

“Or call in some help.”

“You could sort through it on your own, though, and let me know what was taken,” he says hopefully.

But she knows that tone all too well; it had accompanied too many pleas to ‘just give it a look over, Hermione, won’t you?’, and she’s having none of it. “Harry. Your job is to investigate situations like this.”

“Well, I mean, actually, Magical Law Enforcement would be more — alright, alright! Give me the list.”

“Wait, I’ll charm it so they’re re-arranged by value. Or rarity, maybe that would be better.”

“Good idea; if it’s simple theft, they’ll have taken an expensive one, yeah?”

“It’s a working theory, anyway.”

He dismantles the rest of the listening spell while she works out how to charm her itemization. Her first couple tries intermix the lab equipment with the books, and she’s some minutes setting it to rights. Harry, meanwhile, is poking about her flat. Nothing else seems to be amiss, and she can feel the muscles in her back losing their tension.

Soon they’re sitting cross-legged amidst an explosion of post-stamp sized books. “Accio Dembrascus’ Congelation Theorem, Volume Six — Who needs six volumes on… what’s congelation, anyway?”

“Just summon the books, Harry,” she says, for what must be the nine-hundredth time. “Accio Moste Potente Potions.”

Nothing happens. She tries it again.

“So that’s it, then?”

“Looks likely.”

“I can stop summoning books? You’re sure this is it, you wouldn’t have misplaced it elsewhere?”

“No, it’s definitely missing.”

“Kind of a weird book to want. Is it the Hogwarts copy, or did Snape have his own?”

“His own.”

“Is it very rare, then? I only thought it was restricted.”

“It’s fairly uncommon. There are only six known copies anywhere in the UK. This one, Hogwarts, two at St. Mungo’s (one’s incomplete), one at the Aurory, and the Malfoys had one. Rather a lot more on the Continent, though. Maybe sixty copies, all told?”

“But who’d want it? The only thing in there that’s at all useful is polyjuice, you’ve said so yourself. And that’s been written up in a dozen places, since the war. And the Death Eaters definitely had it, during. During the first war, even, they’d had to have. Barty Crouch knew how to brew it. D’you think Snape might’ve cribbed copies for them?”
“Maybe. No, actually I doubt it, I imagine he must’ve bought his copy later.” Or been given it by his uncle? “I don’t think he’d have been able to afford it, during the first war. They probably had it from the Malfoys. Why do you ask?”

“No reason, really. Trying to think out loud. It’s just that it’s such a random book to take, especially given the polyjuice formula is everywhere these days. I think Neville mentioned once that you’d even published a revised version.”

“Yes. Years and years ago.” A random book? No, not at all.

With a sick feeling of dread, she pulls armfuls of outsized clothing from her trunk, heaps them on the bed. Down here, down at the bottom. She’d kept her reprint of the article here.

It’s gone.

And so are her old potions papers, with all their red ink.
“It’s Ronald.”

“What do you mean, it’s Ron? What’s Ron?”

“A ruddy tosser, is what! It has to have been him, who broke in here. No one else would’ve taken my papers!”

“Which papers? Hermione, calm down a second—Hey now! What’d the trunk ever do to you?”

She’s slammed the lid down, and plunks herself atop it, shoulders hunched and fists clenched. Breathe, she tells herself, but she can’t, not from beneath this shudder of rage threatening to choke her.

“Which papers?” Harry asks again.

She takes a few panting breaths, tightens her fingers in her hair, pulls. The clean, searing pain at her scalp slices through the mixture of terror and fury that sits heavy in her chest. “My schoolwork! All of my essays, the ones from Potions. And…”

Harry blinks, and his hand strays up to rub his forehead, his scar. “Why would Ron want your old school things? Why would anyone? Why do you even have them, still?”

“Because, oh! Because…” But she can’t. She feels her anger bleeding off, cold certainty trickling in its wake. She is on the brink of wading into new complications. What is it worth, to have Harry on her side? Is there a way she can make him understand, without endangering herself, or Severus? “Because Professor Snape wrote comments on my essays. Suggestions. To improve my work.”

It’s an innocuous enough description, but Harry pulls a face as he seats himself on the side of her bed. “And you’ve kept them all these years?”

“Obviously. It felt… wrong, to throw them out. Like… Like throwing away Professor Snape. I know it’s silly. But after all he did, and everything that happened…”

Harry definitely hears the pleading note in her voice. He’s staring down at his clasped hands. “Yeah. Yeah, I can see that. It’s a bit wrong, isn’t it, that there wasn’t more of him left behind. I mean, he’d been so…”

“Present. Such a force.”

“Yeah. ‘Present’, that’s good. ‘Presence’? Maybe. You wouldn’t think, someone who could dominate a room like that, who was just so bloody, terrifyingly, solid, could just… evaporate. Into what, some books and some memories.”
“Like he was someone we imagined, dreamed up.”

“Nightmared up. No, don’t start. I don’t mean it, really. You said he wrote you comments? What sort of things did he write? Mine never had much beyond ‘inadequate effort’ and ‘disgraceful’.”

“Some of your essays were, you know.”

“Probably. Ron’s were worse; he never started ‘til after I had. Kind of feel sorry for him now. Snape. God, what a thankless task it must’ve been, teaching us. Remember the fireworks? When you stole the boomslang skin?” He’s attempting to look repentant, but there’s a muscle twitching in his cheek, right below his eye.

“Oh yes, I remember. And if you think he was at all fooled — well, maybe up to a point, but then I turned up in the Hospital Wing with a tail. He gave me such a look, but he never said a thing, not until the beginning of fifth year. Do you remember, he’d asked us to write nine feet on bases of shape-altering potions? I wrote on Polyjuice.” She feels a little smile plucking at the corner of her mouth, thinking again about the wave of pleasant euphoria that accompanied the return of her essays. “He’d written a citation along the margin – quite an obscure study, it took me nearly a week to track it down, but it was about commonalities between Wolfsbane and Polyjuice. They’re both potions where the transfigurative agents are translocated into cells via—”

Harry’s holding up his hands. “Mercy! I’m sure it’s fascinating and all, Hermione, but spare me, alright? How does it follow he knew we were brewing Polyjuice?”

“Excuse me, who was brewing Polyjuice? Credit where credit’s due, Harry James Potter. And he definitely knew: he kept appending little remarks like how he knew I was interested in cross-species transformative potions, things like that. Or he’d mention stages in the brewing process. Nothing overt, ever; I think it amused him.” She’ll ask him, perhaps. Some day when she wants to get a rise out of him.

“You say, ‘kept making’.”

Oops. “Well of course I turned in a revision! He always gave points back if you did — I don’t know why you and Ronald never bothered; your scores could’ve gone up considerably.”

“A revision? A, as in one? I know you better than that. Had to have been a dozen, minimum.” Harry grins, and she knows she’s gotten away with it. “How come you didn’t pull perfect O’s, then?”

“I did pull perfect O’s in Potions, you berk. I’m Hermione Granger.”

“Not in Slughorn’s class, you didn’t.” His grin becomes thoroughly insufferable.

She consciously relaxes her face out of its scowl. “Some of us aren’t Famous Harry Potter. Maybe you didn’t notice there was a double standard at play. I bloody well tried; once I saw you’d got away with diverging from Borage, I spent hours revising each day’s potions, right from first principles; you have no idea the effort I went to. And I’d submit the revisions in to Slughorn for approval, and he’d always say no, tell me to do it by the book, and if I were any good at brewing, I should be able to get perfect results from Libatius Fucking Borage. ‘A very credible effort, Miss Granger’. God, I hated Slughorn. And he started watching me, too, he’d lurk at my bench just to see I wasn’t working from my own calculations.”

“I… I didn’t know that.”

“You have no idea how galling it was,” she sighs. “You just waltzed in there, cheated off
Professor Snape’s old notes, and sauntered out with all the credit. Whereas I spent most of a term basically recreating them, and all for nothing.”

“Why’d you keep at it, if you knew he wasn’t going to approve?”

“I planned to bundle the lot of my revisions up, and drop them on Professor Snape, along with a formal petition. Figured to prove my grades should be adjusted, or that I be allowed to re-do all the set potions from my own notes.”

“…You’re not joking at all, are you? Hermione, please believe me when I say that I mean this with all the love in the world, but you’re a bit touched.”

“Because I cared about my schooling?”

“Because you were willing to face Snape, just for a letter grade.”

“Oh, I think he liked me tolerably well. And besides, I was going to dangle your cheating in front of him as bait. I’d already figured out who the Halfblood Prince was, you know. When I found out his mother’s maiden name, it was easy enough to put one and one together. If that year had only ended differently…” She trails off wistfully. How many things would have, could have, been different? Perhaps she’d have found the courage to go directly down to his office, pulled their dialogue off the parchment and into an open exchange. She spins away on a fantasy of his recommending her to a formal apprenticeship with Tibs, or perhaps his uncle would have bullied him into offering himself in that stead. She’s busy imagining his spare form leaning against a prep bench the way he leans against his kitchen counter, so it takes a moment for Harry’s expression to register.

“The horrible thing, Hermione, is that I think I actually believe you.”

“Sorry?”

“You’d have dobbed me in to Snape, just for a grade.”

“Oh, you can’t try me for imaginary crimes. Besides, he already knew, didn’t he? When you cut up Draco Malfoy. And I wouldn’t be ‘dobbing you in for a grade’, just… exchanging information so he’d consider my petition. My work was going to argue for my grade.”

“That’s splitting hairs a bit too fine, I think. Never thought I’d be in the position of saying anything good ever came of his killing Dumbledore, but I don’t know if I’d have stayed friends with you if you’d gotten me expelled.”

She snorts. “As if Dumbledore would’ve allowed Harry Potter to be expelled. I reckon Professor Snape would’ve had you failed out of Potions, though. And it would have served you right.”

“Well, in that case, I wouldn’t be an Auror, and you’d have no one to call when someone broke into your flat.” He says it like ‘so there’.

And her amusement is abruptly run out. “When Ronald broke into my flat.”

“Lay off, you don’t have any real evidence it was him. Suspicions aren’t evidence. Honestly, what would Ron want with your old school papers?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Then why—”
“Because he was obsessed, Harry. Every time he threw an aggro, it’d come out, how he hated having Professor Snape’s books in the house. And... and maybe... I’m thinking he must have seen the reprint.”

“The what?”

“Reprint. When you publish an article, they send you a copy. Not the entire issue, ‘though I have those, too, but a copy of the paper itself.” Harry’s motioning for her to come to the point. “My first paper. On Polyjuice. I put Professor Snape down as a coauthor. Because I’d never have gone so far with it, if he hadn’t steered me in the right direction with his comments. I never told Ronald, because by the time it came out, he’d already pitched a fit over the books — I didn’t want to have to store them up in the attic, when we had a perfectly good spare room I could’ve used as a study — but anyway, I didn’t mention it to him, never showed him.”

“Uh huh. Yeah, I see... Umn. I could see him being upset, yeah.”

What does Harry know that she doesn’t? She gives him a long, hard stare, until he’s fairly wriggling.

“It’s just, he used to say things. Just jokes, y’know. But he’d say, ‘Madame Snape won’t be coming today, she’s busy with her books’. Stuff like that.”

Madame Snape. That fucking hurts. In the best and worst possible ways. It twists up her insides something terrible. “It’s my own stupid fault. When you were so busy bitterly loathing him, Professor Snape, I mean, I’d talk to Ronald about it. How I didn’t think things were as clear as they seemed, how maybe he was on our side. I imagine he was tired of it.”

“Well, you do bang on, some. Especially when you’re right. ‘Gracious winner’ you certainly aren’t.”

“But it was terrible, what happened. He didn’t deserve any of that.”

“No. He didn’t. No one would have. But he didn’t. It was too bad about the fire. Wish someone had remembered about his body; he should’ve had a spot in the mausoleum.”

She’s tolerably pleased no one did remember, but “Yes. It would have been more than appropriate.”

“I’m still hoping we’ll get a bust done, or something. Even a plaque. Something.” Naming one of his offspring after the man wasn’t enough to assuage his guilt, apparently. Good.

She sighs, and heaves herself up from the trunk. “You’re good people, Harry. Thanks for coming over, too. At least now Ronald can’t listen to me having a wee.”

“I still don’t know why you’re so sure it’s him. Suspicions aren’t evidence, and motive isn’t evidence, either. And let’s be blunt here, your appraisal of his possible motives is extremely sketchy. That’s a professional assessment, don’t give me that filthy look. Besides, if it came out he’d pulled a stunt like this, he could lose his job.”

“Principle of parsimony, Harry. Who else could it be?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know. It’s bloody weird, and I think I’m actually going to write it up.”

“Er, you weren’t already planning to?”
“I mean, I’d have passed a note on to Law Enforcement, sure, but it’s not really a case for an Auror. I’ll definitely mention it in our daily briefs tomorrow, though. Because it is odd. And I don’t think you should stay here, tonight.”

She rolls her eyes. “On one hand, it’s barely worth your attention, but on the other, let’s go full paranoia?”

“About the size of it, yep. It’s odd. Moste Potente Potions, your old essays, a listening spell. It all feels very deliberate, but I can’t fathom what the perp’s ultimate goal is. It feels like there should be more to it, somehow.”

“If we accept that it’s Ronald, there is more — there’s a divorce. In which he’s bringing criminal accusations.”

“I don’t accept that. Not from the evidence available. Anyway, there’s no sense arguing.” He holds his hand to stall her. “It’s my professional opinion you should spend the night elsewhere. The Leaky, even. Or Grimmauld Place, why not, we’ve a guest bed or five.”

Light dawns. She narrows her eyes, and favours him with a long, slow smirk, the kind Professor Snape would bestow upon his Slytherins when they’d done something clever. “You think whoever it is will be back, that they didn’t finish.”

Harry tries, and fails, to look entirely innocent. “It’s a possibility. Anyway, I’d rather you weren’t here alone. I will open a formal case file, if you need convincing. But you could just be friendly, and say ‘Yes, Harry, I’d be happy to take you up on your kind and generous offer to sleep over in the same house as a pack of screaming barbarians’.”

“Yes, Harry, I’ll happily join you and your barbarian horde. Let me water my plants first, though.”

She needs to contact Severus, too; Maddie had sent him a message via mobile, somehow, but she doesn’t think her own does that. It’s not until she’s tucked up in the north bedroom at Grimmauld Place that she has enough privacy to call. She feels a little guilty casting *Finite incantatem* about the room, but it’s far better safe than sorry. Come to that, extendable ears would be dead easy to hide amidst all the florals Ginny has decorated with. Even using *Muffliato*, she keeps her call brief: “I’m fine. Staying over at Harry’s, tonight. I couldn’t really refuse; I’ll tell you all about it later. Yes, thank you. Sleep well.”

She plays it back in her head. Nothing incriminating. Nothing that gives away any clues.

She punches the pillow into a more pleasing shape, and stares up at the ceiling. Why? What does he hope to gain from her papers? Moste Potente, she understands. But why her papers? The only thing she can imagine, is that he’s trying to build a case that she had both the knowledge and expertise to brew one of abortifacients. After all, there’s truly nothing untoward in the red-inked epistolary her papers comprise; she is the only one who can ever know how she tucked each fresh missive beneath her pillow, the countless times she fell asleep stroking the vellum and imagining some future that Voldemort burned to ashes.

She closes her eyes firmly, and tells herself to sleep. Tries running through ingredients lists for common medicinal potions. Tries reciting the properties of cauldron metals. Falls to thinking, once more, about this mess with her husband. The fact that Professor Snape’s comments adorn her papers might be completely incidental to Ronald’s wanting them. Even if he had known about that first article, her school papers only serve to justify the byline. No one in their right minds is going to think ill of her, for having wanted to acknowledge and credit Severus Snape. It’s perfectly rational, to have honoured him in some way. Harry’s done as much. More, really. She rearranges
the bedclothes again, and tells herself she’s being paranoid.

What had Severus said? Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you?

Principle of parsimony, she’d told Harry.

Occam’s razor. Ronald isn’t smart enough, to play the deep game she’s worried about. Too, if he’s on the track of known abortifacients, if he intends to accuse her of using something from Moste Potente… well. Perhaps she’s worrying all out of proportion on every possible front.

Yet it takes hours, before she finally succumbs to sleep. Because Ronald doesn’t need to be as clever as she is. He only needs to convince the Wizengamot.

She wakes late, and takes her sweet time before appearing downstairs. It’s half-past noon when she makes her way into the kitchen. She’s being a terrible guest, and she does feel guilty for it, when she sees that Ginny’s held her breakfast under a warming charm.

“Or wait half an hour, and I’ll have lunch on,” Ginny says.

“A late breakfast is fine; sorry to be down so late, I didn’t fall asleep for ages, it felt like.”

“I’m only glad the kids didn’t wake you; they were setting off dung bombs this morning. Mum always said, she hoped we’d all have kids just like us — didn’t realise back then that it was a formal curse!”

Hermione laughs politely, and begins dissecting the waffle in front of her.

“Mum is always after me, you know, when are we going to have another. But Harry and I are done; three’s plenty to be getting on with, although I’m sure this old heap is going to start feeling awfully empty once Lil’s off to Hogwarts.”

“I imagine so.”

“I reckon Mum expects me to take up the slack, what with you and Ron not having any.” The moment it leaves her mouth, Ginny seems to realise she’s stuck her foot in. “Er, not that… erm, we haven’t discussed it, you know. We’re not, uh, talking it over behind you, or anything.”

“Not even a bit?” She stabs a strawberry, impaling it on the tines of her fork.

“Not Harry and me, anyway. Look, frankly, it’s been clear for ages Ron wasn’t happy, so he should’ve just up and shifted, is our opinion. My opinion, really. I think Harry was always pulling for the two of you to work things out, but…”

“But that wasn’t likely to happen.”

“No. I’m not blaming you, Hermione, you have to know that. Ron’s my brother and all, but he’s my brother. I know what he’s like.”

“What’s he after, then? What purpose does it serve, the way he’s going about this divorce?”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s claiming I’m at fault, you know that as well as I do. Don’t play me for a fool.”

Ginny sets her coffee cup down slightly too hard, and rises to stir the pot of soup that’s begun to steam up. “Harry just happened to accidentally mention that, I suppose.”
“He’s an excellent friend, yes.”

“You’re so very good with those sarky little innuendos, no wonder it drove Ron mad. Listen, Hermione, neither Harry nor I think you’d actually do a thing like that, but this touches us, too. Our kids love their grandparents. I’m not going to be the one driving wedges in our family, I’m not going to hurt Mum the way Percy did. And I’m not about to hurt my children.”

She pushes her plate away; any appetite she had is long gone. “So you think it’s better for me to have my soul sucked out, or my mind wiped and be thrown back to the muggles, than stand up to —”

“Give over, Hermione, the worst that can possibly happen to you is having your wand broken, no one ever takes the Kiss. Besides, you’re muggleborn, you’d be fine. And it’s not like you need a wand for potions anyway.”

How? How can Ginny not know? “What is it that you think happens, when they break your wand? Do you even know?” You dunderhead, she wants to say.

“Like Hagrid. He gets on alright. Besides, it’ll never happen, Ron’s just causing a scene, and Mum’s—”

“A bloody sociopath, is what. Ginny, they rip your mind apart, they strip you of every memory of the magical world you have. Everything magic’s ever touched. Everything. No one could survive that, muggleborn or no. I’d bloody take the Kiss, before I lived like that!”

“That can’t be,” Ginny says, drying her hands on the dish towel. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“And because you’ve never heard of it, it can’t be true? How many people ever get cast out of the wizarding world?”

“Erm, some. I know there’s been some.”

“And they’re all in muggle mental hospitals, probably!”

“She’s not wrong, Gin.” Harry walks into the kitchen, shedding his cloak along the way. “Don’t suppose there are any waffles left?”

“Daddy’s home!” Lily announces, unnecessarily, trailing after him and lugging his briefcase.

“Harry! Why are you home so early? Is everything alright?” Ginny’s eyes are wide with alarm.

“I’m out on discipline for the rest of the week, is what.”

“On discipline? Harry, what are they on about? What’s happening?”

“It’s nothing big, and I’m on pay. Back to the grind Monday, it’s just procedural. Like a detention, really, gives me the warm fuzzies. Turns out you were right, though, Hermione.”

“Right about?”

“Ron. It was him and Howard Marchbanks, who turned over your flat Wednesday night. Or, I should say, Howard Marchbanks did it, and took Ron along in a consulting capacity; it’s Marchbanks’ name on all the forms, but I think we can all agree it’s the tail wagging the dog, here.”
“Why on earth would Ron be poking about Hermione’s flat?”

“He was suddenly struck by a bad case of bookworms, and just had to get his hands on Moste Potente Potions. No, don’t worry over it, Hermione, Marchbanks has all your things sealed in Evidence; you’ll get them back eventually. Forty-seven documents and one book, does that sound about right?”

“I’m not sure how many papers there were, exactly, but that sounds reasonable.”

“Good enough. Are you going to finish that?” He gestures toward her abandoned breakfast, and pulls the plate over when she shakes her head.

“Honestly, Harry, I’ll have lunch on in just a few. You don’t need to clean the plates!”

“Why not, I eat the kids’ leftovers all the time, what’s the difference?”

Ginny sighs, and stirs the soup pot again. “You make it sound like I never feed you.”

“’Course you do, but why let good food go to waste?”

Maybe it’s a hangover from having grown up with his cousin Dudley. Regardless, she’s hard-pressed to care at the moment. “D’you mind telling me exactly why this Marchbanks, and Ronald bloody Weasley, were in my flat?”

“Language; these kids are like sponges. All I know is that Ron seems to have convinced him, and probably a couple higher-ups, that there’s a criminal case brewing, and they needed to secure pertinent evidence. Technically, his — Ron’s, I mean — his hands are clean, because this is Marchbanks’ case.”

Perhaps asking some specific questions will yield better, or more intelligible, results: “What does ‘sealed up’ mean, from a policy perspective? Or a practical one? I’m not sure which I’m asking here.”

“Your stuff’s being held under half a dozen layers of protective and anti-tampering charms, in the Evidence vaults. Can’t get in without a Wizengamot warrant. And the only thing they’re allowed to record is what kind of material it is – documents and a book, in your case.”

“But someone could photograph any of it. Or copy it, or…”

“No, Marchbanks plays straight. He’s always by the books. Probably the only way anyone signed off on a pre-emptive raid was because it was Howard, and everyone knows he’s sterling. He’d never do anything to put the prosecution of one of his cases in jeopardy. And come to that, he’s absolutely furious with Ron right now. I heard a bit of it, and he was foaming.”

Ginny sets a cup of tea in front of Harry, and draws up a chair. “I think you need to start from the beginning, Harry, I’m lost as to what’s gone on. Why is Marchbanks having a go at Ron, then?”

“Argh, I don’t even know where to start. In briefing today, I mentioned Hermione had asked me round to her flat, because someone had broken in. At which point, Thurston tore into me, because I should’ve handed off the quaffle to MLE, where it would have stayed, because they’d have gotten notice it was Marchbanks’ case and to keep clear. Only I’d come, and tipped Hermione off and everything, and done it off the books, like a friend would, you know?”

“So that’s why you’re out on discipline? Sorry to have caused problems for you, Harry.”
“Nah, don’t worry over it. I can use a three-day weekend. It’s on pay,” he says breezily, before adding: “Ron isn’t, though.”

“Ron on discipline too! Whatever for?” Ginny is looking alarmed all over again. Hermione very helpfully does not answer her question: because it’s Ronald, and he’s a ruddy fucking wanker.

“Because they weren’t authorized to begin active surveillance. Because it’s not a criminal case yet — they were only cleared for protection of evidence, and what’d Ron do but put up a listening spell without Howard’s knowing about it. And no one would’ve known about it, ‘til I mentioned. Marchbanks is in full righteous fury, demanded that they stick him with a tracker even, so now he’s confined to Devon until he and Hermione go up for disclosure in the Wizengamot.”

He turns to Hermione, and hands her an envelope retrieved from one of the pockets in his robe. “Oh, and here’s your Ministry owl, letting you know they’ve been in your flat under appropriate warrant.”

She doesn’t bother unsticking the seal. “Shouldn’t they have sent this first?”

“Er, no? How effective would it be, if we were going to do a raid on Malfoy or someone, and told them ahead of time?”

“I’m hardly in the same class as Malfoy.” Although she does intend to be in the same room as him, if she can find a Floo by half after four. It would be delightfully ironic to Floo from Grimmauld Place, but that would mean spending the afternoon amidst their cheerful chaos. A chorus of happy shrieks from above puts paid to the notion. “Clearly, I’m in no danger whatsoever, going back to my flat. Thank you, Harry, for what you have done. It’s some relief, knowing what’s going on.”

“Just, uh, don’t mention, alright?”

“No, I think I understand the situation. Ginny’s explained.”

“Er, I meant, don’t mention I told you about stuff at the Aurory, because I think that might be privileged, but, uh, yeah, the other, too.” He seems to be eyeing Ginny, and she has a feeling there’s a row boiling up apace with the soup.

“I don’t expect I’ll be making many social calls to the Burrow,” she says drily. “I imagine it’s pointless asking, Harry, if you’d stand for me as a character witness? My solicitor wanted me to ask.”

“I…Uh, I’ll let you know.”

It’s not ‘no’, but she hears it that way, and is just as pleased to be out from underfoot.

Because she can’t think of anything else to do, she apparates to Diagon Alley, and fetches up at Flourish and Blotts. They haven’t anything she really wants; she orders new acquisitions directly from publishers’ catalogues, for the most part, but she pokes about in their mineralogy section. This exercise doesn’t offer up any novel ideas for her necklace, but it kills a few hours.

When at last she hears the clock tower pealing out half-past four, she makes her way back to the Leaky. Neville’s apparently just arrived in from Hogwarts; he’s tying on an apron as she comes through to the bar.

“Beating the Friday night crowd, Hermione?”

“No, I’m just here for the Floo.”
“Right then, I won’t offer to pull you a pint. Five whole sickles for the privilege of being sick to your stomach.”

“Oh, I have powder, I just need a fireplace on the network. But I’m happy to pay a use fee, if you like.”

“Get your hand out of your bag, your money’s no good here, you should know that by now!”

In spite of the kind of day she’s had, Neville’s open cheerfulness surprises a like expression on her own face. “Thanks, Neville.”

“What are friends for?”

Disappointing you, mostly, it seems.

But Neville leans across the bar, and lowers his voice. “I’ve heard a little of what’s happening, with you and Ron, I mean. Harry mentioned it. Not any real details,” he hastens to assure her, “Just that Ron’s being a pillock, and making everything as complicated as possible. Anyhow, I wanted to let you know, Hannah and I are here if you need friends.”

She manages a wry smile, beneath the pricking in her eyes. “I appreciate it.”

“I mean it. You were the first friend I ever had at Hogwarts, you know. What kind of person would I be, if I didn’t remember how you stuck up for me, and how you helped with Potions and all? Seriously, Hermione, if there’s anything I can do, I want you to promise you’ll let me know.”

She has to flee before she starts bawling at this unlooked for kindness. “Want to be a character witness in a couple weeks?” she asks, wildly.

“Absolutely. What time?”

Sorting through her satchel for the Ministry letter gives her the moment she needs, and she comes up with the time and date (“The twelfth, Wednesday, at ten in the morning”), along with Malfoy’s envelope, which she is careful to keep out of sight below the bar.

“I’ll be there; Javier can cover my morning section, he owes me for letting him massacre my roses.”

“I don’t know how I can ever thank you,” she says, as sincerely as she knows how.

He pats her shoulder and makes a shooing motion towards the far side of the barroom, “Go on then, off to your Floo. And if you want to thank me, stop being such a stranger around here.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

There’s no one in ear-shot, but she casts *Muffliato* anyway, and a diagnostic spell for good measure. If Edgecombe at the Ministry is on the look-out for unregistered Floo powder, it’s just possible they’ve got up wards to detect it by now. But she doesn’t see any flickers of spell residue clinging to the stonework, and so she’s forced to admit, upon checking her watch, that she’s procrastinating. She checks over her shoulder that Neville’s busy with a customer and paying her no mind, then tips the powder into her palm. Casts it in. Takes a deep breath, and steps into the emerald flames.

“Suite 403, International Acquisitions, Gringotts” she says, low and precise.
The flames gout up, and she spins away, to stumble into a long room, elegant and pristine in white marble.

Draco Malfoy finishes reading the document in front of him, and reaches for a quill to sign his name, before setting both aside, folding his hands atop the dark wood of his desk, and looking up to favour her with that supercilious moue of his lips that she remembers of old.

“Tell me,” he says, “is it Granger, or Weasley, or In Rather a Lot of Trouble?”

She summons up the coldly disdainful way Severus ignores Maddie’s finer antics, and walks slowly, deliberately, to stand in front of Malfoy’s desk. “Good afternoon, Draco. ‘Hermione’ will suffice, if you can bring yourself to be civil.”

He bares his canines in what she realises is a silent laugh. “Hermione, then. Have a seat. Tea?”

“No thank you.”

“Something stronger then? I assure you, I don’t habitually poison my clients.”

Clients? Is she? She shrugs one shoulder; he can take it as acquiescence if he likes. Apparently he does, because he rises to retrieve a pair of tumblers and a decanter from his credenza. She watches him pour, and waits for him to drink first. If this is gauche behaviour on her part, he seems to expect it at least.

She sips. Firewhiskey, of course. She sets her tumbler on the wide arm of her chair, and folds her hands in her lap. Instead of watching Malfoy watching her, she watches his spread fingers. Their movement, a slow, silent tapping on the open surface of his desk, seems to be unconscious. He’s thinking, and when they still, she has no doubt it coincides with him having made up his mind.

“It’s lovely weather we’ve been having, isn’t it?”

Oh, please no. She really cannot. “Splendid, really. I’ve been enjoying the daffodils.”

