

Unstoppable

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15749769) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/15749769>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/F , F/M , Multi
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Hermione Granger/Severus Snape , Pansy Parkinson/Percy Weasley , Millicent Bulstrode/Daphne Greengrass , Antonin Dolohov/Hermione Granger , Draco Malfoy/Ginny Weasley , Daphne Greengrass/Pansy Parkinson , Lavender Brown/Neville Longbottom
Characters:	Hermione Granger , Ginny Weasley , Lavender Brown , Pansy Parkinson , Parvati Patil , Padma Patil , Daphne Greengrass , Susan Bones , Severus Snape , Draco Malfoy , Blaise Zabini , Percy Weasley , Ron Weasley , Harry Potter , Vincent Crabbe , Gregory Goyle , Nymphadora Tonks , Marcus Flint , Minerva McGonagall , Pomona Sprout , Rolanda Hooch , Aurora Sinistra , Millicent Bulstrode , Scabior (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Regency , Angst and Fluff and Smut , Shameless Smut , Prostitution , Smuggling , Criminal Masterminds , Criminal Underground , Assassination , Violence , courting , Alternate Universe , Other Additional Tags to Be Added , Feminist Themes , Girl Power , OOC in places , Casual Sex , Explicit Sexual Content , Mild Weasley Bashing , Turf War , brothel , Implied/Referenced Drug Use , Recreational Drug Use
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2018-08-21 Updated: 2020-07-11 Words: 22,442 Chapters: 7/?

Unstoppable

by [EliMorgan](#)

Summary

Ginny Weasley, youngest of seven and the only girl, was never expected to amount to much. Rebellion was all she had. The staff of Hogwarts Ladies Seminary despair of her ever learning to be a proper lady, and instead make her the next best thing, by sending her off to London to join The Harem, a notorious East End gang led by one Hermione Granger, infamous outcast of polite society. There, she learns how to take fate into her own hands, alongside a group of other young women Society has no time for.

Sort-of Regency!AU, following Hermione, Ginny and friends as they, with the help of their favourite professors, attempt to change the Wizarding World into something they can live with following the war. Politics? What politics?

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the works made use of herein, none of the Harry Potter features or characters belong to me. I make no money from this work. (Basically, if you recognise it, it's not mine.)

Hi!

A new story in which I practise writing smut, romance and anything else I fancy popping in there. Feminist themes, but also mildly problematic stuff that tips it more towards a straightforward Girl Power! story. We here subscribe to the old feminist slogan - you know, women can do anything men can do, except we're wearing corsets. Grey!magic, with somewhat muddled morality. The timing is non-specific early Regency, probably littered with errors because it's my first time writing this sort of thing, but hopefully we'll get better as we go on.

Readers of Iacta will doubtless enjoy the same chaotic melding of multiple character viewpoints and romances (here, I consider the SSLB following that fic has generated and wonder what I can do with this one to get the same love...)

We ostensibly follow Ginny and Hermione, but also the viewpoint of the other six girls, because I love my side-characters. This should include Parvati, Padma, Lavender, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones and Pansy Parkinson (and a bit of Tonks, I reckon).

Not sure on updates as yet, but we'll get there, I hope.

Thank-you for taking a chance on my tale!

Love always,
Eliza x

One: London Calling

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." — Eleanor Roosevelt

“London?” Ginny felt faint. She, who never felt even the slightest dizzy, was proud to never have needed smelling salts and could swear like a sailor to boot, was feeling *faint*.

Headmistress McGonagall’s eyes were faintly kind as she contemplated her across the table. Ginny had been a pain of a student, she knew that, but she’d also thought that the staff had soft spots for her. At the very least, Headmistress McGonagall, whom she had seen so much during her time at Hogwarts that their relationship rivalled the one she had with her own mother. But now she was saying this, this ridiculous thing, in that implacable voice...

“I can’t go to London,” Ginny said, fighting to keep her voice level. “I’m not out, and I’m not ready to be. My mother would have a fit.”

“Your mother has been notified that you will be apprenticing beneath a respectable Potions Master and will have no need for a season, though doubtless she will provide one should you wish.” The Headmistress peered at Ginny through her glasses, solemn as ever. “I was under the impression you did not want a season. Isn’t that what all of this fuss is about?”

She clamped her lips together so that she wouldn’t cry. Of course her teachers would see it like that, *of course*. She’d been acting up for seven years straight, what else could she expect? It wasn’t like she’d let anybody close enough to learn the real reason she despised this school, the syllabus, the vapid little parasites she’d been rooming with who didn’t understand why they were forced to attend Charms and Defense classes, pared down though the subject matter was for their delicate female minds, when in a few years they’d have husbands to do all of that for them. “I’m abominable at Potions,” she pointed out instead, forcing the words past the tightness in her throat. “Healer Pomfrey says so almost every week.”

The Headmistress fluttered her fingers in dismissal. “As you will not truly be apprenticing there, it is of little consequence. I am sending you to a group of young women who may be able to help you - in fact, may be your saving grace. Should this... placement... work out satisfactorily, you shan’t need to graduate, nor will you need a husband.”

Foreboding stirred in her stomach, hurt knifing through her chest. She chose to focus on the latter, as the former scared her. “You’re expelling me?” she whispered in disbelief.

McGonagall shot her an irritable look. “Certainly not. I have not worked so hard these past years to shape you up to give up on you now. We are simply opening different avenues, as we did for these other women. They needed it just as much, and there’s no shame in it.”

“But what is it? *Who* is it?” Ginny asked, increasingly desperate. It was too good to be true, wasn’t it? She didn’t want to turn up in London and find she had been betrayed, as much as she couldn’t imagine that situation.

“Tell me, Miss Weasley,” McGonagall murmured, pressing her hands together atop the desk, as if she was trying not to fidget. “Have you ever heard of ‘The Harem’?”

A ridiculous question to top off a ridiculous night. Had she heard of The Harem? Who *hadn’t* heard of them?

Two years ago, Wizarding Britain had been in the midst of a nightmare, courtesy of one Lord Voldemort.

It is a well known fact that purebloods are both possessive and covetous of titles, and have been since the first Black was made Duke of Wye Valley by a confuted King Henry VIII (which explained a fair bit, too). They kept their claws dug into them long after the title dropped from relevance, no matter who they have to endow to keep it (see: Lord Seamus Finnegan, Irish third-cousin to the late Earl of Rilltree, from the feminine line, who found himself halfway through his schooling dragged to England and lumbered with a crumbling estate, even though he was both a half-blood with no tangible connection to the aristocracy and had been dragged up on a potato farm). Bearing in mind this obsession with the aristocracy, it came as quite the shock when they all seemed quite enchanted by this interloper, and teamed up behind his blood purity principles. Truly, even in France there had never been a Lord Voldemort, and Merlin knew that before the revolt they’d been willing to title just about anyone.

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Lord Voldemort seemed quite reasonable at first, all pleasant politics and pretty speeches, until he’d taken a turn towards the murderous.

He and his moneyed followers, catchily monikered ‘Death Eaters’, arbitrarily determined that ruling half the country was not enough, and, three years back, decided they’d quite like the rest of it, too. They aimed to claim it through killing and torture, and nobody was safe. Ginny knew this personally, having lost a family member to them; Frederick, her delightful, mischievous brother.

Luckily, the Fates had designated a Saviour: Lord Harry James Potter, an orphan boy raised by Muggles. Ginny had known him, which was her claim to fame among the girls at school - he’d chosen her closest brother, Ronald, as his best friend, and so spent plenty of time at their house.

After a few years of horror and fear, two years ago Lord Potter came along and stopped the fighting by destroying Lord Voldemort in spectacular fashion, returning them all to safety.

Or, relative safety, as Lord Voldemort’s unlamented demise left the Wizarding world in upheaval, with nobody knowing quite what to do. Lord Voldemort and his followers had run brothels and drug circles, opium dens and smuggling rings, all of which collapsed in the

aftermath, leaving a vacuum of vices. From this emptiness emerged The Harem, to save the morally corrupt from boredom.

They snagged up the brothels and cleaned up the girls, freeing the captured and forcing the Ministry to pay compensation for what they'd suffered. They closed the drug circles down *hard*, booting the members directly into Azkaban. People began to worry about their smuggling operations, except they were left free, with The Harem taking up the reins and minimising what had previously been a great deal of bloodshed. By now, the Harem ran the East End, both Muggle and Wizarding, with clean brothels, gambling hells and opium dens, all of which now had never-before-seen safety nets, preventing one from losing too much money unless you were quite able to do so, or overdosing on their drugs.

Of course, people slipped through. Now, however, the people who slipped through seemed awful, as opposed to simply poor - serial rapist and notorious werewolf Fenrir Greyback, whom most had thought to be immortal, had been found dead in their premier opium house, ostensibly of an overdose; only one of many horrors that had met their end there. It was a wonder they still attended.

That Headmistress McGonagall was sending Ginny to *join* this infamous gang was a mystery; the fact that she was, both terrifying and flattering. She wasn't even certain what this group might want with a girl like her - she had no demonstrable skills except a knack for developing hexes, and she wasn't what one would call pretty, either. In fact, in a charitable moment, her roommates had described her as 'fierce', comparing her to the warrior of old, Esmerelda the Enchantress. Still, no man wished to marry 'fierce', as Ginny well knew.

Another thing to thank Lord Potter for.

The older woman had refused to give any further explanation than a recap of the Harem's deeds and had simply packed her off into a carriage as soon as she found it possible. Even pulled by Thestrals through the clouds, the trip would take at least two days; plenty of time to theorise on her own.

In her wildest fantasies, Ginny thought they might want her as their own personal spellcrafter, making bespoke hexes for the leader of the gang. Or perhaps an assassin. She could do assassin, she thought; sneaking through the shadows, across rooftops to bring justice to criminals.

In her most realistic moments, she brooded on the fact that she was likely about to become a prostitute.

Not that even that seemed plausible; she would be staying at her brother Percy's house while she was there, and she doubted Percy would miss her sneaking out at all hours to be a fallen woman. He could probably sniff one out a mile away, actually, so any subterfuge wouldn't last long. And, anyway, didn't prostitutes live in brothels, rather than fashionable houses just off the park?

None of this made any sense.

It didn't help that she felt queasy and panicked the further she got from Hogwarts and all that was familiar. Even flying over the county her family lived in didn't help - she'd not been home since the summer prior, and even then it hadn't felt overly much like home. Since Fred's death, a pall had hung over her cheerful childhood home, and being there had been worse than the cool, strictness of Hogwarts. When she'd originally been sent to the Seminary, it had been like a betrayal - all of her brothers had gone to its twin, Hogwarts School of Wizardry in Scotland, which she heard was grand and fun and dangerous and beautiful. Hogwarts Ladies Seminary, by comparison, was set up in a manor house somewhere in Northumberland as a sort of experiment, separating the lesser women from the men who could do 'real' magic, and was *awful*, despite all of Headmistress McGonagall's attempts to make it somewhere worth being. So, yes, more gaol than school, she'd loathed it until Fred had died and her mother had tried to keep her back: then, she'd craved it, if only for the lack of guilt and misery. She'd spent the last two years cozy there, without much thought to leaving, and now the Headmistress had cut the apron strings in a brutal fashion.

And to add insult to injury, she'd done it while forcing her to live with *Percy*.

It bore repeating.

They, which is to say, Ginny; her maid, Geria; a footman and the coachman, inventively named Bert, rolled into London early Tuesday evening. Bert took a moment to glamour the Thestrals before they hit the streets, but it didn't matter, for nobody noticed them among a crush of others.

Ginny peered out the window to watch the world pass, finding herself less and less enamoured with London for every minute they dallied there. The roads, which she'd expected to be beautifully paved or at least cobbled, were in some places simply boarded up to cover pots and cracks, preventing poor horses from breaking their necks but doing nothing for the aesthetics. The waning sun gave an ethereal glow to the newer houses they passed, but the old ones glowered and groaned, the light emphasising their imperfections, letting them list as if too tired to go on. This, in the more affluent areas; the poorer hardly bore contemplating.

Percy rented a small townhouse in a muggle area, the exchange rate from galleons to pounds extremely favorable that year (or so he informed her later, to her extreme boredom). He had some fancy job serving just beneath the minister, promoted immediately after the war's end, and was truly, insufferably proud of himself. Ginny loved her brothers but made no pretense of loving them all *equally*; Percy was, perhaps, second lowest on her list.

Still, he was terribly happy to see her.

"Ginevra!" He smiled at her from the doorway, lifting his arms as if to embrace her, then seemed to think better of it and dropped them in favour of chucking her on the cheek like a child. "How was the trip? Not too uncomfortable, I hope. Ah, Roberts, please take the suitcases to the guest room, and acquaint - Geria, is it? - with her quarters. Come in, Ginny, please, it's quite cold outside and I shouldn't like you to catch a chill."

She was led into a hallway decorated with such oppressive masculinity that Ginny was hard-pressed to imagine her brother living here, never mind herself. The walls were dark wood and even darker papering, with a mist-glass chandelier dappling the room in cloudy candlelight.

Portraits of previous Ministers took the traditional place of family members; presumably because the tone of their red hair would unaccountably damage the colour scheme. Roberts, the butler, seemed solemn and unbending, eyeing her with concealed distaste. Ginny couldn't imagine what the servant had been told about his master's rebellious, too-boyish sister, but the unfavourable impression he'd been left with seemed compounded by her state of dress - a dark blue dress her mother had altered from one of her own, showing signs of wear, with a bonnet she'd discovered crumpled and flat beneath her bed at Hogwarts the day they'd left.

"We'll have to take you shopping," Percy said critically, apparently realising the same thing. She grimaced at the very thought. "You look like a widow rather than a girl."

"I don't mind," she demurred politely. "It sounds as though I'll be spending most of my time in a lab, new dresses would be a waste."

Percy tutted as he waved her through into a parlour and dropped her reticule on a chair. "I simply cannot have my little sister running about London in hand-me-downs. No, don't argue - we shall go and see Madam Malkin at first opportunity. Once you are appropriately attired, we can discuss your misguided belief about your Apprenticeship - to wit, that you shall be spending all of your time there. I understand that you are not yet 'out', and so cannot enjoy many of the occupations of a young lady your age, but as my sister you will be faced with a host of social obligations. Don't worry," he reassured her, mistaking the horror on her face for anxiety, "we'll ensure you're properly prepared so as not to embarrass yourself, or I."

