Tea, Black.

by Coromandel

Summary

A chance meeting during the summer holidays has unexpected consequences for one snarky Potions Master and one unreasonable seventh-year Gryffindor. Can the two work together and find love in times of war, or will the ghosts of the past divide them?

Notes

Disclaimer: With the exception of Alice Crowley, this isn't mine. It all belongs to JKR. I'm not making a knut.

So, here it is. The very first chapter of my very first fic. What happens when you throw a cynical witch and a snarky wizard into a cauldron, and give it a little stir? Answer: A very difficult relationship between two very difficult people in a very difficult time.

Many, many thanks to my wonderful beta, FawkesyLady. My writing would look like a 5 year old's ramblings without her. Ta, duck!

Anyway, let's get the boat on the road, shall we?
Meet Alice - a cantankerous, grumpy seventh-year Gryffindor, a raging cynic and skilled potioneer, who encounters the equally cantankerous Severus Snape during the summer holidays. Let the Snark battle begin!

‘By Boreas’ bouncing bollocks, if me fags are the least bit soggy, I swear I’ll pack up and move to Zerzura and won’t look back!’ This was an empty promise, as while the hidden desert city is dry, it is also hot and disturbingly sunny.

Alice Crowley cursed vehemently as rain started to patter on the plastic bags containing her corner-shop loot. She regretted not having worn her raincoat, so she quickened up her pace, hoping to avoid the downpour that would surely follow, complete with thunder and lightning. As much as she enjoyed watching the violent displays of an electric storm, getting caught in one was not her idea of fun.

It was uncommon for her to be out and about. The reclusive witch preferred to stock up on food every fortnight or so, avoiding social interaction in her day-to-day life, but her food supply was rapidly dwindling. She was more than a little pissed off when she woke up with a rumbling belly, only to find half a rotten tomato in the fridge and a slice of moldy bread in the pantry. She ran out of coffee and fags as well, which meant that she was hungry, angry and only half-awake as she walked down the street towards the local shop on that humid Summer morning. She’s been working too much and completely forgot about nourishment.

‘Not even broad daylight could make this place look any less miserable’, she mused as she broke into a jog to escape the rain. Rounding the corner, she swung the plastic bags filled with bread, butter, coffee, tobacco, and a can of beans from either arm, considering her surroundings.

Spinner’s End was certainly a miserable sight to behold. The most run-down part of the small town of Cokeworth on the outskirts of Manchester. The terraced houses were dilapidated and dirty, the roads were in varying states of disrepair, but at least the residents were mostly quiet and kept to themselves. Spinner’s End was certainly better than her birthplace. Burslem.

If Spinner’s End was miserable, then Burslem was absolutely grim. Alice believed it to be the most depressing, godforsaken place in all of Britain. It almost seemed as if the area was a Dementor itself, attracting the most unsavoury characters in all of Staffordshire and sucking all hope and happiness from its inhabitants. It was never difficult to spot one of the many drug dealers lurking around the numerous pubs and takeaways. Prostitutes accosted potential clients in alleyways and loitered on street corners. Demoralised youths from the council estates were always fighting, breaking windows and stealing whatever meagre possessions the local populace held. Spinner’s End, while neglected and shabby, was a fancy middle-class area in comparison.

Alice did not like to think about her sorrowful childhood. Her parents, who had her at 16, were a pair of utter thugs.* Her father had never done a day’s honest work in his life, preferring to live the life of petty crime and antisocial behaviour. He was in and out of prison on a regular basis.
Her mother, who, Alice suspected, had only fallen pregnant to get a council house, was a neglectful, irresponsible woman who would often choose to feed her alcohol addiction over feeding her only child.

When Professor Sprout arrived at their doorstep to explain to her parents that their daughter was a witch, Alice had found herself full of hope for the first time in her life. She had always known she was different, and was delighted to know she wasn’t the only one who could make strange things happen, and to finally put her gloomy hometown behind her.

She arrived at Hogwarts malnourished, feral, and half-illiterate. Professor McGonagall had her hands full, having to teach the young witch how to read, write, wash and eat at the table. Alice possessed a keen intellect and an excellent memory, and caught up with her peers in no time at all. Still, she found it difficult to make friends and remained aloof with her peer group, choosing not to trust the children who approached her in case they were going to mock her shabby clothes and her rough, broad accent. She was very lonely until the Weasley twins, Fred and George, noticed her and took her under their wing. The Weasleys weren’t wealthy either, but they were happy and friendly, and for the first time in her life, Alice felt like she belonged. She worshipped the twins ever since.

Overall, she was happy at Hogwarts. She excelled at Potions and Defence, with a natural grasp of both subjects. She consistently scored respectable marks across the board, with the exception of Herbology. Professor Sprout admitted that she had never before seen a student capable of killing magical cacti. It was due to the high quality of Alice’s written work that she managed to only just pass, although Professor Sprout seriously considered permanently banning her from the Greenhouses.

Her sixth year, the penultimate year of her magical education, was turned upside down by the Toad, Dolores Umbridge. The memory of the obnoxious amphibian dressed in pink tweed made Alice shudder with disgust and rage. The most frustrating thing was the complete and utter passivity of the staff at Hogwarts. She remembered how nobody lifted a finger to help the students who had to put up with oppressive new rules and regulations, each more ridiculous than the last.

It was Harry Potter who seemed to have suffered the worst. The wizarding world’s golden boy became the Ministry scapegoat after the disastrous finale to the Triwizard Tournament. Alice didn’t know him very well, but she felt sorry for her Housemate. The Minister for Magic was in denial over Voldemort’s return, hell-bent on brushing the bad news under the carpet. Fudge refused to acknowledge the Dark Wizard’s return, choosing to undermine both the Boy Who Lived and Headmaster Albus Dumbledore at each and every opportunity in an attempt to calm the wizardfolk and bolster his position as Minister.

Alice would never forget the terrible parade of shocky students returning from Umbridge's office late at night, bearing the evidence of psychological torture carried out for the students’ “Own Good.” Even the youngest pupils were fodder for the Toad’s odious agenda, subjecting them to unspeakable cruelties. She had often lurked in that hallway in hopes of better mapping out Umbridge's routine for use in future operations. At one point she broke her cover, unable to ignore a second year Ravenclaw boy who had staggered to his knees, face pinched in pain. It was there that she first saw the bleeding words carved deep into a student's forearm, and Alice understood that Dark magic was being used in sadistic punishments. The words etched by a Black Quill read: ‘I am an ignoramus and should never speak unless called upon.’ Dolores Umbridge had tossed down the gauntlet, daring the student body at large to defy her.

Failed by the Professors and the Ministry, the young witches and wizards have put up a considerable resistance movement, and despite the Toad’s greatest efforts, and her Spanish fucking Inquisition
unexpectedly appointed), pupils of all ages managed to make her unwelcome tenure difficult and miserable. Those who were caught quickly learned to bear their wounds as badges of honour. They were defenceless and unprepared, but they were fighting. Whether by causing disruption or joining the Dumbledore’s Army, the students became a force to be reckoned with.

She had spent many happy hours in the Room of Requirement with Fred and George, inventing new spells and potions designed to make Umbridge’s life as unbearable as possible. She developed new products for the growing Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes range to allow students to fake illness and miss the Toad’s classes. Her lips curled up in a self-satisfied smirk as she remembered one of her greatest inventions, the flatulence-inducing hex. One discreet, non-verbal flick of her wand, made from the back of the classroom, caused the Toad to fart loudly to the tune of ‘God Save the Queen’ for eight hours, effectively preventing her from going about her business and overseeing detentions. Yes, that was definitely one of Alice’s finer moments.

The tower of propaganda built by Fudge’s government collapsed after what became known as the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. The man himself had stepped down as Minister, finally forced to acknowledge the truth he had so carefully ignored: Lord Voldemort was resurrected and the wizarding world was once again facing another war. The media flipped from supporting the administration’s lies over to sensationalising stories that proved the re-emergence of the Death Eaters as a force to be feared. Dolores Umbridge was recalled from her position as Inquisitor and teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts, leaving ugly scars and festering ignorance in her wake.

The sky above faded to grey as the light drizzle turned into a heavy downpour and a roar of thunder vibrated the pavement beneath her sodden sandals. It evoked the memory of the din from magical pyrotechnics which shook the school in celebration when the Weasley twins decided that they had outgrown full-time education. She hadn’t seen Fred and George since their spectacular escape last Spring. The three of them had the show planned down to the last detail, and the twins executed it perfectly. She chuckled inwardly, remembering the terrified screams of Umbridge, and the face of Filch, contorted in impotent rage as he chased the raging fireworks with his smoldering mop.

This year, she would be alone. The twins were her only real friends, and save for a few acquaintances in her own year and the year below, she didn’t have that many connections. Fred and George were the highlight of her life. They secretly called themselves the Terrible Triplets, and their creativity was a constant threat to the school and its residents’ peace.

The three teenagers were geniuses at avoiding detection, as much energy being poured into the execution as it was into the actual prank. It was invigorating to evade even the most determined of disciplinarians, Professor Snape and Mr Filch. And Peeves, oh, sweet Peeves, who, after years of trying to out-do them, wisely decided to join them! Things simply wouldn’t be the same now that her best mates were out of school and building up a thriving business.

Alice came to a standstill outside the faded, rickety gate that led into her backyard. She arrived home drenched, famished and in desperate need for a cigarette, but these small discomforts were forgotten when a strong hand unexpectedly gripped her upper arm and violently yanked her around, sending her four cans of beans clattering to the pavement.

Her instincts kicked in, and she raised her knee to feint at her attacker’s groin whilst planning to bring a concentrated force down on his ankle, intending to break it. Instead, she froze and cursed loudly as her eyes focused on the face of her assailant. The oily black hair, the hooked nose and the penetrating, inky eyes could only belong to one person. Professor Snape was a terrifying sight as he
brandished the tip of his ebony wand between her breasts and was pushing it painfully against her sternum. A quick glance revealed that the Potions Master was not merely inconvenienced or irritated. He was absolutely livid.

‘Well, well… and what do we have here? A little Gryffindor girl, sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong... now now, don’t even try to fight me, for you will regret it.’

Alice swallowed thickly, backing up and slamming into the fence, confusion and fear etched clearly across her face. Why was he here? Why was he attacking her?

‘Um… Professor Snape… I don’t unders…’ she began, but was swiftly cut off by the tip of his wand being pressed even harder against her chest.

‘Silence! I will not tolerate being spied upon! What do you think you are doing here?!’ he spat. His black eyes were glittering with unsuppressed rage.

Growing more bewildered by the second, Alice replied in a shaky voice, ‘What do you mean, sir?’


By this point, the girl had had enough. She had no idea why the dreaded Professor was accosting her in this way. She felt weak and lightheaded from the lack of food, and she was desperate to get inside to escape the pouring rain. As a rush of adrenaline kicked into her system, she raised her chin defiantly and looked her teacher in the eye. The bubble of frustration burst out in an indignant cry. ‘I fuckin’ live ‘ere! Now get the fuck off of me!’

* This description does NOT represent the working classes of the British society. Whilst most poor families are loving and caring, there is a special ‘underclass’, also known as ‘chavs’ who are less than nice and are a general menace to society. And no, not every person living in a council house is a chav. If you’re a Brit living in one of those ‘rough’ areas, you’ll probably know exactly what type of people I’m talking about.

** The spelling is intentional. Many Northern accents drop the Ts and the Hs and may be considered less elegant than the Southern drawl by some. I, on the other hand, absolutely love those accents. Alice’s accent is a mix of Manc and Stoke, and occasionally, it will show.
Severus Snape had been outraged to see one of his students lurking so near to his childhood home; the idea that a mere child could have found him in Spinner’s End was more horrifying than the Dark Lord himself.

Alice Crowley. Seventh year. Gryffindor.

Unlike her Housemates, Alice was quiet and calm. She never caused any mither. She worked diligently in class, consistently producing excellent written work and flawless potions. She bore his chiding and castigation with dignity, never arguing or talking back. In fact, Severus didn’t think he’d heard more than a handful of words from her since she arrived as a first year. She would only speak when spoken to, and her answers were short and precise, with no unnecessary elaboration. Unobtrusive, careful, and talented, she was Severus’ ideal, near-invisible student.

It was therefore a shock to his system to see the girl enter the corner shop, where he had gone to buy a pack of cigarettes. As soon as he caught a glimpse of the familiar adolescent, he ducked behind a tall stack of beer cans and discreetly observed, trying to work out what she was doing and why.

The girl seemed oblivious to his presence as she made her way around the shop, filling up her basket with some basic foodstuffs, but Severus knew better. Surely she must have seen him enter and followed him inside. Why was she spying on him? It was obvious the little chit was Up To Something, and Severus would soon find out what. If this was another stupid Gryffindor prank, he would ensure that the little dunderhead regretted it. He would confront her, and make her tell him how she knew where he lived. He would ensure she would run a mile and never look back. And as soon as school starts again, he would get his revenge.

His malicious musings were interrupted as Alice paid for her goods at the counter and exited the shop, having given no indication that she had known about his presence. Severus found himself growing more intrigued by the minute, and, abandoning his vantage point, he sneaked out behind her noiselessly, determined to follow the girl.