“Yes, we’ve been having quite a show of them, in Wiltshire. Astoria’s mad for bulbs: daffs, fritillaries, snowdrops, the lot of them. This year’s tulip display is coming in well, too, and after that we’ll have the bluebells down in the preserve.” He’s trying for ‘civil’ with a vengeance.

She’s not going to be the first to break. Although… “It takes skill, I imagine. Successional planting. I don’t expect I’d have the knack for it, my frame of reference for climate is about equally split between London and the Scottish highlands. I suppose the searu-torche will be just coming up, there.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrow. In appreciation? “Could be. Astoria would know; I imagine hers will be blooming soon. She has four or five species now, I think. Come to that, she’s been considerably put out with your mate Longbottom. Apparently he’s got a species or a cultivar or a hybrid — I never know which — but he has one that she wants, and won’t sell her the seed, or a cutting, or whatnot. They’re one of her particular passions, alpine plants. She’s been developing the most exquisite rockery, up beyond the old oubliette.”

Of course the Malfoys would have an oubliette. That degree of frivolous evil is perfectly fitting, but she doesn’t think he’s merely bragging: is this a warning that she had best forget about his Floo powder? “Perhaps Neville won’t part with a specimen on account of legal constraints. I understand the Ministry has an interest in harvesting certain species.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” That silent little chuckle again. He’s enjoying himself, the worm. “I shall
mention that theory the next time her feathers are ruffled over it. Speaking of feathers…”

“Yes?”

“I had an interesting owl, several days ago,” he says. “It came bearing strange gifts.”

She is absolutely not going another round with him. Enough. Please, already. “Oh? Is your correspondence usually quite varied? I imagine it must be, International Acquisitions and all.”

He gives her a level look. His fingers tap: once, twice. She watches him inhale, his nostrils flaring ever so slightly. And then he ducks his head, opens one of the lower drawers in his desk. “Tell me, what do you think this is?” He sets a heavy ring on the desk between them.

With her raised eyebrows, she looks a mute question at him. He nods, so she picks it up. It’s old, plain, and dominated by a square-cut emerald. The underside of it is carved, a stylized dragon — no, a wyrm — coiled around one strut of the letter ‘M’. “Gold ring. Your family’s crest, or a variant thereof. Emerald?”

“It’s death. And life.” He extends his hand, and she passes it back. “I never imagined I would see this again.”

“Had you lost it?”

“No. It’s a debt-token. Ah, I can tell already, you don’t know what that is.”

“Enlighten me.”

“You’ve heard of life debts.”

“Of course.”

“Too blithe, Ms Granger. Your lot— No, not muggles, I mean you Gryffindors. Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws.” He sneers the words out as if pronouncing something distasteful, “You’ve lost all the old traditions, life debts among them. Forgotten them all.” He turns the ring in his fingers, gazes down at it. His face is entirely immobile when he raises it again. “Slytherin remembers. Slytherin will always remember. This is a debt token; it doesn’t have to be a ring, doesn’t have to be valuable, even, although jewels or blades are common. But it is traditional that it be something obviously linked to the family, to signify longevity of the promise. They’re given in acknowledgement that a life debt is owed to the recipient, but that the giver may never have an opportunity to clear their debt. So it passes down, passes on. There are some debts that have tied families together for hundreds of years.”

“Is your debt cleared then, that you’ve received it back?”

He emits a huff of air, not laughter — disgust? — and looks away. “No. I gave this to… I’ve received it because my debt is being called in. So I have to ask myself, what is my life worth?”

“Is it your own debt, personally, or your family’s?”

His tone is glacial, implacable: “It doesn’t matter. It’s the same. No debt ever diminishes with time. Slytherin remembers. And Slytherin keeps traditions.”

“Where they align with what you know about yourself,” she interjects, ever so softly.

She nearly starts when he fumbles the ring. It clatters to the desk, the sound preternaturally loud.
His lips are pressed tight together, his grey eyes suddenly piercing.

“Ah, but you have a very particular library, don’t you,” he finally breathes. "I didn’t consider that he might have written down his speeches... I’ve been to some effort, this week, trying to figure you out, and get you properly placed. Thought I knew rather a lot about you, Ms Granger. But it hadn’t occurred to me you might have genuinely improved yourself, in the years after the war.”

Something's happening here, and she senses that whatever she says next is going to tip the balance. “I have come to appreciate the necessity of making decisions consistent with an awareness of oneself, yes.”

He picks up the ring, and replaces it in the drawer. Pours another splash of liquor into his empty tumbler. Leans back in his chair.

She tastes her own drink again. Looks at him. Waits.

“Nosce te ipsum,” whispers Draco Malfoy, raising his glass.
Dear friends and readers — I'm sorry I’ve left you hanging. Here's a chapter in apology. It has been very hard for me to keep at this, to keep coming back, knowing that so many of you will leave, that I'll get to know you down in the comments, get to like you, start looking forward to hearing from you. But then one day, I'll update and you'll have left. I won't know why. I won't know what I've done wrong. Most of you won't tell me. Which is your right: you don't owe me anything at all. Most of you won't tell me. Which is your right: you don't owe me anything at all. But if you don't choose to tell me, I'll probably keep doing it (I don't know any better; I'm already doing the best I know how). So I'll upload another chapter. Wait to see who's left. Wonder what it is that I'm doing so badly. Rinse, repeat.

Anyway, here is an apology. I'm sorry for the hiatus. I'm sorry for having been too weak, for a while, to keep going. They say you should write for yourself, as if it's some kind of spiritual exercise. I already do that. A lot of that. I don't want to write this for me. I hope I'm writing it for you. I hope some of you are still out there.

“Nosce te ipsum,” she repeats. Know thyself. It has the flavour of rite, which is deepened by Malfoy’s flat eyes.

“If you haven’t already surmised, it will open doors for you. Don’t wear it out.” He sets his drink down, to lean on one hand and silently gaze at her. His expression is inscrutable, a mix perhaps of bitterness and whimsy.

She watches his inhalations deepen, as his eyes take on a faraway vagueness.

“I’d like to know, for the sake of my own curiosity, how you’d describe your relationship with Tiberius Prince.”

“Is satisfying your curiosity a requirement of this meeting?” Too blunt? She doesn’t think so; it seems like now is her opportunity to press, to get the upper hand here.

The wry moue of his lips reassures her. “No. Let me share an expression with you. About life debts: ‘Some lives aren’t worth saving.’”

“That’s barbaric,” she says, calmly.

“Because you’re thinking about an unspoken emphasis on lives. The emphasis belongs on worth.”

“Explain that for us Gryffindors. We’re a bit slow on the uptake.”

He emits a faint snort. “Pull the other. It has to do with how a life debt is evaluated — when you repay it, you have to repay the value of your own life. If I could have repaid this the night of the battle at Hogwarts, it would have been no hardship whatsoever. Now, though. My life now is rich beyond anything I could have imagined then; I have a career I enjoy, a family I adore, our name is rehabilitated… The value of my life is not incalculable, no. But it is very high, indeed.” He tips
back the last of his firewhiskey, pours another.

“And you owe that to your creditor?”

“Yes. To Severus Snape.”

“I see.”

“You don’t. Not really. You can’t.”

“Try me.”

“I wasn’t worth saving. That exchange — it was more than a simple token, it was a promise to achieve my potential, to rise to a worth equal his own, equal what he expended in my preservation. To have been worthy of owing him that debt. To encompass enough worth that someday I could repay it.”

“And your worth is high enough now?” She doesn’t know what he’s angling towards, anymore, so she extends words randomly.

“Undoubtedly. But am I repaying it? Can I? You can’t pay them off piecemeal, you know.”

“Can’t? Or shouldn’t? If it’s an agreement of honour—”

“It’s more than that.”

“Magic?”

“Ritual.”

She chews at the side of her cheek while she runs their dialogue back in her mind. “Tell me why you want to know about Dr Prince.”

“Because it was from him that I received the token; he’s called in the debt I owed Professor Snape. Called it in on your behalf.”

“Professor Snape was his nephew.”

“I know. Or at least, I know now. I hadn’t realized before that he was one of those Princes. Mother’s dismayed over it; he should’ve been invited to some of the dinners, if not for the Season. The right bloodlines, even if it was the wrong name…” He trails off, and when he speaks again, his tone is pensive and quiet. “It’s strange. They were in school together, you know. Hard to imagine he wouldn’t have attracted attention. Hard to think of him as someone who would so totally escape notice. That no one would have even bothered to find out who he was.”

She nods. She thinks of her own cognitive dissonance, reconciling his wilful indolence, his nihilism, his vegetating amidst his vegetation, with that fierce energy he’d once projected, stalking about his classroom. “Layers and layers, and which ones are anywhere close to the truth?”

“Too, he was a prickly sod. Mother says. Didn’t let anyone close, didn’t make friends. You’re not anyone, in Slytherin, if you don’t establish yourself in the networks. So that accounts for some of it.”

“Likely.”

“You have his library.”
“Yes. And you asked about Dr Prince. He’s a mentor to me. The way Professor Snape was, I suppose.” She can see Malfoy’s about to set his teeth into this tidbit, so she pre-empts him: “Back in school, he was directing my studies. Not formally, but encouraging me to do advanced work in potions.”

Malfoy leans back in his chair, nods. “He’d watch you, sometimes. I noticed. When you were brewing.”

She stares at him, levelly. Is he trying to insinuate something?

“It annoyed me. You weren’t anyone at all, why should you get extra attention? In the end, though, I wasn’t anyone, either. And he was right, to see something in you. I’ve read your work. I never did anything of that calibre. You should have apprenticed, you could be a Guild maestro by now, or nearly, instead of some ragged housewife.”

Is it an insult or a compliment? Both, probably. “I’m working on resolving that, at least.”

“And good riddance. Something I don’t understand yet, though. I’m expected to pay my debt by offering you assistance. It’s an insulting exchange, really.”

The muscles beneath her eyes tense; she consciously relaxes them. “Because I’m some ‘ragged housewife’? Or because I’m a mudblood?”

“You’ll get farther if you don’t waste energy trying to pick fights. Neither. Because helping you navigate a bloody divorce,” he fairly spits the word, “is throwing all Professor Snape’s sacrifices back in my face, telling me my own life is of so little value that my debt can be paid in paltry nothings. That his preserving my very soul was meaningless.”

She edges forward in her seat, so that she can look him square in the eye. “He meant something to you. Professor Snape. He meant something to me, too.”

Malfoy’s jaw unclenches. “But maybe he meant nothing to Tiberius Prince. Perhaps that’s it. Still, it’s a poor exchange. A life debt, for… what, marital disputes?”

“For a life, maybe.”

She has no idea what’s going on behind his eyes. He watches her for what feels an eternity, before breaking off to refill both their tumblers. “I think you should explain that.”

Draco Malfoy is not her friend. He has not even really consented to be her ally. Their apparent mutual regard for Professor Snape is no kinship. He is probably dangerous. She tells him anyway: “I have it on reasonable authority that Ronald is going to accuse me of abortion. His lawyer seems to be angling to have the case considered under some kind of blood-cleansing statute.”

“Flint.” Malfoy says. He rubs his lips, and looks past her. “Maybe. Merlin, the irony!”

“Irony?”

“Forcing you into arguing that you’re a second-class citizen, that muggleborns are inferior human beings. It’s deliciously ironic.”

“I don’t find it amusing.”

“Nor should you. And since I’m drawn into this, now, I don’t either. But you can’t deny it’s a lovely bit of irony. I can appreciate it, can’t I?”
She presses her lips flat, bites back what she’d like to say, instead of “Can you appreciate it silently?”

He smirks outright, and sips his drink. “I’ll do my best.”

It’s something. She raises her own tumbler, mock-toasts him. “Does your best involve anything concrete?”

He takes his time answering. “I think so, yes. It’s not an equal exchange, but it’s a life. A life to pay a debt with. I take it you know they get the Kiss? Witches who perform abominations like that.”

“I know. You don’t disagree with it.” She doesn’t need to ask; his tone has already answered.

“A witch who’d murder her own child? You mu-muggleborns don’t understand, don’t see what it’s like. Pure lines run too strongly, the magic alone kills them; most of them never get a chance. People like the Weasleys, Potters… they muddy up their lines, pollute their magic – and then they march up to the Wizengamot and with the stroke of a pen register dross as gold.” He upends his tumbler once more, swallows hard, cracks the glass down on the desktop.

“So, what, you think I should pucker up and let a Dementer suck out my soul?”

He pours himself another finger, two, before he answers. “Granger, you’re a mudblood. No offense intended, just stating facts. I couldn’t care less about the state of your reproductive organs or what you do with them. It’s a law that applies to pureblooded lines, for sound historical and scientific reasons.”

“You’ll help me, then.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t. So you know.”

“I really don’t give a damn, one way or the other. What’s one Weasley more or less? Filthy blood-traitors, the lot of them. Sorry. I’m drinking. I always run my mouth when I’m drinking.” It doesn’t stop him taking another gulp.

She doesn’t have to like him. She doesn’t have to respect him. He just needs to be useful. “How far will you help me? What constitutes paying your debt, what would be an equal exchange?”

“There is no equal exchange possible. Not between us.”

“Because of my blood.”

“Because I’m at my potential. You aren’t. Some lives aren’t worth saving.”

Her fingers have gone white, curled around the cut glass of her own tumbler. “Who judges? Who decides what a life is worth?”

“The debt. The ritual. Bit sad that Hermione Fucking Know-it-all doesn’t know anything about something so important.”

“The ritual? Some kind of a binding, like an unbreakable vow?”

“Similar.”
“Then you don’t know either. You’re only guessing, that it won’t be an equal exchange. Maybe I’m worth more than you think.”

“Maybe you are. But you’re not really in danger, are you? You’re not a pureblood. So I’m not saving your life, so much as… I don’t know, giving you legal counsel, maybe.”

“Which I certainly don’t need. I already have a lawyer.”

“Then what? What am I supposed to be doing? And who’ve you retained, out of curiosity?”

“Dawlings. And what I want… A contingency plan.” Allies, but she knows better than to ask that much. Not of him, certainly.

“So Weasley’s with Blackwell, then? Or Hapstead?”

“Blackwell.”

“Figures.” It’s easy to tell there’s no love lost there, but Malfoy doesn’t expand. Instead, he props himself up on his hand again, and gives her another long gaze. “A contingency plan. And what particular contingencies are you envisioning?”

“Worst case scenarios. If I lose in court. If Ronald really does press this to the worst conclusion.”

“You want someone to step in and miraculously deliver you from Azkaban, or to get you a stay on sentencing?” He says it as though he thinks she’s a half-wit.

“It would satisfy your debt, wouldn’t it?”

“It’s also damn near impossible. Miracles require setup, daring escapes are the culmination of cunning plans. You don’t build a contingency plan for last-minute deployment, you have it running in parallel all along.”

“Pitch me ideas, then. How do I fix this, how can I be safe?”

“One of your options is running. It would have been best, long-term, if it were all above-board, if you’d left immediately and filed for divorce in absentia. Preempted him entirely. Sadly, I don’t think that one’s on the table, anymore. But we can still disappear you. Not anywhere on the wizarding side, too much risk in that, but even a muggle life is better than none. And it’s the only option that allows your life and safety as a certain outcome.”

“What would ‘disappearing me’ entail?”

“Fake your death. Something mundane, a train derailment, a jihadi attack. You’ll have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Other people would have to die, you’re saying.”

“Other people die all the time. I’m not proposing we engineer anything, just take advantage of some chaos and a high body count when we find them.”

She looks down at her hands. Her fingernails are getting long; she used to worry them with her teeth when she was thinking through something complicated. She doesn’t suppose she’ll be doing that anymore. She wonders again, what her life might be like, as a muggle. She doubts she’d take to it even half as well as Severus has. He’d had a bolthole to slink away to, income-stream included. “When? When would this happen?”
“Don’t know. Whenever there’s an opportunity.”

“Can I decide later?”

“The longer you wait, the less chance there is I’ll be able to pull anything off. I hesitate to suggest faking your murder — Potter’s apt to be a bulldog, he’ll not let something like that go easily. Suicide, maybe.”

“Suicide. Hah, I had someone else describe suicide as a rational decision, lately. Funny. I’ll bet I could write a good letter, though. What are my other options?”

“Don’t know yet. I’ll have to go turning over carpets, looking for dirt. On Weasley, or on whoever’s selected for your wizengamot. If I had something on Blackwell, that would be an easy lever to pull; he plays too close a game, though. But your other options, see, they’re leaving us with less space, less time. The tighter a corner you’re in, the fewer avenues of escape. We want to expand your options, not shrink them down while we sit around on our thumbs.”

“Being thrown out of the wizarding world is not much different than choosing to go, you know.”

He grimaces. “I appreciate that. Are you at least willing to entertain it? Do you understand what happens, when they break your wand?”

“They strip your mind. Do you know how they do it?”

“No idea. Saw the results, once, though. Ugly.” He pours himself another measure of firewhiskey, and swallows it in one go.

She harbours doubts that Draco Malfoy is truly a casual alcoholic, but at this point she’d be surprised if he can stand upright. What’s he trying to hold at bay? “Who? Who did you see broken?”

“It’s none of your goddamn business, is who.” His tone is exceedingly mild, and he reaches across to refill her tumbler. Sloshes the decanter a little, but it all ends up in the glass. “I’m surprised Rita hasn’t twigged to this, yet.”

Yes, well it’s only a matter of time, because clearly “You knew. Before I even walked in here, you knew Ronald was divorcing me.”

“He’s spent the past couple weeks in the law libraries. Weasels in libraries. Strange picture, that. It bore looking into.”

“The law libraries? In the Ministry?”

“Mmm. People tell me things. It’s good for them, sometimes. Or at least not bad.”

“People in the Aurory.”

“Mmm. Heard you lost a book, too.” He smirks outright. “He should’ve paid more attention in Potions. Although, the meanest wits often can’t conceive just how much smarter than them everyone else is.”

She lifts an eyebrow at him. Maybe he’ll expand, the way he would if Professor Snape were sitting in front of him with this expression.

“There haven’t been any new changes in Moste Potente, have there?”
“No. The last one was an update on Polyjuice. Just a footnote, a citation to my paper. I didn’t put it in myself. I don’t know the unlocking spell. Dr Prince might’ve done. Doesn’t your family still have its copy?”

“Mmmhmm. I haven’t looked at it in ages, though. Obsolete technology, as the muggles would say. The guild publications are egalitarian in ways that Moste Potente never was, but I can’t help feel there was some romance to it.”

“Being able to communicate your results to anyone with a copy, you mean. And only anyone with a copy.”

“S’pose you’ll argue it stifled advances, that it kept us chained to a system of formal mentorship, that it made knowledge the purview of the select.”

“No, the argument I’d use, is that it had a fatal weakness. It burns, Draco. For all the complex magic that went into creating them, all of those books burned. And we can never make more.”

“Zealotry. No defense against it. And you’re right: the combination of flammability, human stupidity, and politics makes for fatal weakness. Even the few that are left won’t last forever. Someone should probably take it upon themselves to copy the whole of it over. For history’s sake, you know.”

“Don’t you think the Guild would’ve done?”

“Maybe. Be good to have one on English soil, though. Or keep a copy at Hogwarts, even. Have they still got one, do you know?”

“Yes.”

“If Weasley had read it any time we were at school, he wouldn’t have had to waste time nicking Snape’s, eh?”

“He could’ve read the one at the Aurory, for that matter.”

“Hunh, didn’t know they still had one. What’s he want with yours, then? You didn’t write in it?”

“Of course not. You can’t write in it without unlocking it. I didn’t leave any papers or notes in it, either.”

“He’s just stupid, then. Maybe he didn’t know there was one at the Aurory. Stupidity fits his profile. If his angle is going to be that you used one of those, from Moste Potente, your counsel should wipe the floor with him. Goldthread lasts. You probably know what happens on a molecular level — no don’t tell me, I’m not that interested — but even I know you can see the residual signature in bone for years. He’ll make a laughingstock of himself.”

“Well, amongst anyone with alchemical training.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to find some neutral authority to bring the wizengamot up to speed in your defense. Laughingstock, though. We could do something with that. Spin some propaganda about on the street-corners. A little casual bias.” Draco’s fingers are tapping his desk again. “Would you, though?”

“Would I what?” She’s been following his erratic train of thought thus far, but she can’t really see what this query attaches to.
“Go the muggle side. If it meant keeping your magic.”

“Yes. As a last resort, mind, but yes, that would be infinitely preferable to the alternative.” Not even her magic. Her mind. She could live without magic. If she had to. Her chest feels tight.

“It’s still a shite exchange. You’d be no more than a muggle yourself. What’s it worth, saving a muggle’s life?”

“Are you, or are you not, going to help me?”

“Of course I am. My debt’s called in. I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“It’s a compulsion then, like the unbreakable vow?”

“No. Go read up on it. You like libraries,” he sneers.

“Fine. If you’re going to help me, regardless, is it necessary to keep banging on about the value of the exchange?”

“Am I not allowed to be bitter? Can’t I just have a whinge and get it out of my system?”

“My time, Mr Malfoy, is not infinite.”

“Truth, I suppose. What else did they get from your flat, what’re all the papers about?”

“Old potions essays, and I have no way of accounting for why he’d want them. How do you know all this? I was under the impression everything was under lock and key in the evidence vaults.”

“Lock and key and curse and ward. Let me tell you about a curious affliction I have. Working in a bank tends to infect a person with an aesthetic affection for coinage. I know people who collect pounds sterling, kroners, euros… A few doors down, Financial Control, he collects dinosaur coins from Canada, of all things. Now, me, I admire proper wizarding currency. Galleons, sickles, knuts. I think my favourite are knuts – you weren’t expecting that, were you? Draco Malfoy, appreciative of the very humblest of monetary tokens. Ah, but I like a particular kind of knut.” He plucks something from his vest pocket. A glint of metal between his fingers: “Knuts that look like this. Catch.”

He flicks the coin at her, and she manages to capture it without fumbling. She opens her fingers; resting in her palm is “A bent copper. Nice. Very nice.”

“So you might as well tell me the truth; I’ll find out anyway, it’ll just waste time if I have to.”

“I am telling you the truth. It was all old schoolwork. Oh, and the reprint from my polyjuice article. The only thing halfway interesting about any of it was that the essays included comments from Professor Snape.”

“You said he was a mentor to you. That’s how, was it?”

“I said Dr Prince was a mentor. But yes, Professor Snape made some suggestions, literature to look up, or checking calculations. Things like that.”

Malfoy rolls his eyes; apparently it was a bad idea, because he squeezes them closed almost immediately. It doesn’t seem to interfere with his vocal chords, though, if the room is gone spinning. “Weasley’s such a useless tit. There’ll be some fun in it, anyhow. Wiping up with him, I mean.”
“Glad to provide amusement.”

“Mmm, we’ll see if it comes to that. I suspect the best this will really offer is a mild diversion. Still, beggars can’t be choosers.” He’s doing something fussy with his cufflink now. No one with jewelled cufflinks should be invoking beggars’ situations. “Anyway. Down to brass tacks, because I am supposed to be going to dinner with Astoria and Daphne and that fop she’s marrying. Give me your Gringotts key.”

“Sorry, what now?”

“You key. I need it to get into your vault over the next few weeks or years.”

“To do what?”

“To build you an investment portfolio, and slowly slide your funds over to the Muggle side. I need to diversify them first, suds them up a bit.”

“Launder my money, you mean?”

He doesn’t bother answering. Well, it was a rhetorical statement anyway. “I’ve got some slush on the muggle side already. I like my Plan Bs to have Plan Cs and Qs too, if I can manage them. Seeing you off on the muggle side is, oh, maybe Plan Delta, right now.”

“No, I already explained that.” You idiot, unspoken. “Any daring escape is just the culmination of a plan run in parallel to all your other plans. Hermione Granger, muggle, follows from Plans Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Gringotts key, please.”

“And what am I supposed to do without access to my account? For the next few weeks or years, as you say.”

“This will do you.” He extends his hand; his cufflink sparkles, icy blue and silver, on his palm. “When you’re alone — when you’re dead sure of it, mind — drop this in stone-pure water and say those words. The ones I told you not to wear out.”

“And then what?”

“Then you’ll be in on a little secret.” He grins impishly, but sobers up fast in the face of her scowl. Or stops leering like a prat, anyway. She suspects it’ll take a lot more than a scowl to achieve anything approaching real sobriety. “There’s a location. In the tourmaline. When you go there, if you say our words, and you’re holding onto this stone, you’ll gain access. It’s safe, but not long-term, because I will want to give other people access, eventually. When you arrive, I’ll have left an envelope for you. Muggle banking card, you know how they work?”

She nods. International Acquisitions. Is the muggle world ‘international’, from Gringotts’ perspective?

“Not unlimited, because as I said, my life’s worth is calculable. But enough so you can lie low. Rent somewhere discreet, until your own funds can be made accessible.”

“So that’s the plan, then? If things go the worst possible way, I do a runner and go there?”

“That’s Delta. You’ll need to see to the intervening Alpha et cetera steps, well before then. Once we remove you from the wizarding world, you’ll have to keep low. For weeks, probably. Months,
maybe. You’ll need a bolthole arranged ahead of time. And that’s on you; pull the funds from my account, but pay cash. Do it discreetly, and do it soon. Don’t let your muggle family know, either.”

Hah, no worries there. She nods anyway, and stashes the cufflink safely in one of her satchel’s inner pockets. “So if that’s the Greek alphabet accounted for, what does the Roman comprise?”

She watches him try to suppress a long, slow smirk. He’s not doing a very good job of it: the corners of his mouth keep wanting to twitch up. “Oh, I’ve some ideas. You’ll like some of them. But I don’t think you’ll like all of them, so I think I’ll keep them to myself for a while.”

“You expect me to just give you free reign? Just sit here in blithe ignorance?”

“Eh, periods of blind ignorance. That’ll do nicely, yes.”

“Try again.”

“Look, I’m going to need a fairly free hand, and I just can’t tell you everything. I’m going to need you to react genuinely to some of it. And I don’t want any more of my business rattling around in your head than I can help. Can you occlude, by the way?”

“No.”

“Might be something to learn. The logistics… I don’t think I can work it out to teach you, though. Did Potter ever learn properly?”

She shrugs. She doubts it, but Malfoy doesn’t need to know that.

“Well, see what you can do in that regard.”

“And in the meantime, you’re going to do what, exactly? Bearing in mind that my goal is staying in the wizarding world.”

“Yep. Bearing that in mind, I’m going to rummage about, I’m going to bait some traps, and I’m going to spin some propaganda.”

“Which tells me nothing at all of any use.”

He tips an imaginary hat at her. “Glad to be of service. Listen, give up on it. I’ll tell you what I can, when I can. And that’s the best I’m willing to do on this front. I won’t meet you here again, can’t risk it, but that location,” he nods significantly, “can be used as a drop point. I’ll leave you notes, or vice versa, and meet with you there. Make sure you don’t apparate; use muggle transport methods. In fact, it’d be best if you used your wand as little as possible from now on.”

“Because I might have to give it up to the Wizengamot.”

“Yeah. And when you cast with a wand, it channels the spells differently.”

“Oh, right. I knew that, Flitwick said it disorders inherent magic.”

“I think, not that I know for sure, but I think they’re working on something, in the Department of Mysteries, that lets them see disordered energies.”

“A different way of tracking people? Instead of just tracking the wand, track what wand use does to a person’s own magic?”
“That seems to be the general principle.”

“Bugger.”

“Indeed. Do as much as you can wandlessly. Or have someone else perform spells for you. I think it’s safest. In case we need to switch to our contingency plan’s contingency plan in something of a hurry.”

“Uh huh. And that’s certainly making me feel very relaxed, about whatever it is you’re going to get up to on my behalf over the next few weeks.”

He flutters his eyelashes and gives her a fey smile. “Do loop me in on whatever your legal counsel comes up with, after you go for disclosure and-stroke-or discovery. I wouldn’t want to run at cross purposes with the Dawlings boys. Not yet, anyway.”

“Tell me, Malfoy, what are the chances you’d stoop to making things more difficult, so that you could get value’s worth for the life debt you owe?”

“Would I do a thing like that? I don’t think I would.”

“I think so.”

“Such faith! Honestly, I doubt I need to actually endanger your life, in order to thoroughly put myself out over this. In fact, I foresee it taking up a not inconsiderable amount of my spare time, you know.”

“How ever shall I repay your munificence.”

“Paid already. That night on the Astronomy Tower, and a dozen times or more thereafter. Paid in full.” He rubs a hand across his mouth, grimaces. He palms his wand from the corner of his desk, and wordlessly summons a flask. A sobering draught, by the minty smell of it. “Tell you what you could do, though. As a personal favour. I’d owe you.”

“What?” She’s curious; what does he think she can do?

“Professor Snape’s library. I guess you must have some of his notes, or, I don’t know, daybooks. Wherever he wrote those speeches you’ve read.”

“What about them?”

“I’d like to read some of that. Copies, even. Doesn’t have to be originals. If you had any time. I’d really like to.” She hears in his soft repetition a faint, sad note.

It must be what inclines her to agreement. “I could leave them at the drop point.”

“In your own time. But I would really appreciate it.”

You miss him, she wants to say. I missed him too. What she says instead is, “Does it change anything for you? The things you know about him now, about his motivations?”

Malfoy’s expressions have been poker-ing up, apace with the sobering draught, and he meets this question with nothing more than a faint furrow of his eyebrows. “I don’t think so, no. I think… I think he acted in accordance with his values, and that they derived from an understanding of his own nature. Self-awareness. When you’re there, when you know yourself, you’re strong. You know what you want, you know what matters to you, and it gives you the strength to achieve it.
I… I don’t try to understand why he valued what he did, but it’s evident the lessons he instilled in us are ones he lived by. There’s grace in that.”

And now? “What happens when you achieve it? Whatever it is that you want?”

Malfoy’s lips twist in a non-smile. “Want something new, I suppose. Tell you something else I want. As a favour.”