"Thank you?" Ginny said, remembering all of a sudden how she, Fred and George used to snicker and refer to him as 'Pompous Percy'. How little some things changed.

"Now," Percy slapped both of his palms down on his thighs, a gesture that might have looked in place on a larger, older man - like, perhaps, Minister Shacklebolt - yet on Percy only drew attention to his stick-thin legs. "Master Snape has kindly arranged for a chaperone to escort you to and from your sessions with him, with the promise that a second chaperone will be present indoors. Ginny, I really must insist that you be kind to these chaperones, especially the first. I hear you'll be sharing her with Lady Pansy, and you know how connected she is. If any misdeeds of yours reach her ears..."

Percy gave a significant look that had her choking down a snort of disbelief. Not only was he making Ginny sound like a holy horror, which she was *not*, but he made Lady Pansy Parkinson sound like a Saint, which she most certainly was not! Ginny would know - Pansy had been two years above her at school, and she still remembered how Pansy's laugh bounced off the wall as she found joy in other students' misfortune. She was part of a graduating class that Headmistress McGonagall not so secretly feared was a write-off: seven girls, each and every one of them rebels, genuine rebels in a way Ginny with her paltry pranks and small diversions from the norm could only wish to be.

Still, Percy was taking her in when it would have been much easier to throw her to the wolves, so she prevented herself from saying any of this. Let him have his fantasies; it wasn't as though Lady Pansy's peculiarities would ever be relevant to his life.

"The lady will be here to pick you up at dawn to escort you to Master Snape. With that and your journey in mind, perhaps you would like to retire early, this evening?"

“Ye-es...” Ginny nodded, grateful for the excuse. “I think I shall. Thank you, Percy.” She pushed all of her gratitude into those words, giving them much deeper meaning than the superficial.

Her brother flushed slightly, his ears tinging red in the Weasley manner. “Well, of course. You *are* my sister, Ginevra. I will always be here for you, should you need me.”

Dawn crept in so quickly that Ginny felt she'd barely slept before she was groggily standing before her mirror, watching Geria lace up her stays. It was still a novelty, having a maid; back home they simply had a single house-elf and their mother, with the chores evened out over the family. Geria was a donation from the Headmistress, who'd refused to send Ginny to London without one. She was a quiet girl but trustworthy, hired from a local village more for her discretion than her skills with a toilette.

“Nervous, mum?” Geria asked now as her fingers busily plucked at a knot she'd managed to make in the strings.

“No,” Ginny lied. She'd slept well enough, but woken with a horde of butterflies in her stomach that wouldn't quit.

“I'd be nervous,” Geria told her with a sympathetic pat that said she'd seen right through her. “*The Harem*. I mean, even we've heard of them, and it's only the rich ‘uns that ever go to London from there. They say nobody has ever seen the leader, you know, only his wives, and he has so many of them that nobody knows what the number is. They swish about in cloaks the colour of jewels, covered from head to toe like those heathens in the east.”

Geria's voice was wistful, almost worshipful. A muggle raised to serve the magical world, one would think she'd have enough mystery in her life as it was, but it seemed even she couldn't resist the lure of the criminal underworld.

“Promise you'll tell me about him, mum? When you meet him? There's some who say he's as handsome as he is wicked, and others who suppose he's an ugly bas- err. Not good looking, so he has to wear a mask. I think he must be right pretty, though, to have so many wives. Ways I see it, an ugly man can only have one or two.”

Ginny rolled her eyes to herself. Such logic. “I promise,” she said anyway. If he was as terrifying as he was reputed to be, no doubt she'd need to speak with *someone* about him, and the ‘girls’ McGonagall was sending her to were hardly likely to provide a sympathetic ear. Geria grinned brightly, satisfied with this, and helped her struggle into her best dress, quite possibly the only white thing she owned that wasn't covered in grass stains or blighted by torn hems.

Downstairs, Ginny stuffed a pair of scones in her mouth at high speed as Percy flit from window to window, watching for the carriage that would signal her chaperone's arrival. Why this chaperone was so important to him, she couldn't possibly tell, but he was wringing his hands like a nutter as they waited. They made sparing small talk, Percy too distracted to say

much and Ginny too nauseous to do more than pray that the stodgy-ness of the scones soaked up the roiling before she vomited all over someone's shoes.

Finally, a half-hour after dawn, someone clanked the knocker loudly against the door and Percy shot out of his seat. Ginny stood slower, listening to the sounds of Roberts opening the door a room away, murmuring to whomever was on the doorstep, and then the pair of them plodding towards their room.

"Miss Nymphadora Tonks, to collect Miss Ginevra, sir," Roberts said stiffly, his face so severely tight that Ginny was concerned he was about to have apoplexy. The reason for his manner became quickly apparent when Miss Tonks swept into the room.

"Wotcha, Perce," trilled a young woman, perhaps six or seven years older than Ginny herself. At first, Ginny thought she was wearing an odd, elongated bonnet of bold puce; some minutes later, however, it became apparent that the violent colour was, in fact, the woman's own hair. Ginny gaped at it, barely noticing the elfin-featured woman beneath as she shook - *shook* - Percy's hand energetically. "Been a long time, I reckon. What, five years? Look at you, barely changed at all! How's Charlie?"

Percy appeared to have lost all ability to speak, staring at the newcomer with a face emptied of colour. "Miss- Miss Tonks, yes, hello..." he crumpled his brow in consternation. "I didn't - that is to say... we don't have time for visits this morning, I'm afraid. My sister is going to be picked up any moment for her new apprenticeship..."

"Yep, I know," Miss Tonks grinned, turning to Ginny. "That'd be me, it would. Here to take you to your.... *Apprenticeship*," she embroidered that word with an unsubtle wink. "Lady Pansy offered me up to you - nicest thing she's done all year, honest. One's got to wonder what's in it for her." Another wink, even more significantly emphasised, this time. Suddenly, with a shattering sense of her own idiocy, Ginny recognised her - Nymphadora Tonks, disgraced grandchild of Druella and Cygnus Black, whose middle daughter had run off with a muggle-born shopkeep. Nymphadora, to add insult to injury, had been born a metamorphmagus - a condition which would have been highly prized in a pureblood, but in a half-blood? Shameful.

Miss Tonks had visited the Burrow once or twice when Ginny had been a small child, always hanging about her second-oldest brother, Charlie; throwing gnomes, playing Quidditch and generally eschewing all convention.

"Miss Tonks," she said, offering a hand for her to shake, since she seemed so fond of the action. "I'm so sorry, I didn't recognise you."

"Tonks, please," she replied, still smiling madly. "I wouldn't have recognised you, either, what with you having grown up and all. Last time I saw you you were nibbling at my ankles!"

Ignoring Ginny's snort and Percy's gasp of shock at her behaviour, Tonks grabbed onto Ginny's arm and began steering her out of the room. "Can't chat, sorry! We're late, and Master Snape is a right old git. He'll have my head if I'm not there," she wrinkled her nose

with a quick glance at the mantelpiece clock, “well, right now, actually. See you soon, Perce!”

They were in the carriage in no time, Tonks kicking the ceiling (a convoluted system that required her to lie on her back and flail her legs outrageously in the air) to get the carriage moving at a fast clip. “You ready for this?” she asked Ginny once the sound of hooves striking the ground drowned out outside noise.

Ginny nodded, unsure if she’d be able to lie effectively should she open her mouth.

“Good, good. They’re not as bad as they sound, honest. I mean, I like ‘em all well enough, but I like everyone. I don’t reckon they’ll kill you, though - bad for business.” Tonks burst out laughing when Ginny blanched. “Kidding, kidding! Gods, just look at them like that and you’ll do great, fit right in.”

She wasn’t sure if that was meant to be a compliment or not.

They were driven into the depths of London, middle-class housing dropping away to teetering slums, chandleries and the pervasive stench of sewage. Tonks didn’t seem bothered at all, still laid on her back, reading some book about - Ginny tilted her head - *Investigative Practices of The Intrepid Auror*. Ginny, on the other hand, was used to riding on horseback, or walking, and so found herself fighting off continual bouts of travel sickness. That she did not, at any point, *actually* vomit felt like an accomplishment by the time they slid into an alleyway, Tonks pulling her out one side of the still-moving carriage and directly into another, gloomier one as it pulled alongside. Ginny was still gaping at the swift change when the new carriage, this one cheaper and smelling somewhat of pipe smoke, rattled back onto the street from whence they’d come.

“What?” she finally asked Tonks, who’d snuggled back into the opposite seat, completely unbothered. *She wouldn’t be, would she?* Ginny reminded herself sardonically. *She’s the one who bloody did it!*

“Can’t exactly have aristo carriages tottering up to the house all day, can we?” Tonks said, flipping a page. “Don’t worry - he’ll pick up someone of about your size and shape in the next street, give them a quick ride down to Master Snape’s apothecary. No doubt he’ll love having someone new and innocent to lambast.”

“You could have warned me!” Ginny spluttered, fire shooting through her veins as she remembered the gap between the carriages where she could easily have fallen and broken her neck, or the fact that if they’d been one second later she’d have found herself beneath the horses, instead.

“And give you time to panic? No, thank-you. Learned my lesson with Lady Pansy, I did.” Tonks shuddered dramatically. “That girl can *scream*.” Again, not bothering to notice Ginny’s growing ire, nor how the other girl was suddenly doubting her role as ‘chaperone’ (because she was quite sure chaperones did not pull off moves straight out of adventure

novels without even a yelp), she peered out of the window and gave a satisfied smile. “Here we are, then. Leave the- whatever that is,” she gestured at Ginny’s reticule, which contained the letters of recommendation McGonagall and her staff had written her, “here. You won’t need it.”

With that, Tonks flung open the door of the (*still-moving!*) carriage and hopped down, gesturing impatiently for Ginny to follow, which she did, managing not to twist an ankle only through years of illicit Quidditch training. The carriage tumbled off into the distance, leaving them stood before a row of tumble-down houses. The streets outside were suspiciously clear for being in such a poor area so early in the morning, and the houses themselves looked deserted. This didn’t stop Tonks from marching up to a ratty wooden door and pounding on it three times.

Ginny had only just caught up when the door was flung open by a pudgy bloke in a badly tailored set of robes, who scowled out into the street before catching Tonks’ eye, at which point he melted. *Melted*. This big tough, his face softening into an expression Ginny could only describe as worshipful upon seeing her tiny figure. “Miss Tonks,” he rumbled.

“All right, Flint? Is the big man in? Got ‘em a present.”

“Aye, Miss. In the library.” At this, both rolled their eyes.

“Should have guessed. Thanks.” Tonks waved Ginny through - an effort, given they had to squeeze past Flint’s massive form, which Ginny could have sworn he placed purposefully in the centre of the frame so that he could feel Tonks shove past him. Tonks didn’t appear to notice, striding purposefully into a -

A corridor with beautifully gilded walls, with marble flooring and expensive-looking figurines and statues stashed in crevices along the walls. It spanned the length of the house, archways leading off into sumptuous looking waiting rooms, with a pair of exquisitely carved double doors at one end. “Audience chamber,” Tonks explained, waving at them briefly as they mounted a polished staircase. “For the general public.”

Portraits of women and men in fancy clothes from eras past lined the walls, muttering amongst themselves as they passed, up one floor and then the next. As they went, Tonks nattered on. “This is the main house,” she said, gesturing about them. “Here they do their counting and plotting, and receive visitors, and some of the upper-level members live upstairs, too. A few doors down some of the houses have been knocked together to make the main brothel - you should see the street on a Wednesday, about two, when the men have left Almack’s. Barely room to breathe. On the other side you’ve got the private stuff - labs, treasure houses. The Opium happens elsewhere, and they’ve got a few warehouses on the docks, too.” Tonks paused in the hall on the top floor, turning to Ginny with a solemn look in her eye. “It’s a big operation. Important. I’m proud of what we do here, and so should you be. It’s an honour to be involved.”

An honour? Really? Ginny didn’t huff her disbelief aloud, but Tonks must have seen it in her face, for she got a gleam in her eye that could mean nothing good. “You don’t know nothing about anything yet, Miss Weasley,” Tonks reminded her with a steely hint to her voice.

“You’re right,” Ginny allowed. She had severe misgivings, though. What was she getting herself into? This place looked like Croesus’s house, and that sort of wealth never came from anything good. *Never* .

Tonks made a little harrumphing noise but continued on until they came to a plain door made of fine wood. “Now you be respectful,” she warned, as if Ginny could possibly be anything else, not when her life could feasibly depend on this moment. She turned the knob and pushed the door open, pulling Ginny through with an arm through hers. “Miss Ginevra Weasley, might I present, Master Gold, the leader of the Harem.”

At first, all she saw was a slight figure, their face hidden behind a book. Then, as they lowered the tome, a few disparate details filtered through: mad, bushy hair left loose and springy like a lion’s mane. Elegant, delicate cheekbones. Thick, dark eyelashes surrounding brown eyes, which watched her with an uneasy, nervous expression.

The dress, denoting her gender.

“Ginny,” Master Gold said, getting to her feet with a shy smile. “It’s been a while.”

Through a dizzy haze, Ginny clutched at Tonk’s arm so tight it was bound to bruise. “Merlin’s beard,” she gasped, choking the words out. “That’s *Hermione Granger*.”

And then, embarrassingly, Ginny felt herself succumb to a fit of the vapours, toppling to the ground with Hermione’s familiar stricken face the last thing she saw.

Two: Of Councils and Meetings

Chapter Notes

Hi!

Okay, re-ordering chapters, in which this chapter becomes the second chapter.

Enjoy!

Eliza x

The Evening Before

“ *Yes, yes, yes, yes, YES!* ”

“Lady Pansy?!” A voice called from the hall.

“No, no, no!” Pansy tried frantically to recapture her pace, using the palms of her hands to hold the bloke's shoulder's to the bed. He groaned, a sound that sent a frisson of disappointment through her, because she just knew - just *knew* - he was about to release. Cursing her chaperone to Hades and back, she prayed for just a few more minutes, grinding her hips violently down as she chased that elusive spark.

“Oh, oh -” the man underneath her gasped, his hands clawing at her hips as he thrust up into her. Pansy prevented herself from clamping her hands over his mouth to stop him uttering such off-putting sounds, but only because she might lose her place and even then only by a hair.