Her retreating form was easy to locate and follow. He continued his silent pursuit and almost chuckled when the normally reserved young lady blurted out a string of blistering invectives, loud enough to echo to the rooftops of the nearby industrial estates. Alice appeared to be deep in thought, and Severus assumed it was because she was plotting something unpleasant, like the Gryffindor she was. His discomfort peaked alarmingly high when Crowley rounded the corner and paused dangerously close to his house. He was going to have to Obliviate her, and fast.

When Alice stood outside a faded red gate and fumbled with her pockets, Severus seized his opportunity to pounce.

Treading softly with the well-honed skills of a hunter, Severus stalked over to where Alice stood and, before she had a chance to realise what was happening, he took out his wand and pressed it forcefully against her sternum. The girl shrieked in alarm and her arms flew up in a defensive posture, scattering her shopping all over the pavement. Quick reflexes saved him from the girl’s knee-jerk reaction. As she froze in shock, he tried to summon her wand non-verbally. The stupid child was unarmed! Why would she go out without her wand in these dangerous times? Hasn’t she learned anything in her six years of magical education?
His furious acrimony and desire to intimidate, *Obliviate*, and send the girl running for her life were replaced by perplexity and interest when Alice shook herself out of her terrified daze and snapped at him, telling him in no uncertain terms that she lived right there in Spinner’s End. Severus’ eyes snapped wide open with disbelief and he found himself too unsettled by the girl’s revelation to register the disrespectful way in which she addressed him.

It took him a moment to regain his composure as he ran a quick mental check of all the things he knew about Alice Crowley. ‘Liar.’ He drawled in his low, silky voice, his upper lip curling in a contemptuous sneer. ‘You, Miss Crowley, live in Staffordshire. Stoke-On-Trent, if I remember correctly? Or was it the Moorlands?’

‘I’m afraid your information is out of date, *Professor.*’ replied Alice irritably. ‘I used to live in Staffordshire. This -’, she pointed at the rickety red gate, ‘is my father’s childhood home. And now it’s mine. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to go inside, eat me breakfast, and have a fucking smoke!’

The young witch was visibly agitated and her voice rose in near-hysteria. Casting a quick look around, Severus grabbed her upper arm again and forcibly pushed her towards the gate. ‘Inside.’ He commanded, holding her arm in a bruising grip. He knew that the curtain-twitching Muggles would be on to them like vultures if they continued their argument out in the open. Alice cast an angry glance at her Professor, and then another at her shopping bags, forgotten on the pavement and soaked in the rain. Severus relaxed his hold, allowing the girl to pick up her things. Moments later, he was confronted by a Cadbury’s chocolate bar, thrust into his face by an angry looking Alice. He stared at her incredulously, wondering if the chit had finally lost the plot.

Quickly, she explained, ‘You won’t get past the wards without it, sir. Please take it and follow me inside. It’s raining cats and dogs and I’m sick of standing out here like a bloody idiot!’

Severus considered the purple wrapping, then took it from the girl with an unreadable expression. She sighed with annoyance and, fumbling with the rusty latch, opened the gate and stepped into her backyard. He followed her warily, attempting to hide his discomfort at entering unfamiliar territory. Looking around, he surveyed his surroundings. The tiny backyard was ensconced within a shabby timber fence. The paving slabs were a dull grey, cracked and dirty, with weeds sticking out of the gaps in all directions. A little shed made out of brick stood to the left, and a large terracotta pot was placed opposite, filled to the brim with cigarette butts. It appeared that, just like him, the girl smoked like a chimney.

Stepping inside the house, Severus tossed the chocolate bar onto the worktop by the door and cast a quick drying charm on himself and his host. He closed the door behind him and took in the sight of Alice’s kitchen. Judging by the sorry state of the backyard, he was expecting to find himself in a grimy hovel. Instead, he noted that the place was surprisingly well kept. The kitchen slightly spacious than his own, brightly lit and impeccably clean, although the décor was rather old-fashioned. The walls were adorned with beige, embossed wallpaper, the units and appliances were bog-standard, flimsy and yellowed with age, and the floor was covered in a burnt-orange lino with a circular design. An old, rectangular wooden table with four chairs stood by the opposite wall, next to a door that led into a dark, narrow hallway.

Alice stood by the net curtained window, trying to roll a cigarette with trembling hands. She was still upset over the confrontation, and she struggled to roll her paper into the desired shape. Severus sighed and, in a rare display of benevolence, reached into his pocket and took out his own pack of fags, offering one to the girl.

‘Benson and Hedges, eh? Nice one. Thanks, sir’, said Alice with a small, nervous giggle. Fumbling
around her pockets, she found her lighter and lit up her cigarette, taking a long, deep drag. She closed her eyes as she exhaled a long, shaky breath, and held up her lighter to Snape. He took the proffered light and lit his own cigarette, drawing the smoke into his lungs through his teeth.

Severus looked out the window. The downpour of rain increased in intensity, and the thunderstorm was getting nearer, announcing its presence with blinding bolts of lightning. He was silently reflecting on the recent events, organising the new information in his head. His new neighbour lived on the other side of the road, approximately ten doors down. It looked like she was living alone – why? And why was the house so heavily warded? Was she hiding? What, or who, was she hiding from?

He detected numerous layers of enchantments around the property, including aversion charms, distraction charms, forgetfulness charms, some nasty hexes, and various other repellents designed to protect the inhabitant from unwanted visitors.

If the girl wasn’t aware of him living nearby, how would he explain his own presence outside her house? The thought of revealing himself as her neighbour made him feel exposed and vulnerable. He idly wished that she wouldn’t ask too many questions. He really should have thought this through before confronting her in the first place.

His thoughts were interrupted when Alice swayed slightly on her feet and grabbed the counter top. He took a step towards her, but she just closed her eyes and chuckled. ‘Nicotine rush’. She explained, ‘I haven’t had one since I went to bed last night’. She took another deep drag and exhaled with a contented sigh.

‘I guess we should talk.’ she stated in a small voice. Severus nodded, and Alice grabbed the kettle and walked over to the sink to fill it with water. She set the kettle on its stand, flicked the switch, and turned to face him. ‘I’m going to get changed. I won’t be long. Please, make yourself comfortable, Professor’, she said, gesturing to the table and chairs.

With another nod, Severus sat down at the table, and Alice walked out of the kitchen. He heard her walk up the creaking stairs, and lit another cigarette. His experience as a student and Head of House had him know that women liked to take their time with these things.

He snorted at his own misfortune. Gryffindors were giving him enough trouble in Hogwarts, and now, he had one to deal with during the holidays as well. It appeared that there was truly no safe place to hide. They would always find him in the end. This particular Gryffindor wasn’t the worst of the lot, anyway. If she was telling him the truth, they would keep any interaction to the minimum, like they always did.

Or would they? Severus considered his student carefully. Her essays were always a pleasure to read and grade. Her potions were of exceptional quality. He remembered the small, feral little creature with frightened eyes she was in her first year. Poppy and Minerva would discuss her in the staff room in hushed tones, deeply disturbed by the poor condition of the girl’s physical state.

He was therefore extremely uncomfortable with the realisation that the little creature had grown up into a rather attractive witch. She was still very small, barely reaching the top of his shoulder, but instead of skinny, she was slender and lean. Her dark blonde hair was slightly wavy and fell to the middle of her back. Her eyes, almond shaped and grey like the stormy sky, were framed by thick, brown eyelashes and delicate, gently rounded brows.

She was not a beauty, he decided, but she was certainly a pretty young woman. Disgusted with
himself for even thinking such thoughts, he concentrated on the more pressing matters, determined not to let his mind wander again.

The girl reappeared some fifteen minutes later. Her hair was dry and put up in a messy bun on top of her head. She was dressed in a tight-fitting, pastel yellow, strappy vest, and a pair of obscenely short denim cut offs. Her feet were bare, and her toenails were painted a dark, vampy red. Severus tried not to stare at those perfectly formed, arched feet, and the slender, shapely legs as the young witch glided over to the kettle. Without turning to look at him, she asked, ‘Would you like a brew, sir?’

‘Tea, black.’
Alice felt Professor Snape's eyes on her as she turned away to get the tea out of the cupboard. She was unaware of just how much leg she was showing as she stretched her toes so that she could reach the top shelf. The pressure of that gaze unnerved her, and she wished that he'd just leave her in peace. Perhaps, if she was very lucky, the floor would crack open and suck one of them into the outer ring of hell. She'd gladly go, as it had to be more comfortable there, demons or no.

She dropped one teabag into a green ceramic mug, poured in the boiling water, and turned around to walk over to where he sat. She handed him the steaming mug and indicated the sugar bowl with a wave of her hand. The man made no effort at good manners, snorting in derision at the sight of the teabag floating in his mug. As she turned back to the counter, she caught him looking at her. Was he watching her bum? It was so fleeting that it was possible to convince herself she was seeing things.

Alice put three heaped teaspoons of instant coffee into her blue mug, poured in the water, and added a small splash of milk. She grabbed her pack of cheap tobacco and walked back to the table, taking her seat directly across from Professor Snape. Determined not to lose her cool, she busied her hands by opening her pack of tobacco and taking out a thin rolling paper.

Snape cleared his throat. ‘How long have you lived here for?’ he asked, and took another sip of his brew, wincing as the scalding liquid burned his tongue.

‘Since last September’, she replied, rolling a cigarette absent-mindedly, ‘Professor Dumbledore helped me set up the wards.’

‘I should have known,’ Snape replied, ‘who else would have had the idea of using Muggle chocolate as a way of getting inside?’

‘Well, it is unlikely that a person who wished me harm would be bringing me sweets, isn’t it? These wards are good. They keep all the people I don’t like at bay.’

‘Such as...?’, the Professor raised an elegant brow, intrigued, and Alice chuckled quietly.

‘Well, you know… Muggle authorities, door-to-door salesmen, religious nuts, Tory voters...’
‘...and Death Eaters.’ Snape spat, cutting her off mid-sentence. ‘Why were you out without your wand? Do you know how dangerous it is out there, you stupid girl?’ He barked, his voice lowering dangerously.

Alice blushed with unease, and mumbled, searching for the right words, ‘The Headmaster assured me the area was safe, Professor. And I’ve never encountered a single Death Eater while living here.’ Their eyes locked briefly, and Alice watched her Professor brace himself, schooling his features into an expressionless mask. Breaking eye contact, he studied the sleeve of his leather jacket in obvious unease, waiting for the unsaid ‘until now’.

Neither spoke. Looking into the middle distance in opposite directions, Alice and Severus finished their cigarettes, lost in their own thoughts. Alice began to fidget nervously, and Snape, having regained his balance, finally broke the awkward silence. ‘What did Albus make you do?’ he asked, and downed the rest of his now tepid tea.

‘Excuse me?’ Alice replied, wide-eyed with shock. ‘Wha… what do you mean, Professor?!”

‘Albus Dumbledore never does anything for anyone without expecting some sort of payment’, he began in his most patient voice. ‘He helped you to make this place safe, but it doesn’t look like you’re in any sort of danger.’ His eyes narrowed, and his silky voice dripped with sheer intimidation. ‘Tell me, and don’t bother trying to lie, what are you doing for Dumbledore?’

Alice straightened in her chair and dropped her cigarette into the ashtray. She finished her coffee, stood up, and walked back to the main kitchen area. As she picked up the kettle and re-filled it, Severus drummed his fingers on the table, waiting for her answer with growing irritation.

‘Professor Dumbledore asked me to brew some potions,’ Alice began in a timid voice as she switched on the kettle. ‘It’s… nothing more than that, sir. Just potions.’ She grabbed their empty mugs and busied herself with dropping another teabag into Severus’ mug, and more coffee granules into her own. Severus noted the tension in her rigid posture, but was not prepared to let her off the hook.

‘Just potions?’ he repeated slowly, enunciating each syllable with sharp precision. ‘What kind of potions?’

Alice thanked her lucky stars when the kettle switched itself off at that moment, allowing her to turn her back to prepare the beverages. ‘Just healing potions. Painkillers. Burn salves. Nothing more than that, really. Professor Dumbledore asked me to keep the Infirmary stocked up on those. He mentioned you have been… busy recently, and we don’t know how this war is going to go, and it’s always good to be safe than sorry...’ she trailed off, then walked back to the table and set down the steaming mugs. ‘What were you doing here this morning, sir?’

Professor Snape set his mug down on the table and shifted in his chair. He had been leaning forwards as he asked the questions, but now he didn't appear to be nearly as certain. Placing his hand flat on the table, he straightened up, his expression shuttering closed. He opened his mouth, and then
shut it again, seeming to rethink his initial response. After another hard glance at Alice, he leaned back in the chair and looked away as he answered her half-truth with his own vague answer.

‘I… live in the area’, he said carefully, weighing his words lest he gave too much away.

Alice’s eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘Oh! Whereabouts, sir?’ she asked with genuine interest.

‘That... is none of your business,’ Snape replied gruffly. ‘Do not even attempt to look for me. If I find you prowling around my house, you will curse the day you were born’, his eyes were glittering with malice, and Alice bodily felt the darkness and sincerity of that promise.

Alice nodded and dropped her gaze. ‘Suit yourself,’ she muttered under her breath as she reached for her tobacco and rolled yet another cigarette. She was chain smoking, something she usually avoided, but the morning’s events have thrown her completely off-balance and she needed to keep her hands busy and her mind calm.