“You’re going to owe me a lot of favours, at this rate.”

“Sure, why not. What I want, is for you to tell Potter… before things happen, before you leave. If you leave, I mean. Tell Potter, if he ever succeeds in getting a memorial up, tell him — tell him to use those words. Our words. Our new words. There are those of us for whom it would be a meaningful gesture.”
Floo travel and firewhiskey don’t pair well. Perhaps it’s lucky she hasn’t anything more than half a waffle somewhere in her gastrointestinal tract. The Leaky’s louder, and its crowds denser now, but Neville finds her before long. She’s stumbled to the nearest table, and has her face lowered into her arms, so she doesn’t see him approach.

“Here, try this.”

She raises her eyes to see he’s set a frosted glass of something green and roiling in front of her. Scents of mint and citrus waft up as she lifts it to her lips. “What am I drinking?”

“Javier came up with it. Anti-nauseant. Anti-hangover, too. He tweaked a sobering draught so it wasn’t sobering anymore, which you can see would be a disadvantage in a pub.” Neville grins. “It works a treat for Floo-sick, too. Bottoms up, there’s a girl.”

“He’s one of your mates, is he?” she asks, between tentative swallows. “Delgado, I mean.”

“Sure. We younger staff have to stick together, or the kids would eat us alive. Or, in his case, tie him up in his dungeon like one of those scenes out of Playwitch.” Neville coughs and colours. “Not that I’d, uh, y’know, I’ve had to confiscate more than a few of those skin mags; don’t think we ever had anything like that, maybe the Slytherins did, uh—”

“What’s he like? And how’d he fall in with the Slytherins, speaking of that lot?”

“With Daphne, y’mean? She seems to be alright. I think he’s more interested in beauty than substance, honestly. I don’t know if he’s quite figured out Daphne’s both. We always just paid attention to the flashy snakes, the ones with warning colouration — aposematism, hey? — but adders are toxic, too.”

“What does Daphne do? Anything?”

“She has some kind of interest in Edevane Apothecary. Her mum’s brother, I think. I never pay enough attention to people’s connexiones, the way Gran wanted me to.”

“That’s the kind of attitude that makes non-Slytherin purebloods bearable, frankly.”

“That’s what I figure. Times change; it’s nice to see a lot of that malarkey fading into the background, finally.”

Is it, though? Slytherin remembers, Malfoy had said. “What’re they like now? The Slytherins.”

“At school, you mean? Subdued, I guess. They keep their heads down. Not bad students, for the most part, and a few really bright ones, but strangely non-competitive. They haven’t been in the running for House Cup since I started, I don’t think. I guess that comes of not really having a housemaster. Javier’s been trying, but I don’t think they really accept him. Told him he shouldn’t
be trying to marry in, that it wouldn’t help any. Don’t know if he quite believes me. But yeah. If they were weirdly insular in our day, it’s gotten worse.”

“Insular? Do you think it’s politics? The old pureblood superiority thing?”

“No. Not insular like that. More like… You can’t get them worked up over the House Cup, or over Quidditch, even. They’re not being disruptive, and we’ve absolutely been keeping a weather eye on their politics. It’s more like they’ve decided as a unit that they can’t be arsed to care about things within the school. They’re definitely a group, but not really a House anymore.” He spreads his hands, clearly annoyed that he can’t communicate a better picture. “It’s like they had all the pride and hauteur stamped out of them, so now they’re just slithering along in the background, being quiet. I want them to rattle and hiss a little, like they did in our day, because at least then you knew what they were thinking.”

“Fallout from the war, probably.” She remembers the newspaper editorials: The only good Slytherin is a dead Slytherin (AND HIS NAME WAS SEVERUS SNAPE, SEE PAGE SIX!). She’d buried her own head in the sands of her research, not wanting to deal with fallout and other people. Is it really so strange that a generation of Slytherins might do the same?

“Yeah, that’s what we’re thinking, mostly. It’s awful, how it just keeps going on and on. Kids should have their childhood, they shouldn’t have to deal with the real world yet, it makes them grow up too fast. They should have duelling clubs and detentions, chess matches and screaming themselves hoarse on the pitch. Even we had that much, in the beginning.”

They part on a shared smile, bittersweet recollection of a time when the world was straightforward. And, she thinks, as she descends to the Underground, it didn’t really stop being straightforward until after the war. There was certainty, and a way forward — they’d had to keep going, because there was no alternative. Growing up might in fact be relatively easy, when there aren’t any real choices.

So why isn’t she comforted now, by having her choices stripped from her? She isn’t the least bit soothed by Malfoy taking control of her options, giving her orders.

Giving her trinkets, too.

She retrieves the cufflink from her satchel, and turns it thoughtfully between her fingers. Tourmalines have indistinct cleavage systems too, not unlike corundum minerals. Severus might not hold with Hauser, but theoretical underpinnings are interesting when you’re tucked up in bed in Hackney Wick. Practical applications take on more weight in a murky Pimlico evening, with fog off the Thames rising up into a wall of London drizzle.

It’s possible to put more than one spell on a cut gem that lacks cleavage.

Malfoy might very well have a network of informants, inside the Ministry and out, but he fairly boasted of his preference for multiple plans. Chances are good, she thinks, that he’ll have a tracking charm, or maybe a listening spell, embedded in this bauble. If he’s not interested in giving her information, be damned if she’ll give him any. Besides, she’s considering turning up in Hackney Wick tonight, and that would surely pique his interest.

She weaves into a busy theatre crowd, and ducks through to the loo. Ensconced in relative privacy, she casts Muffliato and Harry’s residue detecting spell in quick succession, before tapping the stone smartly with her wand. “Finite incantatem,” she says, and watches with no little satisfaction as a slight glimmer sizzles across the gem’s facets. Cancellation only works on active spells, so there was something there, beyond whatever concealment spell remains to be activated.
Casting Finite ended her other spells, but no matter, she thinks she’s sober enough to apparate the last few blocks home. She wishes she’d thought to question him about his injunction against apparition – he’d mentioned it separately from general wand use, so perhaps Severus is right, and they’ve got a way to identify destinations or origins. It is perhaps a good thing she’s been gaining some familiarity with the transit system. She sweeps another Finite around her flat for good measure, snags a change of clothing for the morning, tests her plants’ soil, and pops back to a conveniently shadowed stairwell opposite Pimlico Station.

It would look suspicious, after all, if she abruptly stopped using magic.

She smirks, leans back in her seat, and tries to think through how she might encourage Severus to feel up her breasts a little, tonight in bed. His agreeable attentions are lovely and all, but perhaps they can work on expanding that definition.

Tell him you’re up for some petting, Maddie would say. It seems gauche. She’s tried gauche more than once and it hasn’t worked. Nothing seems to work reliably, is the problem.

She hasn’t sorted a solution by the time she reaches the Hive, but that’s not least because she’s been distracted by another train of thought.

She knocks; no answer. The door’s unlocked though. “Are you aware—” she begins to ask, as she lets herself in, but he’s very clearly not.

He’s asleep, stretched out the length of his sofa. His novel has been set or fallen on the floor, and there’s an empty plate resting on the coffee table. He can’t possibly still be catching up on lost sleep from the years spent alternately teaching and spying, so she leans over to trace a finger down the arch of his nose, and says “Good morning, Professor.”

She’s nearly brained, so fast does he sit up, “Casting about for a wand I don’t have anymore.” He emits a rueful sort of laugh, and rubs the sleep from his eyes. “It isn’t really morning yet, can’t be.”

“No, it’s just after eight.”

“Have you had dinner?” He swings his legs off the sofa, and collects the evidence of his own.

“There’s no need to go to any fuss.”

“Not what I asked you, but I’ll take it that means ‘no’.”

Consequently, she’s soon imprisoned by a dinner tray laden with reheated beef stroganoff and green beans.

He pulls himself a beer, and settles back on the sofa beside her. “How’s Draco keeping, then?”

“Scheming his black little heart out.” She apprises him of the situation between bites. By the time he’s plying her with dessert, she’s sketched out Malfoy’s plan in as much detail as she knows. She trades him the cufflink for a dish of rhubarb crumble topped with a scoop of vanilla. “Oh my god, did you make this?”

He shrugs, as if it’s nothing. “Had the rhubarb fresh to hand. Martin brought it by; she’s trying to induce me to join some Food Assembly she’s gone mad for, and I suppose she thinks bribes will work. I told her I’m holding out for sun-ripened pears and triple crème brie. This is quite a nice stone, isn’t it? Blue elbaite species, so that’s iron inclusions, as opposed to manganese. Means it has relatively high pyroelectricity.”
“Hunh,” she says, and swallows, “I didn’t know that. That explains why he set up the activation
the way he did. It has to be immersed in water – there’d be adsorption and surface effects. That’s
clever. He’s such an arse, though: he specified it has to be stone-pure. Because of course that’s
exactly the sort of thing everyone has handy, an artesian well or a spring.”

“The Malfoys do.” Severus passes back the cufflink. “And as far as the Malfoys are concerned,
that’s everyone.”

“Of course they do.” She rolls her eyes. “Probably some lavish monstrosity with a fountain and
splash pool done up in marble and gold.”

“One would almost think you know them. Their spring is channeled up through a fountain, but it’s
down in the tomb — not enough pressure to make the height to surface. I imagine the figure’s
supposed to be Echidna. A pretty nude torso attached to a coiled serpent’s body which forms the
basin. Scales picked out with malachite inlays set in gold. Hideously ostentatious.”

His words have sketched enough detail that she can’t help but agree. “Echidna, mother of
monsters. Fitting enough iconography for the Malfoys’ tombs; a nice statement on their ancestry.”

“The thought might’ve crossed my own mind, a time or two,” he murmurs.

“How does the water come in?”

“Typical Roman tradition, draining across her lips, right past a lovely set of fangs.”

“Tasteful,” she says, drily.

“I imagine it jetted, when Amadeus Third-of-His-Name designed the garish thing, but the static
head’s evidently lowered since then. Narcissa loved complaining about how the muggle
neighbours were affecting the water table. Apparently it was massively expensive, getting all the
garden fountains charmed.”

“Would that we all had problems like the Malfoys,” she sighs.

“I used to daydream that the war might reach its’ terminus somewhere on their estate – and while
everyone else was trading hexes, I’d be off pillaging. There must be fifty or sixty troy ounces of
gold in that fountain alone.”

“I admire your mercenary attitude.”

“You do, actually. I saw that little smirk.”

“I take it you’ve also seen their fountain a time or two. They must use it for rituals?” She can
think of a few, some more macabre than others, and wonders which Severus might have been party
to.

“I suppose. It seemed indelicate to ask. Lucius was rather intent on drowning a fellow in it, at the
time. I didn’t think he’d appreciate being distracted.”

There is absolutely no point inquiring as to whether this is a jest (there’s a good chance it isn’t), so
she shakes her head and moves on. “Do you know offhand what the mineral composition was?”

“High iron load, by the staining. No odour of brimstone, so low in sulphur. I doubt you need any
more detail than that; I’m certain he’ll have set the spell so that a pyroelectric discharge would be
amplified through water. Any iron-rich spring should do.”
“But low sulphur, or else the silver would tarnish,” she muses. “I think you must be right.”

“I know I’m right. I’m always right.”

“And so humble about it.”

“False humility is as bad a character flaw as egotism. I’m usually right. Better?”

“Yes, much. Since you’re such a genius, where do you suppose I can find a flowing spring around London? Preferably one that no one’s been drowned in.”

“Picky, are you? I imagine Goodison’s Fountain might do. It’s up in Heath, but it has the advantage of being in a public green — not far back of Kenwood House, actually. And the basin’s small enough I doubt anyone could possibly expire in it, so it ought to suit you admirably.”

“Ferric?”

“As near as I recollect. Didn’t I make you lot memorize all of the historic springs?”

“That would’ve been sixth year; we had Slughorn by then.”

“Didn’t learn anything useful at all, then,” he huffs.

“Not much.” She considers sharing a well-worn whinge, now that she finally has him as an audience, but doing so won’t rewrite the past. She asks him instead, “Did you enjoy teaching Defense, at least?”

“Maybe the first week. Insomnia rather took the fun out of it.”

“A shite year all around, then.”

He gives her a wan smile. “There were good parts. Some.”

Her papers? “Surviving it. Goes for the next year, too, I suppose.”

“Hmm. Mixed feelings on that one.”

“Absolutely not,” she says, edging her hip up against his, and moving to follow suit with her lips, “I forbid mixed feelings on the matter of survival.”

“Well, when you put it like — mmmph!”

She’s simultaneously revelling in the feel of his fingers threading through her hair, making inroads right along her scalp, and wondering how she should go about convincing him that his other hand, firm upon her hip, would be better placed on her left breast, when she remembers what she was going to ask him. “Say,” she breaks off, panting, “Did you know that you have a cult?”

“They’re not mine, I just collect the rent off ‘em.” He presses forward, and she feels his tongue sweep her lip.

It very nearly distracts her. “O-oooh. No, not them, I don’t mean the nutters next door. I mean the ones that were yours. Slytherins.”

His attentions stop abruptly, and he straightens, blinking. “Sorry?”

Drat. Somehow her brain hadn’t worked the math right, where mentioning Malfoy might lead to a
cessation of snogging. “You must have given them some memorable speeches; they appear to have taken them to heart,” she teases. “It sounds like they’re erecting a life philosophy around your ‘know thyself’ lecture. I’ll bet they’ve got a secret handshake and everything.”

“Well, there are worse things for them to have learned during my time as Head,” he sighs philosophically, and refastens the shirt buttons she’d managed to surreptitiously free. Damn it.

“I suppose. You know, I’m joking, but I’m also not, Severus. How did he say it, now? ‘Our words, our new words’. Nosce te ipsum. Malfoy and whichever cronies he has, they’re using it as a password. No, that’s not quite right, more like a shibboleth, I suppose. Come to think of it, I talked to Daphne last week; she dropped that phrase too. Not in Latin, but still.”

“If they need a shibboleth, they needed to have chosen something,” he says.

Which is true, and all, but, “My point is, is... One, they’re up to something, and two, they’re couching it in your moral philosophies, and three, I think Draco’s raised missing you to the pitch of religion.”

“That was three points. You said 'point', singular,” he seems compelled to point out. She treats him to the eye-roll that deserves, but he ignores the reproach. “Focus on immediate problems, Hermione. Whatever Draco is or isn’t doing, he’ll make his own bed of it. He got a definite taste of where the Dark Arts will ultimately lead you, and I really think it cured him of that thirst if he had it.”

He thinks she’s on the usual tear about his Slytherins — how many times might he have argued down his colleagues in the staff room, been forced to defend them as children needing guidance instead of disapproval? It isn’t at all what she intended to convey; he was right, before, that it’s not her place casting judgement on Malfoy when she needs him. How can she explain to him, that her thoughts are coming from an uncomfortable kind of... kinship, maybe. The recognition of shared loss, and her guilt that she can’t offer him the succor she’s been enjoying. “You’re right,” she says, laying her head on his shoulder, “Malfoy’s making his own choices. I guess I’m annoyed over this silly puzzle he’s set, though. My life is complicated enough already.”

“Sadly, I don’t think that circumstance is going to change anytime soon.”

“No, I can read the writing on the wall. Boltholes. Laying low. Going to ground. Do I look like the kind of girl they’d cast for a spy drama?” she grumps.

Severus’ eyes glint. “Don’t know yet, I’ve only seen you in lingerie and a cocktail dress — most of the Bond girls had bikinis in their valise, too.”

“Bond girls!” She gives him a hard shove which he topples willingly with. “Hmph, I’ll have you know I’m villain material.”

She’s good at it, too: inside of a minute he’s at her mercy, his hands pinned above his head, her thighs straddling his torso. “Now, Mr Bond, I should admire if you went quietly into your just reward.”

She makes a good effort to suffocate him with her lips, but to her considerable annoyance, her brain is still busy worrying away at the problem of Malfoy and his cufflink. “Do you suppose,” she says, when she pauses for air again, “That it needs to be done after the moon’s risen? Silver being in the lunar province, I mean?”

“Oh, the tourmaline.” He props himself up on an elbow and considers. “I shouldn’t think so. That
seems a bit obsessive.”

“A bit? Just a *bit*, Severus? This has to be the most roundabout, fiddly bit of conditional magic I’ve dealt with in years, and you’re only just now thinking that it might be a *bit* obsessive?”

“Look at it this way, isn’t it reassuring that he’s clearly capable of thinking about security on several levels? It’s an ideal way to Secret-Keep a location. Not only do you need to have read the address, but you also need a talisman to pass in. And then another level of security, in requiring the talisman to be activated by the second party — you said it yourself, earlier, it’s a shibboleth, the entire ritual involved in the activation, from having access to a spring, to knowing the trigger words. So it’s tripartite: you need the address, you need the talisman, and you need to know how to activate it. That’s damn near infallible, from a security perspective.”

“Aahah. Let me guess: You’re the one who taught him how to set up a secret-kept location like this.”

Severus doesn’t quite preen, but he does drop his eyes and take an inordinate interest in the state of his fingernails. “You can’t prove anything.”

“They bloody well *have* started a cult,” she snorts, “and you’re just delighted.”

His smug expression fades. “Delighted? No. If they are, I think… I think I’m concerned. Because… Because! Think about it, critically, I mean. A cult? *Really.* It’s absurd. Pure hyperbole.” He makes a brushing-away motion as if the topic is entirely dispensed with.

She thinks again about the gentle, melancholy way Malfoy spoke about the Potions master. ‘Absurd’ is not quite the word she’d use. “I don’t know if I agree with that assessment. You weren’t there. You didn’t hear him.”

“If they have, there are worse philosophies to employ, and *if* they have, what business is it of mine? Shall I waltz in and set them straight? They’re adults, and besides, my miraculous resurrection would just fuel their mania, don’t you think? Imagine, the second coming of Severus Snape.” He laughs. “Has a ring to it, though, doesn’t it?”

She shakes her head. He’s not taking this seriously at all, even if he does have some valid points. “I’m actually sort of….” Worried about Draco, she almost says. “Question for you. Do you think he might know anyone who’s had their wand broken?”

This draws Severus up full-stop, and his eyes pierce hers. “I shouldn’t think so, no. Why do you ask?”

“Something he said. Or the way he said it, I suppose.”

His eyes go distant for a moment, but then he reins his thoughts back in with a shake of his head, and nudges her up off his legs. “Hermione. If you suffer your mind to run off in a million directions, it’s likely you won’t know where to begin looking for it, should it fail to return. Don’t anticipate mysteries in every patch of shade, eh?”

He rises, to retrieve his mobile from the island in the kitchen. She doesn’t read it as dismissal, and within a few minutes, her supposition is borne out:

“Moonrise is nearly six o’clock. In the morning. Call it an hour via transit, between here and Hampstead Heath.”

“I thought you considered it a reach, that it would be tied to the lunar cycle?”
“If I’m wrong about that, you’d have to go back. Whereas if you wait until tomorrow morning, you’ll have all the angles covered.”

“I thought you were always right,” she archly reminds him.

“Usually. I did concede that point.”

“Oh yes, very magnanimously indeed. So if we leave quarter of five, then, we can be there by moonrise, and hopefully miss some of the dogwalking crush.”

“Hold a moment, when exactly did this become ‘we’?”

“You’re coming with me, aren’t you? You’re the one who knows where this blasted fountain is, after all.”

“It’s not that hard to find—”

“Sure. I’ll just walk all over a hundred and twenty acres of Hampstead Heath, while you work your way through your latest tupenny thriller. You haven’t anything really pressing to do, have you?”

“Not pressing, no, but—”

“Good, then it’s settled.”

“I was going to start in on *Oryx and Crake* tomorrow,” he grumbles, “and I won’t be much company anyway.”

“No matter, I’m hardly a morning person either.”

“I mean, I’ll go with, but it will be under a concealment, and that’s entirely non-negotiable.”

“Er, why?”

“Think about it — if you were Draco Malfoy, and you’d set up a talisman the activation of which was conditional upon a flowing spring, wouldn’t you keep an eye on all of them in the vicinity?”

Now who’s paranoid? “You’re right, of course. ‘Though he has no way of knowing I wouldn’t just nip off to Bath. Although they’re sulphuric, so I suppose not. Hmm. Still, invisible company is better than no company, and being invisible doesn’t prevent your pointing me in the right direction. It’ll save hours, probably, and we’ll be back in plenty of time for you to make some headway on your book.” She nods smartly, and he can’t seem to find any flaw in this plan, so she supposes it’s settled. Remarkable, really. Managing Severus Snape appears to have points of similarity with managing Harry and Ronald.

She agrees at once with his suggestion they turn in early. Things had been trending along in the right direction before, but her hopes are dashed when he brings his novel with him. It’s probably just as well — yawning in the midst of foreplay would send the wrong message.

It’s dark when he wakes her, with a hand gently gripping her shoulder. “Good morning. Early birds and worms and all that nonsense.”

She nearly growls something profane, but has a better idea between one synaptic burst and the next. Instead of rolling away to recapture the tendrils of her dream, she reaches up to pull his hand down a little lower. “Try that again,” she suggests.
And, wonder of wonders, he actually does it.

And not just a single light squeeze, either. By the time she’s wriggled back against his morning erection, he’s progressed to circling the tight buds of her nipples. She gasps aloud when he pinches, firmly, through the fabric of her nightdress. “Yes! Oh, like that, only harder, more!” She writhes against the sudden hot ache in her vulva. He’s so close, he’s right there.

He drops his head to press his lips to the curve of her ear. “This isn’t getting us up to Heath, you know.”

“Spoilsport,” she complains, as he rolls away to switch on the bedside lamp. She sighs good-naturedly, though, because he’s right. They’ve an agenda, for all that it’s Saturday.

By the time she’s tamed her hair and freshened up (and stood a few minutes in front of the bathroom mirror, wondering if the expressions she makes while she’s lightly fingering herself are attractive or not), he’s fixed a light breakfast, egg and soldiers and a slice of melon. And coffee, in travel mugs. While she’s placing their dishes in the sink, he picks his own mug up and begins to disappear.

It turns out to be a curious-looking process, complex disillusionment without a wand. She’s only ever done the notice-me-not concealments, and she can’t hold them long without a headache. She leans a hip against the island, and stares in fascination as his edges become indistinct. His flesh and hair go first, while bits of his clothing seem to be unravelling in midair. Their colour soon fades, leaving monochromatic ghosts flickering in and out of existence until finally she cannot tell if he’s still standing there or not.

“Oh hell,” he says suddenly, from the other side of the island to where she thought he was. “I forgot to grab the paper before I started.”

“Can’t you—?” No, obviously. Or he wouldn’t be put out about it. “I’ll bring it, and you can read over my shoulder, how’s that for fair?”

The door opens onto a foggy morning. “I suppose it will have to do. Bring your mobile, too. So we can talk if we have to.”

Like those schizophrenic muggles she sees, talking to their demons. Not that she’s much better off: it’s clearly mental trusting to Draco Malfoy, of all people.

She manages to commandeer pairs of seats on both the Overground and the bus line they transfer to at Highbury and Islington. Severus indicates, with light pressure of his ghostly fingers, when he’d like her to advance to the next section of the paper; he reads the national and local news as well as the markets report, but eschews the sports, for which she’s thankful. They’re working through Home & Garden when the bus trundles past Highgate Cemetery.

They get off at Stormont Road, and guiding her elbow, Severus presses her toward an imposing wall of green. There’s a paved path, and she can see where the trees were once set in orderly rows, but it’s clearly been overgrown for decades.

There’s no one in eyesight, but she lifts her mobile to her ear anyway. “We’re not going in past Kenwood House?”

“The fountain’s just down by Cohen’s Field; faster if we cut through the old orchard.” He keeps his voice low.

“That’s what this was, I take it?”
“Apples and pears, according to a guided walk I joined once.”

“A guided walk? Why?”

“What’re the odds you’d believe me, if I said ‘boredom’?”

“Pretty good, actually. I am getting to know you. But what’s the real reason?”

“There are some very old lime-trees in here. *Tilia.* I wanted to know where they were, without having to poke around the whole of the Heath.”

“That’s a remarkable species of non-answer, Severus. I commend you upon it.”

“Heh.” He lowers his voice further still. “One of them is supposed to be a wand tree.”

“Really! Why only one of them? What makes a wand tree special?”

“Haven’t the faintest. I couldn’t even figure out which one it is; there doesn’t seem to be anything special about *any* of them. I always intended to come back, when it wasn’t so busy, and have a better look around, but… well, I suppose other things took priority, and I just never did. I don’t really know.”

If she could see him, she has no doubt he’d be shrugging disinterestedly, too. She gives the space to her right a sideways glance, just overflowing with her unassailable faith in the veracity and fullness of his answer. He’d obviously been thinking of making himself a wand; why won’t he just tell her that?

“Harry wants to put up a memorial to you. A bust, probably, with your wand encased in glass below.” It’s petty, the little bit of glee it gives her, dropping this into the conversation.

His tone when he answers is perfectly bored. “I’ve learned to manage. It’s a stroke of good fortune, though, that wands won’t burn, even in fiendfyre. I fancy finding my wand amidst the ashes gave the scene an additional veneer of verisimilitude.”

“Verily so.”

His response to her wryness is exceptional: “Let us not vacillate, but instead venture forth most velociously through this verdant vernal vegetation, such that we might contemplate the vicissitudes and vagaries of life at Goodison’s vadose fount, where said vessel sits vicinal to the verdure of Cohen’s Field. To your left there.”

She contemplates this incredible effort for a long minute. “You win,” she says finally, as they set off down a rough path through unmown grasses.

“You mean to say I’m the victor.” There’s a dark chuckle lurking in his voice.

“And a vexing one. That must be the fountain, there.”

It’s a low urn, carved with small animals: a squirrel, hedgehog, owl. A mouse and a little snake, and a creature that she thinks might be intended as a ferret. A stream of water issues from the mouth of a theatrical mask, to spill into a small catchment basin before trickling over into a rusty drain. “Definitely ferric,” she mutters, surveying the bright orange stains the water’s left over long years.

“Indeed. Quite a vivid vermilion, isn’t it? Alright! I’m finished.”
The likelihood of that being the case is low, but he does subside to silence as she checks the time, then drops Malfoy’s cufflink into the basin. She raises her head, looks about slowly. They’re alone, or as good as. A middle-aged woman is walking her dog far up the path they descended, but she’s in no position to see or hear anything. Someone could be lurking under concealment (someone other than Severus), but there’s nothing to be done about Malfoy or his confederates if they are about.

“Nosce te ipsum,” she says to the catchment basin. A soft glow begins to pulse out from the tourmaline, as the iron lining the basin darkens, until she can read the words Lindendale House as clearly as if they were writ in ink. A number follows, and then “—Fuck me, Bishop’s Avenue!”

She rocks back on her heels to stare at the fountain in wild consternation. That’s hardly more than a fast jaunt from here. She’d thought he’d set this spell at the Malfoy manor in Wiltshire, but what if he’s really here? And she’d dragged Severus along, and— She scoops the cufflink up out of the frigid water, shoves it down into the pocket of her denims, and pretends very seriously to dial her mobile. “I think you should go back.”

He doesn’t answer aloud, just rubs his fingers across her shoulders. Whether this is agreement or not, she doesn’t wait to determine, but hurries to her feet and then back up the path.

Her fast march eventually runs down to a determined stride, and then a grudging walk, as the oppressive opulence of the neighbourhood grates down upon her. Draco Malfoy is either a bleeding lunatic or a secret genius, picking a place like this for his safe house. When he’d told her he had ‘a little slush’ on the muggle side, she hadn’t been picturing a multi-million pound mansion.

Lindendale House can barely be seen from the pavement, tucked up behind a heavy laurel hedge and imposing wrought iron fencing. She can’t make out much more than steep gables and heavy colonnades. She narrows her eyes, fixes the tourmaline cufflink between her fingers, and reaches to try the gate.

Her hand slips through the metal, as if she were a ghost.

She tries it again. Fingers, hand, part of her forearm.

It’s evident enough what’s going on, and if she lingers here she’ll run the risk of attracting muggle attention, so she nods to herself, and steps through.

The grounds need upkeep, is the first thing she notes. The topiary are losing their shape, the lawns need mowing, and tree roots are making the pavers of the long drive uneven. The mansion at its end has a forlorn, slightly dilapidated look, as if it is awaiting tenants.

She hesitates only a moment at the wide double doors. When she tries them, she finds the effect is exactly like the gate, her body passing through effortlessly. It is a little more disconcerting to walk through a solid oak door than a wrought iron fence, but she imagines she is crossing the barrier at Platform 9¾.

She opens her eyes to something out of a tastefully hedonistic fantasy, a heady mix of pristine marble, dark wooden panel, and a chandelier glistening with what must be thousands of crystals, which fairly drip between the twin flares of paired marble staircases. Between the stairs is a single glass table, the only piece of furniture in the entire room. It has a vase of snow-white calla lilies (Aroids, she thinks) upon it, and an envelope.

She can’t read it from this distance, but she has no doubt it says ‘Hermione Granger’.
Her feet take some convincing to move forward. Her spinal cord and hindbrain are clearly the smarter parts of her nervous system — they are in favour of flight. It’s just Malfoy, she tells herself sternly. And he’s on your side.

Er, no. But he’s under a geas to help her, so that’s within the same territory.

She strides forward, plucks the envelope from the table, and tears it open along one side. As he promised, there’s a plastic muggle banking card, and another of his appointment notes. Like its predecessor, it begins to smoke at its edges. *If you meet with Dawlings before the 7th, I’ll speak to you here at 2130 that night.*

She leaves it to curl to ashes on the glass beneath the lilies.

Her journey back to Hackney Wick is circuitous, on account of having cast a concealment charm before regaining the pavement in front of Lindendale House. It makes navigating the Overground a little tricky; she has to wait for clear passages through the throngs, and she misses a couple stops on account of it. But perhaps it’ll have been good security?