“ *Shush,* ” she commanded him, reaching down with one hand to pluck at her clit, desperate now for release. Her partner's eyes darkened at her order, his hips pummelling ever harder, impressive with his lack of mobility. His cock, which, if she was honest, was the only reason she was here, tunnelled deeper than ever, dragging against a newly discovered spot that had Pansy *gasping* in delight. She threw herself into the movements, digging her nails into his shoulders until he bled, urging him on with violent slams of her hips until-

Oh, yes. She toppled over the edge like a stone, her channel clamping on and strangling his cock, milking him of everything he had. Pansy fell to his chest with a wet slap of sweat-soaked skin against sweat-soaked skin, sighing with pleasure.

“Lady Pansy!” her chaperone shrieked, now right outside the door. Pansy rolled her eyes, sitting up lazily and allowing his cock to slide from her, patting him on the chest when he pouted.

“Very good, Mr. McMillan,” she said politely, lifting herself from the bed and snatching up her chemise.

Mr. McMillan, or, Ernie, she supposed, if she wanted anything to do with him outside of the bedchamber, which she most certainly did not, propped himself up on his elbows, a position that did not show him off to his best advantage. He was no Adonis, was Ernie. Didn't have much of an estate, either. In short, in no way was he eligible for Pansy's hand in marriage, aside from the pleasing fact that he was hung like one of her father's stallions. That was how she liked her men, however - supremely unmarriageable, that was, but well-endowed helped. That way, when she told them to piss off, there were no hurt feelings, sobbed declarations of love, or, *shudder*, proposals of marriage.

She eyed Ernie for a moment. He *was* looking a trifle... *proposey*. Better nip that in the bud.

Striding over to the door, she flung it open to reveal her chaperone - the worst chaperone in the world, hence why she'd hired her - Miss Nymphadora Tonks. Miss Tonks was the outcome of an unwise liaison between Lady Andromeda Black, the prized daughter of a Duke, and a shopkeep named, of all things, *Ted*.

Shudder.

Still, Miss Tonks had been raised to believe she could be whatever she wanted to be, and due to that patented untruth, the girl had become a holy horror, fighting men and demanding to be let into the Aurors (a demand that was rebuffed due to her inconvenient possession of a vagina). Now, she sold her services as a bodyguard instead, for which Pansy had hired her at a reasonable price.

"Lady Pansy," Tonks, as she wished to be called, sighed in apparent relief. A born liar, the woman was a gem. "Sorry to interrupt, mum, but your pa's just come back from his ride."

Back in the bed, McMillan bolted upright with a speed such as Pansy had never seen outside of the races. It seemed he wasn't as keen to wed her as she'd thought. Oh, well. All to the good, for her.

"Oh, no," Pansy exclaimed, harnessing all of her thespian talent. "Quick, Mr. McMillan! If he finds you here, who knows what he'll do!"

Truly, she should have been an actress.

Pale as snow, Ernie hopped from the bed and yanked his breeches up his legs, trying to throw his shirt on in the same movement. "Lady Pansy," he gasped as he did so. "Might I call on you in the morn'?"

Impressive that he could think of courtship at a time like this. Pansy decided to throw him a bone. "Why, of course," she said benevolently, tossing his waistcoat across the bed into his arms. "I'm sure by that time my father will be feeling much less murderous."

Blanching, Ernie looked to the window as if he were seriously considering tossing himself out. Since crushed aristocrat wasn't the aesthetic she was going for out there, she turned to Tonks with a significant look. "Miss Tonks, perhaps you could take Mr. McMillan out through the kitchen into the alley? And have Hamish send his driver around back, too, won't you?"

“Yes, my lady,” Tonks winked and dropped into a curtsy, then latched onto Ernie’s half-clad arm. “Come along, mate, we don’t have all day.”

Ernie barely had a moment to appreciate the novelty of a chaperone who assisted in one’s indiscretions before he was whipped down the hall and out of sight. Pansy, now alone, leisurely dressed herself, correcting her hair with a few quick charms, and headed downstairs for a late breakfast.

“Finally got rid of him, then?” Her father, Lord Pirineus Parkinson, scowled sourly from the head of the dining table, where a footman was serving him - oh, darn, it appeared to be supper. She’d lost track of time, *again*.

“Good evening, papa,” Pansy trilled, taking a seat halfway down the table. It appeared her mother wouldn’t be joining them this evening, which was no surprise. She spent more time out than she did at home, these days, fleeing the shame of a blue-blooded husband who gambled away his living and now dabbled in commerce, and a daughter who simply refused to marry. “Good day at the docks, was it?”

“Your mother was right,” Lord Parkinson growled, skewering some sort of fish on his fork. “We should have sent you to a convent rather than that dirty liberal school. You certainly weren’t this disgraceful when you left.”

“Since I left when I was eleven, I’d wager you’re correct,” Pansy said idly, nibbling on a slice of bread. She neglected to tell him that *he* certainly hadn’t been this awful when she’d left; before Hogwarts, he’d been a jovial and adoring father. Since he’d started his import business, however, he’d gotten more grumpy by the day. “You would never have sent me to a convent, though. Filthy muggle things.”

He shot her a dark look. “I suppose you’ll be sneaking off again tonight? Seeing more of your admirers?”

Pansy raised a perfectly proper eyebrow. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” she replied primly. “I’ll be in my own bed, all night, like a responsible young debutant. Indeed, I think I’ll go now.”

Without subtlety, she packed some meat and bread into a napkin and swanned from the room, shedding the bleak mood like water. Tonks waited in the hall, chomping on a sticky bun.

“Alright, mum?”

“Please stop calling me that,” Pansy shuddered. “It’s so common.”

“Common as muck, like Grandma says,” Tonks said cheerfully, pushing open the door.

No carriage was waiting for her, for that would be ridiculous. What if the neighbours saw? Instead, Tonks and she crossed to a bush and cast Disillusionment charms on their cloaks, which, in combination with the darkness of a London night, would keep them hidden from prying eyes. From there, they set off down towards the East.

It was a long walk, but cool, and Tonks was good company. They couldn't talk, not while disillusioned, but the silence was comfortable. Pansy didn't have much call for silence, generally, so the odd moment was nice.

They reached the house in no time - not the main house, she didn't have a death wish, but the secondary house only she and her fellow leaders knew about. The door was pulled open to reveal a fuming Hermione.

"Where have you *been*?!" she demanded, yanking Pansy inside unceremoniously. "You're so late that *everyone* is here. Everyone! Even Susan, and you know how busy she is."

"Busy, schmiszy," Pansy mocked, handing her coat off to a gormless looking bloke she vaguely recognised. "Crabbe, is that you?"

"Lady Pansy," Crabbe said with a leer, tugging on his forelock. Pansy raised an eyebrow at Hermione but followed as the girl led the way upstairs.

"You do know Crabbe loathes your lot, right?" she asked as they mounted the steps. "Meet him in a dark alley and he'll sell you for a sickle."

"Luckily for me, we're paying him rather more than that," Hermione said tonelessly. "He's not exactly the only one, is he? If we'd not been thrown together at school, you'd be the same."

"True," she admitted without shame. "But since I went through the laborious, often dull process of getting to know you, I can't blindly hate you for your bloodline. I simply have to despise your bluestocking ways, instead."

"And aren't we all so pleased." Hermione shot Tonks a quick smile. "Sorry, I should have greeted you earlier. How are you, Tonks?"

"Wicked, miss. Never a dull moment with Lady Pansy, that's for sure."

"I do not envy you," her friend said solemnly. "One requires some boredom every once in a while."

They were led into a cozy library on the first floor, stripped of books but comfortably furnished with sturdy, masculine furniture in dark woods and red. Lounging about the room were all of Pansy's old school friends, from the delightfully sybarite Daphne Greengrass and her less classy counterpart Lavender Brown, to the creepy but clever Patil twins, right through to the unforgivably ginger Susan Bones. Hermione and Pansy made seven; the recently graduated class of Hogwarts Ladies Seminary, arguably the cleverest misses on the marriage mart, and, coincidentally, the clan that ruled London's criminal underworld.

"Sorry I'm late," Pansy purred, not at all apologetic. "I got sidetracked."

"Mr. Wood?" Lavender asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"Mr. McMillan," Pansy confided in a low tone, and the two of them shared smirks.

“Ah, Mr. McMillan,” Lavender grinned, fanning herself slowly with some frothy French thing. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

“It is, indeed.” She swanned over to a spare chair, seating herself with a calculated lack of grace. A maid hurried over with a teacup full of dark liquid - brandy, Pansy would bet. The staff here knew her so well. “What’s so important?”

Hermione settled herself at the head of the group, finishing off their circle. Hermione didn’t *lead* them, exactly, but as the most logical, ruthlessly rational one, and, in addition, the only one without substantial outside obligations (such as they were; balls and dinners and house parties might not *sound* important compared to what they did here, but they played a vital part) she was the figurehead of The Harem, and the brain that linked their disparate parts together. “Ginny Weasley,” she said, shuffling some papers on the side table.

“The tiny Weasley nymph?” Daphne asked, frowning.

“Yes. I’ve received a letter from Headmistress McGonagall requesting our assistance in... rounding out her education, so to speak.” Hermione flicked a sheet of parchment across to Susan, her designated second in command when it came to all that clerical stuff that made Pansy feel like she might wrinkle prematurely. “She’s on her way to London already, but we can always send her back. It would be a waste, in my opinion, but still an option.”

Susan read the letter through and passed it off to Padma, who, along with her sister and Lavender, bent her head to it diligently. Daphne watched Hermione with sharp eyes. “In your opinion?”

“You know, of course, that the Weasley clan and I share a history,” Hermione said stiffly. She was always stiff when it came to her life prior to the war, especially the part about the Weasleys. Pansy wasn’t much for empathy, but even she had to admit to sharing in the girl’s rage towards them. “Ginny is a part of that history, if... a considerably brighter part.”

“So, she’s your friend,” Padma said, leaning forward to pass the missive across to Pansy herself, who gave it a quick skim. Formally written, it subtly alluded to a lot of things, but if confiscated by the Aurors would simply be a message about an old friend coming to visit. With a sniff, she passed it to Daphne. “You know what that means, Hermione.”

“No vote for you,” Lavender chirped with glee, flashing her pearly white teeth. The girl was still bitter about her latest boy toy being turned away at the door.

“I know that, which is why I’ve appointed myself her champion, seeing as how no outsider is making the request.” Hermione crossed her legs at the ankle, her pretty manners signifying an upbringing that, for all of its lack of magic, was not so dissimilar to their own. Pansy liked that - it was the little things that tied them together beneath their larger banner.

Daph nodded her appreciation of protocol, which is lucky, since she’d helped write it. Parvati and Lavender seemed to view it as a hindrance, most days, but the rest of them saw the value in their system of rules, weights and measures. Limits on how much they could earn before the excess was funneled back into the business, caps on how many hours they could spend at a business each week, minimum community service hours, shifts in the throne room, and

meeting structures - all of it formed the infrastructure that held up the whole, and they'd spent a year at school perfecting it so that weaknesses were fortified, holes clogged, possibilities of splinter groups thwarted before they rose. Insurrection, with the girls being as self-aware as they were, was a possibility unselfconsciously risen and discussed, until they'd made a democracy that suited them.

Of which the connection rule was one of the most important; to wit, no council member with a personal attachment to a petitioner may have a deciding vote.

That disqualified Lavender from pulling strings for her lover, as there had been no strings to pull. It meant all members had to earn their way in, fighting through a probation period and working their way up. Even if McGonagall's recommendation led to something for Weasley, it wouldn't get her a seat at the council table: only she could earn that for herself. As they all had.

A champion was what they gave petitioners to argue their case if it went further than the throne room. Like a lawyer, only more community minded and less money-grubbing, social-climbing vampire. Usually these champions were either the more well spoken of the petitioners acquaintance, a guardian, or, as often was in the case of kidnappings, even the petitioner themselves. Other times, if any of these are not available, they were chosen from the lower ranks of the Harem, to report to the council.

For Hermione to nominate herself went beyond amity, it was a statement, telling them exactly where she stood, how strong her opinion was, and that it was personal for her - and, happily for Pansy, it would make the girl her responsibility should anything go wrong.

"Why Miss Weasley, of all people?" Daphne asked, tapping her gloved fingers on the table. "I thought she was getting married?"

"You're behind the times, Daph," Parvati snorted. "Witch was jilted. Lord Potter informed her at the last minute that he was looking for something else, and scampered off into the sunset with Longbottom's bride."

"Poor girl was humiliated," Susan added in a solemn voice. "Shot straight back off to Hogwarts and has stayed there ever since."

"Well that sells it for me," Lavender trilled. "Woman scorned? Humiliated by a powerful male figure, right out of the school room? I don't think we could *beg* for a better addition to our ranks."

Pansy scoffed quietly. Lavender hadn't been 'scorned' a day in her life, unless you counted the time Ronald Weasley stole a kiss before moving on to the next girl. Compared to what he did to Hermione, though, even that was trifling.

Hard to believe that man was a baronet, now. 'Sir' Ronald Weasley - what a joke. At least Lord Potter had the excuse of naivete, him having been raised a middle-class muggle. What was Sir Ronald's excuse?

“Don't let's get ahead of ourselves,” Padma scolded them quietly. “A sad story does not make one suitable to take on our lot in life. Our work is important, and vital to our very livings - we cannot afford a mistake.” She turned to Hermione, her face sanguinely beautiful. Her undaunted calm and her exquisite features had made her a favourite of the ton since her debut, and an irreplaceable member of the team. Generally, in public, Pansy was disposed to refer to the twins as one, interchangeable entity, and all of the lascivious jokes that went along with that, but in the private of her own mind she could appreciate their distinct differences. “Please, make your case.”

Hermione smiled slightly, an enigmatic half-expression, and swirled the clear liquid in her tumbler (vodka - highly illegal, continuously gifted to her by a Russian admirer she refused to talk about but Pansy had sworn to get the gossip on at some point). “Why we should hire Ginny Weasley? Well...”