Her stomach rumbled, and she realised that she had forgotten to eat. It was nearly noon, and she was starving. She gave an apologetic smile. ‘I’m sorry, Professor. I haven’t had any breakfast.’

Snape nodded and stood abruptly, eager to take his leave. ‘I will leave you to it then, Miss Crowley. Do keep your wand on your person at all times and do try not to get yourself into trouble. Good day.’

Without so much as a glance in her direction, he turned and Disapparated with a soft ‘pop’.

A gentle wave of magic tickled Alice’s mind as her wards informed her that her visitor had left her property. She exhaled a shuddering breath, trying to calm her racing heart. He knew she wasn’t telling him the whole truth, and she knew that he knew. He didn’t press the matter, but was she truly safe? He could have hexed her, or taken what he wanted to know directly from her mind. A nervous part of her suggested that perhaps he already had, but she had been Obliviated already? How would she know?

She suddenly felt drained and distracted. Professor Snape’s very presence left her unsettled. She looked around the kitchen, desperate to distance and distract herself. Blindly grabbing the two discarded mugs, she ran over to the sink and frantically scrubbed them clean. The action didn’t bring her the solace she desired - instead, she found her mind wandering.

She wasn’t used to having conversations with anyone other than Fred and George. She remembered Snape’s voice – silky, low and rich, expressive and versatile, going from a deep growl to a soft purr and back with astounding speed. The man ambushed her, pinned her against the fence and threatened her. He had also offered her a cigarette in a small gesture of comfort and had shown concern for her safety.
Now he was gone, and she found herself wishing that he would come back. Her spiralling thoughts confused her. She felt like she had been hit with a Confundus charm. Was she going mad? Was her perpetual loneliness causing her to cling to any familiar face, even if it belonged to the one man who terrified anyone in his wake? She shuddered with embarrassment and self-derogation when she recalled the memory of how she had followed his every move with her eyes. Alice had a hard time rectifying this version of a man with her austere Potions Master. Instead of his usual voluminous teaching robes, he was dressed in a pair of dark jeans, a black shirt and a form-fitting leather jacket. Alice found herself pondering how the slim fit of his jeans emphasised his graceful legs, and how his long, tapered fingers elegantly held his cigarette to his lips.

She snorted in disbelief. Professor Severus Snape, the Great Bat of the Dungeons, had deigned to share a smoke with her, of all people. He even accepted a cup of Tetley’s without turning up his enormous nose. Then again, stranger things have happened.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ She shook herself out of her reverie and put the mugs in the cupboard, shutting it so forcefully that its contents shook and almost toppled over. She grabbed a roll of paper towels and a bottle of disinfectant, and furiously attacking the room, cleaning up every last bit of invisible dust, sterilising her surroundings and purging them of the remaining traces of his presence. She attempted to reason with herself. It was just stress. Nothing else. It was nerve-racking to sit at the table with the dreaded Potions Master, to answer his prying questions, to look him in the eye. That was it. That had to be it.

She caught a whiff of his scent - ink, dry vetiver and earthy cypress, cashmere wood and masculine musk. The aroma sent her falling into a fit of hysteria as she realised that, although she desperately wanted him to stay, she couldn’t wait for him to go.

Overwhelmed with the weight of her conflicted emotions, Alice found herself at the end of her ability to cope. She slumped onto the chair and buried her face in her hands. Unable to stop the tears, she finally allowed herself to cry. Her body shook with the force of her sobbing, and she felt a vicious headache creeping up on her. By the time her breakdown subsided, she had fallen asleep at the table, having forgotten about her breakfast. Again.

Chapter End Notes

In case anybody wonders, Snape's aftershave in this fic is Lalique Encre Noire. I know that, technically, it was only released in 2006, but it's just so... Snape.
Severus sat in his threadbare armchair, reflecting on the recent events. The confrontation had not gone to plan, and he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he had made an utter fool of himself.

He groaned as the memory of Miss Crowley’s shapely legs swam to the forefront of his mind. He fought his growing arousal by imagining Dumbledore’s hairy, skinny legs in place of the girl’s, but the fact that he had been thinking about the girl in the first place filled him with self-loathing and disgust. He was supposed to gather information, for Merlin’s sake, not ogle a girl half his bloody age!

His self-deprecation turned into anger. Unsure whether he was angry at the girl, Dumbledore, or himself, Severus reached across to the small table by his chair and picked up an old, thin photo album. He stared yearningly at the picture of a smiling red-haired woman. He caressed the old photograph with his fingertips, dragging them across the woman’s pretty face slowly, lovingly. ‘Oh, Lily,’ he whispered and drew in a shaky breath.

He rose from his chair and started to pace around his living room. The heavy curtains were permanently drawn, obscuring the little natural light that may have otherwise shone through the numerous rows of houses. The built-in bookcases covered every wall from floor to ceiling, and the little visible bits of brown, chintzy wallpaper, so dearly cherished by his late mother, were now faded and peeling. The thin, worn carpet, once beige, now greyed with decades-old dust and stains ingrained deep into the fibres, crunched under Severus’ feet. Even at home, he wore his usual dragonhide boots. He was aware of the distasteful state of the flooring, and preferred not to step on it directly. Severus was heedful of the neglected feel of his house, especially when compared with Miss Crowley’s near-clinically clean kitchen. He found it much harder to breathe in his own home, where the air was stale, dank, and permeated with smoke.

He lit a cigarette, scrutinising his surroundings. Although he was not a slob by nature, he couldn’t bring himself to put anything more than a token effort into housekeeping. The place was saturated with tormented memories that weighed heavily on his mind. He could never find comfort, nor solace, within the walls that reminded him of the pain and misery of his past and present.

He realised that, despite his efforts to concentrate on other things, his thoughts insisted on running straight back to Miss Crowley, and Severus’ cynical nature enticed him to contemplate his neighbour’s suspicious behaviour.

The girl admitted to be working for Dumbledore. She hadn’t been deceptive, although Severus was sure that she wasn’t entirely honest either. Indeed, he had been busy ever since the Dark Lord’s
return, and until a few weeks ago, the Infirmary was running low on healing potions. Severus suspected that there was more to it than that. Albus certainly wouldn’t have turned Miss Crowley’s house into a near-impenetrable fortress for the sake of a few burn salves. Severus knew that the old Headmaster was not above using children to achieve his goals with very little concern for their safety or, indeed, their lives. And in this situation, the pieces simply didn’t add up.

So the girl felt safe enough in the area to venture outside without her wand. That, stupid as it was, meant that she was not in hiding. Severus was sure, however, that she was hiding something. He briefly considered legilimising the girl, but decided against it, knowing that the consequences would be unpleasant if the chit decided to run crying to Dumbledore. In spite of his misgivings, he decided that he would have to come up with a plan to establish trust. He pinched the bridge of his hooked nose, his brow furrowing in thought. Alice Crowley might have been a quiet and unobtrusive student, but there was obviously more to her than met the eye. He remembered her verbal assault and smirked involuntarily. The little cub had a big roar. How would he go about persuading the strange little witch to spill her guts?

He tensed as a sudden wave of paranoia crept up on him. The girl was a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors were known for being nosy and intrusive. She was bound to come snooping sooner or later. He would have to add some extra wards to his property, to ensure the girl would never find him in this decrepit hovel.

He was surprised to learn that she was living alone, and felt his curiosity pique again. Judging by the cleanliness of her kitchen, she was obviously doing quite well on her own. But was she really? She was a chain smoker, she wasn’t eating, her skin was deathly pale and he noted the dark circles under her eyes. Surely brewing a few batches of healing potions could not have had such a taxing effect on the young witch? Severus was growing more intrigued by the minute. What was Albus really up to?

When an idea popped into his head, he felt his thin lips stretch in a slow, cunning smirk. ‘Breakfast,’ he thought. ‘Tomorrow, I will bring her breakfast.’

Just as he was about to elaborate on his plan, he winced at the sudden searing pain in his left arm. The Dark Lord was calling him to his side yet again. During term time, Severus was summoned once a week. As soon as the summer holidays began, Voldemort expected his spy to report almost daily. Severus groaned, knowing he had no useful information for his psychopathic Master. He knew he would suffer at his wand tonight, as he had done the previous night, and the night before.

A wordless Accio sent his Death Eater garb flying across the room and into his outstretched hand. He dressed quickly, painfully aware that the longer he kept the Dark Lord waiting, the harsher his punishment would be. Taking a few seconds to arrange his thoughts and Occlude his mind, Severus turned on the spot and answered the Summons.
Alice woke up sometime in the afternoon, feeling as though her body was made of lead. Her head ached, pounding painfully behind her eyes, and her stomach felt so empty that she was tempted to eat a buttered brick.

She rose from her chair and walked over to the counter. Frantically searching for sustenance, she tore apart the plastic in which the bread was wrapped, grabbed a single slice, and shoved it into her mouth. She ate it quickly, barely bothering to chew, desperate to slake the gnawing hunger burning a hole in her belly. She made quick work of opening a can of beans and depositing them into a bowl which she then placed in the microwave. While the beans warmed up, she put two more slices of bread in the toaster. ‘I’m bloody starving’, she thought crossly, ‘Thanks to Professor - fucking - Snape who insisted on wasting my precious time!’

The image of the Potions Master’s cantankerous face swam to the forefront of her mind. Her obsessive brain catalogued the man’s oily hair, the lines of tension between his brows, the thin lips, curled up in a derisive sneer.

‘God, he’s an ugly bugger,’ she muttered to herself as she busied herself with preparing another mug of coffee. ‘And you, Alice Crowley, are an absolute nutter,’ she continued. ‘See? You’ve even started talking to yourself. Admit it – you’re crazy. And you’ve only got yourself to blame. You fancy the hell out of the greasy git. You’re insane.’

She took a small sip of her coffee and huffed in annoyance. She wasn’t even sure what it was that annoyed her anymore. She stomped her foot, seeking to vent her frustration, but before her foot hit the floor, the fire was doused by her own self-loathing. ‘Why would anyone take me seriously if I’m such a… such a CHILD?!”

The young woman was convinced that it was her isolation that caused her to feel some sort of a strange, twisted attraction towards her Professor. She felt disgusted with herself for even thinking such things about the Potions Master – and the Head of Slytherin, no less! Alice was not obsessed with cultivating the never-ending rivalry between their two Houses, but the fact was that Snape, in spite of his position as a teacher, made no effort to hide his own prejudices, taking every opportunity to deduct House Points from Gryffindor. His criticism was often cruel and needlessly personal, and he was so consistently sour, that one Hufflepuff had once remarked that she thought he might have drank a gallon of Four Thieves vinegar every morning instead of his tea.

No, he was certainly not attractive, and it was only the lack of company that was causing her mind to play such harrowing tricks on her.

Alice decided that it was time to contact the only people she felt she could talk to without blushing and stuttering like an idiot. Fred and George might have been busy businessmen now, but Alice knew they were there for her whenever they were needed. The jolly twins were always happy to chase away any gloomy thoughts that entangled her mind. They would crack jokes, sing, or dance on their eyelashes to entertain her, and she would clap, laugh, and weep with mirth. They would have a glorious time, and she would forget all about the dreaded Professor. Yes, that was a good plan. She would send them a note this evening.
She looked at the wall clock, and paled when she saw the time. ‘Oh fucking buggering hell on wheels!’, she screeched, and ran out of the kitchen, down the narrow hallway and up the stairs at neck-breaking speed. Entering her bedroom, she looked around, trying to locate her wand.

‘Ah, there!’ she thought and ran to the side of her bed. Her wand, a long and slender piece of rosewood polished to a high shine, rested on top of the bedside table. She briefly caressed the burgundy stick with the tips of her fingers before stashing it in the back pocket of her denim shorts. ‘Time to get back to work,’ she whispered on her way out.

As she crossed the kitchen in a few short strides and opened the back door, she cast a longing glance at the food she had prepared. ‘No time for that now,’ she thought gloomily as she made her way outside.

She walked straight over to the shed and paused, considering what lie behind the wooden door on rusty hinges, locked shut with the strongest wards known to wizardkind and a few heavy duty bolts and locks.

Casting a quick silencing charm for extra protection, she started unraveling the tangled web of warding spells, carefully neutralising the various nasty hexes placed upon the outbuilding. It took her a little longer, and tired her out more than it usually did. She was famished, exhausted and still shaken up with the morning’s confrontation, so she had to take extra care as she waved her wand in complicated flourishes, tackling the substantial enchantments with unfaltering concentration.

When the last of the wards dissipated, she took out a small copper key and opened the bulky lock, then started on the heavy bolt. After a lot of pressing, pushing, and twisting of the thick metal rod, the bolt gave way, and she finally stepped inside. ‘Lumos Maxima!’ she called out in a clear voice, and the cramped space was instantly filled with a bright light. Mildly annoyed with the stinging pain in her knuckles, she looked around, checking that everything was in place. The shed used to be filled with miscellaneous clutter - old radios, rusty bicycles, broken pieces of furniture and various other things her grandmother deemed too broken to keep, but too good to throw away. As soon as Alice moved in, she cleared the space in the shed and turned it into a small, but comfortable laboratory. She had a little desk, barely visible under the pile of thick, heavy tomes and rolls of parchment, a work station tucked into a corner, and a filing cabinet. Rows of wooden shelves were mounted on the walls, filled with innumerable potions ingredients kept in jars and vials of various shapes and sizes. The entire space may have looked crowded and chaotic, but Alice knew exactly where everything was and the small shed suited her just fine.