“Malfoys have too much money,” she informs Severus, who has decided to spend the remainder of his morning sprawled across his sofa.

He nods, and turns another page. “Rather makes you feel as though it might even be a moral obligation to pillage them, no?”
A note about the chapter estimate -- this is fully plotted, but there are a few decision trees in the road ahead, which may expand the count beyond 60. It definitely won't be shorter than that.

“I’m new to the Slytherin playbook — does it only count as pillaging if you’re prising gems and precious metal out of the objets d’arts?”

“Oh, certainly not. Rare books, paintings, sculpture, tapestry. Lucius’ shoe collection. You can fence all manner of things.”

“That seems a little advanced for my current skill level. How about if, instead, I treat you to a fancy dinner on Draco’s dime? This pin-and-chip card — I checked the balance at an ATM machine, and it’s a lot. An awful lot.”

“It’s just ATM.”

“Sorry?”

“Automated transaction machine. Saying ‘ATM machines’ is redundant.”

She scowls at him. “I can see why you don’t have any friends.”

“Cauldron, kettle.”

She thinks of all the pedantic lectures she’d given Harry and Ronald over the years. How many of them had been performed in the dungeons? “Well at least we’ve got each other. Even if the rest of the cruel world doesn’t understand. ‘PIN number’ always bothers me, so I suppose I’ll let that go. If you condescend to have dinner with me tonight.”

“Of course. That sounds splendid, in fact. I know a place with marvellous smoked salmon — it’s not expensive enough to really count as a good pillaging, but we can always work through the drinks menu. I take it you withdrew funds, then?”

“Considerable funds. I don’t think it’s wise to have to make too many withdrawals. The muggle banks have all sorts of fail-safes, and they track where transactions are occurring. It occurred to me I’ll have to be careful, because even an ATM’s location will show up in the history. Malfy’s in finance, he’d know that. Odds are, so would the Aurors. So the fewer times I need to withdraw money, the better. Gah, I’m barely even sure who I’m supposed to be hiding from, anymore.”

“Paranoia is a state of grace, and you’re very nearly there. Suspect everyone. If you depend upon no one, you cannot truly be betrayed.”

The bleakness of that worldview should perhaps be a caution, but she can’t absorb it properly, because her heart is hurting for him, for the life he’d evidently lived. That’s a fear of his, isn’t it, that those he trusts will turn traitor. Or, at the very least, will not have his best interests at heart. She doesn’t know where to begin, addressing that, but she can reciprocate, share one of her own
fears: “Except by myself and my own stupidity.”

“And if you admit you’re fallible, you’ll be more inclined to question yourself, which has the positive effect of making you more apt to see your errors before they’re fatal.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m constantly questioning myself. I must be very nearly proficient at this business of survival.”

“Done alright so far.”

“Do the dice have memory, though? Am I running out of good fortune? No, don’t answer that, you’re a pessimist of the first order, and my sense of hope is fragile just now. Here, instead, let me bounce ideas off you.”

“Can I function as a sounding board while I’m fixing us some lunch?”

“Sure; I’ll even help if you tell me what to do.” She follows him into the kitchen, and slices bread at his direction. “So here’s the situation, as I see it: Item 1, there’s a chance they can track apparition; Item 2, there’s a chance they can track me if I use a wand at all; Item 3, they or the muggles can track me financially, unless I’m careful; Item 4, Malfoy will be able to have me followed any time I meet him at Lindendale House, because I won’t be able to disillusion myself on account of Item 2; Item 5, anyone can have me followed, or put a tracer on me, when I’m at my flat, because loads of people know where I’m living; Item 6… umn, actually that might be it. I mean, I’m ignoring all this business with the Dawlingses and Ronald, because one problem at a time, and all.”

“Gherkin on your roast beef? Alright, the way you break it down is similar to the way I have. I was going to chastise you a bit about Draco, because I do think he’ll genuinely help you, but… my own rules. And he could be a weak point; the more information he knows, the more information he could be made to share. Salt and pepper?”

Oh that’s a comforting notion, that the Aurors might try to wring out Draco Malfoy to get to her. “Thanks, sure. So we’re agreed that Malfoy should know as little as possible, for both our protection.” She catches the sideways look he gives her, as she takes her plate. Yes, that’s right, Severus, she thinks. She’s not about to try going it alone as a muggle without him.

“Agreed. The first two are easy enough to deal with — stop using your wand, don’t apparate. Let us take those as solved, and immovable points. Banking is easy enough, take transit to random ATMs; you’ve already solved that one. That leaves Draco and tracer spells… Spend some time, today even, and set up spells on that necklace. You won’t be able to change them out later without using a wand, but you can certainly re-energize them wandlessly. What did we decide? Finite incantatem, a residue-detecting spell… what were the others?”

“I’d thought a concealment spell. But I also want Muffliato, and something purely defensive. Because if I’m going to be withdrawing huge sums of cash, I can’t do that invisibly — they have cameras at all the machines — and what if someone decides to mug me for it?”

“Stunner, then. That’s four, and done. But without concealment, that leaves the problem of being followed.” He bites into his sandwich as if it has offended him, chews. Blinks rapidly. He swallows hard, too polite to shout Eureka with his mouth full, but the single quivering finger he’s raised tells her he’s had an idea. “Why not polyjuice?”

His grin is infectious, she can feel it spreading across her face even as she feels like slapping herself. “Of course. You’re brilliant, and I’m an idiot for not thinking of that myself. I’m only a
bleeding expert on it, aren’t I?”

“And it doesn’t have the disadvantages of a concealment, either. Anything you can cast with a wand, you can terminate with a wand. All anyone would have to do is throw *Finite* in your general direction, and you’d be done for, but there’d be no problem at all with polyjuice, provided your dose doesn’t run out.”

“And having expanded the window to a full five hours, that’s not likely, is it? Only… How the hell am I supposed to get boomslang skin? That’s a Class 3 registered substance.”

Severus frowns, drums his fingers. “And you can’t just nick it from my stores, again, can you.”


But he waves it off, stymied by this catch in their scheming. “Uncle Tibs might… No. I’d have to tell him _something_, and God knows what he’d piece together, and we don’t need anyone _else_ overly interested in either of us so… Hmm. Yes, most of it you could collect yourself, and even the bicorn you could purchase, but it’s the boomslang…”

He has trailed off in favour of chewing at his lower lip, until: “D’you know what? Just tell Draco to be useful and get it for you. It doesn’t even matter if he knows you’re brewing, you can explain the fallibility of concealment charms, and that’ll put paid to any suspicion or argument he may raise. For that matter, make him buy you everything you can possibly think of; he ought to be able to stock an entire laboratory for you.”

“Anything I can possibly think of?” She knows she’s grinning like a third-year who’s just seen Honeyduke’s for the first time in their life. “Good Lord, this is going to hurt his pocket book so badly he’s bound to stop moaning about it not satisfying his life debt!”

Severus raises his teacup for a toast: “To pillaging the Malfoys.”

She clinks her cup against his, and runs her itemization back through her mind’s eye. “Only one problem with all this — it’s twenty-one days, minimum, to brew polyjuice. I’ll need to sort the situation with my flat before then. Just in case.”

“You’ll have to keep up the rent there. Otherwise it will be obvious that you’re intending to go to ground. It needs the appearance you’re living there.”

“I can’t prevent anyone following me though, if I can’t disillusion myself going to or coming from.”

“I don’t mean _actually_ live there. Just leave some of your possessions, anything you don’t absolutely need. Preferably a few things of sentimental value. Let’s see, what else? You take *The Prophet*? No? Post deliveries, though — have your mail redirected to be called for in Diagon Alley, you can always cite Statute of Secrecy concerns. And you’ll have to be seen around the wizarding side on occasion anyway, to avoid rousing suspicions.”

She’s nodding along. She already has all of the equipment from his laboratory; it’s taking up most of the extendable space in her satchel. Clothing can be repurchased. His library, though… “I can’t abandon your library. I can’t. I won’t. But _everyone_ knows I have it.”

“How are you storing it?”

“Old carpet-bag with an extendable charm.”
“Who knows that?”

“Harry. Umn, Ronald could possibly figure it out. He would have seen the luggage I had with me the night I left. And they summoned Moste Potente from it.”

Severus stares off into space for long minutes. The silence and waiting is horrible — her own brain fails to produce anything, and the longer the quiet stretches, the more certain she is that the situation is hopeless. Well, not wholly. But she’ll lose her books. His books. Their books.

She can’t sit still any longer, so she scrubs up the dishes. Severus snags the tea towel and dries. She’d rather he were thinking, but maybe he can do that at the same time, the way he can converse and read simultaneously.

He refreshes their tea with a deep sigh, and they repair to the sitting room. “I don’t see any way around it,” he says.

There aren’t any answers in her teacup, either.

“There’s just no other way.”

She raises her eyes. “Yes? Go on!”

“You’ll have to abandon that carpet bag.”

She deflates.

“…And when or if you have to go to ground, I’ll have to bring Uncle Tibs into the loop. He can insist upon claiming the bag, pretend it still contains the library, and that he has best right to it as my next of kin. Should work, providing you put a complex ward on it, something that will be difficult if not impossible for the Aurors to break.”

She fairly leaps at him, to press kisses to his cheeks.

“Goodness!” he gasps, pushing her off with one of those dark chocolate chuckles. “What, did you think I was going to suggest you abandon them? They’re books.”

She kisses him again, because she simply can’t help it. You understand, she wants to say, but she can’t because her tongue is in his mouth, and then his is in hers, and then his elbow (or maybe her shoulder?) has bumped his tea off the arm of the sofa. By the time they’ve mopped up, practicalities have re-asserted themselves in her brain. “The only other thing is the plants.”

He glances up at his own. “I hate to say this right here, but… they are just plants. Although I suppose it’ll look suspicious if you just leave them there and they dry out and die.”

“Plant torture, in addition to all my other crimes. No, if I set Aguamenti on a time delay, that should suffice. I’m quite good at time-delaying water charms; I’ve done the best one in my shower, keeps it hot for ages.”

“Anything else we might have missed?”

She closes her eyes, nibbles at a fingernail, and tries to concentrate on the problem as she’s outlined it, and not the scent of his aftershave, which is clinging in her nose and making her think terrible, terrible things. “I think that’s everything accounted for. I’ll need to fetch the books, and maybe a few other necessities. And find somewhere else to rent, obviously. I won’t take much with me, so at least moving in won’t take long.”
“Not long at all. Where did you leave that satchel of yours?”

“By the bed.”

He sets off up the stairs. Well, and why not? The sooner she sets about these tasks, the safer she’ll be.

He’s a little longer coming back down than she expects. “Can’t you find it?”

“Any tricks to working the charm?” he calls back.

She frowns. “Like any extendable space, you just think of the object you want and reach in. Why?” She mounts the stairs herself.

Why is evident immediately. Her toiletries are in a heap at the foot of the bed, as is her nightdress, a handful of undergarments, socks, and a Weasley jumper. He has just finished draping a pair of her denims across a wooden hanger.

“Put your toothbrush and what-not downstairs, and for godssakes, bin that ugly jumper.” He moves to sweep unmentionables into the bedside drawer at her side of the bed. “There, you’re moved in.”

She gapes. “Are—are you sure?”

“No, I think you should dither about for a week or two while I tot up a pros and cons list. Take Malfoy’s money just as if you were paying rent, only put it in a muggle account of your own. We’re pillaging, remember? If it makes you feel better, you can buy the wine and groceries occasionally.”

Well. There’s nothing she can say to this, so she does as instructed, adding her toothbrush to the glass at the side of the bathroom sink. So I live here now, she thinks, meeting her eyes in the mirror. With Severus.

By the time she has rearranged the rest of her toiletries, and extracted her cosmetics from her satchel, she’s less shocky. She blushes hot when she withdraws the box of condoms, but she needs to empty her bag in order to transport the books, so it’s either placing the box in the medicine cabinet beside her face wash like a normal, sexually active and mentally healthy adult woman, or wrapping them up in the pink jumper and binning both. She smiles grimly, and deposits her tampons in the emptier of the two drawers. If he has not yet figured out that she has a vagina and that things have and do and hopefully will enter it, well then, there’s just no help for him.

He’s picking dead leaves off the plants in front of the east window when she ventures back to the sitting room, composure or a facsimile thereof re-established. “Slight problem,” she informs him.

“Do tell.”

“If I’m to retrieve the rest of my things and the books today, then I need some way to transport them. Since I have to leave the carpet bag there, I mean.”

“And?”

“And I can’t manage it all with just this extendable charm,” she hefts the satchel, “because I have all your laboratory equipment in here. I can’t possibly fit the entire library in along with, it’ll overload the charm.”
“How long does it take you to construct an extendable space?”

“A few days. Some the spells have to be cast at different times of day than others.”

“How many is ‘a few’?”

“I’d have to check planetary alignments; I don’t know them off-hand anymore. Five, maybe.”

“Hmm. Come with me.” He beckons her down the hallway, past where Eileen and Gracie’s paintings are stored, to the furthest door. “Let me consolidate these light banks, and I think there ought to be enough space to store everything back here. Temporarily.”

She edges around the door, into light so bright she has to squint until her eyes adjust. Severus has donned a pair of medical gloves, and is shuffling through what appears to be hundreds of jars of … what else, but plants. Orchids, she thinks, by their linear leaves. They’re most of them tiny, and growing out of some kind of murky, off-white jelly. “Can I help?”

“No. No need, I have a system, and it’ll be faster for me to do this myself than explain all the hybrid lines, and the mineral and nutrient profiles, and… just get on with unpacking your lab; if you stack all the cauldrons together, they might all fit beneath that bench. You can shove those boxes over; they’re light, I think that’s all just pipette tips.”

Your lab, he says, as if he is completely disinterested in the remains of the life he once lived. But she gets on with it, and they spend a quiet hour tidying the space so that everything fits. Severus finishes before she does, but can’t escape because the floor is covered to overflowing with alembics.

“You know, I’ve often wished I had my old Levitora shelf in here. Just in general, it’d be dead handy. But especially just now because there’s really no better way to store alembics than hovering in midair,” he opines.

When it’s true, it’s true.

“I could move all the unopened slants over to the archive, I suppose. That’ll free up some space above the cabinets for the oddly-shaped ones, the *pelicae, aquilae*, and that No. 7 *crumena*. And maybe we can pack the retorts and such in boxes?”

“As good a plan as anything I’ve got.”

It’s nice to have help, certainly, but it’s hard keeping her mind focussed on the task in front of her, when all she wants to do is study how his fingers splay over the glass, how he lifts each vessel with the ease of long familiarity and perfect expertise. How his palms gently cup them and — Focus. She needs to focus.

“I’ll get started on another extendable space tomorrow,” she assures him, as he closes the door on their shared disaster zone.

“If not, I suppose I could make them sort you some space next door. You could tell them you’re interested in practical and theoretical alchemy and they’d probably only scorn you for not being adequately quirky.”

“Or they’ll assume that I’m producing designer rave drugs, which would actually be an excellent cover, now that I think of it.”

“Let’s deal with one legal drama at a time, shall we?”
Indeed. Although she can’t help but feel she’s been making excellent headway there, of late. Repacking the books back at her flat takes hardly any time at all, and warding the carpet bag is done in a trice. She kicks it back beneath the unmade bed.

What else? There are already used towels in the bathroom. She changes to a fresh pair of knickers, leaves the others lying on the tile, and decides, while she’s at it, that she may as well change for dinner. With luck, dressy casual will be fine, because beyond a return of the cashmere jumper, she isn’t sure what she can accomplish. She rifles her trunk for a few other items, but most everything is dowdy, robes, or Weasley-lish. She’ll need the muggle shops sooner rather than later, unless she tests Severus’ patience and starts wearing his clothing.

It’s a hard struggle, coming up out of a fantasy of fixing him breakfast tomorrow morning, while wearing nothing but one of his button-downs, decidedly not buttoned down.

She touches up her appearance with the few cosmetics that remain here. She’s able to produce a passable effect, so evidently she owns or owned twice as much makeup as she actually needs, which is astonishing. She happily abandons it on the counter, and turns out the light.

The dried-up orange in her fridge is authentic, she decides. Heck, it was there when Harry looked before.

There’s really nothing else left to do.

She looks at Plant, and Spathy, and poor little Mini-plant in its cheerful polka-dotted pot. “Well, friends. We’ve had a good run together, haven’t we? Don’t worry, you’ll be fine without me. You probably won’t even notice I’m gone — chances are, you’ll appreciate it, because the watering will be a good deal more regular.”

She makes it as far as the door.

She can’t.

She’s abandoning all the cards. All the letters she’d received from her father during the school year, the ones from Harry and the Weasleys during the summer. The little gifts and trinkets, the holiday mementos, the prefect badge. Crookshanks’ collar.

She can’t.

She marches back to the window, scoops up Mini-plant before the logical part of her brain can talk her out of it, and scurries back to the door, fleeing, invisible, from what is probably the scene of a life, ending.
“I’m being awfully pushy of late, aren’t I?” she asks the potted plant clutched tight on her lap. Although surely he’s aware that this is her baseline personality… Still, perhaps it would be better to ease off for today. “Dinner is fairly innocuous though, isn’t it?”

She has become one of those people who talk to themselves on the train, evidently. But no one wants to sit beside her, so she decides she’s not much fuzzed with the odd looks a pair of businesswomen throw her way.

Mini-plant doesn’t answer her, although she rather fancies that if it could, it would remind her that she hadn’t given Severus any real choice in accompanying her up to Hampstead Heath. And encouraging him to feel her up in bed… And she should have perhaps put up an argument this afternoon — what if he thinks she was angling for an invite all along? It hadn’t even crossed her mind that he might offer his home as a sanctuary, but he doesn’t know that, and what if…

What if.

She will drive herself mad with ‘what ifs’.

Still, taken in aggregate, this is all adding up to a faster pace than he might really be comfortable with. She thinks of dinner in, the night they went to the boys' show. That seems to have been the right balance, she decides, as she slings her satchel over her shoulder and minds the gap at Hackney Wick Station.

**BOURGEOIS CUNTS** is crowded tonight. There’s a band setting up behind a beat poet who is decrying the ills wrought by revitalization efforts. Of the Hive residents, only Cathy appears to be paying attention to the performer. Maddie and Val have coins stuck to their noses and are earnestly attempting to stare the other down. She imagines this curious competition must relate to who stands the next round, because the rest of the group seems excessively interested in the outcome.

Of course she’s not lucky enough to escape their attention, even with Mini-plant in tow, which circumstance ought to have provided a strange enough picture to camouflage her amongst the locals. She’s collecting her change, the coffee beans, and the bottle of champagne she’s purchased, when Cathy leans an elbow on her shoulder and beams at her. “Celebrating, are we?”

“Oh…” Erudite as always, Mini-plant supplies. Or her subconscious does. “Maybe?”

“I think you are. Someone was by to chat up Gwen and look over her opals this afternoon.”

Oh. She can explain that— Except she can’t, because Cathy’s a muggle, and how well is it going to go over if she bangs on about using gemstones as repositories for magical spells? It’s clear enough to her, what Severus is about, but she can’t do more than smile helplessly and wish her
face weren’t flaming. But Cathy takes pity on her, and lets her flee before Maddie gains the bar. “Run along, Cinderella, you need to be home before midnight.”

Home. Yes.

She lets herself in; this is becoming an action as comfortable as Severus looks. And Severus looks exceedingly comfortable indeed: he is propped against one arm of the sofa, legs up and crossed at the ankles, thoroughly engrossed in the hardback novel that obscures his face. There’s a half-empty teacup on the low table, and its saucer is artfully strewn with biscuit crumbs.

He looks very much as if he has been there all afternoon.

Liar.

She smirks to herself and wanders into the kitchen to put the coffee beans in the freezer, and the champagne in the fridge.

“I suppose I ought to see about a shower and a shave, eh?” he says, at length, not looking up.

“I was thinking, actually, that I should work on that necklace tonight, like you suggested. And you could just enjoy your novel. Unless you’re set on going out?” The likelihood of that seems low, but you never know.

“Not really. Forman’s survived the Olympics, so I imagine they’ll be there next week. Or next month. I can fix us something here just as easily.”

“I can cook, too. But I thought maybe we could order in. And I bought some champagne on the way over, and paid rather too much for it, so at least we’re not losing ground on this pillaging endeavour. What kind of takeaway do you think might go with bubbly?”

“As a purely philosophical question, should pillaging barbarians even worry about wine pairings? Or is that a level of pretension best avoided?”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s any face lost if we strive to enjoy the experience. Proper pairings for optimal gastronomic pleasure.”

“Chinese then; that’s our best bet for takeaway, I’d think. Is it a sweeter champagne? Then I imagine the acidity might pair well with battered or satay prawns, calamari, spring rolls. Maybe something with five-spice powder, or sweet chili. Let me see if I have a menu around here; there’s a place in Clapton that did a nice braised duck, if memory serves.”

They’ve perused the menu, begun a squabble over gingered beef or barbecued pork in addition to the duck, resolved on both (because it’s Malfoy’s money after all, and for that matter, the Kung Pao chilied chicken might be good too, at least in the spirit of leftovers), and called in their order before Severus deigns to remark upon the uninvited guest: “Should I ask about the plant?”

She shakes her head solemnly. “You’re much happier if you don’t. Please trust me on this.”

His lips twitch, but he allows her to escape upstairs unscathed by whatever sarcasm he’s obviously thinking the better of. She settles Mini-plant into his — its — new home upon her bedside table, assures him — it — oh, hell, him that although this may seem rather dark just now, there is a stupendous amount of sunlight in the morning, when it comes streaming in through the skylights like liquid gold. Mini-plant, like Severus, agrees to trust her on this, and doesn’t respond. She smiles at her foolishness, smiles at Mini-plant, smiles at Severus’ side of the bed… Smiles at nothing at all, really.
But she does have work to do, so she schools her expression, retrieves the necklace, and returns downstairs, where Severus is once again either immersed in his book, or doing an excellent job of pretending that this is the case.

By the time she’s cast the foundation spells, she has decided that yes, he probably is reading attentively. He hasn’t remarked on her work, although he did pause to obviously watch her at one point. He’d gone back to the book, though, and aspects of the text have wrung a series of appreciative smirks, little half-laughing exhalations, an eyeroll, and once an expression of such suffusion that she thinks he may have been on the verge of genuine tears. Perhaps she’ll ask to borrow it when he’s finished, she thinks, as she tries to rub out the tension that’s been building at the base of her skull.

Laying spellwork into stone is a much harder task than she’d been prepared for. Dinner is a welcome diversion from the work. “Flitwick had us construct a simple amulet stone, just something that would repel a hex. I’m glad I put the effort into that homework, in retrospect.”

Harry and Ron hadn’t, though each had managed to passably complete the assignment, through brute force and copying the spell on a House ruby that had somehow come into Fred’s possession. You won’t know how to do it yourself, she’d snidely informed them.

“If you think this is difficult, imagine doing it without a wand.” Severus tips chop suey vegetables onto his plate, and passes the carton across to her.

“Have you done?”

“Not yet. I’m pleased to report that my life is quiet enough I haven’t even considered the notion. No, I meant how they must have performed magic before wands. Gem and stone workings are incredibly ancient.”

“They may not have been very focussed spells. That’s the general consensus, from what I’ve read.”

He shrugs. “I think it could be done. Not easily, certainly, but I don’t see where there’s a theoretical barrier.”

“Well, I won’t be trying it anytime soon. I’m exhausted, and all I’ve done is build the foundation and receptive spells. I still have to lay the actions, and then energize the lot of them.”

“You don’t have to charge them all at once, you know. You can keep channelling energy into the labradorite over the next month, if you wanted. That’s the beauty of off-setting the charge and focal components into different stones.”

She nods. It’s a clever way to do it; she wonders if it really was recognition in the moment, a spark of insight, in the very instant he’d seen the necklace in Maddie’s hands. Or maybe it was like pairing their champagne with takeaway. The battered prawns with sweet chili sauce make a remarkable combination with the crisp brightness of the bubbly, although the duck goes well too. He certainly hadn’t been guessing at random, although it might have appeared so to someone who didn’t recognize that his quick potioneer’s mind had worked from principles of chemistry, considering acidity, sugar content, and oxidation effects.

“Should we toast to something?” she asks, wiping her nose from the bubbles.

Severus lays his chopsticks down and tilts his own glass, studying the play of light through the effervescence. “We’ve already done pillaging the Malfoys…” With teacups, anyway. “How about: To solving problems, without creating any new ones?”
She mulls that over and decides it might be more flattering than she appreciates at first blush. If he’s lumping her staying here into the category of solving problems, it’s both a relief and genuinely comforting to think that he doesn’t seem to consider her a nuisance, problem, or hassle. She clinks glasses with him, and wonders how long it will be, before that little fantasy pops like a soap bubble. She is, after all, nothing but problems. She contains galaxies of them, swirling and expanding out into the universe of her reality.

Perhaps she can exorcise some of them, though, or at least bleed off the energy that keeps them roiling away beneath her skin. Something is missing, anyway — it’s certainly more than just exhaustion, creeping through her as she sets back to work.

Can you physically feel an absence? She is making of herself a conduit, pulling her magic out through her wand. She fancies she can even see a faint gleaming, a dichroic shimmer in the depths of the labradorite, where the tip of her wand presses hard into the mineral, and ought to be throwing shadows. And maybe it’s not just her magic she’s pushing into the stone, but her emotions, too. She is beginning to feel curiously flattened, dry and stark. The muscles of her face feel heavy, alien, disconnected. She is unsure how to move them in expressions. What is a ‘smile’, what is ‘happy’?

“For someone so blasted clever, you’re remarkably stupid, has anyone ever told you? Then let me be the first.” Severus’ dark eyes are the whole of her existence, she could wander in and lose herself completely. Hide in there, alongside his horrors and whatever secret joys he hoards to ward himself against them.

She would like to know what they are.

Smell of his hair, slight rasp of stubble. Feel of his hands. Words. Their meanings arrive apace with the feel of cold sweat between her shoulder blades.

“I’m not a damsel in distress,” she tells him, as earnestly as she has energy for.

“Indeed, you’re not,” he says, upending her over his shoulder in a fireman’s haul. “You’re an idiot.”

“An utter imbecile,” he continues, but now the bed is embracing her and the details are slipping away again. “…a moronic stunt of astounding proportions; it’s a bloody miracle if you haven’t permanently damaged your brain, not that your actions suggest you have one…”

When she wakes, all that her awareness encompasses are the dark hairs along his forearm, and the feel of his pulse beneath her cheek. The stains of skull and serpent are half-occluded by the edge of the pillow that she’s not-lying upon, in favour of his arm. At least she hasn’t drooled on him.

Mini-plant, who is making a valiant effort to cast massive, threatening shadows across the wall, agrees that this is fortunate.

“How are you feeling now?” Severus whispers against her shoulder.

“Just tired. Not like before.” She watches, with a lazy kind of interest, as he twists one of her curls around his finger.

“If you ever, ever, do such a dunderheaded thing again, I swear I’ll—I’ll…” His hand releases her hair, and in the next instant he has pulled her close against his body, so tight she can feel it right inside her core when a shudder runs through him. “I don’t know what I’ll do, but I flat-out guarantee that you won’t enjoy it at all. Honestly, what kind of idiot—”
“I know,” she says, petting his forearm soothingly. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I promise I’ll not overextend myself like that again.”

“Well good,” he says tightly, releasing her. “See that you don’t.”

She hears a slight hollow thump, his hands closing a bit too hard on his hardbound book. The rustle of pages, as he finds his place again.

She yawns until her jaw aches, and stretches her legs. It’s incredible, that performing magic can make her feel so stiff, as if she’s walked miles, or put in a hard day’s physical labour. The sheets are lovely, though, soft and cool. Against her bare skin. “Where’s my wand?” And why did he stop at her underwear?

“Oh, I thought you’d be more comfortable.”

“Yes, thanks. Except I’ve got a ruddy underwire poking into my left… Can you undo me?” She pivots up to expose her shoulder blades, and after a moment feels his fingers carefully unhooking her brassiere.

“Ah, blessed relief. You have no idea how good it is to be free of that thing.” She flops back into the bedsheets, and works the straps down her arms. She has sincere doubts that she makes an attractive picture, but Severus is reading anyway, so what of it.

Or perhaps he isn’t. “I’ll find your nightdress for you,” he mutters.

“Oh, don’t bother. Just throw the quilt up to me if nude torsos are that offensive.”

“Not offensive,” he says. When she shifts to look at him, she sees he’s turned fully away. His hair has fallen forward across his shoulders, exposing the back of his neck.

“Seriously, don’t bother. That nightdress is always falling off at one shoulder or the other, anyway. These sheets are excellent, have I mentioned? Thread count must be five hundred, at least.” She arches her back a little, wriggling the stiffness out of her shoulders against the mattress and the soft cotton.

“Eight, erm…” Because of course he has chosen this moment to look back at her, and gotten an eye-full.

Well, and good for him. She smiles, drops her eyelids, and crosses her arms behind her head. Stretches out her torso again. “Like anything you see?”

His lips part slightly.

The expression on his face would be easier mistaken for confusion and discomfort than mindless lust, so she takes mercy on him: “Oh, just give me a kiss goodnight, and I’ll stop teasing you.”

He nods slightly — involuntarily, she thinks — because these are apparently orders he can comply with. She pulls the sheet up over her belly as he leans over her, the tips of his hair brushing across her chin, her cheeks, as his lips soften against hers. It’s sweet and lingering, and if he ignores the way she opens her mouth in invitation, she cannot be truly disappointed, because he proceeds to trail his lips along the angle of her jaw, until his head is resting alongside hers, his mouth languorously exploring the sensitive skin of her neck.

She’s sure he’s watching, as she trails the fingers of one hand down her collarbone, to her midline,
and across to the swell of her breast.