An hour later saw a pair of housemaids come filing into the room with trays of snacks. Pansy liked the housemaids here; they were a trifle straggly and unkempt, their manners unpolished, but due to their having come straight off of the street or out of whorehouses they were liable to enjoy a bawdy joke or two and less liable than her father's to wince and pout at her actions. Indeed, they were grateful for the work and pleased to have any at all, since their prior occupation excluded them from the desirable list of near any vocation in London, and so tended to be a hair too obsequious for Hermione and Susan's tastes, though in Pansy's eyes there was no such thing. She leaned over to peruse the selection, seeing no need to go over her notes before the vote. Of the rest of the group, only Lavender had pounced on the trays before they were set down: Susan and Padma were making a show of inspecting their minutes; Daphne was sitting with a determined expression, hands folded demurely in her lap; Parvati inspected her nails in a show of nonchalance absolutely noone bought.

The maids milled about setting down trays, their faces mildly interested. One of them, a young girl of about fourteen, was new, and her hands shook so much the silver scraped the table loudly. She looked horrified, her face turning bright scarlet as she stuttered out an apology. Susan smiled up at her with the face of an angel and accepted it gracefully, twitching it into place. “Thank you, Mary,” she said to their leader, a stern looking young woman of just-gone eighteen (Pansy didn't make a habit of learning the staff's ages, or even names, but Hermione had insisted on giving a birthday party for her the month before so it was hard to ignore). Mary gave the youngest a frown but accepted the thanks and shepherded her charges away.

The door closed, leaving the room in silence but for the sound of Lavender's happy munching. Pansy picked up some sort of delicate pastry and sniffed at it - pork, maybe? She set it down with a grimace. She didn't eat anything killed East of Mayfair.

“Are we decided, then?” Padma asked, tapping the edge of her quill on her chin. As if there was a choice. As if Hermione wasn't still flushed from her impassioned argument, as if Daphne didn't have tear streaks on her face from sheer empathy, as if Lavender wasn't already

planning how to decorate the girl's bedroom. Still, stickler for procedure as she was, Padma looked around expectantly. "All those in favour, say aye."

"Aye," Pansy droned with the rest of them, not rolling her eyes because she had self control. Padma nodded self-importantly.

"The ayes have it. Miss Ginevra Weasley will be admitted on a trial basis of six months, under Miss Hermione Granger's tutelage., Any other business? No?" She glanced around as if searching for a gavel, looking slightly disappointed when none materialised. Lavender leaned forward casually and handed her a gilt hairbrush, which Padma smacked against the table without a discernable trace of irony. "Meeting dismissed."

Three: Healing Hearts

Chapter Notes

Hi!

This is the new chapter as of 02/09/2018! I know it appears before the old chapter, and for that I am sorry. I hope not to make a habit of rearranging chapters, but I feel like it makes more sense this way?

Enjoy!

Love, Eliza x

Present

“The green, I think, Millie,” Lady Daphne, eldest daughter of the Earl of Greymoor, instructed her lady’s maid quietly. Millicent Bulstrode, who had been her loyal friend and closest companion since birth, lifted the dress from its hanger, bringing it across with her eyes studiously elsewhere. Her family’s fall during the war had been difficult for so many reasons, from the loss of her title to the move from ‘friend’ to ‘staff’ in Daph’s eyes, but what really ached was the *things* .

It seemed selfish and childish and materialistic but Millie couldn't help it. For all of her life, she'd been the ugly one, the fat one, the one no boys wanted to touch - all she'd had to her name was her possessions. Her riches. Her name.

Now, the Bulstrodes had been well and truly destroyed, ripped down to ruin because of her father’s unwise affiliation. Looking at clothes had become immeasurably painful.

“Millie?” She jerked back into the present to see Daphne staring at her, those gorgeous blue eyes of hers endlessly empathetic. Ripping her gaze away, she noticed the material of the dress was wrenched between her fingers, and gasped.

“Merlin, I'm so sorry, my lady,” she rushed to smooth the fabric, rubbing her atrociously pudgy hands across it while she tried to simultaneously ignore the rising tide of self-hatred in her gut. “Circe, what is wrong with me?” That was more a question for herself than for her friend. A year she'd been working for Daph, a year that followed a year of sitting in a moulding estate, waiting for the place to be wrenched out from underneath her, scrambling to find some way to keep her, her mother and her twin younger brothers in clothes and food and shelter. Daphne’s job offer had been both salvation and humiliation, served with a side of relentless torture.

Millie was a shite ladies maid. She knew that. Everytime she dressed Daph’s hair it ended up askew; every dress she provided torn or wrinkled or otherwise tainted. But Daphne wouldn't let her go, and Millie could hardly quit. Not when her pay was the only thing keeping her

family alive, cut down though their expenses had been. Junior and Murdock wouldn't be able to go to Hogwarts as it was, unless something changed drastically in the next two years, and they were holed up in a house somewhere in the Sussex countryside, a house so far beneath their previous notice that her mother hadn't left her bed in days.

Luckily, Daphne was of that rare and exalted status in society that people viewed her hiring of a Death Eater's daughter as charitable rather than objectionable, her imperfect appearance as a result of that choice a show of fidelity, no matter how misguided. Indeed, anything Daphne did in the view of the ton was classed, invariably, as sweet or harmlessly eccentric, with all the more men lined up at her door.

As of to demonstrate this sweetness of character, Daphne asked, "Are you alright, Millie? Do you need to take a moment? I can dress myself today, if you want to get some rest."

Circe, did she have to be so nice? Somehow Millie thought it would be easier if she'd been hired by one of Daph's other friends, like Miss Brown, who was so often unthinkingly rude to both staff and friends, or Parvati Patil, who barely seemed to notice staff at all, seeing them as a part of the furniture. Daphne, by contrast, insisted on continuing what remained of their friendship, reinvented into some farcical approximation of what once had been perfect but now was broken beyond repair. That was worse.

"No, my lady, I'm fine." Millie steadied herself and turned, then stopped in her tracks. Daphne had removed her nightgown and was pulling on her stays, golden tresses sliding across perfect, milky skin, brushing the indents on her spine and tumbling down to end in the tiny, delicate curve just above her bottom. Her pert, luscious bottom.

Millie slammed her eyes shut, spinning back with a choke. *Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods, not again.*

"Are you alright, Millie?" Daphne's voice held a trace of impatience, now, and Millie could imagine her in the mirror, hands propped on her bare hips, eyes flashing indigo as she waited for the attention due to her. Only, the infection remained, that flush of heat that drew her eyes downwards on her imaginary vision, pulling her attention to pretty breasts, flushed pink from exertion, their nipples like beacons - and then, further down, past the gentle slope of her belly to -

She snapped herself back into the present, spinning around with purposeful detachment. Daphne was staring at her through the mirror, brows ruffled. "Fine," Millie snapped. She snatched up the dress and helped pull it over Daphne's head, perhaps a bit more roughly than she usually would. Anything to cover the woman up.

Daphne opened her mouth to talk, but was cut off by the tapping of an owl at the window. "Who could that be?" she murmured instead as Millie went to release the catch. The owl swooped in and deposited its load on the bed, ruffling its feathers importantly. Daphne snatched up the envelope and frowned. "It's from Hermione."

Millie raised an eyebrow. She wasn't fond of Hermione, and made no secret of it - to her mind, she was an insufferable bluestocking of the type Millie had no wish to know. Daphne seemed fond of her, and damn if that didn't make Millie dislike her more. The woman was

usually discrete with her missives, however. This, an owl directly to her room in the early morning, certainly was *not*. No matter if most of society was still in bed, it remained daytime - the owl could be seen.

Daph sliced through the leaf with a delicate silver letter opener in the shape of a leaf Millie had given her for her fourteenth birthday and scanned the missive within while Millie busied herself organising hair ornaments on the desk. She'd never realised how much work it was to prepare a woman for the day until she'd started this job; Daphne woke up near dawn just to get ready for her late-morning engagements. Millie herself had never bothered much beyond a comb and a bonnet.

“Blast,” Daphne swore, throwing the letter onto the bed. She elbowed Millie to one side and with quick, deft movements pinned her hair into a simple twist, pulling on the first hat close at hand, despite its being a vibrant pink that clashed with her dress. “Come, Millie.”

Together they swept from the room, Daphne calling for a carriage to be brought round to the mews as she went. “It's her first day,” she sighed, “and already we need a healer.”

They pulled up around back of the main house, Millie, as ever, clutching her wrap tighter as she stepped down. Three carriage changes had made her nauseous, and the stench of poverty only worsened her condition. She *hated* coming here, but Daphne required it of her. As the prominent daughter of a Sacred 28 family, and titled to boot, her reputation needed to be beyond repute, therefore a trustworthy maid was worth her weight in gold - a reputation all of these precautions were to protect, including the gauzy green veil, that hid all of her features but the pale cast of her skin and sparkling, vibrant eyes, beneath her bonnet and above-the-elbow gloves she'd donned in the last carriage. If she had been a normal lady, then; but even more so because of her connection to the Harem.

Perhaps the most degrading part of all of this was how Daphne *paid her extra* to keep quiet about The Harem. As if Millie would otherwise go blabbing her secret around town. Gods, she might not be clever enough to make it into the upper echelon, not having been educated at Hogwarts (‘too progressive,’ her father had sneered, before promptly hiring her the most peculiar governess in the world - but that was a story for another day) but that didn't mean she had less loyalty than any of the others nor that she wouldn't do *anything* for Daph. *Anything*.

Not that she knew much of what happened in there - no, Millie wasn't a member of their council - but she knew they were there, which made her dangerous enough. Usually, when Daphne visited, Millie would be banished to one of the public meeting rooms with Tonks and a few other companions to make small talk while, in the sacred upper rooms none of them bar, occasionally, Tonks had access to, their schoolmates, the leaders of the Harem, made plans for London.

Today, however, Daphne pulled her along as they entered through the service door, passed by the kitchens and up the stairs, Millie panting hard by the time they reached the top floor. There, a cluster of servants turned to stare.

“Where is she?” Daph demanded in her most imperious voice, wrenching her bonnet from her head and dropping it in the hand of the nearest person in possession of both hands and a frilly apron (neither of which were guaranteed in this house). A good number of the staff’s eyes blew wide and quickly found something else to do; one brave soul, however, stepped forward. Millie recognised her as the leader of their ragtag band of orphaned maids, Mary, she thought.

“Master Gold has the guest in the library, my lady,” she informed them with a respectful curtsy, pointing towards the double doors. “No one’s being allowed in, but Miss Tonks is in there already.”

“Well that explains the possible concussion,” Daph muttered wryly. Millie could imagine her smirk behind the swathes of frothy material that obscured her face. Louder, as she started shucking her gloves, she ordered, “bring me some tea, lots of sugar - the good stuff Master Gold keeps for emergencies and special occasions. Cooking brandy, also. Some towels, warmed for a moment by the fire.” Mary set to her task immediately, ushering the more curious maids away from the hallway and back down the stairs. Millie received a *look* from Daph, the *look* that told her she’d need to have a word with the housekeeper later about instilling discretion in her staff. Then she was off again, pushing open the library doors, her back setting in a way that signaled her change from “Lady Daphne Greengrass”, toast of the ton to “Mademoiselle Pradera”, the Harem’s private Healer.

Hermione panicked inwardly as she and Tonks fluttered around Ginny’s prone form. She supposed this was what smelling salts are for, but she’d never seen the point and didn’t have any in this house; at least, not on this floor and none elsewhere that she knew of. What would be the need, anyway? This house was not for the faint of heart and generally such people would be identified and stopped at the door. She did, however, have some flowers, coal and a rather nice bottle of vodka, not that any of that would be useful in this situation.

Ginny looked like a porcelain doll, so young. Not as young as she had been the last time Hermione had seen her, before the Ron disaster, but still young. Hermione supposed this is what she, herself, had looked like two years ago, but it seemed impossible, because she’d felt so old then, so stressed, with the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“What happened here, then?” Daphne’s brisk voice asked as she swept into the library, neatly sidestepping Ginny’s prone form to kneel at her head. Millicent Bulstrode, her ever present shadow, lurked by the door, glancing around the room while keeping one eye on her friend.

“She fainted,” Hermione said obviously, while Tonks nodded a limp, worried head of pale purple.

“That doesn’t bode well for her time with us,” Daph said with a sigh. “We should probably just send her back up north now, save on trouble.”

Hermione was shaking her head vehemently before she even realised she was doing it. “No. Definitely not. We need her, you know that. It was just... a shock. We could have handled it

better, rather than springing it on her first thing in the morning.”

Daphne raised a sceptical eyebrow, running her hands gently over Ginny’s face and scalp, then kneading her way down the spine. Magic could interact badly with head injuries, so the first examination was always done by hand, something Daphne excelled at. She was a born healer, that girl, compassionate and sweet with sharp instincts for the job.

“Can I assume she didn't faint dead to the ground?”

Tonks shuffled her feet awkwardly. “Erm, no. I... might have dropped her?”

“Might have?” Hermione repeated with patent disbelief.

“Fine, so she fell onto me and I sort of... *accidentally*... dropped her onto the floor.” At Hermione's raised eyebrows, Tonks reluctantly added, “hard.”

“Same old clumsy ‘Dora,” Daphne smiled faintly. Her sister, Astoria, had been Tonks’ first bodyguard assignment; while Astoria had no complaints, the housekeeper had lost half her bodyweight following her around the house, sweeping up the destruction left in her wake.

Tonks shot her a wicked smirk. “Aye, my lady.”

Daphne leaned back on her haunches, flicking her wand so that a mass of sparkling diagnostic runes span in the air in front of her. “She seems fine, just needs to wake up. She'll be dazed, but otherwise, no concussion. Someone should keep an eye on her for the next few days, however?” Here, she looked up at Tonks, who smiled slyly.

“Minnie sent her to London with one of ours. Nosey lass but nice enough. I'll instruct her to stick close as a lamprey.”

“That's not a phrase,” Daphne said absently, checking Ginny’s eyes. With one hand, she reached beneath her dress and pulled out an embroidered pouch, loosening the strings and waving it beneath the girl’s nose. Ginny gasped, her eyes fluttering, face set in disgust. “There you are, then.” Daphne brushed her hands off on her hips, rising to her feet. “Need anything else? Only, I promised ‘Jasmine’ I'd meet her at St. William’s this morning to oversee the eldest in her training.”

Hermione nodded, more focused on Ginny’s waking form than anything else. “Give her my love.”

Tonks was still beside Ginny when her eyes opened, a comforting sight were she not smiling maniacally. “You're back, thank Merlin,” she said. “Sorry about that. Should have prepared you.”

Ginny squinted against the light pouring in from one of the windows, turning her head. “Hermione?”