‘Why, hello there,’ she whispered to the little cauldron that sat on her work station under a tiny flame. The cauldron was very small indeed, no bigger than a soup bowl. A thick, oily, glossy liquid bubbled lazily inside.

The witch walked over to the workbench apprehensively to take a peek at her project. Apparently satisfied with her visual inspection, she sterilised a glass stirring rod with a quick flick of her wand and inserted it into the cauldron, carefully examining the strange potion’s colour and consistency. The enigmatic liquid was a dark, glossy red, and it slid down the glass rod without leaving any residue. Nodding quietly in approval, Alice discarded the stirring rod and reached into the filing
cabinet, selecting a jar of black powder from the drawer. She unrolled one of the scrolls that rested on top of the cabinet, double-checking that she remembered the dosage correctly.

‘Five grams,’ she muttered, narrowing her eyes to better read the tiny print. ‘Five grams, twenty stirs clockwise, followed by another two grams, and four stirs anti-clockwise.’ Measuring out the powder with surgical precision, Alice turned back to the workbench. ‘Here we go,’ she whispered as she grabbed another stirring rod, this one made of solid gold.

She dropped the required 5 grams of powder into the cauldron and began stirring immediately. The tempo was rapid, and Alice’s brow furrowed in concentration. At this stage, she couldn’t afford to make any mistakes, literally and figuratively. It took the Headmaster the better part of the year to locate and source the necessary ingredients, and she only had enough for this one batch. The cost must have been extortionate, and Alice was not prepared to let their efforts go to waste.

She took out the golden rod and massaged her arm, which ached from the vigorous stirring. She took a few deep breaths and attempted to clear her mind, focusing solely on the task at hand. When the potion ceased swirling around the cauldron, Alice added another two grams of powder and began stirring counter-clockwise, this time at a slow, languid pace.

‘Now, I’ll feed you, and then I’ll leave you to it,’ she muttered, and reached inside the filing cabinet once again, this time selecting a green, rectangular box from the very bottom of the drawer. Inside the box, an ornate knife with a gently curved blade was nestled between layers of crimson-red velvet. Alice swallowed dryly, mentally preparing herself for the unpleasant task of feeding the potion. She should have been used to it by now, having done it daily for the past two weeks, but the ritual always left her feeling a little queasy.

She eyed the shiny blade apprehensively. It was sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel, and would slice through her skin and flesh cleanly and almost painlessly. ‘That’s what you get for dabbling in the Dark Arts,’ she grumbled to herself and brought the blade to rest against the inside of her palm. Eyes screwed shut, she grit her teeth and clenched her fist around the blade. Gripping the hilt of the knife, she pulled it down quickly, hissing as she felt the sting of pain as her flesh was sliced open.

Alice stood above the cauldron and unclenched her fist. Her brow furrowed, clearing her mind of any coherent thought, concentrating on bonding her intent to the magic in her blood. Moments later, she opened her eyes and looked at the potion, which stopped bubbling and was now completely still. Setting the knife on the workbench, she reached for her wand and cast a healing spell on her injured hand. A quick Evanesco took care of the blood, and she put the knife back into the drawer.

Grinning with relief and satisfaction, she cast a stasis charm on the cauldron and sat down at her desk. She picked up a tattered notebook and a pen, and scribbled down a few notes. Her mysterious concoction was coming along nicely, and she would have to owl the Headmaster shortly, to let him
know that the Essence was nearly complete.

There was, however, one problem. The parchment containing the recipe was incomplete. The ink was smeared or faded in several places, making it near-impossible to decipher the ancient writing. She had managed to overcome those difficulties previously with a little creativity and a lot of research, but now, she was truly stuck. Even Dumbledore’s extensive library did not provide an answer to her predicament, and they both knew that time was running out.

She put her notes under her arm and left the shed. She was tempted to leave the shed unwarded for a short while, just so she could run into the kitchen and finally put something in her stomach, but decided against it. The potion was far too dangerous and far too precious, and one could never be careful enough. As she stood in front of the wooden doors, putting up the numerous layers of protection, she realised what a threat Professor Snape could be to her work and personal security. He knew where she lived. He knew what to do to get inside. And Alice was sure that, should he wish to, he would have no problem breaking down the more malicious hexes embedded within the wards that guarded her property.

‘I should ask Dumbledore to strengthen the wards further. I wonder if I could make the property Secret-Kept. This way, he would never find me again,’ she mused as she crossed the backyard. Tossing her notebook onto the kitchen table, she set about reheating her beans, which were still in the microwave, and reheating the two slices of toast.

As she waited, Alice found two scraps of parchment, a quill, and a little pot of ink in one of the kitchen cupboards. She dipped the quill into the ink and stared into the middle distance for a moment, considering her words. The scratching of her quill provided a rhythmic staccato over the ticking of the toaster and the background hum of the microwave.

‘Headmaster,

The Ashes are compatible with the potion. I’ve hit a wall. Need more time.

- A.’

She rolled up the parchment and put it aside. She collected her food and set her plate down in front of her. Wolfing down her humble meal of beans on toast, she considered the latest hindrance to her project. She needed to buy more time, perhaps visit Knockturn Alley to try and get her hands on some obscure tome which had slipped under her radar. Time was running out, and her mind was on high alert with a sense of urgency. She knew she had already exhausted all of the possibilities, but could not bear the thought of sitting idly. She would go through all of her books yet again with a
‘I could see if Fred and George are about, make a day of it.’ Cheered by the idea, Alice tucked in to the last of her toast before taking up her quill again.

‘Fancy meeting up this week? Had a terrible day. Snape found me here. Hope you’re both alright.
-A.’

She walked across the kitchen and opened the window. ‘BARRY! COME HOME YOU BLOODY BASTARD!’, she called out and jumped to the side. Seconds later, a massive Eagle Owl came swooping past. He circled the room and settled imperiously on the back of a chair, staring at its mistress with obvious disdain.

‘Hello, Baz.’ The bird ruffled its feathers and narrowed its eyes at Alice. ‘Oh, don’t look at me like that. You’re so cu… OUCH!’, she shrieked and jumped away as the owl bit her finger viciously, drawing blood. She stared daggers at the horrid creature, holding her injured hand against her chest.

Barry the Bastard shuffled side to side on the chairback, glaring at Alice with cold murder in his eyes, as if to say, ‘What the FUCK do you WANT you daft BINT, and dinna ever use the C-word again if you like your pretty eyes where they are!’ He pivoted his head away as only owls can do, effectively giving her the cold shoulder whilst keeping his talons facing straight forwards. She thought she could hear him muttering, ‘Except cunt. That’s acceptable. Good word. Hard consonants.’ Barry, (whose real name was Apollyon, but Alice found it far too dignified a name for such a wicked beast), never woke up well, preferring nocturnal activity. Alice knew it very well, but at that moment, she really needed him.

‘Alright, alright! Calm your beans love!’, Alice threw up her hands in a placating gesture. Tossing a handful of treats towards the menacing bird, she quickly tied both missives onto Barry’s leg, mindful of the sharp beak and claws that threatened to attack her at any moment. ‘I need you to take those to Professor Dumbledore and the Weasley twins. Can you do that for me?’

The owl hooted angrily, as though it was trying to say ‘Why the FUCK did you tie this to me if you didn’t think I’d deliver it? Shall I use it to wipe your bloody arse?’ Barry bobbed and wove his head like a prize fighter, ready to lash out if Alice gave him an opening.

‘Alright, be off then, you horrid bloody ratbag!’ She huffed. Barry gave Alice a last, hateful glance, flapped his wings and took off. Circling the kitchen gracefully, he flew out of the window, leaving a large dropping on the countertop. ‘That’s for thinking I’m CUTE, witch,’ he seemed to say.

‘Bastard,’ Alice muttered angrily under her breath before slamming the window shut.
Albus Dumbledore paced around his office distractedly, musing over the disturbing news he had received earlier that day. ‘I was hoping this wouldn’t happen’, he mumbled to Fawkes, his pet phoenix. ‘I was hoping they would never bump into each other.’

He sat down heavily in his ornate chair and sighed deeply. Reaching into a bowl of lemon drops, he popped one into his mouth and sucked on it in a desperate attempt to alleviate some of the stress. This time, however, not even the sweet and sour taste of his favourite lozenges did anything to calm his racing pulse. His informer apprised him of his spy’s encounter with Miss Crowley earlier today. It was a complication that had the potential to blow his plans to smithereens. If Severus was to find out about the Essence… no, he dared not think about it.

‘What do I do now, Fawkes?’ He asked his familiar in a dispirited whisper. The phoenix bobbed its head to the side, as though considering the old man’s question, then chirped merrily, indicating the bowl of pork scratchings on the nearby chest of drawers.

‘I should have expected this, my friend,’ Albus said, bowing his head and pinching the bridge of his nose in concentration. ‘As reclusive as those two are, they were bound to have met at one point or another. I was a fool to have thought otherwise. Now, Miss Crowley’s work is in danger, and Severus… ah, Severus… he’s slipping away, you see. Could it be that the memory of Lily is no longer enough to keep him within my influence…?’ he trailed off, staring into the middle distance. ‘If I lose his loyalty, we’re doomed. We cannot win this war without Severus’ help. If he discovers the Essence, he will never forgive me. He will turn away from me…’

Albus stood up abruptly and began to pace the perimeter of his office again. It had been a long time since he felt so truly horrified. He knew that Miss Crowley had invited her Professor into her home. Severus was a perceptive wizard, and would have sensed immediately that something wasn’t as it should be. He was also persistent, and would try to get to the bottom of it. Of that, the Headmaster was sure. Perhaps he already had?

The Headmaster turned to his familiar again. ‘I thought Severus’ love for Lily was strong enough to keep him within my grasp, Fawkes. But now, I’m not so sure anymore.’ Albus shook his head and studied the ornate carpet. ‘If only I could find another reason for Severus to keep fighting the good fight...’

Just then, the wizard’s gloomy musings were interrupted by a rattle coming from behind the window. The old man moved the red velvet curtain aside, and immediately noticed the massive, hostile-looking owl scratching the glass with its sharp talons in a display of impatient irritation. With a flick of his wand, the window opened, and Albus ducked to the side with surprising speed and agility.
Unfortunately, he wasn’t quick enough, and was greeted with a massive runny poo which landed on the sleeve of his brand new, jade-green robes. The ill-tempered creature did not like to be kept waiting.

On any other day, the owl’s actions would have elicited a hearty chuckle from the Headmaster, but this time, Albus eyed the bird apprehensively. ‘And what news do you bring?’ he asked, and with trembling hands, untied the parchment from the owl’s leg. He stalled for time, taking deep breaths to calm himself. Was Miss Crowley writing to inform him of their project’s discovery? But surely, if that was the case, Severus would have come to confront him by now?

Seconds ticked by, and Albus shook himself out of his pondering. Gliding over to his great walnut desk in nervous anticipation, the ancient wizard adjusted his half-moon glasses, unrolled the parchment and read the missive quickly.

He shut his eyes tightly, and with a great sigh of relief, Albus turned towards the nearby chest of drawers, tossed a pork scratching towards the owl, and dropped heavily into his chair. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered to nobody in particular, ignoring the jealous squawk that came from Fawkes’ perch. He had a lot to be thankful for. Miss Crowley had not mentioned Severus, and it looked like the their secret was still safe.

Albus watched as the vitriolic owl gobbled up the pork scratching, sending disdainful glances towards the phoenix. The brown bird hooted something that, judging by Fawkes’ shocked expression, must have been an exceptionally vulgar obscenity, and swiftly left the office through the window, leaving another dropping on the windowsill.

Rushing over to the window to clean up the mess, Albus suddenly stopped in his tracks and straightened his back. The plan beginning to form in his mind was risky and delicate, but if the Headmaster played his cards right, Severus’ dedication to the cause would be set in stone.

The old wizard reached inside his pocket, found another lemon drop and put it in his mouth. His eyes twinkled with self-satisfaction, and he glanced at his phoenix with an expression of someone who had found a pot of gold.

‘Perhaps, with a bit of prompting, Severus would be willing to fight for another love...’
Severus lay in his bed, riding out another wave of aftershocks from the Cruciatus curse. To say that the Dark Lord was displeased would have been an understatement. Severus had, yet again, failed to bring any valuable news, which made the madman frighteningly furious. The Order had been quiet lately, and Dumbledore was too busy to think up a believable lie for Severus to report. As a result, the spy was forced to serve as entertainment for the members of Voldemort’s Inner Circle. The memory of the evening’s long hours of torture and humiliation was very fresh in Severus’ mind, and he let out an involuntary yelp as he tried to find a more comfortable position in his old, battered bed. His skin was clammy and cold, and his crooked teeth chattered as his limbs jerked and twitched about violently, uncontrollably.

He curled up on his side and shut his eyes tightly, encouraging his mind to enter a meditative state. He tried to cut himself off from his mental torment, to put the pain behind his Occlumency shields. He failed. His energy was depleted, and his normally unshakeable mental walls were weak and feeble, leaving his mind open, exposed and defenceless.

