

Find Your Way Back

by jawy

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"Arm yourself, my heart; the thing that you must do is fearful, yet inevitable."

... Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*

The warmth from the sun forces my eyes open. I am blinded by the glare from a window as dust motes dance around me. Whether it is morning or afternoon, my body is now simply the conduit between an aching head and the sweat pulling my shirt to my spine.

Mother's voice rings in my head, warning of future under-eye circles as I rub out the sleep and look around me. Rumpled sheets line the only other bed in the room, a dusty mirror hangs precariously on the wall, and a dresser in the corner has not seen varnish in years.

With patience and no small measure of willpower, I lever myself from the bed. I have awakened in a musty, beige-walled room, still clothed and quite alone. I cannot believe I was stupid enough to let someone else share this space overnight while I slept unguarded. The past two years have taught me my lessons in caution.

I rise and walk to the doorway as if in a dream, barely feeling my wrist move as I turn the door knob. When the door opens, I am staring at another beige wall in a short hallway opening into what looks like a sitting room and a dining room in a flat.

When I reach the end of the hall and turn into the sitting room, an idle thought flashes through my mind. Whatever we drank last night passed through me with the finesse of a stampeding Erumpet.

We.

I sag against the corner opposite the sitting room, my head throbbing with the sudden onset of memories, relief, and worry.

He is here, standing with his back to me as he stares out the window. Tension rides the arc of his shoulders, pulling his rumpled school shirt taut as his hands grip the windowsill. He has been standing there so long that his breath has clouded the dirty window above his head. With his dark skin and coiled energy, he is the only sight of interest in this entire flat.

For me, this is the old familiar groove: watch and wait as he mentions, does, or thinks aloud. Despite my red hair and the spotted letters branding my face, I am no match for his energy and will. So I wait yet again, silently willing him to speak.

He breaks the silence before I understand that he has spoken. "Sleep well?" he asks, still staring out the window.

It has been more than a year since I have felt this uncomfortable around him. I try for flippancy to compensate. "Brilliantly," I reply. "Enjoying the view?"

When he finally turns his head to look at me, tension pulls his face blank. "No one's been in or out of the Leaky for ages." The look on my face must convey my confusion because he adds, "No celebrating like last time."

"Does that matter?" I ask, truly curious. "We know from the radio reports that Potter won."

He straightens back from the window, and I instinctively curl away. He notices, just as he always has, so he moves slowly and lets his open hands hang at his sides in a non-threatening gesture.

Even though my heart is in overdrive and my breath has quickened, I have the presence of mind to be disgusted with myself. I have always been jumpy around sudden movements, but my frights worsened after fifth year. My spotty face meant I was easy prey for any bully, and we had quite a few at Hogwarts. Strangely, the Slytherins had the most fun tormenting me, even though many of them were in the very Inquisitorial Squad I aided.

But he was never one of them. In fact, he somehow stopped most of it by the beginning of seventh year, though I never knew how. And though I know he would never hurt me in that way, my senses betray me every time. So, I hate myself while I wonder at his patience.

He remains at the other side of the room as I internally claw my way to normalcy. When my breathing becomes more manageable I whisper, "Sorry."

"Stop apologizing," he says evenly, but I hear the undercurrent of anger. I never know why he is angry. "It's not your fault."

And I can never find a response to that.

He sighs and rubs a hand over his short, curly hair. "What will you do now?" he asks.

He is expecting an answer from me, but I do not have one. I have not even had the time to think of a plan. But it is a welcome distraction. "I'll have to find Mum first. Then... I don't know, finish school, take N.E.W.T.s, find work. The same as before. You?"

"I'll have to find my mum, too," he mutters, not mentioning that since Voldemort's ascension to power, Mrs. Zabini has frequently been spotted in the company of Death Eaters willingly. "If they hold N.E.W.T.s again, I'll probably land at the Ministry or Gringotts."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. "If? Why wouldn't they hold N.E.W.T.s again?"

"Hogwarts's a mess," he says, nodding towards the window. "There's no news other than Voldemort's dead. Who knows if they'll rebuild again?"

He speaks Voldemort's name slowly, savoring the taste syllable by syllable, but I only feel panic rising as my plans begin to crumble before my eyes. "They have to hold N.E.W.T.s," I protest. "It's barbaric to end a school completely before it's even finished its last term!"

He quirks an eyebrow but his expression remains. "And if they didn't? What would you do then?"

I do not have an answer. I only know that knowledge is power, so I want to live, breathe, and continue learning before another megalomaniac wrests away the privilege. I do not have the finances or connections for any other way.

He sees the answer written across my face. But the look on his face is expectant, as though he wants me to say something.

Taking measured steps, he begins crossing the room to the beige couch. "If you could start anew, if you had no obligations, what would you want to do?" he asks.

I think he is trying to distract me, but I take the bait because the answer is so simple. "Photography."

He cocks his head to the side, watching me with some surprise. "I didn't expect that."

"Should I be flattered?" I ask with more confidence as I enter the room and head for a squashy beige chair opposite the couch.

He laughs, and I am so startled I almost miss my seat. I have made him laugh before, but I have not seen him smile in the past month or so.

"Yes, I do not always make perfect predictions," he replies ruefully. "But I always thought it was merely a hobby."

I feel safe in this seat, so I open up more. "It is just a hobby, but I can only imagine how wonderful it would be to travel the world for shoots, or even to run a successful business on my own. I can set the hours and the clientele while allowing time for friends."

"By which I presume you mean myself?" he asks a little imperiously.