“No, I'm Tonks,” her chaperone tutted. “*This* is Hermione.” She dragged a curly haired figure into the light, and Ginny abruptly felt faint again.

“It *is* you,” she murmured. “We all thought you were on the continent. Ron told us...”

“Your brother says a lot of things,” Hermione replied, not unkindly. “If only more were true.”

Ginny winced as much as she could without taking her eyes off of Hermione's face. It was obvious that criminal enterprise agreed with her, her eyes were bright, hair bouncier than she'd ever seen it before. She'd regained the weight she'd lost during that hectic year on the run, now curvy beneath her dress. Perhaps slightly more curvy than was currently *en vogue* in the ton, but that would hardly bother her for she didn't spend her nights in the ballroom.

“You look well,” she said, lamely.

“Having control over your own life will do that for you,” Hermione replied, her tone significant. She shot Ginny a knowing look. “Isn't that why you're here?”

Scoffing, Ginny ignored a wave of dizziness and pushed up into a sitting position. Tonks handed her a glass of something dark and sweet, which she sipped gratefully to find it was tea. *Good* tea. “Headmistress McGonagall sent me here because she grew tired of me.”

“Headmistress McGonagall struggled through seven years of me; she doesn't get tired of anyone.” Hermione held out a hand to pull Ginny to her feet, only she didn't stop pulling until they were in each others arms, hugging ferociously. “Gods, I missed you,” she murmured into Ginny's crown.

Ginny blinked back tears. It was one of those times when you realised just how much someone meant to you, just how much you missed them in their absence. Hermione had been like an older sister to her, a sister she'd direly needed, living with so many men. They'd stay up late just talking, sharing secrets, and at Hogwarts Hermione had always looked out for her, taking the fall whenever one of Ginny's pranks got out of hand. That nobody believed her didn't matter - it had been the thought that counted.

When Ron told them that Hermione had fled the country rather than save her reputation by marrying him, Ginny had cried all night, mourning the loss of a girl who was just as much a part of her family as any of her blooded brothers. Then, by morning, she'd walled those emotions away and gotten on with things. She'd think of Hermione every now and again, when she saw or heard something fascinating, when she was helping a younger student with their unmanageable hair, whenever she saw Ron... but hadn't felt her loss so keenly until now.

“How..?” she asked, getting a mouthful of curls for her trouble.

Pulling back, Hermione used their linked hands to pull her to a chaise, settling next to her. “It's a long, *long* story, dear. Do you really care to know?”

Ginny took a long look around at their gilded surroundings, the fortune's worth of books all impeccably lined on the shelves. She thought of the armies of servants, the row of houses, the

carriage swaps.

“Please,” she murmured.

Four: Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Hi! Okay, so I've re-ordered the chapters, so that this chapter (which I think, if you're subscribed, you'll already have read as chapter three) is now chapter four, with the new chapter being uploaded **before** this one, so it will come up as **the previous chapter**. I know, I'm a pain, but it just *happened*.

So, in summary, subscribers need to read the previous chapter, which is new, and those of you who have come to the story new, please disregard this statement! Enjoy!

Love, Eliza x

Two Years Earlier

"Miss Granger!" Madam Umbridge gasped, leaning over her table to pluck her needlework from her arms. Hermione braced herself as Parvati sniggered; across the room Susan Bones caught her eye and grimaced in sympathy. "What do you call *this*?"

One eye on her - admittedly atrocious - embroidery, Hermione cast about for a suitable answer. Really, battling Death Eater had been *much* easier than cross-stitching. "A... kitten?"

"A *kitten*?" Professor Umbridge was aghast and too late Hermione remembered the witch's obsession with felines. "You call this a *kitten*?"

"Err..."

"Ladies do not 'err'," Umbridge informed her snippily. If Hermione hadn't sworn not to hex anyone this year, the odious woman would already be the toad she so resembled.

"It looks more like a posy," Lavender said, tilting her head to one side. "If you squint." She and Parvati snickered behind their hands.

"Ladies do not squint," Umbridge snapped to them, to which they rolled their eyes. "Ladies are sweet, and kind, and excel at *every task* without *whining*!" Here, she shot a vicious look at Padma Patil, who was, in fact, quite the whiner - when she wasn't mixing up alchemical bombs to drop on their enemies, of course. In answer the girl held up her own exquisite needlework, in which a puppy napped amongst a field of roses.

"Do you think this will capture me a Duke?" she asked their instructor sweetly, batting her eyelashes. "I hear the Duke of Warminster is terribly fond of his hunting dogs."

"You heard wrong, Miss Patil," Pansy purred, slipping her embroidery hoop beneath her skirts, for she was as useless at the skill as Hermione. "In fact, His Grace is terribly fond of hunting *dogs*. Such a common animal, don't you think?"

Madam Umbridge's face had turned a nasty shade of purple, her collar straining to contain her pudgy neck as she seethed. "Lady Pansy, you must not speak of your superiors in such a way!"

Pansy smiled smugly. "He wasn't so superior last winter. Unless you consider an Azkaban uniform the height of fashion amongst the ton?"

Umbridge threw her hands up with a bellow. "None of you - hear me - none of you will attract a Duke with your attitudes!"

"I don't *want* to attract a Duke," Hermione said, reasonably. All around the room, her six classmates nodded in agreement.

"Well, if you're so clever, Miss Granger, what *do* you want?" Madam Umbridge turned a sneer on her. Since the girl had had the poor manners to be involved in that nasty little skirmish some called a 'war' a few months earlier, Madam Umbridge had taken specific exception towards her. Along with, well, pretty much everyone else in Wizarding Britain. "Come on, speak up, girl. What, *exactly*, do you think a girl such as you can accomplish?" The insinuation being yet another slight against her respectability, because surely, a sweet, demure girl of the ton shouldn't have *ever* publicly saved the Minister's life. No, that was a sure sign of corrupt morals.

Hermione, prepared for this, smiled charmingly. "I shall be a Potions Master," she declared. "All around the world, men will seek my advice on issues of tricky brewing."

Umbridge gave a tinkling laugh that made her want to rake the bitch's face over broken glass. "A woman, a Potions Master? Not only a woman - but a *mudblood*?" She laughed heartily once more, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. "Poor, deluded soul!" The door clicked open, the expansive form of Professor Sprout slipping through, bringing with her the aroma of damp earth. Umbridge ignored her, turning on Lavender. "And you, Miss Brown? Do you have such *lofty* ambitions?"

Lavender tipped her head to a side and smirked. "Not me, no. I'm no Potions Mistress. But I don't want to be a Duchess; certainly not. Too many rules and regulations for me. I-" she grinned, sliding a leg outwards until her dress, which was pinned to the sofa by her knee, rode up past her ankles, "shall be a *courtesan*!"

Professor Sprout smiled fondly, but Umbridge narrowed her eyes. "I should have expected nothing more from a *Brown*," she sneered. "Your lot have never been good 'ton'. Why you were let in here is beyond me, but Headmistress McGonagall has always had questionable taste." Here, again, she pointedly looked at Hermione, who was getting quite tired of being the mudblood scapegoat, thank you very much.

"Her taste was fine until she hired *you*," Pansy Parkinson muttered with a smirk, receiving a glare in return.

"At least Lady Daphne knows her place," Umbridge said, with increasing desperation, spinning to face her most favoured student. Daphne, who had been making faces at Pansy behind her back, snapped to attention immediately with a sickeningly ingratiating look on her

face. "You shall marry a Duke, dear, I'm quite sure," Umbridge said in what could be misconstrued as an affectionate voice.

Deliberately, Daphne brushed off her dress, folding her hands in her lap demurely and blinking her baby blue-eyes with cloying sweetness. "Me?" she murmured, smiling with lowered eyes. "Oh, thank you, Madam. I am flattered that you think so well of me."

"Well of course, dear child," Umbridge simpered. "With a family such as yours--"

"But," Daphne continued in the same soft, quizzical tone, "in the interests of what I *really* want in my marital bed, do you suppose I could catch a Duchess, instead?"

After seven years at Hogwarts Seminary for Modern Witches, Hermione Granger and her classmates had become somewhat accustomed to being told they would never marry well. It was an insult that became less vicious each year, and only ever more hilarious - especially after the disaster that had been their interrupted seventh year, bringing them back to play all over again. Since the reason they had been sent there in the first place was that their parents despaired of them ever finding a husband in the conventional manner, they were prepared for this sort of dismissal, though they had to admit they'd not expected it on a daily basis.

Headmistress McGonagall, assigned the dubious task of getting them ready for the Marriage Mart, despaired.

Madam Umbridge was the seventh etiquette instructor they'd scared off in as many years, a fact which had the Headmistress rolling her eyes in exasperation. After all, it would have been all well and good if it were only those seven girls that would have been benefiting from the instruction, but it hadn't. She had six other year-groups of students to bring up to snuff by their graduation, and perfect etiquette was the only way to make their parents, and her board of governors, overlook the more... *unusual* side of her curriculum.

It had taken thirty years of wheedling to make the Board of Governors allow her to teach her charges actual magic. Up until ten years ago, they had been under the impression that all witches needed teaching were household spells and beauty charms; less of the former, more of the latter, what with House-Elves and Muggles being so readily available. Those women who had broken through this restriction were considered dangerous eccentrics, for the most part, and certainly *not* marriageable material. The match between the late Emily Malliet and Lord Angus Bones, Viscount Herringbone, had been laughable to the ton, despite how very successful it had been. Amelia Bones, the only remaining member of that family aside from their orphaned daughter, was a perpetual spinster, ostracised for her political views - that is, that she had any to speak of.

Keeping the place running after the havoc Hermione Granger had caused with her escape and subsequent fame last year had taken everything she had in her.

However, Minerva had managed it, expediently; she'd simply begun crafting a syllabus, and the rest had followed. Now, not only were graduates of Hogwarts lauded for their beauty and

charm, in private they were also considered the brightest minds of their generation - without even the clarifying 'female' title added. Of course, there wasn't much they could do about this out in Society, not unless they fancied growing old alone, possibly in Greenhouse Three, eventually strangled to death by one's own Venomous Tentacula. No, they had to remain quietly clever, forever hiding that side of themselves from the world.

At least they have that side of themselves, though, Minnie comforted herself. Better that they were quietly clever than to see all of that potential gone to waste.

Her concern remained for her eldest students. Brilliant and bright, every one of them, but none were the retiring type. Pansy Parkinson alone could turn the whole of Society on its head if she were allowed to do so - hence why the etiquette lessons were so very important.

The Headmistress sifted through sheets of job applications with a sigh. There was no shortage of applications for the position - etiquette instructors of prestige may have been in relatively short supply, but they were all, each and every one of them, arrogant enough to believe they had what it took to bring her girls in line. Madam Umbridge had thought to do so with corporal punishment - Minerva had stopped that before it had even began - but they all had their own ways of doing so. Worse than a group of girls who would run riot in a ballroom would be a group of rioting girls whose pretty skin had been marred by scars. Aside from her ethical and moral considerations, the simple fact was that the use of these methods, should they get out, would *destroy* her school. Even at the more lower-class, Muggle institutions where these methods were instituted they were sure to only use feathers, or velvet, so as not to mark the skin. *A blood quill* ?! Unthinkable.

Hmm . This was promising. A Mademoiselle Delacour was applying, all the way from France. Surely their reputation hadn't spread that far? And yet, it appeared to have, for Fleur Delacour raved about the school as though it were a second home. It sounded terribly false, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and at least if this one was a beautiful half-Veela then Lady Daphne wouldn't complain.

She was just dampening her quill to reply when her door opened and Professor Pomona Sprout bustled in, followed by Madam Hooch, their flying instructor. At their heels came Septima Vector, sweeping through with all the regality of a Queen. "Headmistress," they murmured, bowing their heads in overblown respect. Minerva took a deep breath and prepared herself - if they were being *submissive* , of all things, then they wanted something. And that something wasn't going to be new books.

"Get up, Rolanda," she sighed, and Madam Hooch, who'd been parallel with the ground, straightened with a sheepish grin. "What do you want?"

"Now, now, Min, no need for rudeness," Pomona chastised lightly, perching her vast arse on a spindly stool. "Just a few friendly suggestions." She smiled brightly, the picture of innocence.

"I dread to think," Minerva sighed again, but waved them on.

"It's about the seventh year girls," Septima said primly, brushing off her robes before she took a seat.

“Isn’t it always?”

Pomona shot her a piercing look. “They don’t need etiquette training, Min. They just don’t. Why do you think they’re so bloody headstrong? You’re wasting everyone’s time by teaching them things they already know, when they could be doing something else. Something useful. Especially that Miss Granger, and with her around, the other girls only become more difficult.”

McGonagall prevented her eyes from rolling by sheer strength of will. “And I suppose you have a suggestion?”

A cat-like grin flitted across Rolanda’s face. “Just a few. You know those girls, Min - they’re good girls, but they’re independent. Do you really think that in the next three months you can make them into meek, submissive little Society Misses, willing to parade themselves through that cattle market they call a season? The first time a bloke comments on Lady Pansy’s bosom, she’ll deck him right good. Miss Granger? She’ll spend less time flirting than she will giving financial advice. And Gods forbid Miss Brown and Miss Patil get sent out there without some hold on their libido; they’ll be the whores of Babylon!”

“I know this,” Minerva grit out. Those girls had both her affection and her exasperation; they were without a doubt the most intelligent girls she’d ever taught, at least in their own ways, and yet they were set to become her greatest failure. Releasing them in this state would destroy her reputation. “What am I to do?”

“Give them to us,” Septima said simply. “We have a few projects brewing, and they’re exactly the assistance we need. When they leave, they’ll have the project to sustain them; somewhere to channel their brains before they moulder in their skulls. You know how much I loathe London, but it’s undeniably the financial centre of the country. They’ll run the business, and I’ll get to remain up here with my books.”

The word ‘project’ in lieu of any actual details disturbed Minerva, but not enough to stop her from grasping at what could be a saving grace. She trusted these women. They were a bit iffy, morally corrupt, but otherwise wonderful people and excellent instructors. Pomona had led the Herbology field for thirty years now. Septima, while much younger, a spinster at age thirty-two, published widely-read treatises on Arithmancy that practitioners all over the globe consulted. Rolanda... well, she was witty and sly and the girls adored her - even Hermione, who had never taken to riding a broom *nor* a horse, since every time she climbed atop one she went to sit astride, something even the modernists here at Hogwarts couldn’t risk allowing.