Thankfully, his injuries would not result in permanent damage. The Dark Lord had made it very clear that his patience was running out. Tonight’s punishment was a warning to Severus, and he knew that he would be in for a much harder time if he failed to report anything useful the next time he was summoned. It was vital that he speak to Dumbledore, and soon.

The wave of aftershocks finally subsided, and Severus took big, gulping breaths, fighting for control. He was a fool for doing this over and over again. He should never have gone back when the Dark Lord returned. No – he should never have joined him in the first place. If only he had have ran away all those years ago, when Voldemort was first defeated by Lily’s son. He should have listened to Lily.

‘Lily,’ he rasped out, ‘I’m doing it all for Lily.’

Every move felt like a herculean effort as he slowly rose and stood on shaking legs. He didn’t want to leave his bed. He was hurt and vulnerable, and the dark bedroom provided a comfortable shelter, a lair in which to hide and lick his wounds. He was desperate to bury himself under the covers and sleep the pain away. A hateful voice at the back of his mind whispered, persuading him to stay down and never get up again. That he was a filthy coward and he deserved to feel this pain, every bit of it. More disturbingly, the voice was recognizable. It was as if Sirius Black's shade had risen from the grave for the sole purpose of haunting him when he was at his weakest. ‘Look at you, Snivellus. You dirty, reeking, pathetic man. You could scrub your skin raw, but you will never rid your soul of that stink.’
Reeling like a drunk, Severus staggered into the bathroom and removed his Death Eater garb. Tossing the wretched costume to the far corner of the room, he looked down at his skinny body and inspected the damage. The marks around his hips and legs have began to bruise a deep, ugly black, and he had several minor cuts and scratches all over his arms and abdomen. He frowned in distaste. He was used to the disturbing sight of his own skin, crisscrossed with scars of all shapes and sizes, and splattered with fresh wounds and bruises like a freakish work of art.

It was the scent that rattled him the most. The sharp scent of his own fear emanated from his body, mixed with the rank sweat and semen of his assailants. His stomach twisted in knots, and Severus panted, trying hard to hold on to the last shreds of dignity. He would not throw up. He would wash their filth away. He would return to the Dark Lord, and go through more of the same again and again, for he was doing it all for Lily. There was no other way.

He winced as he carefully lowered himself into the bathtub, and sat with his arms around his long legs, letting the warm water soothe some of the pain away.

A strangled sob escaped his throat and he bit back his tears, unable to forget, unable to escape the impossible situation he had found himself in. He would never escape the physical torment, nor the mental anguish, nor the guilt. The guilt, which reminded him, time and time again, that he deserved all he got.

Picking up a plain bar of soap, he scrubbed his body furiously, ridding himself of the dried blood, the sweat, and the stench. As the evidence of his ordeal was washed away, leaving his body in grey soapy suds, he felt his mind grow somewhat calmer. Carefully, he restored his Occlumency shields brick by brick, seeking out the memory of another scent. A complex, balsamic mix of dry, smoky vanilla, bergamot, and deep, golden amber with hints of woods and spices.

Severus found himself drowning in a strange, unbidden fantasy, in which he sat at an old wooden table, sipping awfully prepared tea from a green ceramic mug.

The imaginary kitchen was tidy, and the morning sunrays penetrated through the white, lacy net curtains. The window was open, letting in the fresh air penetrated with the sweet smell of matthiolas planted on the outside, just below the window sill. Muggle radio played in the corner, and a dainty blonde woman stood in front of him with her back to him. She was humming along with the radio in a soft, pleasant alto, preparing a full English breakfast at the cooker. A strange, sweet feeling of complete serenity washed over Severus’ mind, and he reclined slightly in his chair, enjoying the soft caress of the summer breeze on his face. He caught a glimpse of an apron ribbon, swaying back and forth between the hob and the worktop, and a pair of feminine hands, chopping up the foodstuffs with nimble dexterity.
Severus was sure he knew the kitchen and the woman, and strained his brain to remember, but at that moment, the memory seemed strangely elusive. He knew her rich, deep, heady scent. He knew her name, which hovered on the tip of his tongue.

‘Breakfast?’ The fantasy woman asked as she turned to face him with a gentle smile. Severus eyed the girl, taking in the sight of her plain but pretty face, the ashy hair that fell past her shoulders in a messy wave, and the stormy-grey, almond-shaped eyes. The sense of safety and tranquility came crashing down, and Severus let out a surprised gasp as he realised who he’s been dreaming of.

She was his latest project. The girl whom he had accosted, the one who stood up to him and nearly kneed him in the balls in self-defense. The girl who smoked like a chimney, kept her kitchen surgically clean, and made a pathetic brew. The girl who smelled heavenly. The girl who was hiding something.

‘Alice.’ He stated as he rose from the tub and walked back into his bedroom. ‘Her name is Alice, and tomorrow, I shall bring her breakfast.’

Meanwhile, Alice sat curled up on the settee in her living room, studying the fourth volume of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s ‘De Occulta Philosophia’. Her eyes were glued to the old, yellowed pages as she swung her damp hair over one shoulder and absent-mindedly braided it into a long, loose plait.

It was getting late, but the hot Summer night and the uncomfortable humidity made it impossible for her to sleep. Despite having had an evening shower, she already felt sticky and sweaty, and seriously contemplated washing herself again. It would only give her another excuse to linger in the bathroom, engaging in her favourite ritual of anointing her freshly-washed body with the silky body lotion, powdering her shoulders with the matching body talc, and finishing it all off with a drop of her favourite perfume dabbed onto the most strategic places.

Alice wanted to take the evening off, having spent the last few nights researching and perfecting her special potion. The project was complicated and dangerous, requiring extreme care and precision in the preparation of ingredients as well as the actual brewing process. For the past few weeks, Alice’s entire time and concentration were fixed entirely on the task, and the mental and physical strain were truly beginning to show. The Headmaster was merciless with his demands, always pushing Alice to work harder, longer - and for what? A bloody pittance.

She was desperate to take her mind off the Potion, and tried her hardest to find something else to do. She cleaned her house. She changed the bedding. She had a long shower. She even inspected her
toenails for chips in the nail polish, but found none. A pedicure would have been a lovely way to spend the evening, but her toenails were still perfectly squared off, glossy and red, the cuticles were pushed back, and her feet were perfectly light, soft and smooth. There was no point in wasting precious product. Alice was living on a shoestring as it was. The modest salary she received from Dumbledore as compensation for her brewing work was just enough to pay for overheads, and very little was left for luxuries. Alice wasn’t particularly bothered by her low income. ‘Make do and mend’ was her life motto, and she wasn’t above stopping the gas and electric meter with magic either.

Having failed to distract herself, she ended up researching possible ways of speeding up the completion of her project. Her vast Dark Arts library, studded with all kinds of unsavoury knowledge, contained no answers. Until Dumbledore got back to her, she was truly stuck. She was missing a crucial ingredient, which would unlock the true potency of the Potion, but the writing on the ancient scroll was indecipherable with age, wear and tear.

Alice jumped out of her skin as the fireplace suddenly blazed with green flames. She shrieked in surprise, and the book in her lap tumbled to the floor. Two red-haired heads appeared in the fireplace, pushing each other in and out of sight.

‘Fred! George! You blighters scared the shit out of me!’ Alice yelled, before running over and kneeling down on the mock-persian hearth rug to better see her best friends.

‘Hello, Ala dear! Getting lonesome out here in Yell? How nice of you to write to us after all this time! We were beginning to think you don’t love us anymore!’ Fred Weasley flashed a wicked, toothy grin.

‘Barry delivered your letter today. He nearly bit my bloody head off! You want to do something about that bird, you do!’ George cut in, pushing Fred’s head to the side with one hand.

‘Ay up me ducks!’ Squealed Alice with delight, sticking her head into the hearth, thrilled to see her two partners in crime. ‘I am so so sorry, I’ve been so busy, and I completely forgot to write, and oh, I’m so sorry about Barry, he’s such a horrid creature! And then Snape found me here today, and…’ She trailed off, and paused as she spotted the angry looks on the twins’ faces.

‘Yes, that’s why we called, actually. What do you mean, the greasy git found you? Did he hurt you?’ George spat, his brows drawn together menacingly. The twins were clearly alarmed, having reach their own, sinister conclusions.

Alice rushed to explain, ‘No no, I’m alright, honestly. I was a little shaken up before, but I’m okay
now. Snape lives in the area, and wasn’t expecting to bump into me, so he wasn’t very happy to see me at all... But it’s alright. He’s gone now. He didn’t hurt me.’

‘Blimey,’ George began, ‘We had no idea you’re neighbours...’

‘...With Snape!’, finished Fred, unsuccessfully suppressing a chuckle. ‘This is gold! But really, Ala dear, he would only ever be happy to see any of us if our heads were severed off and hung from the Astronomy Tower!'

At that, the trio dissolved into a heartfelt fit of giggles which stretched for many minutes. Holding her belly, which ached from laughter, Alice wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and sighed happily, looking at her friends with affection. ‘I love you two,’ she said softly, and the twins smiled sweetly in return. Shortly after, the mood became weighty and serious, and Alice could see the serious concern in her friends’ eyes.

‘You tell us right away if he so much as looks at you cross-eyed...’ Fred began, and Alice tried to hide her blush as she remembered the penetrating onyx gaze of her Professor,

‘...Or lays one grubby finger on you…!’ George chimed in, and Alice flinched as she felt her stomach drop and twist into a tight knot. She momentarily lost her concentration and much of the twins’ tirade escaped her as her mind presented her with a visual reminder of Snape’s long, graceful fingers; the way they delicately held a cigarette to his lips, how strong his hand felt, wrapped around her arm, and how thrilling it would be to...

Shaking herself out of her reverie, Alice spluttered and searched for something innocent to say, when the rest of the twin’s speech finally reached her ears.

‘Because we have lots of things you could slip into his tea...’

‘And we’d even give you best-friend discount!’ The twins finished in unison, grinning like madmen, he corners of their eyes crinkling with mirth and a hint of malice.

‘Honestly, you two!’ Alice jabbed her finger at the two freckled faces in mock-scorn. ‘You never pass up an opportunity to make a few sickles out of your poor friends, do you?! And besides, I doubt I could slip anything into Snape’s tea and live to tell the tale!’ She was laughing too now, partly in genuine joy, and partly in relief that the conversation had strayed away from such dangerous topics as hands and eyes belonging to one Potions Master.
‘Well, business is business!’ George said with a shrug,

‘- But we’re happy to help if you need to teach the Big Bat a lesson!’ Shouted Fred with enthusiasm, then promptly added in a more serious tone. ‘Ala, you know where we are if you need us. We keep telling you, come to the Burrow, Mother won’t mind…’

‘And you won’t be stuck there like a bloody recluse with Snape, of all people, for company!’, George cut in, waving his finger at Alice.

The girl sighed wistfully. She would have loved to go to the Burrow, but it was too crowded, too loud, too… lively. She loved the Weasleys with all her heart, but always felt awkward around the big, happy family. And she had work to do. One could never keep secrets in the Burrow for long, and her project was very demanding and very sensitive.

‘I would if I could’, she began with a small smile, ‘But I can’t. I’m sorry. I’ve been very busy recently. I’ll come and see you next week. Tuesday, perhaps?’

‘Sure thing, Ala,’ said Fred, bobbing his head up and down.

‘We’ll go out for lunch!’ his twin shouted, pumping his fist in excitement. ‘You’ll have to see the shop, it’s…’

‘Awesome!’ finished Fred, and his eyes widened, shining with unadulterated pride.

‘Alright then!’ Alice clapped her hands with an air of finality, ‘Tuesday it is. Remember to polish your shoes and iron your shirts. Have I made myself clear?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty’, George replied with a mocking bow.

‘Are you going to check if we’ve washed our necks and ears as well?’

‘Less of the cheek, thank you!’ Alice turned her nose up at the two ruddy slobs. ‘And for the record,
Snape really values his privacy, and for good reason. Don’t mention our… encounter to anyone… please?’ She bit her lower lip, afraid of what would happen if the Professor found out about her big mouth.

‘Don’t worry about it, Ala. We won’t tell a soul. See you Tuesday, love, and stay safe!’ The twins winked, waved, and disappeared from view. Within seconds, the fireplace was empty again.

Alice’s knees complained as she stood up and made her way out of the living room. She prepared a cup of tea for herself, and pondered her situation. She would need to speak to the Headmaster about the Potion. She knew it was a powerful brew, and if her Arithmancy predictions were correct, it would yield interesting results already. According to the theory, the power of the finished product would be unimaginable. The problem was, that the ingredients required had been unobtainable for centuries, and nobody had ever succeeded in completing the potion. The recipe was vague at best, and Alice had had to circumvent several obstacles already, filling in the gaps using her own instincts as well as countless rolls of parchment filled with mind-boggling Arithmatic equations. She had already got used to the feeling of her brain being fried.

An idea popped into her head, and she almost dropped her mug on the floor as her eyes lit up with unsuppressed excitement. ‘Snape is a Potions Master and knows a thing or two about the Dark Arts...’ she mused as she lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. ‘And he lives nearby… perhaps if I could get him to trust me… if I befriended him, or…’ Her eyes flew wide open and she gasped, refusing to finish her mind’s preposterous suggestion. ‘Ugh, he’s an ugly bugger, remember?! But perhaps he could help me without even realising!’