He reaches a hand toward her wrist. To stop her? Or? His hand hovers in midair. His breath is tickling a strand of hair by her ear. He had best say something, because otherwise she is going to… She extends her other hand, slowly, up to his, and traces her fingers down from his knuckle, down until the pads of her fingers meet the smooth surface of his nail. She increases the strength of her finger-grip, gently tugs, leading him in this way to settle his fingers, his hand, in the centre of her chest.

She strokes, lightly, down along the tops of his fingers again, continuing the motion beyond his hand and across her flesh, a clear demonstration of what she’d like.

She doesn’t think he will, at first, but then his fingers progress, barely skimming, gently testing the texture of her flesh. His index strays across the margin of her areola. “It’s not so different, is it? Just the colour.” He could be talking to himself; his words sound detached. “Oh, no, I suppose not.”

The skin there, where his finger has brushed, is puckering up, little wrinkles twisting it up in arousal. He repeats the experiment a little further over, with similar results. “Does that… can you feel that, does it feel like anything? Or just touch?”

Just? “Not yet, really. If you press right at the center. Or like this:” she closes her fingers around his, guides him into a slight squeezing motion, stroking up the whole of her areola in a gentle tug. Her nipple peaks nearly at once, and he explores again the tight circle her skin has contracted into.

“It’s mobile. Kind of loose. The skin there.” Is she really explaining this? Like a scientific curiosity?

“I can see that.” He presses his fingers around her nipple, repeating that gentle tug, twisting ever so slightly, rolling her flesh up between his fingers.

“It doesn’t feel like much at all. Without a little more pressure, I mean.”

His fingertips tighten on her nipple quite obligingly. She feels it as a jolt just back of her stomach, and her breath hitches.

“And deeper, across the rest of your breast too?” He’s propped up on an elbow now, looking at her face to gauge her reaction. She nods, and he slides his hand beneath the weight of her breast, to capture its peak between the pad of his thumb and the slight callouses across his palm. He strokes, presses, eases off, bears down again, and she’s about to lose her fucking mind.

She adds her own hands to her other breast, and realises after a moment that he’s watching her motions, studying what she’s doing. Soon he’s mimicking her nearly perfectly, and she’s just started tensing her thighs, trying to get some pressure there, too, when he abruptly ceases. The sound of protest she releases is not quite involuntary, and certainly more petulant than she’d be proud to admit.

“I was thinking this probably needs a different angle,” he explains with a crooked half-smile.

She relaxes, beams at him, and marvels contentedly at the heavy flush that’s spread across her sternum. She hasn’t long to admire the rosy glow, because he reaches, switches off the lamp, and plunges them into darkness.

Perhaps that’s more comfortable.
“If you lie back, up against my chest, like, I’d have both hands free.”

She submits to this plan with perfect alacrity, pausing only to capture his lips in a kiss that deepens until her head is spinning. When she breaks off, gasping, she isn’t sure if it’s from lack of air, or because he’s tweaked her nipples taut again, to the point she’s fairly aching.

And not just there.

Her back is arching up, she’s like a strung bow beneath his hands, her neck bent across his shoulder. She presses her face against the side of his neck, breathing in the scent of his skin, tasting the salt there, revelling in the tickle of his hair in her face and wanting, yearning.

“Severus. Oh, oh, Severus!”

She needs to get control of herself, except why?

He tilts his head to kiss her again, so gently.

“This is why.

“Alright?”

“Oh god, yes. I’m falling to pieces, I need, I want… Oh!” She breathes in deep, trying to think, trying to find nouns and verbs and even just words. “Can I— would it make you uncomfortable if I touched myself?”

“Er, no, haven’t you been— Oh. You mean… oh.”

Well fuck.

“Right, no, of course, go ahead. I’ll, uh, I can give you some privacy, come back to bed in a little while.”

She sags back in pure defeat, groans. “I meant… That’s not what I meant. Not for you to leave. Look, never mind. Forget I said anything.” She rolls away, onto her side. Her nipples, brushing the sheets, are so tender, but it’s not very arousing anymore. “I’m sorry.”

His hand on her shoulder feels hesitant.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “Thank you. For… thank you. I wish I hadn’t— you do know, right, that I’m not some kind of deviant. I’ve only ever—I’m not even a slut. Not some—some harlot.”

“Oh give over,” he finally sighs. “I certainly don’t think you’re any of that— and even if you were, what of it? Look at O’Shea, she evidently sleeps with anything that has a pulse, and she’s a fine person whose company I’m amused by. Why should I hold you, or anyone else, to a different standard?”

She doesn’t answer him. She doesn’t know how to. Besides, she can’t think properly about what he might really be telling her, not when she’s suddenly acutely aware that her thighs are slippery, that… She needs to wipe up, or else she’s going to mess his 800 thread-count sheets, and…

His hand strays down her biceps, feather-light touch. “If you still wanted, erm…”

“No. No, it’s alright. I’m… Mood, you know.” Although maybe he doesn’t. She’d not been paying attention, and the way she’d lain against him, their lower limbs and hips had been too far apart to tell. What if?
What if.

She will drive herself mad with ‘what ifs’.

“What mood, hmm? Does this help?” His fingers once more brush her breasts and now the slightest touch arcs through her like electricity, so tender has her tissue become in the course of his previous ministrations. She feels his breath along her jaw, and his lips, open, upon her skin. Gentle suction on the tender expanse of her neck, and his tongue—*Oh*.

His fingers circle her wrist. So loosely, just a mere suggestion, only encouragement.

Her hand crossing the vulnerable expanse of her belly, her fingers brushing through her curls as if of their own volition. Legs parting, hips arching, slick heat enveloping her questing fingertips.

And his mouth.

The exquisite counterpoint of hot, silken kisses, with cool air, the fall of his hair. His mouth: his lips and tongue massaging her flesh in counterpoint to his fingers. The pure, molten heat, when he closes his lips upon her breast, the liquid pulling that’s there in his mouth and there along her spine and there inside her in that secret place with light so bright it blinds her so harsh it washes out all sense all sensation except this tight stinging bliss every muscle in her body rigid and

She comes back to herself in trembling cascades. Little pieces of the room, of her body, of the London night sky above her, of Severus. All coalescing back into awareness in no particularly meaningful order. Feel of sweat beneath her breasts. Smell of her arousal. Feel of Severus’s hand upon her stomach. She’s pressing it tight against herself; if his head and shoulder were not interposed, she would be bent double against his spread palm.

“You’re twitching like a live wire,” he breathes more than says. A thought falls into her head, something in his tone. It’s gone before she can examine it, gone in the instant between his breath and her own.

She lets her head sink back into the soft depths of the feather pillow, and tries to regain control of herself. Her heart is hammering in her chest; surely he can hear it with his face against her ribs like that. She still has his hand trapped against her stomach, she realizes after some moments, as her rapid gasping subsides to deep, heavy exhalations.

She gentles her grip, strokes once more along the tendons of his spread fingers, and wonders if she should be thanking him or apologizing. He doesn’t move at all, and she can’t begin to decipher his thoughts from just the slow rhythm of his breath, playing out across her searing skin. “I suppose you can have your hand back now,” she finally whispers.

She feels his fingers curl, and he does move. But not away. No, instead he shifts, and tucks his hand down along her ribs, circling around her to where her side dips into the mattress, his forearm pressing against her bosom.

Enclosing her.

“Goodnight,” he murmurs, into the hollow of her neck.
Life kicked me while I was down. Thank you all for your patience, and especially for your support. Your little trickle of comments during the past couple months have meant the world to me. I'll set about responding as soon as I've slept -- I expected you'd rather have a chapter today, than my responses. :)
She’s suddenly hesitant, wary: If she does this wrong, well, now she has something to lose.

She watches him re-arrange himself in the chair. His hand stills for a moment, then he moves to set the biro aside. One hand idly pushes his hair behind his ear, while the other… She’s aware, suddenly, that she’s holding her breath, as his hand closes over the shaft of her wand, hefts it aloft to eye level. His fingers trace, as hers often do, down the shellacked handle as he tilts it, apparently studying the play of low light across its carvings.

It seems an eternity before he sets it aside, and quietly rises from his seat.

She drops her eyelids closed, breathes long and slow – she’d had plenty of opportunity to practise ‘sleeping’ while lying next to Ronald in the dark, so perhaps he’ll even be fooled by her performance. She waits to feel the dip of the bed, but hears instead a slight scuffing, his stockinged feet passing down the metal treads of the stair.

If he returns at all, it’s after she’s drifted back to sleep.

Come morning, she stares at the sheets on his side of the bed, and ultimately decides that she can’t tell. They’re mussed, but whether he’d slept beside her is academic at best: he’s not sleeping there now.

She can smell coffee, but getting out of bed is a reluctant affair. It’s hardly the kind of morning-after she has a script for. With Ronald, playful flirting was the order of the day, but she’s out of her depths with Severus. Maybe he’s out of his depths with her?

She pulls his dressing gown over one shoulder as she’s nudging through the wall of plants with the aim of gazing down upon his kitchen. She manages to prise apart a peephole just in time to see Maddie O’Shea emerging from the hall. The redhead seats herself at the island (in her spot), and pours a cup from the cafetière.

“Soooooo.”

“With a needle and a thread. So what?” says Severus, laying aside his paper with a visible sigh.

“So what’s the latest gossip, this side the wall?”

“Gossip? Do I look like the sort of person who accumulates gossip?”

“Er, yes? Go on, spill. I’ve got a nose for it, I do, so there’s no sense pretending everything is perfectly boring as usual.”

She can see, even from this vantage, that Severus’ raised eyebrow is in counterpoint to a smirk he’s trying to conceal. “Very well, then. Let’s see, what’s been happening lately? Wednesday, I think it was, Gary found out that Pat Phelan has been sexually harassing his mother Anna, so he went down to Phelan’s lock-up and gave him a proper knock about the head with a length of planking —”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Snape.”

“What? It were a right proper knock, and ‘e had it coming, Phelan did.” Severus says, sinking into the depths of a northern drawl.

“You and that fecking soap opera. Look, Snapey, I like you and all, but there’s taking a bad joke just one step too far, and you’ve gone ten or more. Lay off, already, or I’ll show you a plank or two, you gobshite.” Maddie’s hands have curled to fists, and she is probably glaring fiercely at
him. “Now, stop being a bloody plonker and tell me about Cinderella.”

“Went to a ball in a pumpkin, as I recall.”

“Christ Jesus, fine, you numpty. Tell me about Her-my-oh-nee.”

“She works in theoretical chemistry, she has an exorbitant amount of curly brown hair—”

“I really will deck you, Snape. I swear I’ll do it. I don’t know why you can’t be normal — er, normal-ish — and just tell me straight up, ‘Maddie, you’re a dear friend and I’d be lost without your charming company, but I’ve invited a pretty woman to leave her tampons in my bathroom cabinet, and could you please knock in the mornings, just in case?’ You want me to say that again, so you can repeat-after-me?”

“It’s hardly like that. She’s between living situations, on account of complications with her divorce. I was her teacher, for godssake. Just a friend being helpful, hardly some… some paramour.”

Maddie is quiet a long time. “Right,” she finally says, and it’s obvious she’s only dropping the topic, not halfway convinced in the least.

The trouble, Hermione thinks, is that she is. Halfway, and perhaps more. She’s been the one initiating. Pushing, shoving, insisting. He’d told her before, hadn’t he? Clear as day, he’d explained that he hadn’t anticipated anything like romantic entanglement; moreover, he’s not much interested in fucking her. Oh, he touches her when she insists upon it. But is it because she insists? He wants her as a friend, she’s clear enough on that and thinks she even understands something of the depth of meaning he ascribes to the condition, but perhaps he also thinks that having her friendship is contingent upon his performing sexual services for her?

She hugs her arms across her chest, and retreats to the bedclothes. Pretends to sleep, and maybe she even does, because she doesn’t hear Severus mount the stairs.

There’s no ignoring the tender way he pushes her hair back from her face, though, nor the press of his lips against her cheek. She turns her head, meets his mouth, lifts her hand to languidly tangle her fingers in his hair. Oh yes, she’s being insistent again, but surely he doesn’t have to settle onto the bed and indulge her? And when they break off, he leans his forehead down against hers, and he doesn’t have to do that, either. She looks a smile up into his endless eyes, and firmly tells her brain to just shut off, for a change, because it’s not doing either of them any good.

“I’m deadly serious,” Severus murmurs.

“Hmm?”

“This establishment still doesn’t offer breakfast in bed.”

In the course of accomplishing coffee, breakfast, and a shower, she firmly tells herself, more than once, that she is going to completely ignore the sundry oddities and quirks of his behaviour. If he has misgivings, he is going about expressing them in entirely the wrong fashion. After all, he himself presented her with a memorable analogy involving ginger biscuits, so if he doesn’t want them, he ought to say ‘No thanks’. It is not her responsibility to read his mind. …Is it?

She wishes she had a confidant. Mini-plant is a fantastic listener, but she knows now that sound carries well throughout Severus’ home, and taking her plant out for a walk is far too absurd. She can take herself out, though, and she does. She has to sort her account at the Post, she informs Severus. He’s busy watering plants, a task he insists he doesn’t really need help with. Indeed, he
has an air of relaxation about him, so perhaps it’s something he finds soothing, enjoyable.

She makes it around the corner of the warehouse, before being assaulted.

“Ha haaa!” crows Maddie O’Shea, swooping down upon her and aggressively linking their arms.

Cathy’s not far behind, but is satisfied with giving her a friendly punch on the shoulder, and a wide grin. “Good morning, Cindy. We’ve been on a stakeout, as you can see.”

If they have, it’s been at least two hours of it, so perhaps their efforts deserve some reward. She turns to Maddie, and solemnly informs her that “Your mate Snapey is a terrible lying liar, who lies, terribly.”

Maddie nods placidly. “Of course he is.”

“Are you moved in then,” Cathy asks, “or just staying over on occasion?”

“It’s a bit complicated. It’s not… we’re not like that. Not, umn…”

“Having a ride? A bit of how’s your father? Shagging? Seriously, still not?” Maddie looks as if she would happily turn on her heel and share her eyeroll with Severus.

“I said, it’s complicated. Argh, and I probably shouldn’t even be talking to the two of you. You’re his friends, after all.”

“Oh, but we’re your friends too.” Cathy pats her shoulder. “There’s no rule saying we can only be friends with one of you.”

“It just… It makes it complicated. Because obviously he doesn’t want you thinking there’s anything between us, and whether that’s because there really isn’t, from his perspective, or… or I don’t know, maybe he’s just uncomfortable, or… Anyway, now I’ve told you there is, and so I’m undermining his relationship with you lot and…”

“Oh, get bent, Cindy. Give us a little credit for having more than two brain cells to rub together between us. It’s not like I’m about to fetch up at his, and tell him I don’t think much of his teaching philosophy, if he’s always sparing the rod. Except, haw! that’s such a perfect line, I just might.” Maddie grins impishly.

She groans helplessly, and can feel herself colouring up.

“Don’t worry, Cindy, I won’t let her. So you’re moved in, but you’re not intimate?”

“He was sort-of telling the truth. He offered to have me stay. The divorce, finances.” She waves helplessly, and wants to kick herself for not having taken the time to think up a watertight explanation.

But they nod, and seem to accept it anyway.

“And we’re not not-intimate, just not that,” she continues. She bites at her lip, to stop herself saying the next bit, but it doesn’t work. “He kisses me.” She looks down at her shoes. Is she avoiding their sudden, predatory gazes, or trying to wipe the silly smile off her features?

“And?” Maddie.

“And what?”
“And is it good?” Cathy.

“Umn, yes?” There’s no help for it. Nothing short of physically covering her mouth is going to suppress that smile. “It’s wonderful.” How can she even begin to explain those feather-light touches, or the intensity when their kisses deepen, or the way his hands sometimes clutch at her hips, or the feel of his arms tightening, pressing her to his chest? “He’s wonderful.”

Grins are infectious, apparently. It’s surreal, though: here she is, telling these women that Professor Snape kisses her, and she likes it so much she’s tongue-tied, and they’re clapping her on the back. Her dorm mates, or Ginny, even, they’d have been gagging at the mere notion. Context, she supposes, but it sobers her a little. “I think… I think maybe it bothers him, that I was his student. He told me it didn’t, but it’s what he said to you earlier, Maddie.”

“Eh, probably he only thinks it should. If it really did, he’d hardly be participating, don’t you think?”

She purses her lips. “Participating. Sure, but only so far. You’ll promise this stays between us? I don’t think he really wants to. Be intimate with me. Have sex, I mean.”

“Or maybe you’re just overthinking things again,” Cathy puts in, “Because this sounds to me like exactly the same tear you were on before. Give it some time. Have you ever thought, maybe he’s shy? Maybe he’s scared? Maybe he’s not even all that experienced. Just because he’s older than you, he automatically knows more?”

Professor Snape, scared? It beggars belief. But Severus… Had he been with anyone after Lily? Had he even been with Lily? She shoves that thought away; she hasn’t got enough inclination or energy to battle the ghost of Lily Evans, not just at the moment. She thinks instead about the methodical, experimental way he’d touched her. He’d felt her up a bit before, when she’d asked him, but they’d been fleeting gestures, not much like the deliberate way he’d gone about last night. He’d been attentive, focussed on her. Like the night he gave her that massage, she thinks. Focussed on her experience, and not his own.

They’ve been walking, while she’s been sunk in thought. Cathy buys them sugary, espresso-laden confections at BOURGEOIS CUNTS, and they fetch up on construction spools outside. It’s still chilly for sitting out in the morning, but she warms her fingers on the paper cup, and the bright sunlight is soon heating her coat across her shoulders. “Help me out,” she finally says.

“At your service,” Maddie sketches a bow, and Cathy nods affably.

“I want to do something nice for him. Something he’ll like, something that will… oh, this sounds stupid. But something that will make him feel, oh, it does sound stupid. Cherished. Only that’s not right, what I mean is warm and fuzzy and melting inside and so certain that all I want is for him to feel nice, for him to be happy. Because that’s how he makes me feel, only I don’t know what to do in return. Obviously not what I tried before…” She runs down miserably, her mortification finally at a high enough pitch to close off her throat.

They’re silent for a moment, her audience. But then Cathy reaches across the crude table, and prises her stiffened fingers from the paper sleeve of her cup, and calmly folds them in her own. “What did you try before?” she asks, her voice quiet.

When she speaks, it’s to Cathy’s slim dark fingers. They’re steady and solid in ways that her own never seem to manage. When her own hands are still, it always seems to be a result of tension. Stillness, she thinks, could easily be Cathy’s hands’ native state.
“I started to give him a massage. Undressed him some. Explored some erogenous zones. Found a few, by observable evidence. I was going to…” she swallows a gulp of air, “I was going to put my mouth on him. Give head, I mean. He didn’t… He wasn’t interested.” This doesn’t begin to convey the magnitude of that misadventure, but she has no desire to betray his privacy further than she already has this morning.

Maddie slurps her coffee. “Easy-peasy, Cinderella. It’s just the difference between romance and sex, is what you’re after.”

Cathy is beaming. “And people wonder why I put up with this one! That’s absolutely what you’re asking, something romantic. And sure, sex can be romantic, but that comes in knowing how to show the other person that you know them, know what makes them feel cared for. Whereas romance, why, that’s just endless possibilities, everything from candlelight and flowers to doing the washing up!”

But what would make Severus feel simultaneously known, understood, and cared for? Because they’re right, that’s what she wants: she wants to make him understand that she cares for him, cares about him. Wants him to feel the way she does. (Does this mean, de facto, that he cares for her? It must.) She feels clumsy, turning these thoughts over in her head, and she is acutely aware of her failure to have ever performed these exercises with Ronald as their subject.

She is mulling the matter over when she bids them good morning, chewing her fingernails and thinking hard as she rides the Underground to Leicester Square, and thoroughly distracted by it while she waits in line at the Post. The harried clerk calls her twice before she realizes she’s next up.

“Yes, I hope you can help me. I need to redirect my mail to be held for me here until I call. I’m at a muggle address just now, and it’s been too complicated receiving owls.”

“Form 7c, then, just fill it out.” He pushes the parchment and a quill in her direction, and beckons forth the next customer.

She shrugs, and fills in her biographical details. It’s remarkably satisfying, writing ‘Granger’ again. And her old signature feels right in ways that forming a hasty ‘W’ never did. The clerk takes back her papers perfunctorily and asks her to press her wand against a keyring, then hands her a small diamond-shaped token.

“It’ll turn blue if you’ve got post to call for; keep an eye on it, because we clear the letterboxes every second Friday, noon, unless you pay for an extended hold. Parcels are held twelve days.” He’s already turned away from her when he glances down at her completed Form 7c. “Hermione Granger? Cor, I didn’t recognize you, you’re not in the papers as much as Potter, are you? But I’ve got a letter for you! Your owl didn’t deliver; I was going to send him back out this evening, but since you’re here, I’ll just nip up and fetch it, shall I?”

He darts off to one of the poles back of the counter, hooks an arm around it, and is whisked up and away, presumably to whichever floor sorts outgoing mail. The owls, she knows, are up on the fourth through sixth floors; she’s often seen them swooping out of their windows. He’s back, and thrusting a slender envelope into her hands, before she has time to settle back into the miasma of her thoughts.

“It’s from Viktor. She’d long given up on hearing from him. Ages and ages ago. She frowns, thinking back to the dull, overcast days after Christmas. Ages and ages ago, but barely a couple months. She wanders back out to the Alley, and slits open his envelope as she lets her feet carry her toward the Leaky. His letter’s short, as bland and uninteresting as her own note was. Their
correspondence has trickled away to innocuous nothings over the years. He’s planning to be in London, though, and wants to know if she’ll meet him for dinner. He doesn’t know anyone, not really, and doesn’t want to be mugged by fans while he’s trying to eat. Reasonable enough; she retraces her path back to the Post, sends an affirmative reply, and in a sudden spirit of philanthropy, writes Ginny and Harry a note, too. Perhaps they’ll like to reconnect with Krum – Ginny will have a professional interest, and Harry enjoys talking to him, as far as she's aware.

One clever idea evidently gives rise to another: by the time she’s passed through the archway, she’s finally had a thought or two about Severus, as well.

It's decidedly after noon before she’s finished at Marks and Spencer, but she’s managed to equip herself with a half-off hound’s-tooth clutch, which needs only an extendable charm to replace her abandoned carpet bag. And, wonder of wonders, she’s even managed to purchase some clothing that actually fits: blouses, slacks, trousers, and a fitted jumper. There had been a choice for this last of plum or woad, only it had been no choice at all, really, because she heard it as clearly as if he’d leaned into her ear: Earthier tones, perhaps. Gunmetal blues and pale woads. Sorrowful autumn skies.

The door’s locked, when she finally makes her way back to the Wick. She knocks over at the Hive, and Val directs her to the bottom of the window box. Sure enough, there’s a key secreted there, and at this rate, every single member of his ant farm is going to know she’s taken up residence. Ah well. He’ll get over it. Probably.

It’s not even half an hour before he’s returned, balancing a pastry box, and rather interrupting what she’d thought to make a surprise of. “Are we freeing house elves, again?” he asks, drily.

“Not in the least; Harry’s the one who gives them socks, I always knitted hats.” She rolls the pair of socks she’s just finished with, and reaches into the half-empty package for another. Shakes the little bottle of silver nail varnish again, dabs off the excess, and carefully draws a small letter along the cuff margin. “These are for you.”

“Come again?” He looks over her shoulder, evidently baffled, as she starts on the next. “Are you… labelling them?”

“With Ls and Rs,” she says serenely. “If I’m going to do the laundry around here once in a while, I thought it’d be wise to know how to fold your socks, so I don’t accidentally put two rights together. If you bring me your others, and tell me which is which, I’ll do those too.”

He laughs until his eyes are streaming, but he kisses her, too. And it really is quite wonderful.
Chapter Notes

Coming back from breaks or hiatuses is always hella hard – so far, obviously I’ve successfully done so, but it’s getting more difficult all the time. Too many people leave and never return, and while I do know that’s my own fault for not having consistent output, it does still affect me. Anyway, I have managed to pull together the next chapter, as a ‘thank you’ for the lovely people who are still here. An important note before you dive in, however: I’ve rated this work as “Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings”, which means any/all of them could apply. I can assure you there’s no major character death in Chapter 47, but otherwise, you should be aware that This Chapter May Contain Nuts, so if you’re allergic you should proceed with caution.

The title of this chapter, if you’re interested, is (like several others) a semi-sarcastic joke of mine.

While Severus is busy constructing something complicated, which he assures her will be baked salmon, she sets to work on her hounds-tooth clutch, which she assures him will be the answer to recovering his growth room to some semblance of usability. Extendable spaces are tricky; the logic is, they’re pocket realities – you’re not so much constructing them, as weakening the walls between consensus reality, and whatever’s on the other side of it. And, of course, defining the boundaries of the space you’re using, so that your books and lab supplies aren’t lost to the infinite. She’d asked Flitwick, if every extendable space protruded into the same alternate realm, but he didn’t know either. “Just a theory, Miss Granger; let’s get practical applications down first, shall we?”

Practical applications require a lot of astronomical and arithmantic calculations, in order to set up the requisite series of spells in the right order, and at the right times. By the time dinner is starting to smell good, her eyes are crossing, trying to keep track of half a dozen different planetary alignments across twice as many star charts. She sets them aside willingly enough — she needs a break before she rechecks her work — and wanders into the kitchen to pester Severus and pretend to be helpful.

He takes her at her word, though, and sets her slicing strawberries for a salad he’s assembling of spinach and “What are microgreens?”

“Seedling plants. These are mostly brassicaceous; mustards, rocket — like this one. This red one’s a beet, and here’s some basil.” He points them out for her edification.

She snags the plantlet he’s identified as basil, and pops it into her mouth. “Mmm! It is, too!” He swats at her hand, but she manages to capture another, anyway.

“If you’re going to be underfoot, Granger, you could muddle this dill.”

Muddling, Professor Snape had once intoned, exasperation a strong undercurrent in his voice, is not crushing or mashing, but merely bruising. Hermione had appreciated the difference even then: the point was to release volatiles, not break chloroplast membranes. She grates the dill over with a
bit of Himalayan salt at his direction, flawlessly muddles the herb, and presents the results for his inspection. “Satisfactory, Professor?”

“Five points to Slytherin,” he responds.

“To Slytherin!” she cries in mock-outrage, as she snitches another basil plantlet.

“Of course. Your professor evidently taught you very well, and should be rewarded for such perseverance. And I saw that.”

“No, you didn’t,” she says, selecting one of the remaining strawberries from the tray, and pressing it past her lips in the most salacious manner she can manage. She receives a raised eyebrow and just the barest hint of a blush for her troubles, but she’s nonetheless well pleased, and helps herself to more basil when his back is turned.

Dinner is a roulade of salmon stuffed with parmesan and crab, and encased within phyllo pastry that shatters perfectly in her mouth. Her eyes keep slipping closed, mid-bite, because the experience is utterly sublime. She pauses for a sip of wine, and informs Severus that “I have fairly low standards when it comes to meals I don’t have to prepare myself — tinned soup is fine if I don’t have to fix it — but this is transcendent, exquisite.”

His expression is positively saturnine. “Not tempted to flee back to Devon, to dig one of Molly’s casseroles out of the freezer, then?”

“Severus, you’d need the Met to evict me at this point. And probably a squad of Aurors, because believe me: I’ll be putting up a fight. Argh, those casseroles, though. Molly didn’t need to provide any, I had to learn to cook all that stodge myself. I don’t think I really know how to cook anything else, tell you the truth. I tried paella one time, because I loved it when I had it on holiday once, but Ronald wouldn’t touch it. Fixed himself a sandwich instead.”

Severus nods sympathetically, but carefully leaves further discussion of Molly and Ronald alone. “The way to learn anything is to get a book and practise. It helps having an instructor, but I certainly managed to figure it out on my own. Had to; this place didn’t come with Hogwarts’ elves, and sadly, I’d grown accustomed to edible meals. On that note, I suppose victims are also useful in these endeavours. If you’re of a mind to practise, I’ll happily furnish some from next door.”

“So self-sacrificing of you.”

“I saw your cupboards, remember? I wasn’t willing to be a martyr for Dumbledore, so I’m not about to chance my luck and good fortune at this late date.”

Sticking her tongue out would be incredibly immature, so she gives him a baleful pout instead. Marginally better.

He smirks. “I know you’ll forgive me when you see what I’ve found for afters.”

Afters are sour-cherry strudels that could only have come from the dessert display at her Hungarian café. “I am supposed to tell you, ‘Hello, from Laszlo’, by the way.”

“And at this juncture,” she says, lifting a bite of pastry to her mouth, “I’m fairly certain I’m supposed to tell you that I am absolutely smitten with you and love you beyond all reason.”

She misses the first glimmers of his expression, because she closed her eyes tasting the strudel, but can intuit what they must have comprised, on the basis of the trapped awkwardness of the smile.
that she does see on his lips. Within moments, his expression has washed out to something bland and neutral, though, so she forges on, nattering away as blithely as she can: “Pastry, the stuff of epic romances. Can you imagine how much better *Romeo and Juliet* would’ve been, with an apple tart preceding Mercutio’s demise? Or no, I suppose it should’ve been those Italian custard horn thingies, I forget what they’re called. Cannon-something-or-other. But they’re great; maybe that can be my first advanced culinary project. Only you won’t get any; I’ll have to feed them to Cathy and Maddie instead.”

“If O’Shea’s still standing at the end of twenty minutes, I suppose I’ll try one,” he offers.

“Oh no, you had your chance,” she informs him pertly, gathering their dishes and taking the last half of her wine off with her to the sink; she’ll finish it doing the washing up.

Severus’ humour seems to be restored. “That’s just my life, innit?” he says, sorting through the refrigerator to find room for the remainder of the salad. “Missed chances.”