Still, she should probably check some things. “Is it dangerous?” she asked, praying silently.

Septima, Pomona and Rolanda all shared a glance, then grimaced. Minerva kneaded her temples, stressed. “Profitable?”

Relief hit the three women so hard they fell over each other to nod and grin. A bad feeling rose in Minerva’s stomach. “Can you at least tell me it’s legal?”

There was a pause, and Rolanda tapped her fingers against the side of a cabinet. "Do you mind if we lie?"

"Oh, Gods, please do," Minerva gushed, and they laughed.

"Perfectly legal, Headmistress," Pomona reassured her with a mischievous wink. "At least, our part is. If you're worried about legal, you should look at what they're plotting in their bedrooms at night."

Rolanda, seeing Minerva's look of horror, rushed into the breach. "Don't you worry. It won't come back to you."

Aye, like hell it won't. "Fine," Minerva groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "But please, please be subtle about it. And don't go too over the top, for Heaven's sake. One or two businesses are fine while they get ready to be married, but I don't want them suddenly running the criminal underworld, alright?"

Rolanda grinned as they headed to the door with alacrity, not women to push their luck too far. "Alongside what they're plotting? No promises!" she winked, just as they disappeared.

Minerva, far from being relieved, proceeded to bang her head against the wooden desk in the hopes that a little amnesia might go a long way.

Five: The Butcher's Wife

“Master Gold?” A silver-haired woman popped her head through the door, dragging Ginny from the story. “I’m sorry to interrupt, ma’am, but your appointment has arrived.”

“What appointment?” Hermione frowned, slowly coming back to the present herself. She’d been immersed in her story, completely lost to the telling, her voice lilting, that of a born storyteller. And she’d been building to something, too, Ginny could tell.

The woman in the doorway paused, shooting Ginny a wary look. Hermione made an impatient noise in the back of her throat. “Miss Garnet, Mrs. Farnsworthy, our housekeeper.” Ginny jerked at the name, but stilled at a warning look from Hermione. “Miss Garnet is my new apprentice, Mrs. Farnsworthy. You can trust her.”

The housekeeper sniffed haughtily, ruffling her skirts. “It’s Mr. Bodd’s wife, Master. Apparently his stocks have been robbed. I told her you’d see her immediately, being as you’re so fond of her.”

Hermione frowned. “What happened to their protection?”

“Don’t know for sure, Master, but I’m thinking it wasn’t at the market, if you get my meaning.”

If the way Hermione’s lips pursed angrily was any indication, she did. Ginny, her interest now thoroughly piqued, was glad to follow when Hermione invited her to sit in on the meeting. “You might want to just listen, this time, and we’ll discuss it afterwards,” Hermione told her as she pulled a thick amber veil over her head. “Later, you might need to take these meetings yourself, so it’s best to know how they work before you get involved.”

She just nodded, a low-boiling excitement in her gut that surprised her. Sitting in on meetings for the most notorious gang in the country? Yes, please.

Hermione led her down the hall, only stopping briefly to fetch her a gauzy white veil from a nearby closet. “Initiate,” was her only word of explanation, but it was enough. Ginny pulled it over her head to hide her small smile.

Two floors down, they entered a small receiving room done up in blue and gold, the colours bold and masculine. The furniture showed slight signs of wear, and one leg of the sideboard was chipped, though Hermione glided past without noticing. A footman stood against one wall, staring vacantly into the distance.

“Mrs. Bodd,” Hermione greeted a small, round woman with tightly bound, coarse hair and a face folded into thousands of miniscule wrinkles. She’d come to her feet upon their entrance, her face pinched with nerves as her hands swept self-consciously across her threadbare, blood-strained skirts. Ginny would have been concerned by that - almost was - but she’d spent enough time ordering supplies in Ottery St. Catchpole to recognise a butcher’s wife

when she saw one, even if this particular one was a sight more ragged than the ones she was used to. Hermione nodded towards the seat the woman had claimed. "Please, do sit."

Mrs Bodd dropped into her seat like a particularly heavy stone, her fingers fiddling with her bodice. "Thank-you, my lady," she said in the gruff tones of a born-and-bred East Ender. "For seein' me, an' everything. I know you're busy."

Hermione beckoned Ginny forward, ushering her to a seat just beyond the one she was heading to. "It's no problem at all, I assure you. I hope you don't mind that my associate sits in on our visit?"

Mrs. Bodd nodded, but didn't look at Ginny. She seemed close to tears, her eyes fixed on Hermione as if the woman were her only hope. "Now, tell us what happened," Hermione bid her, motioning for the footman to send for tea.

So much tea went into running one household, Ginny mused as he left the room. It was ridiculous.

"'Twas the rag-and-bone man," Mrs Bodd said immediately. "He nicked our meat, he did. Broke in through the back and took it all out into his cart, quick like. Now he'll be hawking it somewhere over St. Giles, cutting it with all sorts of stone, eating pretty tonight, meanwhile Mr. Bodd is off trying to--trying to--" Mrs Bodd stopped, sucked in a deep breath, and started again, her voice losing its hysterical note. "He's off looking for work, temporary like, but he won't find it, and then what will we do? That meat is all we've got, least 'til the new ones come in, Monday. We're on our last penny, my lady."

They paused as a maid entered, carrying a platter that trembled in her hand. Setting it down on the table, she reached for the handle, only to be stilled by the touch of Hermione's fingers on hers. She dropped into a clumsy curtsy and left, the door swinging to show her murmuring something to the footman. He didn't reenter.

Now alone, Hermione poured them all a cup, handing one to Mrs Bodd daintily, who accepted with a look of surprise. She hadn't expected to be served. "What makes you think it was the rag-and-bone man?" Hermione asked, handing Ginny a cup.

Mrs Bodd paused, eyeing her tea while she tried to find words. Ginny thought that there was not so much certainty and anger in her face as something else, something close to fear.

"Who else could it be?" she said, confirming Ginny's assessment - what she had clearly meant as a hypothetical came out with the lilt of panic. "You drove - drove *them* out of town, didn't you?"

Hermione nodded, but her fist tightening subtly on the cushions caught and held Ginny's attention. She was lying. Why was she lying? "We are certain the Death Eaters are gone," she said, her voice holding the ring of truth. Ginny gave herself a shake. She must be imagining things.

Visible relief washed over Mrs Bodd immediately, to have her fears quashed. A Muggle, she had no clue of the worst atrocities Voldemort had perpetrated, but she knew what happened in

her own neighborhood, even if she didn't understand the whys. Children lifted from the street. Drugs spiked. Stalls ransacked, shops burned. Men thrown into rings to fight to the death, all for the amusement of what, to her, were faceless gang members.

“He's odd, that one. Don't know his family. I know everyone's family, but not his. He just arrived on the street one day, and noone knows where he comes from!”

Cocking her head, Hermione jerked as if moving for paper, only to realise there was none at hand. Ginny remembered that about her - always with a quill and parchment, even now her fingers were ink stained, she could see from here, as the older girl eschewed gloves. “Not Jeremy, then?”

Mrs Bodd shook her head sadly. “Nay. He died a few weeks ago, just before this new bloke took up his rounds. Footpads, his mama tells me, though what they'd want from Jeremy is a mystery. She was all shook up about it, too.”

Ginny rolled these facts around in her head. It seemed connected, but she might just be projecting her own thirst for excitement - after all, who would kill a rag-and-bone man just for his spot? More likely to be a coincidence, someone filling up the gap in the market. It was a lucrative business, and people were killed every day on the streets around here.

Hermione took a sip of her drink, ponderous, and nodded to herself. “Do you know where he's staying?” she asked. Ginny thought that was a silly question, for London was so big that she barely knew where *she* was staying, but then Mrs Bodd nodded firmly.

“Rents a room just over Tackle Street chandlery. Mrs Hopple's area, and she's a regular. Says he pays cash on time, even early, and he's been renting it for a month or so.” She looked pleased with her own detective work, smiling brightly in such a way as to take years from her face when Hermione thanked her.

“You've been very thorough, Mrs Bodd. Now, I'll have one of my men check your stores, in case there's evidence, but I think you're right. It is likely this new rag-and-bone man simply grew tired of picking your leavings, took a more proactive approach.” Placing her cup carefully on the saucer, she added with a wry smile, “Merlin save us from entrepreneurs.”

If Mrs Bodd found anything odd in Hermione's choice of words, she didn't say anything, instead allowing profuse thanks to fall from her lips. “I'll send over a cow and three sheep to keep you going,” Hermione was saying, speaking loudly to be heard over Mrs Bodd's gratitude. “They'll arrive tomorrow. In the meantime, I'll have you reimbursed for loss of business. Leave the numbers with Mrs. Farnsworthy, won't you?”

“Oh, thank you, my lady! Wait 'til I tell Mr Bodd - he didn't want me to come, you know, he said you had better things to worry about, but I told him! I said, ‘Master Gold and his women will help us, they promised they would’! And now you have! God keep you, my lady.”

“And you, Mrs Bodd.” Calmly, Hermione rose from her seat, opening the door. “Garrett, perhaps you could escort Mrs Bodd to Mrs Farnsworthy, to seek recompense. Then, I'd be grateful if you would see her home safely.”

The footman bowed, leading Mrs Bodd away while the woman gaped in awe at Hermione, who waited until their visitors had left before her face crumbled, seething rage revealed just beneath. Her jaw set, she collared the first footman she saw. "Perris, isn't it? Fetch me Scabior. Quick, now. I've got a message to be sent, and I'm not waiting about to do it."

"Yes, ma'am," Perris gave a dip of his head and hared off to the back door, while Hermione slammed hers. She caught Ginny's eye, but didn't bother to apologise, instead pulling herself up to her full height, which, while shorter than Ginny, remained intimidating.

"I hoped you'd be here a bit longer before you met Scabior, but needs must." Her face was so cold, so implacable, that Ginny shivered in fear. "Don't you look down on me, though, Miss Weasley. Working with men like him is the price of doing business in London. Diplomacy only goes so far."

"I don't understand," Ginny found herself saying. "Who's Scabior?"

Noone good, obviously.

Hermione's face closed off at that question. "Odd jobs man," she replied in clipped tones. "Very good at his job - he can find anyone, anywhere. Could be a werewolf with that nose of his." She took in a deep breath, puffing her chest out as far as her stays would allow, before letting it collapse and looking much calmer for it. "Right. It might take a while for him to get here. In the meantime, it's a perfect opportunity to go over your job description."

Six: Petitions

Susan Bones peered at the miniature before her through her magnifying glass, the warped screen allowing her to see the pinprick freckles she'd painted onto the cherub. One side had five, she noted, then moved the contraption barely a hair's breadth to one side, and counted those freckles, too. Six. The five freckles were shaped more pleasingly, however, so she picked up her miniscule brush and dabbed the end.

Susan didn't *love* to paint, so much as *need* to paint. Her real love was the law, books, politics - opening the news sheet over her kedgerie and absorbing the tiny changes on a daily basis, watching the chessboard of government play, attempting to guess the next move. For fun, she found loopholes, and she was good at it. It was almost a game, picking at the strings where politicians had taken their eyes away for mere seconds, allowing a single stitch to drop, one that could be manipulated into something large enough for Susan to climb inside and play. She wished she could battle it out with her aunt Amelia, except Amelia had connections; she always knew someone who knew someone in the Ministry, someone who could get things done, someone who could follow the breadcrumbs back to Susan and her friends. If Amelia knew of her interest in the darker side of the law...

Well, Susan wouldn't be free to play much longer.

It wasn't that Amelia was strict, because she was not. Nor was she dull, nor angry, nor any of the things her friends so resented in their own guardians, reasons they couldn't bring work home. In fact, Amelia was perfect - a mirror image of Susan, only older, a glimpse into a comfortable future of intellectual stimulation, evening salons, and a complete lack of male interference that Susan found gratifying.

That was the problem.

Not on Susan's side - oh, no, Susan adored her aunt. She thought that perhaps, if Amelia let them, they could have been best friends, partners. But Amelia... Amelia feared that Susan was *too* like her; headstrong, clever and independent, to eschew the company of all others for the sake of books and learning. She worried should Susan spend overlong in the library, always appearing after an hour with weak excuses to get her out of the house - tea parties and house calls that were awkward and excruciating for all involved. Her aunt claimed that she simply didn't want to watch Susan make her mistakes, doomed to a life of growing old and alone, just like her, but Susan didn't see the problem. It wasn't as though Aunt Amelia was unhappy. Sure, Society eschewed her, but who cared about them, really? Amelia had a circle of *true* friends, all of them clever and witty and entertaining - Vector, Sinistra, Sprout and Hooch all included.

Actually, the only time Susan had ever seen her Aunt discomfited - this indomitable woman who simply waved condescendingly whenever a Sacred Twenty-Eight Lord or Lady gave her the cut-direct in the street - was when Auror Moody was around, and even then, there was just a lot of slow blinking (her one and only tell). Moody, however, blushed and stammered

and was generally adorable in a way that a man with only half of the requisite number of limbs should be.

It was always after these visits that Amelia would get more frenzied about ensuring her ward had a life, friends, standing in society. As the last Bones, she was entitled to some respect from the *ton*, but not enough to entirely wipe away the stain of her controversial spinster aunt, not that she cared, but enough. Enough to build on. And Amelia thought her reputation would be ruined if she began displaying her bluestocking ways in public, and after anxious reminders, she stopped doing so at home, too.

Instead, she painted.

It was something she was good at, and as a distraction from her work, it was adequate. They sold quite well in the Muggle world, too - they had become quite a fashion, Bones Miniatures, with women ordering brooches, all with their own, individually designed mythical monster on them. Creatures were her specialty, after all, both real and imagined. Her mermaids sold well, but only if she advertised them as sea-demons, and her dryads had to be reimagined with larger bosoms and longer hair, but otherwise, the pictures made her a pretty penny.

If only she could like them more.

A chime from the hall had her throwing her brush down, a smile splitting her face quite involuntarily. There was a scuffle, some low murmurs, and then Aunt Amelia appeared in the doorway, her brow furrowed. "Lady Padma is here," she told her niece uncertainly. "I wasn't aware we were expecting guests."

"I'm not a guest," Padma said sweetly, coming up behind her. "I'm a friend, therefore you needn't worry about being presentable. It would only make us all uncomfortable."