Alice considered the idea. She was planning to befriend Snape. Snape – the enigmatic, dangerous Dark wizard, the most unfriendly man she had ever met. How would she even go about establishing trust? She knew the plan was foolhardy to say the least, and had the potential of backfiring on her in a frightful way should her manipulation be discovered. She would have to tread carefully, and perhaps enlist the help of the Headmaster, who knew Snape a lot better than she did. She hoped she could persuade Dumbledore to help her come up with a viable strategy… it was, in the end, for the greater good.

‘We are neighbours, in the end...’ She tapped her finger against her upper lip, deep in thought. ‘Maybe I should go around his house and ask to borrow some flour?’ She snorted at her own stupidity.

‘Flour, right. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would keep flour in his kitchen. Unless he has a wife… does he have a wife? Or a girlfriend? Is he even single?’ She just realised that she knew next to nothing about her Professor, and her mood deflated. She had no explanation for why it made her feel disconcerted to think that the Potions Master could possibly live with a woman.
She rose from the table and began preparing her supper. Beans on toast yet again. She should have bought more food. Her plate and utensils clattered loudly as she handled them roughly in irritation. ‘I don’t even know where he lives exactly,’ she muttered to herself as she thrust the knife into the piece of toast, cutting it angrily into perfect squares. ‘And perhaps,’ she added in between bites, ‘this was just a one-off meeting. I might never bump into him again anyway.’ She chewed the toast and the beans with a frown, trying to make sense of the irritation and exhaustion that fought for dominance. The simple meal she usually enjoyed suddenly seemed stuck in her throat, bland and unappealing. Swallowing with effort, Alice pushed the leftovers away and decided to call it a night. Feeling very rebellious, she decided not to wash her plate.

She climbed the rickety stairs and stomped into her bedroom. The walls were painted a horrible, muted shade of ‘harvest gold’, an unsightly reminder of the 70s fashion, now terrible outdated and somewhat depressing. Alice wrinkled her nose at the sight of mould that was beginning to come through in one corner. She had spent a long time trying to get rid of it in the first place. ‘Long live the great English architecture,’ she grumbled under her nose as she shed her clothing to get ready for bed. ‘This house is a fucking shithole,’ she muttered as she reached into the massive, clunky chest of drawers, looking for fresh pyjamas. Realising what she just said, she paused in her tracks and guiltily whispered a quick prayer of gratitude for her grandmother’s largess, and peace for her soul. She firmly shut the drawer, abandoning the search for pyjamas in favour of sleeping only in a pair of pastel-yellow knickers instead. It was a very hot night, and bedclothes would only have made it harder to sleep comfortably.

She climbed into the double bed – a utilitarian iron frame topped with a thin economy mattress. It wasn’t the world’s most luxurious bed, but it was Alice’s first purchase in her new home. She didn’t feel comfortable about sleeping in the same bed her grandparents died in, and the one she bought was cheap, cheerful, and would do nicely until she had enough money to buy something better.

She tossed and turned for a long time. Her mind was busy working over the problem of getting Professor Snape to help her on her own terms, ideally without finding out what it was she was doing with Dumbledore. Idea after idea was weighed in her active imagination, and she was hard pressed to keep it on track. Fantasies of how things might evolve began to occupy her thoughts, each less likely and more thrilling than the last. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, the exhausted Alice dropped off to sleep, whispering,

‘Lunch. Next time I see him, I’ll invite him for lunch.’

Chapter End Notes

‘Yell’ is a place in Shetlands - a very remote part of Scotland. Alice doesn't live in the
Shetlands, but Fred was poking fun at her living like a hermit.

Also, for those who want to know, Alice's perfume is Guerlain Shalimar.
Breakfast at Crowley's

Chapter Notes

It has been scientifically proven that FawkesyLady is the most amazing beta in our Solar System. She should be knighted, or indeed sainted, for her patience and her ideas... and her ability to rein me in when necessary. ;) <3

By the way, dear readers - reviews make me write faster. In fact, they motivate me to keep going with this story. Sooo... please review! ;)

Alice was dreaming. Panting and sweating, she ran through the Hogwarts’ corridors, chased by the same basilisk that prowled around the school in her third year. She rounded countless corners and climbed innumerable stairs, trying to find a safe place to hide from the beast that remained hot on her heels - coming ever closer, its presence ever more menacing.

‘Professor Dumbledore? Anybody? Help!’ She cried as she ran through another hallway and down a flight of stairs. She was heading down to the dungeons. Great. She was bound to get lost in the complicated maze, filled with endless crossroads and dead ends. Would she get so lost that she would never find her way back, or would the monster find her first, and tear her apart with its unforgiving fangs?

Her breath came out in white puffs of air, and she realised that the dungeons were freezing cold. Tears of terror prickled at her eyelids as she rounded another corner, her legs beginning to wobble as they started to give up on her. She stammered as she nearly collided with a wall, but quickly regained her footing and kept running blindly ahead, feet burning and aching with effort, desperate to put more distance between herself and the basilisk which silently continued its pursuit.

Knock, knock, knock.

Severus shifted his weight as he waited outside Alice’s front door. Plastic bags hung from his arms, filled with various foodstuffs he had acquired at the farmers market on the other side of town.

He woke up very early to ensure that he got the freshest produce. If he was going to befriend the girl, he would astonish her with his extraordinary cooking skills. Besides, he was rather hungry himself, and on a day like this, nothing but the best would do.

When the girl didn’t appear after a reasonable amount of time, Severus frowned, and knocked again.
She heard a strange knocking sound coming from somewhere to her left, and ran in that direction, hoping to find help. She wanted to shout out, ask if there was anybody out there, but dared not alert the basilisk to her exact location.

Her muscles were on fire, she was out of breath, and tears were streaming down her face. She lost her bearings in the stone labyrinth. The knocking sound was gone, and once again, she had no idea where to run for shelter. She looked around in panic, trying to find a hiding spot, and realised that she was in the corridor leading to the Potions classroom.

Knock knock knock

Severus was getting impatient, as he didn’t get up so bloody early only to end up standing there like an idiot. He reached into his pocket – the chocolate bar was still there, and it was beginning to melt. He was certain that the chit could hear him – surely she wasn’t sleeping?

Tap, Tap, Tap.

There it was again, coming from the passage on her left – this time a clearer, louder sound. She broke into a brisk jog, too exhausted to keep sprinting. Finding herself at a dead end, she brought her hands to her mouth, trying to fend off the rising nausea. Her hands were clammy and shook uncontrollably, and her breathing came in quick, short gulps.

Her side hit something hard and smooth, and Alice realised that she was standing right in front of the door to Professor Snape’s office. She tried the handle – it was locked. ‘Oh, no, no!’ she keened, knowing she was as good as dead when she heard a low hissing sound resonating in the near distance. She was stuck.


The door frame shook with the force of Severus’ pounding as he rapped at the door with enough
power to wake the dead. Was she even in? For all he knew, she could have spent the night elsewhere. For all he knew, she could have had a boyfriend. He shied away from following that particular rabbit down the hole of extrapolation.

His lips thinned with distaste, and he couldn’t explain why he felt a rush of anger at the idea. ‘She’s one of your students,’ he thought to himself. ‘Of course you don’t want her to sleep around,’ he explained to himself in his most patient mental teacher-voice.

‘Oi, you!’

Severus nearly jumped out of his skin as he heard a loud, raging voice bellowing behind his back.

‘Wha’ do you think you’re doin’, standin’ there makin’ a mighty din?! ‘S too bloody early, innit! Piss off ‘fore I go down there an’ knock your fuckin’ lights out, you hear me?! PISS OFF!’

Tap, tap, tap.

The sound was very loud now, and was coming from inside the office. She curled up on the floor and rested her face against the door, listening for the enigmatic sound. ‘Professor?’ She whimpered quietly, ‘Professor Snape, are you in there? Please, please help!’ She began clawing at the door, pulling the handle with all her strength, begging for the door to open. She heard a muffled voice coming from within, and strained her hearing to make out the words. Shouting. Someone was inside, and they were shouting angrily.

She heard a hiss right behind her back, and knew that the chase was over. Turning around, she stared, mesmerised, into a pair of red, gleaming eyes. They were coming closer and closer, the powerful jaws opening slowly, showing off the massive yellowed teeth in their razor-sharp glory…

‘PROFESSOR!’ She cried as she jerked awake, her chest heaving. Trying to catch her breath, she looked around, struggling to remember who she was, and where she was.

Her gaze slid across the familiar walls of her bedroom, and she sighed with relief when she realised it was only a bad dream. Making her way to the window, she opened the faux-velvet, burnt-orange curtains, and felt much better when the bedroom was illuminated by the morning light. She heard an ongoing argument coming in from the outside, and registered that someone was knocking on her front door.
‘Oh flamin’ ‘ell, who the fuck would that be?’ She wondered as she grabbed an old Manchester United T-Shirt from the back of the nearby chair and quickly pulled it over her head. The Muggle postman? She rarely received any correspondence in that way. A parcel, perhaps? But she hadn’t ordered anything lately. Was it an emergency? Fire?

She ran down the steps and paused outside the front door, fumbling with the key. She was still in distress over the terrifying dream, and her hands were a little shaky. It took a bit of jiggling about, but finally, the door opened and Alice found herself staring at Professor Snape in the flesh.

Severus was ready to turn around and hit the curtain twitching twat. The young man, a thuggish-looking reprobate, was hanging out of the upstairs window one down and was spewing abuse loudly enough for the entire street to hear.

A vein began to pulse in his temple when the lad did not shut up. Severus opened his mouth to answer with his own angry retort when the front door opened, and a sleepy looking Alice appeared. The girl’s wavy hair was a tangled mess and her skin was pale with dark circles under her eyes. Someone hadn’t slept well.

A look of dawning dismay spread over the girl's face as it registered exactly who was darkening her door.

‘Um… Professor?’ She asked in a quiet, slightly raspy voice. ‘Are you alright sir? What bri…’

‘Good morning, Miss Crowley,’ Severus interjected, as he pushed past her and stepped inside, making his way towards the kitchen. ‘How nice to see you awa … ke.’ He stopped dead in his tracks, and his eyes widened momentarily as he took in the sight of Alice, who stood by the door, wearing nothing but an oversized football shirt and a pair of skimpy knickers that only just covered up her privates. She was obviously uncomfortable, her gaze averted as she chewed on her bottom lip.

‘I’m sorry, Professor… I wasn’t expecting to see you this morning. I’m not… dressed for visitors.’

‘Quite,’ Severus scoffed, and schooled his features into the picture of disinterest. He turned around and entered the kitchen, trying hard to master his physical reaction to the slip of a girl. His heartbeat quickened, and his cock twitched to attention. ‘Stop it, you fool,’ he mentally chided himself. ‘It’s not like you’ve never seen a woman before! You’re Head of House!’
It was true – from menstrual blood to tears and snot to nudity and even copulation, Severus had seen it all in his years of tenure as Head of Slytherin. The problem was, that never before had he reacted so strongly to the sight of a student’s bare legs, or to a low waistband of lacy knickers. He prided himself on his ability to remain professionally neutral, therefore his body’s enthusiastic reaction to Miss Crowley’s indecent state rattled him more than he cared to admit.

‘Do not dally, Miss Crowley,’ he bit out as he heard the girl’s dainty steps making their way up the creaking stairs. ‘Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes!’

‘Damn, damn, damn and blast!’ Alice thought angrily as she ran upstairs, desperate to get out of Professor Snape’s sight until she was satisfied that she was fit to be seen.

‘Just look at the state of me! No, no, don’t look. My hair’s a mess. I’ve no makeup on! I bet I look rough as a bear’s arse!’

For Alice, this was a tragedy. She was a vain creature, and her obsessive nature, which encouraged her to keep her home spotlessly clean, extended to the matters of personal appearance. She performed her morning ablutions quickly and efficiently, making sure that she was fresh, clean and scented with her favourite perfume. She twisted her hair into a messy bun at the nape of her neck, and began to put on a small amount of makeup.

‘What the FUCK is he doing here at this hour?’ She groused as she expertly tight-lined her upper lash line with a chocolate brown pencil, taking care to keep the line thin and sharp.

‘Besides cooking… and if the smell is anything to go by, he’s damn good in the kitchen…’ She muttered under her breath as she put a coat of black mascara on her lashes.

‘I wonder if… oh no - no, no, no, do NOT even go there, Alice Crowley!’

Her imagination refused to be cowed, and as she closed her eyes, the man strode into the kitchen in her mind. He was dressed in the same tight black vest that showed off his wiry, strong arms. In her mind’s eye, she could see the muscles flex as he wrangled a cast-iron pan at the stove. His back was turned to her, and as she lowered her gaze it passed over a pair of dark-blue denim cut-offs that sat low on his hips, and fell just above the knee. Alice recalled how muscular his legs were, and how pleasant it was to watch him move with cat-like grace. What else had he hidden under those teaching
With an effort, Alice dragged her attention back to the chore at hand. She tried to ignore the rosy blush that spread across her face as she finished off her makeup by dabbing a bit of clear gloss on her lips.