Missed chances? To right wrongs, or to make different choices? Or just noise, the kind she’s been creating to cover over truths that might otherwise be noticed in the silence? “Maybe you haven’t missed them all, yet,” she says quietly, letting the rush of hot water drown her words as the sink fills.

He hears her, though. “Maybe not.”

Naturally, Maddie chooses that precise moment to push the door open. Severus’ consternation is nearly comic. “Damn it, O’Shea, haven’t we talked about knocking?”

“Might’ve done.” She turns back to the door, raps smartly. “There you are, happy? Hi, Cindy. God, it smells good in here; anything left I can jack?”

“No. What do you want?”

Maddie heads to the silverware drawer anyway, helping herself to a fork and the last bits of salmon on the platter.


“Go on, then, get it over with.”

“Privately, I mean.”

Oh fuck. Hermione takes a careful sip of her wine, sets it back on the ledge above the sink, and turns to survey the urchin now sat at the island. Maddie ignores her entirely; she’s giving Severus a look Hermione can’t interpret. He shrugs, pulls his brown sports jacket off its hanger in the entry closet, and the pair of them proceed out the door. “I’ll help with the washing up when I get back,” he tells her by way of explanation, which is nothing of the sort.

She can just about hear Maddie saying ‘spare the rod’ or something equally crude. She’s put her foot in things well enough tonight all by herself, she doesn’t need or want O’Shea’s help on that front. She doesn’t think, just strips off the rubber gloves, tosses back the last mouthful of wine, and slinks out into the dark. If Maddie’s about to ruin everything, fore-warned is forearmed.

They haven’t gone ‘round to the Hive. Unless they fairly jogged, she’d still be able to see them;
she’s only moments behind. Nor are they heading down the street. Around the back of the warehouse, then, to The Wall. She approaches as quietly as she can. She can’t hear voices, and she almost decides she has been mistaken after all. But no: She peeks around the brick corner, and there they are, sitting on a pair of upturned milk crates, backs leaned against chalked inequities.

Maddie lights a cigarette, takes a drag. Extends it toward Severus. He finally takes it. Inhales. Passes it back.

“Alright, then?” Maddie says.

“Near enough.”

“Things’re changing.”

“Things tend to do that.”

“I ’spose they call it ‘progress’.”

“Debteable if that’s an accurate descriptor.”

“Mmm.”

Silence. They trade the cigarette again. Neither speaks. Hermione wishes she’d brought a coat. This is stupid. She’s a daft, paranoid wreck, and if either of them saw her now, knew she was here, she’d be so humiliated she’d probably die on the spot.

More silence, whole minutes of it.

It’s too cold to stand here in nothing but a light blouse; she should go back. Finish the washing up. Work on her extendable charm.

“I like Cindy.”

“Her name’s—”

“I know what it is. I like ‘Cinderella’. Suits.”

He sighs. “How so? I don’t think she has any wicked stepsisters.”

Maddie declines to answer, just passes back the cigarette. Silence reigns again, until: “You like her too. Go on, admit it.”

“Of course I do.”

Maddie gives him a long, appraising look, and again they cease talking. She beckons for him to hand back the cigarette. He does. She takes a long drag, holds her breath.

“Me Uncle Pat.” she says and Hermione flinches at the abruptness of it. “Where I’m from, everyone’s got an ‘Uncle Pat’, don’t you know. Probably not the same one, ‘though Dadaí had enough sisters they very well may have outnumbered the Available Others and had to hand the fellas ’round between. So I suppose you never know; I sure as never asked.”

Maddie subsides back to silence, waiting, evidently, for Severus to participate. At length, he agrees to, and asks, “What about your uncle Pat, then?”

“Used to rub his dingle up against my leg.” Matter-of-fact, blunt force trauma. “I was eight,
maybe. Never heard he did aught else to anyone, but Maman and I were off to Nice, so what do I know?"

Severus is perfectly still for a long time, before cocking his head in Maddie’s direction. “Still bothers you?”

“If I let it, it might. Why I’m saying is: that type, they usually don’t wait for ‘em to grow bush, let alone ‘til they’re thirty-and-change or whatever.”

Severus doesn’t respond. Eventually, Maddie passes him back the cigarette. Hermione retreats, slowly, gingerly, until she is once again safe in Severus’ kitchen. She does the washing up, then carefully collapses onto the sofa to stare blankly at her new hounds-tooth clutch and wish that she could obliviate herself, because she does not want to know these things, of which she was not an intended audience.

It’s after nine, when Severus lets himself in.

“What did Maddie want?” she asks, because she has to.

“What does O’Shea ever want? Rainbows and kittens, I imagine. On fire. Well, the kittens, at least; hard to set rainbows on fire, they’re light refracting through water droplets…”

She catches a whiff off him then, as he passes into the kitchen. She’d been wrong about the cigarette.

“…and maybe not kittens on fire, either. But kittens as incendiary devices? That’s more like her style. Do you know, I expect I’m a bit stoned. Thanks for doing the dishes.”

“No problem.” She watches him rummage in the fridge, extracting leftover salad and a wedge of cheese.

He cuts two slices of bread, and looks her a question. “Peckish at all?”

She shakes her head, no.

“In that case, I suppose I’ll be an uncultured brute, and forego toasting this,” he mutters to himself, constructing a rude sandwich of cheese topped with salad. He consigns the lot of it to the microwave, and while it’s being electromagnetically irradiated, he takes down the pastry box again, to transfer one of the remaining strudels onto a small plate.

He doesn’t quite manage to balance both in one hand, approaching the sofa. “Ouch,” he complains, setting the strudel in front of her, before scraping a bit of hot cheese off the side of his thumb with his lower teeth. He sets his own plate down on the coffee table, and heads back to the bookshelves, from which depths he retrieves a slim silver case (a laptop computer, albeit much smaller than the sort she remembers her father owning) before finally settling onto the sofa. He boots up the device with one hand – the other is tentatively navigating his cheese sandwich again. “Want to watch Corrie with me?” he asks.

“Pardon?”

“Coronation Street?”

She’s obliquely aware that it’s a show which exists, and she supposes, therefore, that people must watch it.
“It’s this thing I’ve got going with O’Shea,” he says, with the air of someone offering an explanation, “I find I have to actually watch it once in a while, for verisimilitude.”

“Verisimilitude.”

“Otherwise I lose track of who’s who.”

Epiphany. “You’ve been pretending to watch a soap opera, just to annoy her.”

“Oh, not just watch. It’s Salford, and that’s practically Manchester. Ergo, I’m a fan.”

She moves a cushion, so that she can budge over on the sofa beside him. “Do I need to know anything, in order to follow along? Also, you’re insane; you’re aware of that, right?”

“Reasonable chance, sure,” he says agreeably. “The activity is not without precedents, though, so I’d venture insanity is hardly a novel condition of my existence.”

“And what precedents might those be?” she asks, around a mouthful of sour cherry filling and flaky pastry. She’s not ‘peckish’, but it’s just sitting there. Taunting her.

“This and that. F’r’instance, I always did try to make a point of having liquor on hand, any time I was doing my marking up in the staff lounge. Generally good for a half-hour harangue, at least. Albus saw through it, sadly, although I did hold out vain hopes that the other staff might eventually prevail upon him that I was in no way fit to instruct tender young minds.”

Her huff of laughter, as she shakes her head, is only half-disbelieving. He hums along with the opening theme, hideously (purposefully?) off-key, but she doesn’t mind because he also drapes his arm around her shoulder. And if his ratty Supertramp tee smells like the concert it may have originally come from, she doesn’t mind that either. The slight rise and fall of his pectoral muscle beneath her cheek transpires to be infinitely more engaging than the show, and she thinks Severus is at least equally interested in studying the texture of a lock of her hair, which he keeps winding around his fingers, as he is in cataloguing the fictional melodramas of Greater Manchester.

She’s aware of pressure beneath her chin. Severus’s index finger, lifting it. “Bed, I think.”

The end credits are running, and she’s been sleeping against his chest, and this time she has drooled on him. “Sorry,” she says, flustered and trying to dab at him while simultaneously realising this draws attention to the circumstance.

He stretches. “Hardly the first time that I’ve experienced your saliva.”

“Umn?”

He leans back toward her and demonstrates. With tongues.

Her muzzy brain starts waking up when his hand passes beneath the untucked tail of her shirt, and his cool fingers splay across the small of her back. They barely rest there before travelling up, but her attention is distracted almost instantly by his other hand, which has begun popping buttons. These are highly promising developments, and if he weren’t kissing her so thoroughly, she’d tell him so, too.

Except.

Except now her ruddy brain is awake, and drawing her attention to the way his tongue is thrusting against hers, how hard his lips are, how mechanically his fingers are going about their tasks.
This isn’t the way he usually touches her. His hands caress, his lips encompass. And now they are doing neither.

And his eyes. There is a kind of immobility, a tension in the delicate muscles that surround these piercing, empty windows.

Her own stupid hands have been working the buttons on his trousers, but she takes control of them now, and skims them up his ribs, across his shoulders, to rest ever-so-gently on either side his face. Softens her lips, her tongue. Slows this oral parody of intercourse, until they are exchanging little more than open-mouthed kisses. She lingers on his lips, drawing them slowly between her own, flicking her tongue lightly across them as if tasting, but inexorably slowing her own movements until they are barely kissing at all, more resting their faces close than anything else.

“Bed, though. We probably should,” she says, adding her voice to the discourse of their heartbeats.

“Probably.” And she does not think she is wholly imagining that there is something like relief in his voice. And sudden trepidation in his eyes.

Maddie had literal hours to talk to him, but Hermione doesn’t think it would do her any good to know what the other woman said. Maddie knows how to say things in her silences, and there’s no way of telling what Severus heard in any of them. She’s happy he takes himself off to shower (“My hair stinks, it’ll get in the sheets.”), because it was the staircase, and the requisite distance between their bodies necessary to ascend it, which she most wanted to accomplish, rather than the transference of said bodies to an accommodating horizontal surface.

She goes up alone, and sorts herself into her new nightwear. Now she has something filmy and pretty, and she’d be lying to herself if she didn’t admit that she wants Severus to see her in it, but what she chooses for tonight are her new pink and grey plaid flannel bottoms (rather ugly, on sale, and she needn’t shave her legs), and the Iron Maiden tee he’d worn to bed last night. She wonders if he has some arcane rule for which tees are sleepwear, and which can be worn in public. Maybe he sorts them on musical preference, or maybe it’s as simple as the order in which the wash was done. Whichever circumstance it is, this one is soft, and comfortable, and smells like him, and she might know this because she buried her face in the fabric before pulling it over her head, but if that’s the case, no one is going to mention it. By the time he is finished with his shower, she has helped herself to his novel as well, and is reading the inside leaf of the book jacket.

“Can I read this when you’re done?” she asks, looking up to see that he’s still in his towel. This offers delightful possibilities, but she ignores them, continuing: “It looks like it’s nearly literary; she’s won or been shortlisted for all sorts of prizes — even the Man Booker.”

“It is literary, that’s why it’s taking me so long. It has SF trappings, but they’re set pieces and satirical glitter, and almost wholly beside the point, which is more structural in nature. So it’s slow going. I haven’t read the others yet, the ones that won all the awards, but The Handmaid’s Tale was stellar; I’d suggest starting there instead, if you’re of a mind to try her.” That he accomplishes a book recommendation in the course of pulling his bottoms up beneath a towel underlines an important point: he is very decidedly not Ronald Weasley. She’s had enough experience of mechanical, obligatory sex to know that she doesn’t want more of what she had beneath Ronald — she wants something new, she wants Severus. But even more than that, she doesn’t want to run the risking of becoming to him what Ronald was to her.

“I stole your shirt,” she tells him, leaning across the bed to return his book to his nightstand.

“I noticed.”
“I imagined you might. On account of your having eyeballs and optic nerves. I’m mentioning it because I’d like to encourage you not to find another quite yet; I have a plan, you see.”

“A plan?” That eyebrow. That eyebrow alone is enough to make her wet these days.

“A cunning plan.” She nods smartly, and beckons him over. “Granted, I probably should have thought of it while I was at Marks and Spencer this afternoon. But I think it’ll work out well enough with lotion instead of almond oil. Don’t worry, it doesn’t smell perfume-y.”

The other eyebrow. Not quite such a knicker-drenching expression, this one.

“I owe you a massage,” she explains. “Stretch out and get comfortable, and I’ll do your back. You can always read tomorrow.”

She does a proper job of it this time. She’s learning.

The results are worth the effort, too: His sleepy smile as much as the contented exhalations and slight groans which he stops trying to hide midway through. She presses a single kiss to his shoulder when she finishes, and he emits a deep, appreciative sigh that floods her in rosy warmth.

Since she neglected to ask, and cannot herself tell if there’s any difference between the Pink Floyd shirt and the one that might’ve read *The Beatles*, she brings the latter when she slips back to bed; of the first two she pulled from the wardrobe, it’s the more ragged. He takes the tee without comment, reluctantly turns over, and pulls himself up until he’s half-sitting. “I’m practically enervated,” he says, pushing his arms through the sleeves. “Boneless and limp as a flobberworm. *Crucio* has nothing on your hands.”

He’d meant it as a quip, so she smirks, but this expression is wholly divorced from the hurt in her stomach. It makes her want to cry, that his mind has leapt from pleasurable lassitude to the aftermath of what she knows is incandescent pain. The only thing that connects these experiences is that they result from other people’s attentions upon his body. Her own mind, shying from this hypothesis, makes leaps of its own, to the other Unforgiveables. Which truly are unforgiveable, as she has learned.

The first time she performed obliviation, her subjects were Antonin Dolohov and Thorfinn Rowle. Not the Doctors Granger.

Severus has thrown an arm around her, and is toying with her hair again, and when she concentrates on the solid heat of his body against hers, the despair and panic ebb a little. She feels his lips nip at her ear. This would normally result in a cascade of tingles, but now it’s a cascade of words:

“Obliviation,” she says. “The way it works, it’s impinging upon the subject’s ability to access their memories, not really removing them. Right?”

He withdraws. Not far, but he does. “Obliviation. I didn’t think this evening had gone quite *that* badly.”

She should swat his chest and make some caustic rejoinder, but it’s beyond her capabilities just now. “Because I was wondering. How it really works. Can you pick specific time frames, or specific memories? That’s what I told everyone I did, to my parents I mean, but as far as I know, the spell just blanks out the most recent events. But the Aurors have to modify muggle memories
all the time, for the Statute, I mean, and so I think there must be a way to do it.”

“What’s brought this up, all of a sudden?” His tone is a mix of curiosity and concern.

She has told him everything else, and he hasn’t flinched. Maybe he simply doesn’t flinch. He didn’t flinch from Maddie – perhaps he is a repository for everyone’s private hurts, or their worst selves. It’s good, then, that he is mostly alone. He is only one man, with a narrow back constructed of muscles, connective tissue, bone. She knows, she felt it. His back is not strong enough to carry the weight of more horrors than his own. But, selfish, she tells him anyway:

“You mentioned the Cruciatius curse. I started thinking of the others. Imperius. Crouch taught us how to do it. We thought he was Moody, and so did Dumbledore, I suppose, but we should never have learned that. It’s what I did to my parents. To get them out of the country before all hell broke loose in ’97.”

“How long was it effective for, do you know?” he asks with perfect, scientific detachment.

“Nearly a month.”

He whistles. “Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

“You’re a wizard. Even without a wand. You could throw it off, probably within a few minutes. Muggles can’t, though. It was a terrible thing to do to them. They’ve never forgiven me, and I don’t blame them.” She has rolled over in bed, and so she can see when he nods.

“Your heart was in the right place. It doesn’t excuse it, I suppose, or make anything better. But… maybe don’t marinate in quite so much guilt?”

“It’s not that easy.”


Life goes on. Or some semblance of it, at least, until the things you’ve done start catching up with you. Although maybe she’s not as unlucky as she’s imagined: if they break her wand, she will no longer be affected by any of these things that cannot be changed. Absolution.

Maybe her parents would come to visit her in whatever mental hospital she ends up in. Will she be a ward of the muggle state, if they decline to be saddled with the hassles of legal guardianship? Perhaps she should ask Severus to be her custodian, just to be safe. He can alternate visits between her and Eileen.

Eileen. “There is. There is a way to remove specific memories. Maybe it’s not obliviation, but there is. Because that’s what they do when they break your wand.”

“It’s not the same thing that the Aurors do to muggles. I know that much. Why are you wondering about all of this? At midnight?”

“Because if there were some way I could excise the memories of doctoring the Andisen’s solution, and of working out the chemistry, I could tip back some Veritaserum and be done.”

He sits up in bed and blinks rapidly. His mouth opens, closes again. A little vee, the start of a thoughtful frown, starts to furrow between his brows. “It depends,” he finally says.

It’s not ‘no’. “Depends on what?”
“On what else those memories might be integrated with. You’d have to be damn near surgically precise, because if you cut off too much, there will be noticeable gaps. And if they notice your memory’s been tampered with, they’d just call it a mistrial, send you off to St. Mungo’s, have your memories restored, and you’d be no better off.”

“But, theoretically. It *could* be done.”

“Theoretically, I suppose.”

“How do they do it?”

“The Aurors? Ask Potter, he’d know better than I would.” A deflection, she's certain of it.

“No, restoring the memories. I know you have to have looked into it, just humour me. I want to work out the logic of it. How obliviation really works.”

“And it can’t wait until morning?”

“Severus, please? Pretty please? Just tell me.”

He sighs, and re-arranges his pillow behind his back. “With legilimency. As you've correctly intuited, obliviation doesn’t remove anything, it just interferes with the frontal lobe’s ability to communicate with the hippocampus. Or something. Even the muggles haven’t really figured out how memory works, but the result of obliviation is essentially an inability to reconstruct something previously encoded. It’s a kind of brain damage, really. Recovery is more akin to therapy than magic; it takes place over many sessions, where a legilimens guides the subject in forming new synaptic connections, new ways of accessing what’s still there in their minds.”

She licks her lips. “You told me, once, that legilimency is imprecise, that you can’t know immediately if something is a true memory, or a memory of something seen or heard — even thought about. Metacognitive events.”

“Yes. So there’s a chance the legilimens could implant false memories, cause the patient to reconstruct things that are in their minds, but not part of their own experiences.”

“That’s terrifying.”

He gives her a long look and a somber nod.

She wants to ask. She wants to very, very badly.

She can’t.

Because she trusts him, and he needs to know that she accepts that he’s no longer the person who —

“Yes. Thrice. It’s damnably difficult to do. On the first one, I didn’t cover my tracks well enough, and they found some of the gaps, where I’d obliviated things. Albus undid my handiwork, eventually. The second one, he said he wouldn’t have found, if he hadn’t been on the look-out by then. I think, if he had not been aware of what I was capable of, he never would have taken me in when I defected. I suspect that his calculations at the time were almost entirely mercenary, that he considered me a better weapon to have on his side, or at least kept carefully out of commission.”

“And the third?”
His lips purse. “To my knowledge, that bit of tampering hasn’t been detected. I hope it never is.”

“Who?” The barest whisper, escaping the icy hand gripping her throat. “The third, I mean.”

Another long look. Measuring her up. Finding her lacking? He answers anyway: “Draco. There are some things he saw… I thought it would be a kindness, if he didn’t have them in his head. And no, don’t bother asking. I won’t tell you. I don’t want them in your head, either.” He turns on his side, to face the plants. Away from her.

She carefully balls up everything she is feeling, and shoves it down into the deep, dark corners of her consciousness — down in the same place she kept Ronald’s son, all these many years.

Breathes in. Tastes the night. Damp soil, vegetation, a fresh hint of Severus’ shampoo or soap, overlain on the memory of baked salmon.

“You know how to do it.” She tells his stiff back. “How to perform selective obliviation.”

He doesn’t answer, which is answer enough.

“You’ll help me. Won’t you?” Pleading, because she can’t help it.

Maybe he’s only thinking it over. She tries to be optimistic. Eventually, he does reply: “I don’t have a wand.”

“I do.”

“And you want the spells on it to include Obliviate, and Legilimens?”

He has a point. She tells him so, and, “I didn’t think that far ahead, obviously.”

“Obviously.” You dunderhead.

She turns it over in her mind for a while. A spare wand is a likely solution, but they all have to be registered. Maybe Malfoy could get his hands on an unregistered one; he seems to have all kinds of connections, but she’s not sure she wants to give him that amount of leverage. Still, if it comes down to it…

“You said it depends on what the memories are integrated with.”

“Mmph?” A startled snort, as he shakes himself awake. “Some things, especially big things, are entangled with too many facets of personality, too many other important memories. If you start messing them around, brain damage is the least of your concerns.” He yawns, and punches his pillow into a more pleasing shape.

“How do you tell? If they are, or not.”

“It’s actually incredibly simple: You close your eyes, and you count backwards from one thousand, and you ask me in the morning.”

It’s not ‘no’.

It’s not really ‘yes’, either, as she discovers over scrambled eggs and a rasher of bacon. “So you’d have to perform legilimency on me, to see whether those memories could be obliviated without causing damage? Or too much damage, anyway.”

“And to determine whether it would even work as a defense against Veritaserum. If they only need to reword a question, to access a memory close by, which happens to be entangled with the same
emotional palette, you’re sunk.”

She pours herself another cup of coffee, but the extra caffeine doesn’t do much to improve clarity. “See, Severus, you’re using words that have a precise meaning to you, but I’m not following. ‘Entangled’, ‘emotional palette’. That means something specific to you. Like ‘muddling’ versus ‘crushing’.”

He sets his fork down, and rubs his palm across his stubble. “I see what you’re saying. I do. I just don’t know how to explain it, to someone who’s never... Alright, you know how word associations work? Entanglement is like that. Accessing one memory or thought will bring up another. There are a lot of different ways that memories can be entangled, but legilimency works with emotions. I mentioned to you once before — when we were up in Northumberland, I think — that in legilimency, they’re perceived as colours. I call it the emotional palette.”

She does recall, now that he’s reminded her. “Entangled memories, then, they all have the same colour?”

“They can. It’s not a science. And sometimes the same event can appear in a different palette entirely, depending upon how the subject has thought about it, over the years. The older a memory is, the more it’s likely to be entangled with different palettes.”

It makes sense, and it’s singularly disheartening. She has a lot of different emotions attached to the events she’d like to wipe out of her mind. This means that “Even if you obliviate the memory attached to one particular ‘shade’ of emotion, it could still be there, attached to another?”

“Precisely so. As I understand it, that’s the principle behind the recovery therapies.”

She rests her chin on her hand, and stares, unseeing, at the scarlet jelly jar. “Occlumency, then.”

“What about it?”

“Harry said you told him to clear his mind, to suppress his emotions. That’s how it works — if a legilimens can’t figure out what ‘colours’ your emotions are, they can’t find the memories entangled with them.”

He shakes his head, despairingly, and swallows his bite of toast. “Again. My plan was much better. Either I or Albus could’ve taught you occlumency, and you could’ve taught Potter, and it might even have worked.”

“Well, you can make up for it by teaching me now. Draco thinks I should learn, anyway. But why didn’t you just explain it to Harry like you just did to me? He’s not stupid, he’d have picked it up.”

He frowns in disagreement with her assertion on Harry’s relative intelligence, but doesn’t verbalize what she reckons he wants to say. Instead, he explains: “Riddle didn’t think I could occlude very competently, although he was under the impression that Dumbledore erroneously believed I could. My cover literally depended on his assuming either he or Bellatrix were privy to anything they wanted to look at in my head. Just how well would it have gone over, if I’d been able to give Potter clear and cogent instructions, for doing a thing I wasn’t supposed to know how to accomplish very well at all?”

She sighs. “You’re right, your plan was much better than Dumbledore’s.”

“I maintain that the only thing accounting for most of us making it out alive was the capricious benevolence of the God of Sheer Dumb Luck.”
“All hail, praise be.” She helps herself to a second slice of toast, and slathers it over in jelly. “So will you teach me?”

“I can try, I suppose. The basics should be well within your grasp. It takes time, though, and a lot of practise. It might be more effort than you’re interested in investing, right now.”

He’s trying to be politic, she can tell that much. “I keenly appreciate distractions from the mess that comprises my life at present. Besides, maybe there’s a way to beat Veritaserum with occlumency, have you ever thought of that?” She won’t tell him about her midnight musings on unregistered wands.

He screws up his mouth. “I doubt it. Veritaserum doesn’t… Well, no, maybe… Hunh. It’s supposed to work to prevent your substituting a fabrication by upregulating activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and it has coercive components in common with babbling draughts… But maybe if you could shut down the entanglement via occlumency, you could prevent yourself recounting something. Maybe.”

“So it would be worth investigating?”

He nods, very slowly, his eyes distant. “But you’d have to do it properly… the way I do it… Because you’d need to substitute in another memory, recount something different. You can’t get away with saying nothing at all, when you’re up in front of the Wizengamot; it would be dead obvious you were beating the potion somehow.”

“And the memory you substitute, it would be closely entangled to the one you’re trying to occlude, right?” She’s excited now, perching up on the edge of her seat.

His eyes are sparking. “That’s it precisely!”

She grins toothily. She can’t help herself, or at least that’s what she chooses to believe. “Ten points to Gryffindor!”

His answering smile is a masterpiece of sardonic sourness. “Come now, Miss Granger. Ten? Really. Five, I’ll grant you. If you want the other five, you’re going to have to work for them.”

“I shall work as hard as a Hufflepuff, Professor,” she assures him.

“A little more cleverly, though, one hopes.” He ignores the whites of her eyes. “We should start off with a practical lesson in entanglement. If you want to learn how to select your true memories, and not get them twisted up with fabrications or metacognition, then you need to know what entanglement looks like.”

He picks up his coffee mug, and wanders into the sitting room with an air of distraction. He makes two circuits of the room, before slowing in front of one of the orchids. “Go fetch you wand,” he says to the plant.

She sets their plates in the sink, wipes her hands, and does as he asks.

“What are the components?”

“Of my wand? Linden and dragon heartstring, why?”

“Linden! Good, this might actually work.”

“What might actually work?”
“Your casting *Legilimens* on me.”

“Er, why? And I thought we agreed I shouldn’t do that, on account of it being suspicious as hell if anyone casts *Priori incantatem* on my wand?”

He waves this away. “Once or twice, you can probably explain. Tell them you intended to try it on Potter, or one of the Weasleys, even, in the hopes of gaining more information about what charges your husband intends to levy.”

“And if I were intending to use a spell like that, of course I’d practise casting it ahead of time.”

“Naturally.”

“But why *Legilimens*?”

“You need to see what real memories look like. Fish don’t recognize water, and you can’t see the colours of your own mind — counterintuitively, it’s easier to understand how true memories differ from recollections of fantasies or fiction, if you can see it in someone else’s head, before trying to tease out how your own might be entangled. Because you do know, your emotions are tied up in *everything* in your cranium — it’s tricky, even in your own mind, to make a near-instantaneous leap between two lived events, two true experiences. And that’s what you’ll have to be able to do, if there’s any chance of this scheme working.”

While he’s been speaking, he’s been drawing a convoluted glyph on a piece of scrap paper. It’s a spell-map, she realizes. Encoded in the angles and lines are the motions she’ll make with her wand. The thickness of his lines indicate the speed of the movement, and he has drawn it in the requisite order of flourishes. She summons paper and pen of her own, snatching it from the air as it flutters down the staircase from his writing desk. Somewhere in the middle, she misses a step, and her diagram diverges from his. “Show me again?”

They’re half the morning at it, but by the time they’ve scribbled over twenty or thirty sheets of paper, she’s entirely confident she knows all the wand motions for this spell. “I think I’m ready to try.”

He tidies away their detritus, and seats himself beside her, hands loosely clasped in his lap. “The incantation on the third widdershins stroke.”

She nods.

“We’ll try for something recent, so I can be sure of bringing it all to mind. Unless you work hard at it, constantly revisiting your memories until they’re firmly cemented in place, you’ll invariably lose little details. It’s different once you’ve used a pensieve. The real events… for some reason they never fade out, although the rest — thoughts, fantasies, things you’ve merely learned instead of experiencing — those all seem to diminish at predictable rates.”

Oh, now that’s interesting—

But she doesn’t have an opportunity to ask what he means, about pensives, because he turns then so that he is staring directly into her eyes, and says “You wanted to know, yesterday, what O’Shea wanted. Go on, look for it, I’ll show you.”

He can’t possibly mean that he will give her unfettered access to the whole of that conversation. He’ll occlude some of it. Maybe she’ll be able to tell, when he is and isn’t holding information back? That would also be highly interesting, to say the very least. She chews at the inside of her cheek, and wonders if she has an obligation to tell him that what she’s really going to look for are
the plastered cracks, not the colour of the walls.

She meticulously traces the glyph in midair with the point of her wand, and carefully pronounces “Legilimens.”

And yet, the colour of the walls turns out to be fascinating. The scene she enters is entirely awash with syrupy golden light. She is nearly face-to-face with Severus, so close they’d probably be touching noses if her point of view were corporeal. In the instant she recognizes ‘too close’, her viewpoint shifts, and now she can see Maddie, who crackles over with little specks of bright orange, flaring like fairy lights. But when she tries to get a closer look, they coalesce and glow up until they’re subsumed into the rest of the light, which is too warm by far to simply be a memory of the street lamp illuminating The Wall. The Wall. She looks up at it. Some parts are clear, but other sections she can’t read at all, and when she focusses on some words, the light changes. It gets dark, it gets green. Or it purples. Or washes out to a light, melancholy blue. She firmly redirects her attention back to Severus and Maddie, and nearly sighs with relief as the light stabilizes in honeyed gold.

“I like Cindy.”

“Her name’s—”

“I know what it is. I like ‘Cinderella’. Suits.”

She should be paying attention to what’s happening, not to the light show. What’s next? Wasn’t it a long stretch of silence, before Maddie described her pedophilic uncle? He won’t let her see that. She should look there for his occlusion — she knows what should be missing, and she knows when it should be missing, so what does ‘missing’ look like?