"Lady Padma," Susan smiled, standing to give her friend a peck on the cheek in greeting. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" She asked, as if it hadn't been the plan all along - but, up until a few years ago, Susan had had so little excitement in her life that a touch of mild subterfuge was thrilling, even if it was deceiving her aunt, which she admitted to a little guilt about. She'd love to bring Amelia in on this, she truly would, but a childhood of attempts at being forged into something a little more feminine, good-willed though it was, told her that she would disapprove.

"I am in dire need of a new hat," Padma announced, running her fingers along the brim of the frothy, periwinkle concoction she was wearing. It rose several inches above her head in a style Susan couldn't name, with little violets dotted through pale gauze. "Perhaps you'd like to accompany me?"

Susan bit her lip, making a show of considering it. "I'm not sure, there's so much to do..."

Aunt Amelia coughed delicately, shooting Susan a chastising look. Susan could almost read her mind - *this is the daughter of an Earl!* "Surely it can wait, Susan? A stroll along Bond Street might do you good."

“Oh, but...” Susan shot a longing look at her painting, as laughable as that notion was.

“Susan would be happy to join you, my lady, I'm sure.” Amelia smiled at their guest. “You have enough pin money?”

“Yes, Auntie,” Susan droned with the air of one making a large sacrifice. She turned to Padma with a smile. “Just let me fetch my own hat. I can't bear to let the milliner squeeze my head like a fruit. Last time I thought I was going to *burst* !

Ten minutes later they were rumbling down through London, Padma dropping her Lady face to show the business-like interior. “Right, so it's first to Madam Tatting, then, since we've promised Miss Amelia a hat.”

“Then to the House?” Susan asked hopefully.

Padma smiled. “Then to the House.”

Lavender smiled prettily in the mirror, fluttering her eyelashes, in a manner specifically designed to beguile. Big eyes the colour of her namesake, peachy skin of the sort that portrait artists kill to paint, rosebud lips just a shade lighter than rose... there was nothing physically wrong with her.

So why had he left?

Lavender knew beautiful. She had spent her every day with varying kinds of beautiful, even then. Daphne, the perfect English rose. Hermione, the quiet beauty. Padma and Parvati, the exotic twins. Susan, the wallflower. Pansy, the sultry seductress.

She also knew that she still stood out.

Golden hair, and she meant that literally - when she stood next to a new galleon both shone just the same. Voluptuous curves, which might not be the thing this season but were ever men's favourites. A button nose, a distinct lack of freckles...

Proven fertility.

And yet she hadn't managed to hold him.

Hermione had warned her, of course, in that way that Hermione does. Kindly, with sympathy, but still firm. She had not listened, though, in that way that she didn't. Nodding along, thinking about his eyes, his shoulders, the way he moved.

She sighed. Two years had passed, she knew now that he wasn't coming back, yet she was still beating the same dead horse. She had other things to think about, too: Esmeralda wanted to retire so Lavender had to fix her a leaving package as well as find a replacement; Anne-Marie was complaining that the bed in Sylvia's room squeaked too loud for her to concentrate; her mother required her input on planning the Beltane Ball.

Thoughts of him lingered.

It wasn't that she loved him. No, not that. She had thought so, at the time, but she'd been young and naive. No, this was about-

"Lady Lavender?" Hermione's nursery maid, Gertie, appeared in the doorway. "Miss Rose is here."

"Yes, good," Lavender cleared her throat, which had closed up in that peculiar way it always did when she was here, facing this moment. It had only been a few months ago that Hermione had needed to be here for it, holding her hand and smiling warmly. Parvati was Lavender's best friend but Hermione was the one she went to about *this*, this feeling, this need. She couldn't explain why. "Please, bring her in."

Gertie smiled widely and bowed, beckoning to someone in the hall. There was a pitter-patter of tiny feet, and then-

Rose appeared in the doorway, grinning widely, her carrot-orange hair tied up in braids. Freckles littered her face, her plump arms waved madly, and yet she was *so beautiful*.

"Mama!" she cried, launching herself across the room into Lavender's arms, kissing her cheeks clumsily, heedless of the dampness there. "You're here!"

"Hello, Rosie-Posie," Lavender replied, her voice muffled in her hair. "Am I glad to see you!"

Rosie launched into a less-than coherent speech about how her week had gone, how Gertie was teaching her to draw, how Herry the House-Elf had made her *three* new dresses, and Lavender giggled and asked all the right questions, all the while feeling the emptiness inside of her gape, because this was her *daughter*, she was her *mother*, and yet they couldn't live together, couldn't be seen together, and her darling Rosie was forced to bear another woman's name-

This was why she needed him.

This was why she'd never forgive his leaving.

This was why she'd never forgive *herself*.

Two hours on Bond Street down, Susan and Padma ended up in the throne room, a large hall decorated lavishly with piles of treasures of all sorts around the edges. Hermione had, at first, balked at the idea of a receiving room of this kind, until Professor Sinistra described the effects in a scientific manner; the public were more likely to respect them should they look the sort to be respected, benevolent yet ruthless Street Royalty, as opposed to simply a few nobles interfering in what was not theirs. The display of wealth, while gauche, was meant to intimidate and reassure in turns, while the seating of them higher than their visitors inspired primal fear dating back to feudal times. *I hold your life in my hands*, it said, *and I could better or destroy it at will*.

On a dais sat three gorgeous chairs, carved from oak, with mythical tales embossed on their surfaces. The middle was largest, with a pump gold cushion on the seat, its tassels trailing along the edges, while the chairs on either side were less beautiful, cushioned in sumptuous red. The middle chair was symbolic; not for them, but for their public, yet another accessory to point to the existence of the benevolent 'Master Gold' - Madam Hooch's idea, though Susan thought that she just liked sprawling on it when there was no one else about. ("It needs to look *worn*, or the illusion won't work!")

It was empty of petitioners for the moment, but that wouldn't last long. By two o'clock, there would be a queue and a crowd, both, of locals, all waiting to be heard. Susan couldn't deny a cheap thrill from the power here, and even more, that she could use that power for good.

A smattering of guards hung about, waiting to be useful; an eclectic mix of wizards and muggles, most of them scarred and brawny, showing the signs of a life of hard living. Were they invisible, Susan would still have been able to locate them, if only by the stench. While the wizards mostly had their own homes, or if they lived rough, their wands with which to clean themselves, the Muggles were another matter entirely, often renting a single room with dubious plumbing. Daphne had been on about maybe building a barracks if they were to continue having so many males about, but in the meantime they'd opened a bathhouse and subsidised rent for those with families, though she knew from the look of them that they were leery of such provisions, still. Until their operation settled, that was the most they could do; as it was, much of their profit was immediately reinvested.

Goyle stepped forward, his face all business. Susan liked Goyle, for all that his width and height dwarfed her, for all of his unwise alliances in the past-she knew him better. His mother used to sneak him into their house under the guise of a social visit with her Aunt and have Susan tutor him during Summer break, and through this he had a heart of gold, even if he was easily led by his counterpart.

A counterpart that was conspicuous by his absence...

"Where's Crabbe?" she asked abruptly, then blushed when Goyle turned slightly injured eyes on her.

"We're not joined at the hip," he said, his expression pained as he looked elsewhere. "He had things to do."

"Things apart from his job?" Padma asked tartly.

Goyle shrugged. "He don't tell me anything nowadays. Not after..." He broadened his shoulders, turning to wave a hand at the other men. "We're all set if you are, ma'am. Should be a decent afternoon, by the looks of the crowd."

"Not rowdy, are they?" Padma asked, brushing down her veil. Padma, more than anyone, was used to the veil, for she'd been wearing one every time her parents took her to visit their homeland for years now. This also meant hers were the most beautiful, too; specially designed for her in flattering shades to match her array of dresses.

“Just excitable, my lady. There’s been rumours...” Again, he stopped. “Ah, you’ll hear all about that soon enough.”

Susan frowned and opened her mouth to ask, but the back door swung open and interrupted her. Through it glided Parvati, her own veil in place, leading a contingent of giggling whores. Susan felt her lips tighten involuntarily at the sight. She knew it was hypocritical to be so disapproving, but she just couldn’t help it. Prostitutes were the bane of a well-born lady’s existence, along with actresses and opera girls. Women specifically crafted to lure a lady’s husband from the marriage bed. Even never planning to wed, the idea still angered her.

Goyle’s eyes followed the group as they moved inward, not in a particularly lecherous way, not like some of his other men, but it still frustrated Susan to see it, and her words were all the sharper for that. “Hear all about *what?*”

“Ah, you’re here!” Parvati clapped her hands happily, swishing over to kiss their cheeks. “Good, good. Now, the girls are ready if you are, though if I were you I’d keep an eye on Tania, it’s her first time. She hasn’t caused any trouble in the house *yet*, but one must be careful, and that one has an eye for gin.”

“Won’t you be staying?” Padma asked, sounding mildly surprised. “I thought...”

“Daphne sent a messenger - apparently she was called to the House early this morning and needs an alibi. We’re going for ices,” Parvati gave a little cheer. “Speaking of, I’d better be off - she’s waiting for me. Now, remember about Tania, but don’t worry overly much because I’ve left Marguerite in charge. She’ll keep her in line. Good luck!”

And she shimmied off. Susan turned back to Goyle only to realise he’d disappeared, and was now stood at the head of his crowd of men. “Two minutes!” he called.

Padma and Susan made their way up onto the dais amidst the chaos of last minute preparations. The doxies fanned out across the room, nine of them in groups of twos and threes, enjoying the chance to play slutty courtier. It always seemed mad to Susan that they’d *enjoy* this, but for prostitutes in the East End a position with the Harem was the Holy Grail of the sex trade, and these sessions were a chance to show off their position. They were all dressed in their best gowns, fans hanging from their hands, laughable excuses for masks attached to their faces by pink ribbons. No sex involved; today they were simply part of the window dressing.

Goyle’s men took up position around the walls of the room, with four at the door and two at the foot of the dais. Goyle came to stand to Susan’s left, so close it felt as if to breathe would be to touch him, and she studiously ignored the almost claustrophobic effect this had on her nerves.

The man at the door - Marcus Flint, Susan recalled, a good guard who might have been made leader if not for Goyle getting there first - shot Goyle a hand-gesture, which Goyle returned immediately.

The crowd gushed through the doors the second they opened with no thought to propriety, a humming, shoving mass that seemed to pour into the corners of the room and fill it from

there until they were up to capacity. It took no more than five minutes, with their women glittering amongst them to calm raised tempers with a touch of flirtation, or to greet family and friends with glee. The guards kept the crowd from coming too close to the women on the dais, clearing a space for petitioners on the floor. Soon, that was the only space available, and Susan felt Goyle shift as he kept a wary eye out for thieves.

A nod from Goyle had the doors closed once more, and silence fell as he took the stage, so to speak. "Number One!" he called, and stepped back.

The petitions were seen on a less than random basis, which used to be decided by the endless Arithmantic calculations Susan ran with Hermione and Septima. However, when it became clear that nearly eight hours of work was going into maintaining an equation that really told them nothing except that there happened to be a great deal of poor people in their neighborhood (which they only need step outside to realise), the girls backed off with their academics and handed the responsibility to the next best people: Lavender and Parvati, and their trusty Divination.

Somehow, despite the two not having a single drop of Seers blood between them, they managed to always bring up the more crucial cases first.

And, sometimes first literally *was* first.

A rangy woman stepped forth into the circle. It was odd, because usually their first petitioner was thin and worn-down looking, sometimes with children hanging around their legs. They were in the worst-case scenario, at a point where even their own community cannot help them, and they must beg help from the Big Bad Wolf of the area - the Harem.

Despite the full state of the throne room, it was true that every two days, when they held these conferences, they got perhaps four or five actual petitioners rather than observers simply looking for gossip or trouble. After all, they were a *gang*. They had a reputation. And while they would never turn down a person in need of real help, they were certain to add caveats or limit such help so that they were not overrun by beggars. It was necessary, for they could not save all of London, and they certainly were not going to try.

This woman, however, was no meek victim, nor was she a beggar. She stood tall, her eyes fierce, catlike slits as she assessed them. The crowd reacted oddly to her, too; silence fell, without a single mutter or bet exchanged. Padma and Susan shared a look behind their veils. This did not look good for them.

"My name is Elizabeth Knuckle!" the woman proclaimed, her standing regal. "I'm 'ere 'cause we've got concerns, and we want to know what'chu gon' do about 'em?"

Padma straightened in her chair, leaning forward slightly. "Might I ask what your concerns are, Mrs. Knuckle?"

Mrs. Knuckle grinned, a not entirely friendly expression, showing all of her teeth. "Right you can. Burgled houses, slaughtered animals, kidnapped kids, robbed shops - what do you think our concerns are?"

“Mrs. Knuckle,” Padma began, her voice soft and soothing, but Mrs. Knuckle shouted over her-

“ *Death Eaters! They’re back!*”

Seven: Investigation

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the wait!

Please don't hate me, I wasn't even sure if I would ever update this one, it's such self-indulgent bull.

I've deleted a chapter which didn't make much sense, I might update the flow in future, but in the meantime, please, enjoy this chapter.

Love, Eliza x

“You’re new.”

The first words Scabior said when he slinked through the door like a cat did not endear him to Ginny, though the way she bristled certainly endeared her to him. He smirked, showing off a marvelous selection of gold and silver teeth. “And pretty, very pretty,” he murmured in a sing-song voice, stepping closer, wagging a finger as he did so. “You didn’t tell me you had new treasure.”

This, he seemed to be addressing to Hermione, who was stood at Ginny’s side. The only reason Ginny had not shrank back from this man, in fact, was her desire to impress her new mentor. That, and the fact that Hermione appeared utterly unmoved by the man’s demeanour.

“She’s not for you, Scabior,” Hermione told him in a bored tone, waving him off with a flick of her wrist.

“Then how might you be paying me this time?” He asked, turning his head to her. His hand still lingered near Ginny’s neck, as though he wished to play with the veil obscuring her face, or the ribbon bordering the top of her bodice. Neither option was appealing, terrifying, really, and she couldn’t seem to breathe. She’d never been touched by a man not related to her, or, well, *Harry*. The memory of that did not help her panic at all.

“Gold, perhaps?” Hermione gestured to a chair. “That rather depends on how good a job you do, doesn’t it? Sit.”