Walking into her bedroom, she opened the wardrobe and looked around, trying to decide on what to wear. She chose a pair of white linen knee-length shorts and a dark navy vest. As she dragged on the vest over her head, again her imagination presented her with her professor, standing at the hob. He turned at the hip to look back over his shoulder at her, tossing his head so the hair was out of his way as he fixed her with a curious stare. As time drew out, a single black eyebrow lifted in curiosity. Did he have to beg her to come and get it?

It was definitely getting warm in here. ‘Too hot for anything fancy,’ Alice mused as she pulled on her trousers. ‘Maybe I’ll have to ask for seconds,’ she said to herself as she critically examined her appearance in the full-length mirror. ‘I mean, look at this! Another pound or two and my norks will disappear completely!’

‘And stop talking to yourself, you daft idiot!’ She reminded herself sternly as she made her way downstairs, following the delicious scent of food.

Severus was busy frying the bacon, nearly ready to dish up when he felt Alice enter the room. He knew she was there, even though the girl made no noise and he stood with her back turned to her. His nose was assaulted by her divine, balsamic scent, which permeated through the smell of the frying food. He stealthily took a deep breath and closed his eyes in pleasure. He was quickly becoming addicted to the delightful aroma, powerful enough to fill entire rooms.

Turning his head towards the young woman, he addressed her rather more stiffly than he intended. ‘Miss Crowley. Take your seat and wait for your food.’

Instead of sitting down obediently, as he expected her to, Alice reached into the cupboard and began to set the table with a brisk efficiency worthy of the most experienced housewife.

Severus’ gaze slid momentarily down her lithe form, and he turned back to the stove, saying a quick prayer to Merlin as his eyes registered the girl’s choice of clothes. The navy vest she was wearing fit her like a glove, emphasising her tiny waist, and, for heaven’s sake - she wore no bra! Severus clenched his teeth as he desperately wished his arousal to disappear. ‘Think of Dumbledore… think of Dumbledore… Albus in a swimsuit… Albus in leather… Albus in a nightie…’ He mentally
chanted, but nothing could take his mind off the lovely thing ghosting around the kitchen.

He piled up the plates with sausages, bacon, hash browns, beans, mushrooms, tomatoes, toast and poached eggs.

‘Um… sir?’ The Lovely Thing’s timid voice floated over to him from across the room.

‘Miss Crowley?’ He replied without looking in her direction.

‘Since you’ve cooked… shall I make the drinks?’

‘By all means, Miss Crowley.’

The girl filled up the kettle and took two mugs out of the cupboard. Flicking on the switch, she turned to him, and asked, ‘Tea or coffee, Professor?’

‘Tea,’

‘...Black, I remember,’ she interjected with a small chuckle, and dropped a teabag into the green mug. ‘His’ mug, as he then began to think of it. He groaned inwardly at the prospect of yet another pitifully prepared brew, but decided to play nice. In the end, his ulterior motive was to gain her trust, and insulting her brewing skills would not get him very far.

He watched from the corner of his eye as Alice put three heaped teaspoons of coffee into her mug. ‘Your blood pressure will go through the roof,’ he blustered at her, and the girl raised an eyebrow at him in response.

‘I cannot function without it, I’m afraid,’ she said with a shrug. ‘Besides, it’s half seven in the morning. I only had 4 hours sleep at most, and I need to wake up in one way or another.’

‘And just what were you doing last night?’ Severus asked grumpily. So, it wasn’t just him who had a restless night, it seemed, although he imagined that his student’s nocturnal activities were much more pleasant than his own.
‘Brewing,’ the girl replied loftily. ‘Nothing more, nothing less. I’m more of a homebody. I don’t go out unless Fred and George…’

‘Very well. Eat.’ Severus cut her off abruptly, as the girl’s mention of the troublesome twins had seriously grated his nerves. So, she was brewing? ‘A likely story,’ he thought to himself, then gave himself a mental shake when he saw the affronted look on the young lady’s face. He was doing a great job at making friends. Not.

He set the plates down on the table, and promptly tucked in. He was starving, and judging by Miss Crowley’s voracious expression, filled with amazement as she stared at the feast put in front of her, so was she.

He took a small sip of tea, and winced in disgust. ‘This is too hot,’ he said when he noticed Miss Crowley’s questioning look. Seemingly satisfied with his explanation, the girl turned back to her food.

The brew was truly dreadful, even worse than the day before, but that thought was wiped out by the happiness that radiated off his dining partner.

Giving himself another mental shake, he raised one dark brow and said grumpily, ‘Stop grinning like a fool, Miss Crowley. Your food will get cold if you keep gawking.’ Severus felt like an idiot, dazed by a beaming teenager. It seemed that the girl was capricious, easy to agitate, and equally easy to impress. He filed the information away for future reference, thinking that it would take him one step closer to his ultimate goal.

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. This is truly delicious.’ She said as she resumed attacking her food with vigour. Severus turned his attention onto his own plate. He noticed that the girl kept glancing at him covertly, her lips curved in a tiny, almost imperceptible smile, and he couldn’t help wondering what she was thinking about.

He knew he was taking a huge risk as he sent a tendril of magic into Alice’s mind. It was unlikely that she was an Occlumens, but knowing the girl’s explosive nature, the consequences would be dire if he was caught invading her head without her consent. He probed her surface gently, trying to detect the merest trace of a wall. Finding that her mind was unguarded and open like a book ready to be read, he gently pushed forward, hiding in plain sight on the outskirts of her consciousness.

‘Whoa…’ he finally detected, and tuned in, straining to better hear her thoughts. His eyes widened and curiosity piqued, he attempted to probe a little deeper, wishing to find out just what she was referring to. ‘I had no idea they came that big!’
Realising what she was thinking about, Severus blushed a deep crimson and nearly spat out his tea. Burying his face in his elbow to hide his bewilderment, he choked on the hot liquid noisily, momentarily unable to regain his balance. Was she… was she thinking about his cock?!

‘Professor? Are you alright?’ The girl was alarmed, and she rushed to hand him a napkin, but he stopped her by raising his hand.

‘I’m… fine, Miss Crowley. I, um… the tea has gone up the wrong way. Pray continue.’ He snapped as he saw the genuine concern flash across the young woman’s face. Desperate to change the subject, he asked the first thing that came into his head.

‘I would like to see those potions, Miss Crowley. I believe I have an obligation to check if their quality is… acceptable.’ He stated, and firmly bit his tongue before the vitriolic remark about his faith, or lack thereof, in the brewing skills of the Gryffindors had a chance to escape his mouth. Yes, potions were a much safer topic for discussion, and would take his mind off the disturbingly delicious sight of the girl’s nipples poking through the thin fabric of her vest.

The little minx, however, seemed hell-bent on being his undoing. Noticing that her fingers were covered in egg yolk and melted butter, she dropped her toast and put each of her fingertips into her mouth, sucking on them gently. She closed her eyes and hummed in pure pleasure, and Severus felt his mouth go dry. His control of the situation was slipping rapidly.

‘Miss Crowley!’ He boomed, and the startled girl looked up at him with a sharp jerk of her head, her eyes wide with innocent puzzlement, her hand hanging in mid-air.

‘I’m sorry, sir. The potions? Yes, yes of course, I’ll take you down to the lab as soon as we’re done here…’

She wiped her hands on a napkin and shoved a piece of bacon into her mouth. She chewed quickly, her gaze fixed upon her plate.

‘… Well, I call it a lab, but it’s only a bench down in the basement, and it really isn’t much to look at…’ She trailed off again in a shaky voice, and Severus detected how tense and uncomfortable she suddenly appeared. Clearly, she was worried, and it made Severus feel much better about the whole situation. It was familiar, a safe ground, where he was in charge, and she was the grovelling student. Intimidating the girl in her own home was not the plan, but it was infinitely better than saying, or Merlin forbid - doing, something he would later regret.
‘I hope you’ll be… satisfied, Professor.’ The girl said, and turned her attention back to her food.

‘We shall see,’ Severus replied, and took another sip of the now tepid tea. They finished their meal in silence, the clinking of the cutlery the only audible sound in the otherwise peaceful kitchen. Severus, however, felt as though the room was suddenly short of air, the tension so thick one could cut it with a knife.

Did the little tease know what she was doing to him? Was she aware of the forbidden, illicit reactions of his treacherous body? Was she, in fact, encouraging them? Or was she completely innocent, and it was him who was the disgusting lecher, who read too deeply into every word and every movement? Was he seeing something that wasn’t - had no right to be there?

He decided that really, he wasn’t truly attracted to her. He was simply desperate and starved for sex. It must be time to visit the whorehouse, to get these urges curbed. The trollops at Madam Clementine’s were vulgar, well-used, and riddled with disease, but they were also imaginative and would take the edge off his frustration. He needed this to assure that he never thought of Miss Crowley’s lovely body in that way again. He mused that in his current state he would have fucked Minerva or Pomona if either of them had given him the least encouragement.

When they finished their breakfast, Alice gathered their empty plates and put them in the sink. She was eager to wash them straight away, as the sight of dirty crockery piling up in the sink was especially abhorrent to her eyes. She grabbed the washing up liquid and a sponge and began scrubbing away, ensuring that every last bit of sauce and grease was gone.

She sent a small, tight-lipped smile at Snape, who was observing her with a mixture of amusement and mild irritation. ‘Surely it would be easier to use a washing-up spell?’ He remarked with a quirk of his eyebrow.

‘No spells could ever get these as clean as a good old scrub by hand!’ Alice huffed as she attacked the frying pan with a scouring pad. ‘And besides, sir, isn’t it your favourite punishment ever to make poor students scrub cauldrons the Muggle way in detention?’

‘Those students are hardly ‘‘poor’’, Miss Crowley,’ Snape drawled silkily as he nonchalantly lit a cigarette. ‘And as you noticed, scrubbing cauldrons the Muggle way is supposed to be a punishment. Since you seem to enjoy it so much, I might have to come up with something less… pleasant, should you ever find yourself serving detention… under me.’

Alice rolled her eyes, choosing not to grace his remark with an answer. She dried her hands on a tea towel and, padding over to the table, found her pack of tobacco. Rolling her first, highly anticipated
cigarette of the day, she sat down heavily, her belly so full she felt as though it would burst.

‘I must say, Professor, your cooking is excellent. I haven’t had such a wonderful breakfast in… well, since the end of term.’

‘Thank you, Miss Crowley,’ Snape replied as he took a deep drag. ‘I spend my days chopping, grinding, boiling and simmering. I do know my way around the kitchen.’

‘I’m sure your family feel very lucky to have a Potions Master in the kitchen,’ Alice remarked, and stared incredulously as the man’s eyes widened and his head snapped up sharply. He was looking at her as though she had grown a second head.

‘I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about, Miss Crowley,’ he said carefully. His usual drawl was quiet and uncertain, and his expression was guarded, wary.

‘Umm… your wife, sir?’ Alice flushed a deep crimson and averted her gaze, feeling an odd mixture of embarrassment, irritation and nervous anticipation wash over her in waves.

‘I do not have a wife, or children, not that it’s any of your business,’ the Professor replied in a low, dangerous growl. ‘I spend enough of my days surrounded by mewling sprogs as it is.’

‘I know what you’re thinking, little Gryffindor do-gooder. Oh, how horribly lonely must it be, to have a quiet house in the night and no-one to help with the wash,’ he mocked her coldly with a vicious snarl curling his upper lip. ‘And before you decide to make any unsolicited comments regarding my life, let me tell you this - I content myself with peace and quiet, and have no desire whatsoever to have them destroyed by any woman.’

Alice swallowed thickly, intimidated by the Professor’s outburst. She knew the man had a bad temper, and deciding to heed the clear warning, she whispered meekly, ‘I’m sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have asked.’

The man’s angry snort was the only reply.

She stood up, putting out her half-finished cigarette. ‘You wished to see my lab, Professor?’
Nodding, Snape stood and indicated for her to lead the way. She walked into the narrow corridor, and opened a door that led down to the basement. ‘These stairs are very steep,’ she warned as she began her descent. The Professor followed, and soon they found themselves in the dusty, cramped basement, furnished with a simple workbench and a small brewing station. A small variety of cauldrons was stacked in one corner, and a small cart was tucked under the bench, filled with ladles, knives, stirring rods and other necessary accessories. A simple wooden shelf, installed on the far wall, housed a limited amount of ingredients needed for brewing basic potions.

‘I know it isn’t much,’ Alice stammered as she studied her shoes, ‘But it does the job. I only brew simple medicines, so I’ve no need for anything fancy.’

The Professor looked around the small space, his lips drawn in a tight-lipped expression of disapproval. Alice felt very self-conscious to be put on the spot, knowing that the man probably thought it beneath him to set foot in such a shabby ‘lab’.

‘May I see the potions, Miss Crowley? I doubt anything made in here would be suitable for anything other than the sewers.’

Alice’s mouth hung open as she absorbed the man’s acerbic remark. Sewers, eh? Alice knew very well that her potions were nearly, if not just as good as his own. She narrowed her eyes momentarily, imagining all sorts of horrible things she would have loved to do to her teacher in that moment, and stomped over to the cart in a huff.

She picked up a vial of cold-relief potion and a tub of burning salve, and presented them to Snape with a sweetly venomous smile. ‘Here, Professor. Please, do check them and let me know immediately if you have any concerns regarding their quality. After all, the work produced by a student reflects on the teaching ability of the Master, does it not?’