She waits, patiently. Her mind wanders, wondering what Maddie might have filled the rest of the time with. Has Severus chosen to start with the beginning of their encounter, or is it a choice she unconsciously made, because the beginning is what she knows? If she’d had any knowledge about their later conversation, perhaps she could have swooped in, and accidentally discovered some awkward details of Maddie’s first handjob, or something equally uncomfortable and sordid.

Things tilt.

It’s imprecise, ‘tilting’. But her stomach drops as if she’s stepped through one of Hogwarts’ trick stairs, and she reflexively closes her eyes — or whatever the equivalent is when you’re in someone else’ head — and when she reasserts her awareness, she is on a riverbank awash with bright summer sun that filters through a canopy of intensely green leaves.

Severus Snape, all of perhaps thirteen, stringy and poorly dressed in ill-fitting muggle denims and a button-down too long in the arms, is leaning against a tyre suspended from a tree branch. Perhaps this rude swing is something he and Lily Evans constructed in some earlier summer. Because of course he would not have been far from her, nor she him. Even now, she is standing close to him, all knees and freckles. Very close. Too close. She’s taller than him, and although her expression is open and her smile cajoling, to Hermione, she seems to loom.

“Don’t you want to?” Hermione has always imagined Lily’s voice as sultry, something low and melodic. But this girl has a sweeter alto pitch, which tumbles forth with perfect confidence: “I’m certainly pretty enough, and it’s not like the girls are fighting over you, you know.”

He looks trapped, and Hermione can see that his breathing has shallowed out.
“Well, take your trousers down, then; what, are you scared, Sev?”

“No!” It’s the goad that finally works, and he releases the tyre’s suspensory rope, which up to this point he’s been gripping with both hands. Unbuttons. Draws his fly down. And then halts, hands clenched upon his waistband.

Lily’s grown impatient, and shoves them down herself. His hands stray to cover his y-fronts, but she bats them aside, and hooks her thumbs in the fabric, tugging it down his thighs.

He’s on display, then, and she can see he’s completely mortified. His face is flushed, and she thinks his eyes are slightly glassy.

Lily is oblivious. “It hardly looks at all like the pictures Pomfrey showed us! Oh, but if I do this, that’s more like.” She’s pushed his foreskin back, pressing until the entirety of his glans is exposed. “How do you usually go about? Like so?” She clasps her hand around him, begins to rub her fingers along his length.

He’s clenched his jaw tight, and he’s staring fixedly up at the shimmering leaves. The longer she’s at it, the more still he becomes, until Hermione can’t even be sure he’s breathing.

“Eeeewww!” Lily laughs as her attentions have their normal result. She flicks his semen off her fingers, bends to wipe her hand in the grass. There’s still ejaculate spilling from the head of his quivering cock, leaking down his shaft and dripping into his trousers. “That’s so manky!”

Her bright grin fades when he fails to respond, and one hand — the other hand — settles at her hip as she watches a tear spill down along the side of his nose. “God, you’re such a baby. You know that’s why they call you Snivellus, don’t you? Here I am, doing something really nice for you, and you’re going to thank me by pitching a cry? Fine, enjoy your afternoon.”

The scene dissolves into the twin corridors of Severus’ dark eyes. She feels cold, and shaky inside, and she can’t tell how much of it is performing the spell and how much of it is what she’s learned.

He blinks, once. Calmly? God, his face is so immobile, she can’t tell how bad this is, she can’t tell anything.

“What colours did you see? In the scene?”

“G-gold. Like looking through pale amber.”

“Just that? What about O’Shea?”

“More orange, but only little flickers, and then they turned to gold, too.”

“Because my recollections of her are entangled with more than one emotion. In concentrating wholly upon that scene, I was able to suppress the others. Had I not, you’d have seen far more hues, a veritable kaleidoscope.”

“When I looked at The Wall. Parts of it changed the light, made it go green and blue.”

Is it really possible, that he isn’t aware of what else she’s seen?

“I noticed that. You didn’t follow them. You could have; I might have occluded you, but that’s the way to go about it.” He frowns, suddenly.

Shite. Fuck.
But what he does next is something entirely unexpected: He raises his hand, and swipes the edge of his index across his right nostril. Stares down at it, as if he doesn’t understand what he’s looking at.

There’s something crimson there, smeared across his pale skin.

“Severus!”

He looks up, and she watches a thin trickle of blood leak out of his nose and down to the corner of his mouth.
There Forever

Chapter Notes

Y’know how last chapter, I said ‘may contain nuts’? This chapter was definitely manufactured and packaged in a facility that processes nuts (= stuff gets dark).

Guys, I really am sorry for what I’m about to do.

“I don’t understa— mmph!”

She has reached across to pinch the bridge of his nose, and while it shouldn’t interfere with his vocal cords, he nevertheless declines to finish his sentence. When it’s obvious he’s not going to continue, she asks, “Do you get nosebleeds? Has this happened before?”

“No, unless you count Sirius Black clobbering the daylights out of me on the Express at the beginning of my fifth year.”

“Pinch here, where the cartilage starts. And lean your head forward, so the blood doesn’t drain down your throat.”

“It’ll get on the upholstery,” he complains.

“Lean over so it drips on the floor then.” She scurries down the hall to the bath, and dampens a washcloth. He reaches to take it from her when she returns, but she pushes his hand away and dabs tenderly at his upper lip. “You worry about keeping pressure on your nose, I’ll worry about cleaning up.”

“How long do I have to do this?” he asks after a few minutes.

“Until it stops bleeding. Has it?”

He releases his nose, and his nostrils flare as he inhales. “No. Damn it.”

“Don’t inhale through your nose next time,” she advises, as he re-applies pressure. “My dad had nosebleeds when his blood pressure was elevated. Are you feeling anything else, are you…” Are you thinking of what I know, now?

“No, I’m perfectly fine. Just quietly exsanguinating, apparently.” She can’t detect anything but vague annoyance in his tone, but his voice is markedly changed by holding his nose, so she isn’t entirely sure.

“Well, hopefully not quite as bad as that. So this has never happened to you before, when someone’s cast Legilimens on you?”

“Never.”

“Maybe I did it wrong?”
“If you’d done it incorrectly, it wouldn’t have worked at all. It’s not like baking biscuits, it either works or it doesn’t. And as you’ve described seeing something — presumably what I saw — I’m wont to believe you cast it successfully.”

“What did you see, what did it look like from your perspective?” Kill her now, and get it over with, is what she’d like to say.

“O’Shea and I sitting on crates, sharing a joint. I couldn’t see the colours you did, obviously, but I felt… hmm. Quiet. I don’t have a good word for that emotion. I know what it is, know the texture of it, but translating into words is less my forte. It was golden, you say?”

“Yes. Not metallic, but warm. Like treacle, a bit.”

“Golden. Well, silence often is. We should try again, you could tell me what all of my colours are. I’d be interested to know. But! That’s hardly our agenda today, and I don’t think you can explain casting Legilimens more than two or three times, so next—”

“I need the loo first,” she interjects. And flees.

Pulling her denims and knickers down is a little too reminiscent of what Lily had done. She stares at the shower curtain, but it’s singularly uninteresting, and so are the towels, and neither serves to displace Lily Evans’ hands.

Is he ignoring it? Had he meant her to see? …Or, most likely conclusion given available evidence: has she somehow defeated his occlumency, broken into some hidden stronghold, plundered his secrets?

She wishes Harry had something as utilitarian and commonplace as a mobile. She can’t ask him questions via patronus. She needs to talk to him, she needs to understand if something like this is even possible. He’d know. He might not be any great shakes at occlumency or legilimency himself, but he has to be working with people who are, if that’s how they do selective obliviation.

This has been enough of an exercise in distraction that her bladder muscles indulge her, and she’s finally able to pee.

She spends too long scrubbing her hands. She doesn’t know what she hopes to accomplish. Something symbolic, maybe, except hers don’t look like Lily’s.

Why hadn’t that scene had a colour to it? The light had been intense, yes, the colours too vivid, too lush. Is that what he’d meant by a kaleidoscope? If he was only concentrating on a single emotion, in recounting Maddie, then was she seeing all of them, with Lily? Or… was she perhaps seeing a figment of his imagination? It can’t be that obvious, the difference between real and conceived. Can it?

As much as she does not want to face him again, she does want the answer to this question, and since she is not about to mention what she’s seen, and neither is he, there seems only one way of obtaining it.

Severus has made a pot of tea in her absence, and looks none the worse for his nosebleed. He passes her a cup, and a plate with the last of the cherry strudels.

“We can cut it in half, you know. I don’t need the entire pastry. No? Sure you don’t even want a bite?”

“Maybe a bite.”
She smiles, victorious, and lifts the fork to his lips. He senses the intimacy in this gesture, too — his eyelashes flutter, and his lips ease against the fork’s tines. Perfect.

She is ever so much better at navigating Severus Snape than Lily Evans was.

She’s fairly certain he’s watching her lick sour cherry off the fork in turn, as she disappears the last of the pastry. But they have an agenda for this afternoon, and she wants answers rather more than she wants to haul him up to bed and teach him that it doesn’t have to be like that. Besides, maybe he already knows.

Maybe Lily even taught him, herself. Later.

He loved her, after all.

Answers. It’s beyond time to get some. She sets the plate aside. “So what’s next?”

“This next thing I’m going to show you will be a blend of something experienced, and something fictional, observed. You’ll be able to tell which parts are real, just based on content, but I want you to try to see how the texture, or the colour even, of each part is different.”

“How should it look? Will the light be different, or…”

“I have no idea. In my experience, it varies. Every individual’s mind is going to be a novel experience. Sometimes it’s easy to tell, and sometimes it isn’t. The more thoroughly a subject has absorbed something extraneous to their own experiences, or the more closely it resonates with them, emotionally, the more it appears like a lived experience.”

Well, that tells her absolutely nothing that she really wants to know, but she nods gamely, and flexes her wrist in preparation of spellcasting once more. “Ready?”

He nods, and she falls back into his eyes.

She’s aware of the scene coalescing, this time. It’s fast, but the room seems to pull inward, from the edges. There’s very little extraneous colour in this scene. Just the barest hints of lavender, overlain on the bright window, the light fabric of the padded booth that surrounds the table, and reflecting in Lucius Malfoy’s silver-blond hair.

He’s sitting across from Severus. They both have pints, dewed over with condensation. That can’t be imagination, can it? A detail that subtle? She studies their booth, then looks over her shoulder at the bar.

Oh.

She nearly laughs. It’s the bar from his soap opera. She squints at the woman tending it. She looks like the same buxom blonde, but the longer Hermione stares, the more the cant of her eyes resembles Madame Rosmerta’s. Heh. Well, she knows where they really were, whenever this conversation took place.

She moves closer, so that she can hear what Malfoy is saying.

“Draco’s taken to insisting that he’d like a pet snake. A samoyed would be more appropriate, I can’t help but think.”

“Ah, but you can’t wear a samoyed round your shoulders to quidditch matches as a fashion accessory, can you? Or at least, its probable charms as a pet would be markedly diminished if one
Lucius Malfoy snorts into his stein, wipes his mouth. “Merlin. Though, I did see those banners he enchanted. He brought one home at hols, so proud of it! Are they draping themselves over with them?”

“Could you ever doubt it?”

They both look so young. This must have been sometime during her first year. Severus’ face has its characteristic worry lines, but they are not so deeply etched, and the silver has yet to make a showing at his temples. He looks rested, healthy.

He is a little younger than she is now.

Something in that realization makes her slightly nauseous. If he was an adult then — and he surely was — then she is one now. And this means that there are no adults, not really.

“…And perhaps it will be good for him, having to clean up after it, take it for walks.”

“Pick up its’ dung, you mean. Severus, old chap, we have house elves for things like that. And they’re happy to do it, too!”

Poor Dobby. Poor everyone, who’d suffered at this man’s hands. She scowls blackly at him, but of course he doesn’t notice, just carries on: “Cissy will bitch over the shedding, of course, but…”

—— Such a filthy habit, Mulciber ——

“…if you don’t mind bending the rules on pets, just a bit…”

—— Mind the teeth! Our lord intends on questioning it later ——

Questioning what? It’s as if two parallel conversations are buzzing in her ears. She hears what Malfoy is saying to Severus, but beneath it, he’s saying something else, and she’s clearly not making out all the words. She cocks her head, tries to focus, and slowly the words crystallize:

“Tell me, Mulciber, does this mudblood whore really excite you? You honestly want to be rutting into it, pumping away like a hundred blood traitors before you?”

The room darkens, the textures of the walls change. Stone. Dust, hanging in the candlelight. Lucius Malfoy casually traversing the scene, his boot heels ringing against the flagstone floor. He is using the head of his cane to tease cobwebbing away from alcoves that house… boxes? No, too ornate by far. Coffins.

They’re in the Malfoy crypts.

“Y’know, I think I would! That’s a banging idea, Lucy old boy.” A burly man, too hairy to be good-looking, although he has the strong kind of jaw that purebloods appreciate. He is standing over a woman.

She is bound, and gagged.

“Given your deplorable lack of standards, might I suggest the back end of a sow? At least you wouldn’t risk defiling the Mulciber line.”

“Hardly treason to my line, given what’s in store for her. Not much chance of her gestating anything foul from the inside of Nagini’s guts!” Mulciber, if that’s who the hairy man is, has been
stroking his cock the entire time, alternately slapping it alongside the bound woman’s face.

“Ah, I see. So it’s acceptable, in your particular ethos, to dirty yourself with them, if you intend to kill them afterward?”

“Oh come now, Mr High-and-Mighty, I’m not about to dispose of her. That’s our lord’s prerogative. And frankly, he’s the only one I take orders from. Certainly not some fancy-nancy who’s been tucked up safe in an Azkaban gaol cell! I mean, really, Lucy, you can’t have been spoilt for choice this past year, and just look at these splendid tits!” He seizes the woman by her hair, drags her up.

It’s Charity Burbage.

Hermione does not want to see her professor like this. She should be striding back and forth in front of her chalkboards, arms waving and voice pitching up in delighted raptures as she expounds how transformative the internet will be, how it will truly equalize muggle and wizarding kind. She should not be kneeling here, hands bound behind her back, hair disheveled, bruises darkening her eyes, fine clothing in tatters at her waist.

“Look at ‘em bounce! Tell me you wouldn’t like to bite right in and—”

Hermione turns away, but she knows what Mulciber’s done, because Professor Burbage screams, a groaning sound that bubbles up as her tongue thrashes against the gag.

“Disgusting,” says Lucius Malfoy.

She can hear Mulciber spitting, before he speaks. Something wet and solid. No, not ‘something’. “No worse than your letting that halfblood suck you off. O-ho, what’s that Lucy, you think we don’t know who butters Snape’s bread? Tell me, Lucy love, d’you let him bend that frigid bitch of yours over too? Eh? Grease her twat for you to get her started? Keep her warm all the long nights you were away from home?”

“One day, Mulciber, I am going to feed you to my dogs. Piece by piece. I think I’ll start with your despicable little cock.” Malfoy strokes his lips, contemplative and cold. “Severus is quite good at cauterizing wounds, perhaps I’ll ask if he’d like to assist. A halfblood, yes, you’re right: He does suffer that deficit of nature, but at least he has some proper feeling for what blood he does have.”

“One day, yeah? Well, that day’s not today, so if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to enjoy my filthy slice of cunny, and you can fuck off. Unless you want to watch, what hey? You never know, she could be a right good show. Ask Snape, reckon he’s fucked her! He likes them muddy, I s’pose you know? Your precious Snape, who’s got such proper fucking feeling, bet you didn’t know he was always panting after that Evans whore after you lot left school. Just as hard as James Potter ever did.”

Where is Severus? Where is Severus in this god-awful, hellacious nightmare? It’s his memory, he has to be here! Why didn’t he do anything, why didn’t he stop this? Is he doing as Mulciber suggests, watching the show? She whirs, trying to suss out the potions master — spy — Death Eater — amongst the shadows of the Malfoys’ crypts.

But the crypts are flying apart, disintegrating, and what she sees now are Severus’ long black lashes, blinking down across those dark eyes. Watching.

“What the fucking hell did I just see?” She doesn’t scream it, but she wants to. Her voice is shaking so hard she can’t even be sure he’ll understand the words.
He does though, and draws back, suddenly wary. “What do you mean?”

Of course he’s wary now. “You fucking well know what I mean!”

“I’m sorry! Would you just take a breath, there’s no need for apoplexy.”

“Take a breath! Take a—!!” But she does. Three.

He charges into the breach: “Look, I am sorry, Hermione, but be reasonable: How on earth was I supposed to know that the mere sight of Lucius Malfoy would be so repugnant to you?”

“The mere sight!”

“It honestly didn’t occur to me. I’m sorry. I thought… I don’t know what I thought, but maybe that you’d get a laugh, at the absurdity of Lucius Malfoy having drinks at the Rover’s, debating the merits of buying Draco a fluffy puppy. I didn’t mean any harm by it.” He reaches, tentatively, to lightly rest his fingertips against her forearm, as she gapes at him in disbelief.

She flinches, jerks her arm away.

His eyebrows contract, and for an instant he looks crushed, and for an instant she cares. But she doesn’t want him touching her.

He’s sniffling, and at first she thinks he’s crying, and she feels the rage inside her swelling up. He turns away, and drops his head, and she wants to strike at him — how dare he dismiss this! How dare he disengage?

He’s pinching the bridge of his nose in anger or defeat or… no. No, she understands, even before the trickle becomes a stream.

“Fuck,” he mutters, staggering up to his feet.

“No, don’t—!” But her warning comes too late, and her attempt to halt his fall even more so. Especially as she does not really want to touch him.

But she must: he’s still bleeding, both from his nose, and the new gash up in his hairline, where his face got up close and personal with the edge of his coffee table. Head wounds bleed. They just do, and you can’t really apply pressure, so she ignores it. If she has to touch him, she doesn’t want to touch very much of him, and pinching his nose (hard) is a compromise she can force herself to stomach.

His eyelids flicker. She looks away. The last thing she wants is to meet his eyes again.

…No, the last thing she wants is to feel his hands on her. God. She let him touch her. He’s had his lips on hers, he’s had his tongue in her mouth, he’s had his mouth on her breasts—

“Ow. Ease up, would you? What the hell happened?”

“You’re draining blood out of your cranium and you decided to stand up, like some kind of idiot. What do you think happened?” Her voice is a million miles away from the pounding in her head. She sounds calm, she thinks. Detached.

“Hermione.” His voice is barely more than a whisper.

But it’s still too much. “Don’t.” Don’t say my name.
The feel of his skin beneath her fingers makes her want to vomit. He can hold his own damn nose. She scrubs her hands on her denims as she rises.

"Please. I’m sorry. Please, I don’t understand—"

"What? What don’t you understand? You don’t understand why the sight of one my professors, at the mercy of your comrades, brutalized, raped — you don’t understand why that would affect me?” Her voice is rising in pitch, increasing in volume and she does. not. care.

"What are you— Charity?"

"And what did you do, just stood there, just watched? That was all she was worth?"

"I didn’t! I— I wasn’t. I wasn’t there.” He’s hauling himself up, bracing on the coffee table.

“I beg to differ! It was in your head, that entire scene. It was in your head, SNAPE!”

He crumples back to his knees, as if she’s kicked him. She’d like to. He doesn’t look halfway wounded enough, for all that he’s started streaming down tears to mix in with the blood, for all that he’s gulping for air. “I know. I know it’s there and I can’t get rid of it and I’ve tried I’vetriedI’vetried. So many times, so many. It’s all there and I can’t get rid of it.”


“It’s been better, after I got the pensieve silver out, it’s been fading, not so sharp anymore, but it’s still there, it’ll be there forever, all of it.” And he seems so fucking hopeless and pathetic, as if he’s the one who’s suffered, as if he’s some kind of victim.

She has a wand. She is not helpless. She is not Professor Burbage. She can end this. She can end him, even.

No.


He’s been whispering, and she’s been ignoring him, but she listens now, now that she’s decided what to do next. “I don’t want to remember her like that. I don’t want to see her writhing as that fucking snake crushes her ribs, squeezes the breath out of her, eats her whole. I don’t want to see those things I found in Mulciber’s head, I don’t want to know what he did to her. I only looked because I knew he’d know where she was being held. And maybe, maybe I could… Fucking idiot. I always look. I always fucking look and every time it’s worse, every time I think I’ve seen it all and it’s always something new. And I can’t get it out of my head, I can’t, I’ve tried, I’ve tried so many times. She taught me what a search engine was, and that’s what I want to remember, not—”

“What? What are you saying?”

“I don’t want it in my head, and if I could get it out, if there were any way, any way at all, don’t you think I’d have done it?”

Her fingers snarl in his greasy hair; she jerks him up. “What are you saying, damn you! What did I see?”

His mouth opens, closes. Like some demented fish. Then: “I don’t know. Tell me.”
“Malciber. And Malfoy. And where were you, Snape?”

He begins to laugh, a broken, ugly, hollow sound, but a laugh nonetheless. “At Hogwarts. Prepping my goddamn lessons.”

Liar. Fucking liar. Even now, now that she knows. “Then why is it in your head?”

“Because that’s what legilimency does. You experience it. You see everything they have. And it’s there forever.”

It washes in like a tsunami, the understanding of what he’s saying.

And in its aftermath?

In its aftermath, there is only wreckage.

There forever.

She loosens her clawed fingers, releases his hair. She has pulled some of it out; the strands cling against her sweat-damp palms.

The sunlight fades, through amber and rose-gold, crimson, until all that is left are the encroaching shadows, the night’s dark memory of his hanging garden.

The street-lamp at the corner flickers to life.

She has somehow arrived on the floor beside him. Her legs have given way, perhaps. Or perhaps she has intended to crouch and then to sit, to reach a trembling thumb and brush away the tears that are still occasionally descending the crevices of his face, glistening in the poor light.

This time, it is he who flinches.
Chapter Notes

A handful of you will have noticed that I’ve been back for a while now; over the past few months I’ve finished posting Alms for the Wretched, which nearly broke my desire to write at all. I’d often joked (=worried) that Inkstains is a one-off, that the little following I have as a writer is strictly limited to this piece, and that when it ends, I’ll sink back into utter obscurity. I’m pretty sure, now, that’s the end result of finishing this story, so it’s hard to make myself want to work on it. The other side of the equation is that it’s weird/hard/sad to be writing this and knowing that Trägerse isn’t going to be reading it. It’s honestly so much fun, knowing there’s always someone reading who’d be playing the ‘meta’ game with this, treating it as if a capable author were writing it, willing to pick it apart and wonder what I was doing, willing to delve into it looking for hints and metaphors, in-jokes and extended allegories. She was willing to be my friend, too, instead of just a consumer of my work. I value so highly the few people who make that effort, I truly do. Losing one of the few friends I have -- that hurt, a lot. But on the other hand: I do value you, you few who give me your time, who make that effort. So here is my thanks, to you:

It feels like there is an ocean between them, as if he is so far away as to be situated on another continent, instead of just beyond the reach of her extended fingers. She has to close her eyes, because it’s making her seasick, this spatial disconnect between the hard hurt in her chest, and what her objective senses tell her.

Or maybe the nausea is just her shame, her horror, her dismay, her violent self-loathing all roiling together.

She doesn’t know what to do.

She doesn’t know what to say.

Fuck, she doesn’t even know what to think.

Maybe nothing?

Maybe that’s what he’s doing: thinking nothing. His breathing is so very calm, steady. She has to concentrate to even hear his faint exhalations.

She can’t manage the trick of it herself. She doesn’t remember if there were any conscious decisions to just stop thinking, that week or two she spent in bed. She certainly doesn’t feel that lethargy now. No, she feels like her skin is crawling, like her nerves are raw and smarting, as if she is about to unravel at her seams at any moment, dissolve into some caustic soup of sobbing regret.

Sitting here with this terrible crushing silence, with nothing but her thoughts echoing endless anguish – it’s too much, it’s too hard. But neither does she want noisy disruption: When the music starts from next door, her silencing charm is practically reflexive, Malfoy’s dictum against casual spellcasting forgotten until she is staring down at her wand, clenched tight in ghostly-pale hand,
which seems, somehow, to be disconnected from her awareness of herself.

He has finally looked up, though, at her movement.

“I apologize for this.” His tone is strangely formal, distant. “It rather caught me unprepared, your mentioning Charity Burbage.”

And she thinks she hears a pause, just the slightest bit of a stumble, when he says Professor Burbage’s name.

“Severus.” Maybe it’s a plea, against the vast emptiness in his voice, the deliberate chasm he’s placing between them. Maybe. Maybe not. But it hurts like it might be a plea, trying to get the word out. She can’t manage any others.

He’s looking away from her; she can see, even in the darkness, that his head is tilted in the opposite direction.

She can’t blame him. “Severus, I’m sorry. I thought… When I saw… did you— you don’t even realize, I don’t think,” she swallows hard and tries to marshal her sprawling thoughts into some kind of sensible order, “You must have had occlumentic shields in place, but I saw things, Severus, that I don’t think you intended to show me, I saw—”

“Don’t!” A beat, and then more quietly: “Please don’t.”

She watches a shudder run across his shoulders, before he moves, abruptly. Spastically. Clutches his knees up to his chest, and presses his forehead down against them, the gray sliver of his face obscured now by his hair. Draws in a deep breath. Another. Begins, low and almost as if he is speaking to himself:

“She was mad for cricket. Drew these terrible Doctor Who cartoons in her spare time, she’d always be shoving them at people in the staff lounge. And when she first came on staff, she drove Minerva nearly to tears, badgered her for bloody weeks to help her transfigure Firewhiskey to Carlton Draught. And she was so fucking annoying sometimes. She’d pass me in the hallways, and she’d make that Darth Vader breathing sound and then laugh like a gormless idiot and I couldn’t hex her because what if students saw. And that one summer when she got her hands on walkie talkies and made me help her test their range, and where all the magical interference zones were. And I think it must have been her, who left that William Gibson book on my desk in ’96. I never told anyone my birthday, I don’t know how she knew.” He’s not crying, but his voice has that tight scratchy sound and he stops talking.

She understands what he’s doing. This is how he wants to remember her, because “She was your friend.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I wish I’d known her. The way you did.” Insight dawns. He has a type, doesn’t he? “She sounds a little bit like Maddie, maybe.”

This makes him tilt his head in her direction, at least. “I don’t know. Maybe. I guess a bit. Martin, too. And the rest of them. People who pretend not to take themselves very seriously, I suppose. They do, of course, everyone does, but… I guess maybe it’s nice not to have to, all the time. At least it looks that way, from the outside.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I thought… I don’t know what I thought.” Yes she does, but she can’t bring herself to say it.
He doesn’t say that he accepts her apology. But then, it’s not a real apology, is it? And in fact, he doesn’t say anything at all. Not for ages.

“I don’t understand what happened. How you saw… anything. Whatever you saw.” He’s making a try for detachment again.

She decides maybe this is best, maybe she should let him. “D’you… d’you want me to tell you what I saw?”

“No. It was the crypts, wasn’t it.”

It’s decidedly not a question. She answers anyway. “Yes.” Such a little word, to encompass all that horror. She still feels sick revulsion twisting up her insides, but she’s no longer sure whether it’s what happened to Burbage, or…”I accused you of terrible things. I’m so sorry. I—I want to say I’d never think… but I said it, I—”

“Just stop.”

“Severus…”

“I mean it. Stop.” He has sagged back, his head fallen against the seat of the sofa. “You were right. I should have done something, I should have been there, should have. Should have. So many should haves.”

She can feel her face burning up, and now she hugs her own knees close, squeezing tight against the miserable wail that wants to fight free of her sternum. He thinks that’s all she accused him of, he doesn’t know what happened in her head, the kind of villain she cast him as. And she can’t seek absolution for these errors, these sins, because confessing to him now would be like shoving a knife into him and—

“Sshhhhh, sshh, Hermione, don’t.”

Oh god, and it’s so wrong that she accepts this comfort she doesn’t deserve, leans into the curve of his body. She clutches at him like something drowning, presses her hands to his face, her lips to his. “Severus. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” As if she can make atonement by these actions? No, what she’s doing is asserting to herself that she wants him, that she is somehow not the person who heaped unspoken vilification on these strong kind hands, on these slowly soothing lips, on this poor broken man who has so little peace to call his own, yet extends it out to her without hesitation.

His voice in her ear is rough: “I think—No, I believe. I have to believe. That some of what we’re feeling, when we’re in someone else’ head, is what they’re feeling. That it’s not just us, not just our own reactions. I have to believe that.”

Something must be short-circuited in her brain, because she can’t seem to wrap her head around what he’s telling her, and why. If what she felt is some echo of what he does, what he thinks…

Does he think of himself as—as a rapist? Or, no, as a willful voyeur of such acts?

Because this is what she’d thought, that he’d stood there watching, complicit in his inaction. “There was nothing you could do,” she tells him, tightening her arms around his torso. “You weren’t even there.”

He doesn’t say anything, just presses his forehead in a little closer. She feels his chin hard against her shoulder.
I have to believe that.

She doesn’t want to think about what these words mean. Wishes he hadn’t said them. There is a quiet desperation there, in the construction of that sentence, which a sane person’s mind would shy away from contemplating. But of course her own worries at it, wonders. “If… if you saw that… if you got it from Mulciber…”

He starts to pull away, but she tightens her grip. I trust you, she wants to tell him, smoothing her hands over his shoulders in long firm strokes. I’m sorry, she longs to say, pushing his hair aside with her chin, to rest her cheek against his. I have to believe that too.

“I don’t know if Riddle ever—I never saw him perform legilimency on anyone else. But Bellatrix Black. Lestrange. She used to—used to,” he swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing against her own neck, “Used to do it for fun, look in people’s heads.”

Fun. She doesn’t think she can even begin to imagine what Bellatrix Lestrange might have considered ‘fun’. “She scared me. Lestrange.”