"And Cho," I respond, enjoying the banter between us. He and I have been Potions partners since sixth year, and our camaraderie in the classroom translated into a friendship outside of class. He and Cho are the only ones I can trust. Even though I did not hear her name in the casualty lists, I still hope Cho is all right.

To continue the distraction, I ask, "What would you do if you could start fresh?"

He is silent for a moment, playing with a tear in his uniform pants as he thinks. "Wine," he responds carefully. "My mum told me my dad was a sommelier in a restaurant when they first met. I'd like to try my hand at growing the grapes."

I am equally surprised to hear this. He and I have never spent lengthy periods of time together, so we have never discussed much beyond school. I have also heard the rumors about Mrs. Zabini's husbands over the years. "Do you still speak to your father?"

"He's dead," he responds flatly. "He died when I was two. I only have a few memories of him."

"I'm sorry," I say, horrified by my blunder.

"Stop apologizing," he says in a long-suffering voice. But from the look on his face, I can tell he has forgiven me.

The conversation lulls again, so I look around me and I am struck by the space. "This flat...do you own it?" I ask, gesturing the room.

He shrugs. "No. But the rent is paid for another two months."

I marvel at this. "So, you rented this place, anticipating the battle?" I ask, not quite understanding the situation.

"Yes."

"But you couldn't have known that the battle would happen near the end of the year," I point out.

He hesitates, and I feel a strange tension shimmering in the air between us. "I've had this flat for the past year," he finally says.

"You Slytherins really are prepared for everything," I mutter.

He says nothing, as though expecting more questions. But all I can think about is the forethought he put into letting this flat. He even ensuring there were two beds in the...

"Merlin's beard!" I exclaim as I jump up from the couch. He stands up quickly, and I cringe as expected, but I force myself to ignore my tense muscles. "I'm so sorry I've been sleeping in your mother's bed! I'll *Scourgify* the sheets and leave..."

Before I can take two shaky steps towards the bedroom, I feel his hands warmly gripping my forearms. "Sit down," he orders quietly, and I am in such a state of mortification and fear and adrenaline that I can only comply.

He squats on the floor in front of my chair, his grip looser on my arms. "First," he begins exasperatedly, "stop apologizing. Second, the bed's yours if you want it."

"But where will your mother sleep?" I ask.

It is then I notice his face is as still as a mask. "You know what she's done. I doubt the Ministry will let her go."

"But the bed..."

"It was always yours," he says patiently.

For the second time today, my mind goes blank. "But... how did you know? That I would come with you?"

Something in his face changes, and I realize that I am seeing Blaise at his most insecure. "I didn't," he says simply. "I only hoped."

Now my mind races, thinking back to just last night when we both left the castle together. McGonagall had ordered the Slytherins and younger children to leave Hogwarts. When he had turned to leave, he had caught my eye but did not say anything. He did not need to.

I immediately turned to Cho and knew she would fight with Potter and the rest of Dumbledore's Army. And just as in fifth year, I looked each of them in the eye and knew I was not wanted.

So, I joined the throng exiting the Great Hall and followed blindly as we went to the Room of Requirement. I remember being amazed at the number of beds and House hangings in the room, but that changed when I saw he was still there, waiting for me. I did not have time to say anything to him before he grabbed my hand and led me to the tunnel in the painting.

"But why?" I ask him gently. "Why did you want me to come with you?"

"Because I needed to know your plans after the war," he simply explained.

This conversation has taken on an undercurrent that I do not understand, but I decide to ask, "What do you mean?" anyway.

"We have choices here, Marietta," he says deliberately as he watches my eyes. "We can return to the Wizarding world and continue with the N.E.W.T.s-and-work plan. We can move to France or other Wizarding communities on the Continent and start over there. Or" ...he squeezes my arms lightly to understate the importance... "we can break our wands and live like Muggles. Here we are so far removed from Hogwarts and the Ministry that we can decide what to do on our own, with no prejudices."

I cannot meet his eyes. My intentions are predicated on passing N.E.W.T.s. Without them, I am left powerless, knowledge-less. Yet voicing this would show the self-doubt that my past and the bullying have wrought in me. And he was never a part of my plans.

So why did I leave Hogwarts with him? Why do I remain with him yet?

"What is your decision?" I ask him quietly.

He quirks his mouth into a little grin as he replies, "I won't bias yours."

We stare each other down. I want to make my choice immediately, but each option is fraught with uncertainty. If we become Muggles, we will need to start on our own without any magic. While magic gave me the hateful spots on my face, studying it brought me more joy than any other subjects. What could I find to study in the Muggle world that would approach the complexity and exhilaration I found in magic?

Leaving England would be easier, but there would be questions surrounding our past. Even though we are personally innocent of Death Eater activity, running away implies shame. We also do not know what his mother has been doing for the past year.

The mere thought of returning to Diagon Alley, to Hogwarts and to all of the places I love stirs my soul. I want nothing more than to walk those cobblestoned streets with our heads held high. But his standing according to the new Minister may be more questionable than mine. I cannot bear to return only to lose him to another Inquisitorial Squad.

But there is a fourth choice that he has not mentioned. I can leave this flat and refuse to make a decision that includes him.

I look at this man, this *boy* who has never spoken of friendship, love, hate, or the myriad other emotions which may pass between two people. He is not staring at my spotty face, my hair, my breasts, or any other conceivable body part that would catch the eye of a seventeen-year-old male. He is staring into my eyes, opening the shutters to my soul.

He is giving me the truest and best gift a person can receive: respect.

He will not voice his choice, but I already know it. He spent all morning staring at the Leaky Cauldron directly across the street from our flat. He wants to return.

When I look into his eyes and smile, he smiles back.

Finite Incantatem