Ginny did not hide behind Hermione; that was merely the position she happened to be in as they all moved to the seats. Scabior wouldn’t have noticed, either way; he was in front of them, his steps a liquid dance, before he sprawled across the one loveseat in the room, propping his head up on his hand and crossing his feet at the ankle over the armrest. Ginny sat down but couldn’t stop watching his boots, caked in dried dirt, bounce on the delicate damask with distaste. Hermione did not so much as shudder, instead leaning forward to pour the tea.

More tea. Ginny was getting rather sick of tea.

“Ah, none of that, ta,” Scabior drawled, his eyes running over Hermione - or, more specifically, where her bodice bowed outwards at the movement to display a line of flesh. “Got any whiskey?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied sweetly, continuing to pour, “but I’ll not waste the good stuff on you. You’ll drink this or thirst and I don’t mind which.” She lifted a hand and snapped her fingers. “You needn’t look at my face but my breasts certainly won’t be paying you.”

“Yet you offer me no other sight,” he sighed, but obediently took his eyes away. “If we’re not going to... *play* , then why have you brought me here?”

“The new Rag ‘n’ Bone man up Garden way, do you know of him?”

Scabior paused - only for a moment, but it was a perceptible pause. His entire body froze, not a muscle twitching, and then he smiled. “Ah, my lady, y’know you’re not me only employer. I can’t share nothing about that with you.”

Ginny frowned, but Hermione only nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose it’s the same for Jeremy Brass, then?”

“I know the fella what done him, o’course, but... you well know, my lady. I’m in their employ, so I can’t tell their secrets.”

Hermione nodded again, this time with a hint of a smile in her voice. “I thought as much. Thank you, Scabior.”

Scabior grinned, his teeth glimmering, and Ginny realised with a start that the man was wearing *kohl* . “No need t’ thank me, luv. I didn’t tell you nothing.”

“Quite right.” In a move that had Ginny gaping, her mentor plunged a hand into her bodice. Scabior let out a hearty laugh, his eyes pinned to the motion, and Hermione produced a small sack. “There you are,” Hermione said, tossing it over the table.

Scabior caught it with reflexes that would make any Seeker cry in envy. “Ta, luv,” he muttered, bringing it to his nose and inhaling deeply. “I don’t even need the gold - I could be quite happy with just your warmth alone.”

“Then you’d best get out before you leave with just that,” Hermione - *flirted?* Ginny had never before thought of her as the flirty type, but... there was a definite set to her shoulders, a husky note to her voice that belied the assumption. *Who was this woman?*

The door opened as if on cue, and a veiled head poked through. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“No problem, Scabior was just leaving.” Hermione stood, and Scabior followed - at least the man had manners, if a poor facsimile of them. “Have Tom show him out.”

Scabior slipped from the room in the same way he’d come, silently, with a leer for each of the ladies in turn. It was only when he was gone that Ginny felt she could breathe again - and the

breaths came quickly, shallowly, and completely out of control.

“Hush - hush,” Hermione murmured, whipping off her veil. She came to her knees by Ginny’s chair and took her hands in her own. “He’s gone now. Hush, don’t worry.”

“He - he had a knife,” Ginny gasped, her fingers curling around Hermione’s and squeezing. “In his pocket, and those rings - all those rings, they were caked in blood.”

“His personal hygiene does leave something to be desired,” Hermione admitted, with a little smile that seemed to ask for laughter but didn’t receive it. “Ginny - Ginny, dear, you cannot let yourself go to pieces. There are worse men than Scabior out there.”

Ginny huffed a laugh through her closing throat at that. Each word felt like razors stripping her throat but she managed them, with effort. “But he’s in your employ.”

“He will not bite the hand that feeds him, but he gets off on unnerving people - couldn’t you tell? All those things he does, the touching, the looking - he’s doing it to upset you.”

“Which doesn’t make it less upsetting!” Ginny squeaked, feeling hysteria rising. She was not cut out for this, no she was not. Only a couple of hours in and she had passed out and now here she was again, close to repeating the experience. “This is ridiculous!” she gasped, angry at her own thoughts. “I’m a strong girl - I know I am! Fearless, they call me!”

Hermione pulled her into an embrace, her arms around Ginny’s simultaneously comfort and constriction. “If you were fearless, you wouldn’t be here, because that would make you an idiot. Look - look at me,” she pulled back again and presented a hand, the other enfolding Ginny’s in hers once more. “Look at it - see how it shakes? That’s nerves. I’ve done this every day for two years and still it shakes when I see Scabior. He came after me during the War, you see; almost got us all killed, presenting us to Lord Malfoy. But *you* - you do not have my baggage. You will learn to deal with him much better than I, because you *are* strong. You are *brave*. But we cannot expect you to be everything on your first day, and neither should you. Okay? Okay. Now, have some tea.” She chuckled at Ginny’s involuntary grimace. “It’s tea or vodka, that’s all I have to hand, and I can’t have the staff seeing you like this. They’re ours, of course, but any sign of weakness...”

“I’ll be fine,” she managed as the clouds in her mind subsided slightly. “I’m *so* sorry, I don’t know-”

“It’s alright, Gin. We won’t speak of it again.” Hermione stroked a hand over Ginny’s hair, held back by the veil crumpled up at the top. “We will have to think of some sort of sign, however. So that if you’re uncomfortable I can find a way to get you out of that situation. It won’t always work, mind you, but it’ll be something...” the older girl trailed off in thought, and Ginny took the opportunity to breathe, fully and deeply, for what felt like the first time in hours. She’d thought she’d had a hold of this. She hadn’t had a panic attack for a year, at least. But then...

It had come as such a shock, she supposed. Hermione’s warning had been hours before, now; they’d spent the time after Mrs. Bodd’s exit going over the way the Harem worked, and

Ginny's likely responsibilities. For the first week, she would simply shadow Hermione, and that hadn't seemed so bad, but now...

"Besides, that was very good," Hermione smiled proudly. "You noticed he had weapons, and where they were. Like it was instinct. That will keep you alive one day."

"He's gone, slimy git," a familiar voice said from the door, and both of their heads whipped around to see the veiled figure from before return. She reached up to pull it off, whipping long, unpinned jet-black hair back and sighing. "He tried to pinch my arse, you know."

Ginny was gawping, she knew. But of all the people one would least expect to find in the palace of an East End crime ring, Parvati Patil was near the top. Much less Parvati Patil wearing a dress likely to be the envy of every madam in London, cut in the French style of the last century, complete with snow-white ruffles from sleeves and neck and sapphire blue silk falling over a full corset, the proportions of which Ginny was quite sure were impossible.

"Careful, you'll catch flies," the impossible girl told Ginny dismissively, before turning to Hermione. "Betty Knuckle has been stirring up trouble again."

Hermione sighed, rubbing her hands over her eyes tiredly. "What is it now? Grindylows in the Tyburn? A werewolf in her shed?"

"Death Eaters. In the East End." Parvati raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "On our turf. And it looks like she's got evidence - not to mention, all our people riled up. Once we dealt with her everyone else up and left, seemed to forget all about their own problems."

Hermione shot to her feet, apparently completely forgetting Ginny. "Where is she?"

"Susan put her in the war room, she's there with her now. I'm meeting Daph down at the docks, but you'll have Padma too. I doubt you'll need us." Hermione was barely listening by this point, already halfway through the door when Parvati cleared her throat and pointed rudely at the younger girl, still there, listening with wide eyes. "What do you want doing with this one?"

"I do have a name," Ginny pointed out.

"Yes, Ginny, the youngest Weasley. Well, we're not too fond of Weasleys around these parts, darling," Parvati said with a sickly-sweet smile. "I've enough on my plate, and-" she turned back to Hermione. "I'm not babysitting. We have an agreement."

Hermione's eyes shot to Ginny, and she bit her lip. "Right. Right. Is Tonks still here?"

"I assume so, unless Pansy has decided to take her out."

"She's with her dad today," Hermione said. "I'll get her. Can you stay with Ginny until she comes?"

Parvati groaned as if this was the greatest chore, and Ginny narrowed her eyes. She was getting *very* tired of being talked about as if she wasn't there, and only her respect for

Hermione was keeping her quiet. She had no such respect for Parvati, who had always been a silly, childish creature. “Yes, fine, whatever.”

“Good.” Hermione came back into the room and to Ginny, smiling warmly. “Tonks will come and take you home, okay? You mustn’t tell anyone about what you’ve seen here today, not even your maid, do you understand? There are lives at risk.”

Ginny nodded, irritated at being treated like a child. “Yes, yes, if the Minister finds out -”

“We will hang. Or burn. Or drown. Whichever way they find most expedient in getting rid of seven meddlesome women. Ginny - no-one. Not a soul.”

She clamped her lips closed, biting down to keep them that way. For her to lay out the possible outcomes like that - so coldly, succinctly... it sent a thrill of fear down her spine. Hermione smiled, kissed her cheek, and disappeared into the corridor, leaving her alone with Parvati.

Who stared back at her, clearly bored.

“I’m not my brother,” Ginny announced when the silence became cloying.

“I know,” Parvati replied coldly. “If you were, I’d have castrated you by now.”

Well. That was cheerful.

“On your back.”

Flora arched her back into a langorous stretch, her movements almost feline as she transitioned smoothly into her turn, twisting her spine so that breasts and face where the first to appear, her lovely arse the last to move. Her pleasure was shown in a deep, throaty purr, her legs sliding against the silk bedspread.

Daphne felt something cold drip down her wrist, jerking her out of her reverie. *Damn*. Her ice had melted. Bringing it to her lips, she curled her tongue to lick up the trail, before stopping when her own arousal made the action feel ludicrously erotic.

“That’s good, Flora. Spread your legs a little, show us that sweet little cunny.”

Parvati was directing the girl’s movements, munching on her own ice all the while. She seemed utterly unaffected by the display, and why shouldn’t she be? Parvati was straight as the proverbial arrow, and no amount of supple, feminine flesh could tempt her.

Daphne, however?

As a Healer, she really should be professional about this and *stop*. Never mind that she didn’t hold the title, nor that she had taken no oaths - it was a moral thing, and not something she usually struggled with.

But, Flora...

Flora was a lithe woman with exotically slanted, wide brown eyes and small, pert breasts that she showed to best advantage by wearing corsets so tight they almost popped from the top. Her boyish figure seemed to bring with it an almost male confidence to take what she wanted and consequences be damned, hence why she had ended up here, in their brothel. She'd been in a sorry state when she'd first arrived and even now her nearly-black hair only reached her ears, having been cut on her arrival to rid her of lice and since then simply adopted for the style.

There were things about her that ruined the illusion, however, and that was how Daphne knew it was not truly Flora she wanted. The look in her eyes, for example; the way she moved, for another.

Okay, so the issue wasn't Flora at all, but her resemblance to a certain someone else Daphne knew, loved, and would never be able to touch. Not the way she wanted.

“Pradera?”

Parvati's voice brought her back to the present and she jerked, sending the rest of her ice slopping over her knuckles. With a curse that had Flora snickering, she waved her fingers before realising that she couldn't use magic here. Parvati handed her a napkin with a smirk. "What do you think?"

"Lovely," Daphne said, slipping into her persona easily. "But useless. Can you not be still, Flora?"

"Right I can, ma'am, if that's how you fancy it." With a bawdy wink, she made like a plank of wood. "Better?"

"Hardly," Daphne muttered, rolling her eyes as she approached the bed. Flora had, apparently, been exhibiting some sort of rash. Rashes caused all sorts of trouble in this business, meaning that when Parvati had received the message about it, they'd immediately had to hurry back from their walk. Which was disappointing in itself, because Daphne found herself curious to learn more about their new addition, but this torture took the cake. Her friend meant well by insisting that Flora show them her moves while they were here - it being important to keep on top of your whores' skills if you want to survive - but it only served to remind Daphne of what she could not have.

Putting her hands to warm, soft flesh, even through the gloves, was torture. Palpating the area, feeling it move beneath her hands, undulating as Flora giggled at the sensation, was worse. "Feels funny, that does, milady," she squeaked, writhing.

"My apologies, Flora." If her voice emerged slightly hoarse, no one mentioned it. That was the benefit of working in such an enterprise, Daphne supposed; no one was going to judge your proclivities. This boundless acceptance gave her a dangerous freedom. Forcing herself to focus in the rash, which was pale pink and flecked brown with broken blood vessels, she frowned. "Lift a knee," she commanded, and her mind was once more professional as she examined the girl's genitalia. Even so, she kept it perfunctory, and moved back to her stomach the second the girl let out a low, purring laugh. "When was the last time you had a holiday?" she asked after a moment, pulling back.

"Wot's a holiday?"

Daphne closed her eyes momentarily. "You have a sister, don't you, Flora? In a boarding house up Oxford way."

"Yeah? Wot's it to you?" Flora was suddenly defensive, pulling herself up onto her knees, arms relaxed but ready to fight. "Yer not 'avin' er."

"That's not what she means, Flo."

"Calm yourself." Daphne swallowed the lump in her throat and straightened up. "It's not infectious. Just stress."

"Stress?" Flora looked up at her askance.

"Quite so, Flora, dear. I think you need a break."

"But ma'am!" the girl scrambled up into a seated position, reaching out for Daphne, her expression panicked. "I need this job, Mum! I'll work harder - some powder'll cover it!"

"Hush, girl, you're embarrassing yourself!" Parvati snapped, as Daphne lurched backwards and away from the girl's grip. "Do not make me restrain you! Who do you think you are?!"

"Sorry, milady," Flora sobbed. "Don' send me away, I beg you-"

"Only for a week," Daphne reassured her, her own voice shaky. "Stay with your sister, make sure she's doing well."

"O' course she's doing well!" Flora snapped through her tears, her tone swapping to petulance with such speed it almost made Daphne dizzy. "She's got work in a seamstress's house, and she won't thank me for risking that!"

Daphne closed her eyes, counting to ten. No, this was not the woman she wanted. But she was her responsibility, anyway.

"Find her somewhere to go," she ordered Parvati, disliking the impatient edge in her voice just as much as Parvati seemed to, but unable to muffle it. She had to get out of here. "Soon, and for no less time than a full week. I only want to see her back here when that rash is gone, do you understand?"

Only once she was safely on the other side of the door did Daphne feel safe enough to breathe once more. And that, only for a moment. This curse would follow her for the rest of her life.

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