“That’s right, you would have run across her at the Ministry. And in the battle at Hogwarts, I suppose.”

“And at the Malfoys’. When they caught us, she had me up to the drawing room.”

His reaction is instantaneous, savage. One moment she has his wiry limbs folded against her body, and the next she is pinned back against the sofa cushions, one of his hands shoving her shoulder down, the other tight on her chin. Her first reaction is to squirm, ineffectively, and it costs her precious seconds in which she might have escaped his eyes. They’re boring into hers, glints from reflected streetlights that somehow become candelabra, flickering at regular intervals along the dark hallways, and searing pain along her scalp, because they’re dragging her along by her hair and —

She shuts her eyes, hard. Flails for her wand. But he’s had the same idea, and her scrambling fingers are at war with his; she loses her purchase on the smooth handle, feels him pulling it away, knows that if she risks opening her eyes, she’ll see him swiping it down in familiar arcing paths and any second now he’ll say “Legil—”

“STOP!” She gets a knee between their bodies. “Stop, Severus, you’re hurting me!”

It works. It might even be comic, the way he flings himself back from her, hands raised in a kind of unconscious surrender, wand rolling away across the floor, his eyes huge and frightened. “I have to know,” he pants, “I have to know what she did to you.”

Lestrange.

What does he think she did to people? What does he know she did to people?

“I’ll tell you, you don’t have to look. Severus,” she reaches for him, presses her hands to his shoulders. “Severus, you don’t have to look.”

A hard shudder passes through his body, and she feels him tensing in its wake.

“Cruciatus. And a knife, to my throat first, and then up my thigh. Mostly Cruciatius.”

“And?” He expels the word from between gritted teeth.
“And nothing. That’s what happened. The scarring wasn’t really that bad.” She leans past him, snags her wand back. “Lumos. I’ll show you.”

Her fingers fumble her zip at first. “Look, it’s just here, doesn’t even bother me,” she says to his look of blank incomprehension. As she watches, this expression shifts: His eyes shutter with some kind of grim horror completely out of proportion to the silvered scar that runs nearly up to the gusset of her knickers.

Things in his head.

Things he can’t get rid of.

_Tell me, or I swear by Merlin, I’ll run you right through with this knife!_

She feels a course of pre-nauseous saliva flooding her mouth, because she _knows_, she knows what he’s seen. In Lestrange’s head? Or first-hand? Doesn’t matter.

He rises, stands. Rigid, halting motions. A marionette suspended by unskilled hands.

But it does matter.

She watches him stumble past the staircase, into the yawning darkness of the hall.

It does matter, because if it was inside Lestrange’s head, he must have had some vicarious understanding of what she felt in those moments. Glee, or satisfaction, or…

_I have to believe that._

Fun. Bellatrix Lestrange, having “fun”.

She hugs one of the sofa pillows to her chest and tries very hard not to wonder if he has retreated to the loo. Tries, and fails, not to remember the way he punished himself, the wet sounds of his breathing as he— _I have to believe that_. Because otherwise it’s him, his own reactions, wholly.

It takes a few tries, but she does manage to uncurl her limbs, to stand. Gryffindor courage. Hah.

She almost sobs with relief, that there’s no line of light beneath the bathroom door. Her legs do give out, but there’s no one to see her cowardice, as she crawls the rest of the way, to sit against the wall opposite the archive.

Her legs and feet go numb, long before she finds the courage to rise up from the floor, to try the doorknob. It’s not locked. She doesn’t know whether to be thankful or not, as she stumbles in on pins and needles. And maybe it’s because she’s scrunching her eyes against the pain of nerves coming back to life, that she doesn’t see him at first, huddled in the shadows cast from the archive’s low amber light.

He’s sitting on the floor, much as she has been. White cotton gloves draped lifelessly across his knee. Unfinished painting propped against the shelf opposite.

It’s Eileen of course. Just sepia shadows, but there is no mistaking those piercing eyes. She would recognize those eyes anywhere, because they could only ever belong to two people: the woman who can’t remember, and her son, who cannot forget.
There’s no space that she can share beside him, down here in the corner. She could seat herself out in the light, in the aisle between two shelves of paintings. Or she can do what she’s doing now: stand, awkwardly. Hover. Stare down at the haphazard way his hair parts at the top of his head. There isn’t even a natural way to reach a hand out to rest on his shoulder.

She twists her fingers together instead, and can’t help feeling like a penitent schoolgirl. Waiting.

“You’re a nuisance,” he finally says, puncturing the silence. “Do people tell you that? They ought to. Often.”

“I’m not sure there are enough people who know me that well anymore. To notice that, I mean.” Just you, she doesn’t say.

“Oh. Well you are. Go away,” he adds, as if it’s an afterthought.

“All right,” she says, and sinks to her knees in front of him, intersecting his view of Eileen. She sees, beyond the lank curtain of his hair, that he lifts his eyes to peruse her face, instead. Their eyes connect, but he seems to experience the contact as something jolting; she watches his pupils twitch to the side, away. She feels an unspoken sigh with her entire body, a sudden absence of… purpose? Fear? Perhaps they’re facets of the same thing. Now she does reach a hand, to brush his hair back from his forehead, to tuck it behind his ear. “Alright. I’ll go. If you’ll come with me.”

He doesn’t answer, but his eyes close, and then he slumps in something like defeat, his forehead coming to rest on knees that he draws up to his chest.

There’s room, now, to wriggle in beside him, and she does.

She can lay her arm across his shoulders now, can comb her fingers through his hair. Can pull his face to rest against her bosom, when the tension in his back finally eases and he relents into what she intends as comfort.

It is substantially the same, she thinks, as it was the time before. Except that it’s not cold silty cobbles hurting her tailbone, just hardwood flooring. Not anguish, just stillness. So maybe it’s not the same at all.

And maybe it isn’t comfort, either?

She lays her forehead against the top of his. Her head feels heavy (or maybe it’s her heart), and gravity is winning out. “If I talked. Would that be alright, I mean. Would it help?”

If it helps.

Chapter Notes

So. In January, I started a new job that turns out to have been far more trouble than it’s worth, and has pretty much ruined my desire/ability to write. This is not an excuse, but I hope it serves as an explanation for the hiatus. I’m posting this latest chapter under the proviso that if I ever figure out how to write again, I may edit or rewrite part(s) of it.
“Dunno,” he mumbles into her shirt.

He probably doesn’t. She decides to take it for assent, and not deflection. “In Muggle psychology. They talk about trauma, and how people react to it. There’s this huge body of literature. Post-traumatic stress disorder. I started reading about it. After the war.”

She waits. And he does, too. So eventually she continues: “There’s a whole suite of things that happen to our brains, things that traumatic stress induces – nightmares, and flashbacks, and—”

“I know. I know some of that. But I decided Dune was a healthier body of literature to absorb.”

Ah. “I guess I decided to absorb alchemical theory.”

He shifts a bit, and when he speaks she feels the warmth of his breath across her skin where her shirt has become unbuttoned. “I did that for a while, too.”

A while? Is two decades ‘a while’? Or is she making assumptions? “You’re a natural Legilimens. Harry said Dumbledore said. I don’t really know what that means. What’s the difference? This? The way it sticks with you? Or does that happen with everyone?” She stops short of asking the next question in this queue – has it happened to her, now?

“You’re a persistent kind of creature, aren’t you?”

“We don’t have to talk. I mean, I’d like to know, but we can be quiet together too. Here, for now.”

“Now? Now is the only time we own, you know that. The past is illusion, reconstruction, and the future is hope – neither are real.” He lifts his head away from her torso, but he’s only straightening, not readying himself to rise. She feels him sigh, as he leans his head back, over the arm she hasn’t yet removed from his shoulders. She thinks about now, and about his grasping for the safety of philosophy.

Will he forgive her that she is too raw and exhausted to participate? She has no energy to indulge him in sophistry. She only has blunt certainty left at her disposal: “It is real. Maybe not immediate, maybe not something tangible, but you can’t tell me the past isn’t real for you, Severus. Tonight I saw you, saw the way it traps you, how hard it is for you to fight free of it.”

“…I do, though. I always do.” His voice is very small. “I’m not something broken, something worthless. Or maybe I am, I don’t know. But I manage.”

“I know. I see that, too.”

“I’ve managed for a long time, longer than you’ve even been alive.” A defensive note rising in his voice.

She squeezes his shoulder, but she can’t help feeling it’s inadequate as gestures go.

Bugger this.

He’s not something broken — he’s not going to shatter if she pulls him hard against her, if she pushes a knee over his lap so that she can feel the length of his torso crushed against hers, if she tangles her fingers in his hair and tips his head back to press her lips to his. “I know,” she says between fierce kisses, “I know you’ve managed. But you shouldn’t have had to.”

“You say that like you think life is supposed to be fair.”
“It isn’t. I know it isn’t. That’s why we have to reach for one another, that’s why we have to keep trying to help – because life isn’t fair, and it’s up to us, in our own fumbling, mistake-riddled ways, to help make it a little fairer for each other.” She softens her mouth, deepening this last kiss before whispering her thesis: “To do what we can, to make things a little kinder, for those who have received too little mercy.”

His eyes bore into hers for a long time. She can’t read his expression, can’t decide if the furrow in his brow is disbelief, confusion, or something else entirely.

“Is that what you’re offering, mercy?”

She drops her eyelids. It feels kinder, somehow, than looking away. “No. Not mercy. I don’t think it’s something inside of me to give. But I am offering to be your friend.” She untangles their limbs, and reseats herself beside him. “To sit here with you, and to listen, and to give you a hug. If that’s what you want. If it helps.”

He shakes his head, and his lips curl up in a wry kind of defeat. “I don’t know. That sounds suspiciously like mercy to me.” She feels his arm sneak around her waist, but he also looks away again.

At Eileen.

“I do manage,” he says again. “I interrupt it, shove it away, focus on something that I know is me, is mine.”

“Emotions, you mean.”

“That are my own, yes. That I know are mine.”

“She looks across at Eileen too. She understands, now. Maybe.

“But it’s gotten harder. Because everything’s all flat and empty now. There’s just this mess left behind, this mess I am become. It was never for anything. And I know life isn’t fair, but I think I still want it to balance, somehow. For there to have been meaning to it all, to everything I’ve done, everything I’ve lost or squandered.”

She has no answer for him, but she can fold his hand in her own, and she does.

“I used to use my anger. Rage: bright, hot, bitter, clean. You know, I tossed nearly everything. When they made me rid the place of anything magical. Spinner’s End, I mean.”

“You kept this painting, though.”

“I kept her in my trunk, that last year at school. I’d take her out sometimes, sit there in the dark. Like I used to sit with the Faceless Girl, when I was little. I was so angry. Back then. Because nothing was fair. And stupid me, I thought I could do something about that. I’d sit there in the dark, and make my promises to her, that I’d fix this. Somehow. Or if I couldn’t fix it, then at least I could make a glorious, unholy mess of things, trying.”

“You wanted to tear them down, to see them burning.” Them. An all-encompassing word, but she has her suspicions it needs no further division, needs no proper nouns or categories, no levels of blame, no severities of judgment.

“Pull it all down, set in on fire. Spare no one, no exceptions. …Because no one made any exceptions for me, did they? If they weren’t enemies outright, then it was only a matter of time,
before all the latent hypocrites showed their colours.”

Lily? “Did she know — Evans I mean — about what had happened to your mum?”

She feels him shrug. “I don’t know how she could’ve. We hadn’t said a word to each other for more than a year, by then. Why?”

“I wish… Did you have anyone to talk to?” Anyone apart from Eileen’s unfinished painting?

He doesn’t answer, which is an answer all the same. But then he does, and it’s worse: “Some things had happened to me. Been done to me. I was keeping to myself by then. Because— because…”

She doesn’t want to know because. So it’s a good thing that he’s clenched his jaw against telling her.

“It’s harder now,” he finally whispers. “Because sometimes I think I don’t even remember how to feel properly furious anymore. Where I used to have anger, where I used to be safe, it’s all just flattened out and empty now. Days are, I don’t even know what keeps me upright anymore.”

“Maybe I can. For a while, until you figure it out. Come on, stand up,” she says on impulse, “Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?” But he takes her hand anyway, and submits to being dragged to his feet.

“I don’t know, out. Out there. Somewhere.”

‘Somewhere’ isn’t a long silent walk along the canal of the River Lee, but it might be the cold marble steps of the War Monument in Abney Park, where they eventually fetch up to bear witness to the grey light of another day dawning, life moving on in spite of them.
Dear friends, thank you for having stuck with this. Those of you who know way more about my life than you likely ever wanted to have some sense of what the difficulty has been. I'm sorry. Thank you, to every single one of you who has left me a kind comment over my hiatus -- there have been days when your words have sustained me through more than you can imagine. I cannot convey how much your support has meant to me, and how grateful I am. I'm sorry I haven’t responded to your comments in a timely fashion (I'm going to get busy doing that immediately), but please know that I have been silently cherishing each of them. And it's down to you, Dear Readers, that I'm back working on this. Thank you.

And if you have not yet seen the Absolutely Effing Exquisite Art that MyWitch has created, RUN -- DO NOT WALK to see it here.

But they belong to shadows that the rising sun dispels.

They belong to silence, which is inevitably broken by birdsong.

They belong to the night, to darkness, to sorrow, but it is daytime now, so it is only right that their bitter things be put aside, to haunt them again another time. Or at least this is what Hermione thinks, threading her cold fingers through Severus’. But then, she is not entirely certain that it is so easy to set aside their darkness and their hurts – have they not each of them tried, and each of them failed?

And so instead they flee, seeping back to Hackney Wick, wrapped in tendrils of the enshrouding fog rising off the river Lee.

They have not spoken.

Are they beyond words, or are words merely inadequate, ineffective to convey the things roiling their separate thoughts? Or simply absent, left behind when they donned their coats, forgotten at the doorstep?

She doesn’t know.

She’s tired, and her thoughts have become a morass. She feels somehow out of step with time, reality: the world coming to life around them, in noisy hiccoughs and disjointed bursts of activity, sits oddly against the fey and solemn stillness of the night they have passed through.

It has roused Severus to some level of awareness, though. His eyes have become alert, shed their faraway cloudiness. He is looking now at the graffiti around them, and not at those places in the
past that she cannot [does not want to] see.

She rubs at the sleep-numbness that has taken residence in her face, and tries to follow the lines of his gaze, to share with him at least this final leg of their aimless journey. He seems particularly taken with one work, currently under construction. His head is even cocked, as he surveys the cartoonish purple monsters striding across the brick wall like Godzilla, gnawing with broken teeth at the wobbly silhouettes of skyscrapers, or reaching to pluck motorcars and their screaming stick-figure inhabitants from the two-dimensional roadway. Another is urinating on Parliament, and one is positioned against the Gherkin as if it were a phallus. All of the monsters are festooned in daisy chains, and peonies like botanical illustrations drift down from cartoon clouds.

Or maybe he has been observing the artist, instead. “So this is yours, then,” he says to the woman descending her scaffold.

She peels back her respirator mask to reveal generous lips and crooked teeth. It’s only up close, as they’re standing now, that Hermione can see she’s had bad acne in the past. The scars barely show in her brown skin, and none of it detracts from her blazing eyes. “Sure. I’m having fun with it.” It sounds to Hermione as if the statement is a challenge.

“I can tell.”

The woman shares a smirk with Severus, before turning her firecracker regard upon Hermione. “Are you Cinderella, then?”

“Sorry,” he interrupts, “Apricunt, meet Cinderella. And vice versa, et cetera.”

These are, apparently, vital niceties.

Severus turns to survey the mural again, before offering a bored, casual question which Hermione now intuits has been his primary intent: “How’re you set up these days?”

“Doing alright. Worked my way up to bartender. Weekends, too.”

“Still in the council flat? With your sister, was it?”

“And her kid. He’s out of nappies, now. Screaming bloody terror, he is. They ‘ave this unerring instinct to find the most dangerous thing in a room and run smack at it. How the fuck did we ever evolve, is what I always wonder.”

“A genuine mystery,” he agrees.

Perhaps it’s not to shadows and stillness they belong, after all. Perhaps it is to absurdities. She has never thought of herself as a fixture before, a part of any landscape, but it seems she has at least become affixed to one. “…If I’m Cinderella, who does that make you?” she asks, consideringly, as they walk on through the garish row.

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Prince Charmless.”

It startles a laugh from her, and he seems pleased by it. He even takes her hand again, and of his own volition.

They are once more their daytime-selves. The adult selves, the selves who soldier on, who are firmly planted in the present tense, who only look back to the past as a curiosity or an academic exercise.
“Sickle for your thoughts?” she asks, when the quiet begins to press too close again.

“Do you think you might have a natural talent for legilimency? I’ve been trying to think my way through what went wrong. Yesterday afternoon.”

It was, wasn’t it. It seems to her as if it should have been longer. “It feels like we live whole lifetimes, sometimes. In the space of days or hours.” He nods, but she can see he’s waiting for her to answer his question. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t think so. How do you tell? How did you find out that you were?”

This last question seems to pull him up sharp, or maybe it’s only that they’re passing *BOURGEOIS CUNTS*. “Coffee here, or at home?”

She gives him —them— a look over. His shirt has a conspicuous bloodstain where it peeks from his coat, her denims have a handprint of same, and both of them look exactly like what they are: sleep deprived idiots who’ve been out all night, hanging about in a graveyard. “Home,” she answers. *Home*. She gives his fingers a little squeeze.

“I don’t quite know,” he says at length. But it’s not apropos of nothing, he’s reciprocating by answering one or both of her questions: “Do you ever have a sense, when people are talking, that you don’t understand them? Or that they are using words entirely incorrectly?”

“Umn, like noticing malaprops?”

“No.”

She waits for him to continue, but he’s fallen silent again. She looks away, down, and begins picking at a loose thread in her coat, even as she recognizes this tic for what it is: “Half a lifetime later, and I still feel embarrassed when I get a question wrong.”

“Embarrassed? No, I don’t think you do. My sense of it is… Hmm, diminishment. Not desolation, but approaching in that direction.”

She looks up at him, sharply. “Your sense of it?”

“And now you’re feeling alarmed, apprehensive. And something else, hmn, like last night only not so strong. ‘Violated’ maybe, is that too strong a word?”

She can only gape at him.

“What Dark Arts are these, hey? It’s not mind-reading; relax a little. ‘Sense’ is the right word, it’s just a tickle, a niggle, and only if I know someone well, and only then if I open myself up to it. I usually don’t. Because if I happen to be feeling the same emotions someone else is, well, then I’ll get more.”

“More?” Faintly.

“More of what’s in their heads. Flashes, flickers. Stray thoughts. I don’t like it when it happens. Because then it’s in my head.” And he can’t get rid of it.

“No,” she says slowly, “I think I can confidently say I’ve not experienced anything like that.”

“If you weren’t looking for it, you might never have noticed. You might only think you’re good at reading body language.”
“I’m not, though. I don’t think I am, at least. I’m never sure what you’re thinking, from your body language.” Except, she is. Sometimes. More and more often, but that’s only because she is beginning to understand him, to really know him, not… Surely not? “I really didn’t understand what you were asking me. About using words incorrectly, or whatever.”

“And that’s not quite right, either.” He stares down at his feet for some time, silent, as they continue on to the Hive. “I’ve never… Never thought about how to explain this. Maybe…

…How about: When you have an unshakeable understanding of what a person most wants to convey, but it’s completely at odds with what they’re actually saying.”

“Oh. Like when you’re certain someone’s lying?”

“Not exactly, no. No active intent to practise a deception upon you, but rather, that they’re saying the opposite to what they think.”

“That’s almost too subtle a distinction.”

“Call it a social lie, then. A distortion of outward expression, meant to gloss over a harm that they only wish they could convey without repercussion, but would not actually want to manifest, for fear of same.”

“Example?”

“How often did you tell your husband that you loved him?”

“Umn. Not very. But I tried to. Love him I mean. Or at least, I didn’t despise him, I don’t think, and at most I suppose I was indifferent, but—“

“Another example, then. Had you any friendships that drifted apart? Where you might have wished to be free of the connexion entirely, but you went to excessive effort to assure them how important they were to you? Or the same been done to you?”

Is that quite at random, or is this perhaps Lily Evans again, intruding where she’s not wanted? “I see. I see what you mean. Saying one thing and thinking another.”

“Thinking another, and wanting to say it, but simultaneously knowing they can’t. Have you ever interacted with people, and been… hmm, profoundly?” he nods to himself, happy with this word, “Profoundly aware of that discrepancy?”

Profoundly? No. Quite the opposite: it always took her ages to clue into the fact that people were annoyed with her arm-waving. Amongst other things. She shakes her head. “Why do you ask that, in particular?”

“Because that’s how it was for me. Being so utterly confused by human interactions. Words not seeming to mean anything, because I just knew what people really wanted to say, and it wasn’t what was issuing from their mouths. I don’t think I interacted well at all. Socially. As a young child. Because I didn’t know how to, you understand? Because words didn’t seem to mean things, or they didn’t mean the same things consistently.”

“I think I see what you mean. And no, I don’t think I can be. A natural legilimens. Not like you.”

“No. I didn’t really suppose you were. I never saw any evidence of it. When you were in school, I mean. I suppose I hoped, though, because… But then, Riddle was a natural legilimens, and Dumbledore too, and I know neither of them saw anything I didn’t curate for them.”
“But you never intended for me to see, umn, what I did.”

He sighs. “I may be an absolute sodding idiot, but I like to think I’m not a sociopath.”

“You’re not,” she assures him, firmly. She reaches to give his elbow a squeeze, and he sighs again.

They are arrived home, and it is immediately obvious that further exploration of this topic will have to wait, because Cathy Martin is industriously scrubbing the countertops. She looks like a whirlwind has hit her: no smart blazer or labcoat today, just a man’s faded plaid shirt, pushed to her elbows. Ragged denims that look almost as bad as some of Severus’. Her dreadlocks are roughly bound in a high, lopsided ponytail, into which her glasses are folded. She has possibly perched them there so that she is not hampered, when she pauses in her scrubbing to wipe her streaming eyes against her biceps.

Hermione looks up at Severus. She didn’t think he could look more tired, but he does, suddenly. They watch as Cathy pours another mound of baking soda, moistens her cloth, and rubs furiously at some miniscule spot that has somehow escaped her onslaught.

She does not look up at them, not even once.

Severus shakes his head. A caution? He shrugs a response to her raised eyebrows, hangs his coat, and then motions impatiently for her own. This accomplished, he walks right past Martin as if she’s invisible, and sets about grinding beans for coffee.

Hermione seats herself in her usual spot, at the island, and falls into serious contemplation of a question not dissimilar to the one Severus had put to her earlier. Would you necessarily know if you were awake or dreaming? She is leaning towards ‘no’, when he places a cup of coffee (black, no sugar) in front of her. He sets his own at his side of the island, and then pours a third, to which he adds a generous dollop of heavy cream, a spoonful of sugar, and a brisk shake of cinnamon.

“It’s like house elves,” he says to the refrigerator, as he puts the cream away. He places the coffee in Cathy’s general line of sight, then retreats to hide behind the newspaper he’d snagged from the unwelcome mat on their way in.

The blood in the sitting area is gone, and the coffee table is once more perfectly parallel to the sofa. Maybe whatever Cathy used for the blood is multipurpose. She should ask. Maybe it works to scrub out thoughts, to lift memories before they set in and permanently discolour the fabric of reality.

She looks across at Severus. He flips over to the EU articles and calmly sips his coffee, evidently having decided that everything about this is fine.

Cathy has been quietly deflating, though. Her shoulders are hunched in, even as she reaches to rinse the cloth. She folds it neatly, slowly, and sets it at the side of the sink before finally accepting the mug of coffee. She has the look of some melancholy corvid, Hermione thinks, as she perches herself on the nearest kitchen stool and solemnly addresses her gaze to the floor tiles.

“I won’t ask if you won’t ask,” she says after some long minutes.

“Deal,” Severus agrees, laying aside his paper. “Although I am curious about one thing: why here, why not a cleaning rampage next door?”

She finally looks up, to favour him with an incredulous shake of her head. “I don’t think there’s a person alive with enough repressed rage to make a visible dent over there. At least here it looks
like I’ve accomplished something,” she finishes glumly.

He nods in commiseration. They drink their coffee. He fixes them a second round.

“You know, sometimes I think everyone’s about one step away from being a complete disaster. I think that’s just an existential condition, a natural bent to the way the universe works. Like, probability space is just scattered with random black holes and we’re all skirting event horizons on a day-to-day basis.”

Severus appears to consider this. “Mmm. And spaghettification is that sinking feeling, maybe, when time seems to stretch out just so that you can thoroughly marinate in the knowledge that everything is going completely and utterly to hell.”

“Yeah,” she says agreeably. The nature of the universe thus sorted, she takes a deep swallow of coffee, before asking, “What’s a house elf?”

“Like a hob. Or a kobold.”

“Oh. Must be a northern thing? Hobs are from up north, right?”


“I like them. Those queer old folktales. The ones that grow up out of the ground, and get so embedded in you, you never wonder where they came from, it’s just the sort of thing everyone ‘round you knows. That’s how you know you belong to a place, I think. When you know the stories that live under all the local rocks.”

“Well,” he says gently, “Then you must belong to this place, because you surely know the tales living under Hackney Wick.”

She brightens right up at this. “That’s true enough, I suppose. And perhaps everyone who belongs somewhere brings stories of their own, to add to a place. Like you’ve brought house elves.”

Hermione thinks about the other stories the two of them have brought. Is Hackney any better for having inferi and dementers and werewolves and— “What stories came along with you, Cathy?”

“Oh, I don’t think I have any. It was just Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, growing up. Or, no, wait, I suppose I’ve got my gran’s jumbie-cats. Reckon I saw one a few weeks ago, either that or I was having a seizure or probably I’d just been staring at the computer screen too long with too little sleep and too many energy drinks.”

“Jumbie-cats?” He frowns. Hermione knows where this expression is rooted: there is no such entry in *Fantastic Beasts*, nor in half a dozen other texts in Hogwarts’ zoology section.

“A witch’s cat. Like a familiar, only it’s not really a cat, just something she puts herself into to go wandering about in, setting curses or whatnot. But you only know it’s not a cat when the witch dies. Only sometimes the cat dies first (so I guess they are cats, too? Dunno.) — if the cat dies first, then it’s just this piece of the witch’s soul, lurking around. Can’t get back to her.”

Hermione shifts uneasily. She does not like the idea of bits of disconnected souls. She has met a few too many, living in lockets and cups and the like.

Either Severus has not made this connection, or he is intent on nurturing Martin’s restored humour. “So what are they supposed to look like, just regular cats?”
“I don’t fully know, Gran didn’t really believe it, you know, it was just a scary story to give us all the shivers. When they’re cats, they’re normal. Normal-ish. If you didn’t happen to look too hard. But once they’ve died, then you see them in the corner of your eye, something creeping along or a flicker of something and then you look and there’s nothing there, only you can feel something watching you for a long time afterwards.”

Severus absorbs this without any expression whatsoever, until he finally says, “I don’t think we have anything quite like that. In the stories from up north. Interesting. Can I get you another cup of coffee?”

“No thanks. I should shift for the train. Er, and change first. I’m supposed to be teaching a coding class later this morning, joy.” She washes her mug, returns it to the cupboard, and leaves them to their renewed silence in the spotless kitchen.

Severus has leaned his chin on his open palm. He might be staring out the window, or he might be looking at his plants, or he might have fallen asleep with his eyes open. The only thing she is quite certain of, is that she is not a natural legilimens, because she hasn’t the faintest idea what he might be thinking.

But there’s a solution for that. “Do you want to, umn, to talk about what’s happened. Last night.”

“Why? It doesn’t solve anything, talking. Rigorous experiment has now demonstrated that it only makes things worse.”

He probably doesn’t intend to make her feel so small. She plumbs the depths of whatever stupid Gryffindor resolve she has left, and firmly informs him “That may very well be. Let’s not rule it out entirely though. What say we agree to reconsider the possibility once we’ve gotten some sleep.”

He shrugs affably enough, and follows her up the staircase without further comment.

“My imaginary version of you was a lot easier to live with,” he informs her, as he levers himself beneath the duvet.

“I’ll bet. No shed hair or dirty dishes.”

“You were this bright glittery plaything that I could drag out to imagine theorizing with, or waxing philosophical, or… I don’t know. Someone to keep me thinking, a distraction from having to feel anything too long. Sparkling intellect, witty conversation. Kept the dark away, for a long time.”

It doesn’t strike her as a reproach, just an observation. About how far they’ve come. Or not?

“Imaginary-you fucked me in a lot of really interesting ways,” she offers in return.

Can a shrug feel defeated? “Sorry,” he says.

“It’s okay.” She is not at all sure she’d take him up on it if he offered right now, anyway. But this is not what she says next (later, she will stare up at the iron bars of the skylight and wonder if he knows —senses— this momentary discrepancy). What she says next is “Real-you is a better friend. Even if I do have to feel things and think things and even if I am scared and sad and lost an awful lot, it’s okay, because I know you are too.”

He props himself up on an elbow, to gaze down on her. “Yes. Yes, that’s it exactly.”

“That’s what, exactly?”
The corners of his lips turn up, inexplicably, until that soft, wondering smile — the one from Eileen’s painting — is again living there upon his mouth. “Why I wouldn’t want to exchange the real you for the imaginary one.”

End Notes

Comments, kudos, and recommendations are the Internet’s ‘tip jar’, and in that regard, I’m truly blessed to have such lovely people reading my work – thank you! Parts of this story have been burning me out, but your kindness in leaving me some thoughts makes it worthwhile, and really keeps me going. Please know that I also welcome your constructive criticism, particularly if you find yourself unhappy with this tale. I am very open to hearing if there are ways that this story could have been improved for you.

Works inspired by this one: Artistic endeavours by Grooot, Book Club by MyWitch, Inspired by Inkstains by MyWitch

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!