A muscle twitched in the sour wizard’s face as he snatched the proffered samples from Alice’s hand and held them up to the dim light of the overhead lamp, inspecting both items for any visual imperfections, foreign bodies or undesirable colour. Finding everything to be in order, he uncapped the healing potion and sniffed it, then set it aside on the bench. He opened the tub of salve and rubbed a small dollop between his fingers, checking the texture and consistency. Finally, he looked at Alice, his aquiline nose firmly turned up, a derogatory snarl gracing his mouth. His eyes bore into hers as he passed his judgement.

‘Adequate.’

Alice turned around and shut her eyes firmly, slowly counting to ten in her head. Adequate?
ADEQUATE?! These potions were of much higher quality than what was sold in most apothecaries, and he had the gall to call them ‘adequate’?! She was tempted to turn around and give him a piece of her mind, but knowing that it was not in her best interest to do so, remained silent.

Seething inwardly, Alice put the potions back in the cart, and schooled her features into the picture of politeness and modesty. She would have to ask Barry to shit on the spiteful old wanker’s head later.

Severus could not take his eyes off Alice as she climbed up the steps. Her hips swung from side to side like a pendulum, and he was hypnotised by the movement. To his chagrin, there was no escaping the alluring, highly inappropriate view, unless he wanted to climb the stairs with his eyes shut. Choosing not to risk falling down and breaking his neck, he allowed his gaze to remain on the young witch’s round, firm posterior.

The insolent chit had managed to catch him out several times during his short visit. He could not believe her impudence as she pried into his personal matters involving his non-existent love life. What business was it of hers anyway? Severus felt that his vitriolic response was completely justified under the circumstances. He did not want or need anybody’s pity - especially not hers. She was only a foolish, insignificant little Gryffindor who knew nothing about the hardships of life. Even less did she know of true love. Oh, if only he could put her over his knee and spank that pert arse for the sheer audacity…!

It was so satisfying to put the girl firmly back in her place by refusing to acknowledge the pristine quality of her work. The samples were flawless - he had to admit that he himself would have been hard put to produce something better. These were, however, the most basic of healing potions, and it was not exactly the world’s greatest achievement to brew them perfectly.

He paused and closed his eyes for a moment, putting a lid on his impure thoughts. He willed his heartbeat to slow and his cock to deflate. His arousal died the instant he imagined a stark-naked Hagrid doing the Macarena, and he climbed the rest of the stairs. Miss Crowley stood in the doorway, regarding him with the ghost of a smirk hovering around her lips.

‘Are you alright, Professor?’ She purred smugly as she casually leaned against the doorframe in a way that was far too inviting for his liking.

Groaning inwardly, he graced her with an angry scowl, and waved his hand in a manner reminiscent of chasing away an annoying fly. ‘I am. Do kindly stop prying, Miss Crowley, Your concern is
unwanted.’

He could have sworn that the witch rolled her eyes as she walked back into the kitchen and began rolling a fag absent-mindedly. He was tempted to stay for a while longer, to share a cigarette and then take his leave, but for some reason he refused to acknowledge, he was desperate to get away from the witch who had nearly managed to make him lose his self-control so many times in such a short amount of time. The meek and obedient student he knew was replaced with an irresistible temptress, and Severus wasn’t sure if he could trust himself not to bite into the forbidden fruit if he stayed for a minute longer.

‘I am going to leave now, Miss Crowley.’ He announced, taking a last, quick look around the lovely bright kitchen. He was reluctant to leave, but it had to be done.

‘No time for a fag before you go, Professor?’ Alice asked in a tone of studied indifference. Was she hoping for him to stay? Or did she want him to go?

‘I am sure you have a lot of … fascinating things to do today, but unlike you, I do not have the luxury of bumbling around during the holidays.’

The tension drained momentarily from her frame. She nodded, and turned her attention to her cigarette, ostensibly ignoring him.

The girl was sulking, and Severus felt a little guilty. Perhaps he had been too hard on her. The girl had been a gracious enough hostess, and had paid him many compliments, just to be sneered at and belittled in return. Attempting to soften the blow of his rudeness, he added, ‘I have matters of great importance to discuss with the Headmaster. Good day.’

Without waiting for an answer, he turned on the spot and promptly Disapparated. He never saw Alice bang her fist on the table.
The rest of the day passed uneventfully for Alice. She cleaned her entire house top to bottom to burn off excess energy, with BBC Radio 2 playing in the background. The three o’clock news caught her attention, reporting that a bridge had suddenly collapsed in West London. A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police was giving a statement:

‘...Local authorities are on high alert after this morning’s disastrous events. The was no evidence of an explosion, and records pulled from public works show that engineers did a thorough inspection two months ago and found the bridge to be in good condition. Ensuring the safety of the British public is our top priority, and the Metropolitan Police Investigators will be working closely with the government to determine the reason for the collapse, and to find and punish the culprits. We currently cannot rule out the possibility of the IRA’s involvement.’

Intrigued, she padded closer to the radio, cradling a load of dirty washing in her arms. ‘Shite!’ She gasped as she listened to the testimonies of survivors, reporters and eyewitnesses, several of whom claimed to have seen an unnatural red shimmer climbing up the bridge minutes before it fell into the river.

‘There something sinister going on here. There is no chance in Dante’s nine circles that this is merely mass delusion,’ she muttered to herself as the news ended and music began to play.

Alice's thoughts ground to a full stop as the floor in front of her arrested her attention. She had already gone over the kitchen floor and bathroom with a wet mop, and thought the floors done. Heat crept up her neck and cheeks with flames of feminine rage, the likes of which were not seen in these walls since her Gran last reigned over the household. The subject of her ire were large, dusty footprints crossing the ceramic tile of the front entryhall. She never used the front door - there could be only one explanation.

‘That poisonous bunch-backed toad!’ She shrieked as she ran to grab a bucket of warm soapy water and a cloth. Falling on her knees, she began scrubbing the kitchen floor in small, quick circles, ensuring that no outside dirt remained in her little sterile bubble of a house. By the time she was done, her knees were red and raw, and her trousers were soaked in grey, sudsy water. ‘I don’t spend my days keeping this house habitable just so HE can come in and leave dirty footprints all over!’ She
fumed as she emptied the bucket into the sink. Really, the man was a bastard, an inconsiderate tosser whose slovenly ways threatened to destroy the remaining threads of Alice’s sanity. ‘I swear, if he ever dares to keep his shoes on in this house again, I’ll hex his bollocks off and affix them to his gigantic nose with a fucking permanent sticking charm!’

She paused, and felt her fury drain away, only to be replaced by a wave of malicious humour. The young witch tipped over laughing, her arms around her middle as her mind conjured the image of Professor Snape’s beetle-black eyes, peering over a phallic nose with two hairy bollocks jiggling about as he lisped, ‘I can teaf you how to bottle fame, bwew glowy, and even put a stopper in death - if you awen’t as big a bunsh of dunderheadths as I uthually haf to teaf!’

Alice gasped, trying to catch her breath, and covered her mouth with one hand, her small form still convulsing with mirth. ‘Dumbledore won’t know which end he is talking out of…’ She dissolved into a fresh set of giggles, and her abdominal muscles began to protest. ‘As if that’s any different than usual!’

She grasped the countertop for balance, snickering uncontrollably between taking deep, calming breaths. Her face was red, and her eyes glittered with glee as she imagined presenting the idea to the Fred and George. They would love it - perhaps they could even come up with a potion that would do just that! The perfect punishment for the affront that incensed Alice so profoundly.

‘That grumpy, old, sour-faced git wouldn’t know a perfect potion if it punched him in the face!’ She asserted firmly, remembering how Snape insulted her potion-making skills. ‘Adequate’, she enunciated slowly and clearly, in a mockingly high-pitched tone. ‘Adequate, my arse!’

If the ruddy bat only knew what she kept in the shed, he wouldn’t even dream of using the word ‘adequate’. But he couldn’t know.

Her good humour left her as quickly as it appeared, and Alice sunk down and sat cross-legged, leaning her head against the washing machine. The Headmaster had made it very clear that if word got out of the Essence’s existence, the effects would be catastrophic. The ominous concoction, if completed, would provide the Light with a substantial advantage in the war effort. Its safety at this crucial time could not be compromised in any way.

Realising just how much was depending on her silence and her efforts, Alice rubbed her temples with her fingertips. She couldn’t fuck this up, not now. But Dumbledore wasn’t helping either. The emotional blackmail and the constant, ever-increasing pressure were beginning to break her resolve to do her bit for the Order. She wondered just how much she could give before her body, or her mind gave up?
She was safe for as long as she was useful, but she had no illusions that this would last. The second her task was complete, she would be left to fend for herself - just another pawn in Dumbledore’s game - sacrificed, if need be, for the ‘Greater Good’.

Dumbledore was not a kind man by any stretch of imagination, and Alice had seen straight through the slightly dotty, grandfatherly persona. Everyone around her worshipped the de-facto leader of the wizarding world, but did anybody else see him for what he was - a callous, cold-hearted warlord? It was obvious that Harry Potter and the entire Weasley clan had swallowed the act, hook line and sinker.

Alice was certain that Dumbledore had even managed to deceive Severus Snape. She had always thought that there was more to the surly whoreson of a potions master, and she found that his presence was strangely comforting, and not entirely… unwelcome. Alice could not deny the lure of those penetrating, onyx eyes, which sparked with dreamy intelligence. Whenever he was near, she found herself subconsciously gravitating towards the dark wizard, watching his every move. She was fascinated by the precise movements of his long, elegant fingers. The sight of his tall, whip-thin frame walking through a crowd made her eyes glad. The dramatic flare of his robes as he paced at the front of the class surely sent flights of angels into song, or so she imagined.

A small voice at the back of her head acknowledged the all-encompassing sense of masculine strength that emanated from the man. Alice imagined a life where he was her partner in all things, the two of them supporting each other through what must be dark times ahead. A warmth blossomed in her chest as she meditated on how perhaps she could ease his troubles in turn. Who looked out for Severus Snape, if not she?

The piercing sound of an annoying advertising jingle on the radio snapped her out of her reverie, and the witch scrambled to rise from the floor, shaking off her discordant feelings. Her bum and back were numb, and her knees made a cracking sound as she rose to her full height. She might have fancied her Professor’s sexy arse, but nothing could change the fact that he was an condescending asshole, an arrogant twat AND an ugly bugger to boot.

Lips drawn firmly into a thin line, the young witch drew herself together, refocusing her anger on its proper target. She needed to change out of these dirty clothes, so she stomped up the staircase loud enough that she fancied that Snape might be able to hear her, wherever the git lived. Unable to contain herself, she shouted, "ADEQUATE IS WHAT YOU KEEP IN YOUR TROUSERS!" For good measure, she slammed her bedroom door shut with a satisfying bang, which in turn caused dust to shower down from the plaster ceiling onto her erstwhile spotless hallway floor.

Severus walked briskly towards Dumbledore’s office. After he came to a halt in front of the stone Gargoyle, cleared his throat and gave the password. ‘Curly Wurly’, he uttered in clipped tones. He
often wondered why the Headmaster insisted on setting such undignified passwords - was it simply that the old codger loved his confectionery so much, or was he doing it just to annoy him specifically?

Severus pushed this benign mystery to the side, and turned his mind to his plan of attack as he ascended the spiral staircase. He had a report to give and a lie to invent in order to keep the Dark Lord off his back.

The door opened before Severus had a chance to knock, and Dumbledore’s calm, deep voice came floating from the centre of the room. ‘Ah, Severus! Come in, my boy, I was wondering where you were!’

‘Forgive me, Albus,’ Severus replied, ‘But I had something to attend to this morning.’

‘That’s quite alright, dear boy, quite alright. Come, sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?’ Albus raised one bushy brow invitingly as he gathered the filigree tea set which rested on a nearby table.

Severus nodded as he took his usual place in a winged chair by the fireplace. Stretching his legs in front of him, he leaned back and folded his hands on his stomach, watching from beneath hooded eyes as Albus busied himself with preparing the tea, his movements artful and exaggerated. Really, the old man had a liking for theatrics, not unlike the Dark Lord himself.

He noticed that a small fire danced merrily in the grate. It might have been the middle of Summer, but the Scottish Highlands were relatively chilly, and Severus found himself staring into the flames, as though they held the answers to all the questions in the universe.

‘And there you go,’ proclaimed Albus as he handed over a dainty china cup adorned with hideous pink cabbage roses. Severus eyed the proffered cup for a moment, remembering the brew he was forced to endure earlier at Crowley’s, best described as dirty water, all tannin and no tea. He schooled his expression to one of polite acceptance. ‘Thank you.’

Albus knew how to make the perfect cup of tea. Severus took a small, cautious sip, sampling the beverage before giving a small hum of approval. ‘Excellent as always, Headmaster,’ he offered with a slight bow of his head.

Dumbledore chuckled cordially before gesturing to a crystal bowl on the tray. ‘Lemon drop?’ He asked, and when Severus politely declined, he shrugged and popped one in his mouth, his expression
one of sheer bliss.

The two men exchanged pleasantries for a while, discussing the weather and the local gossip. Albus excitedly gave an account of a recent fight between two drunken wizards at the Three Broomsticks, describing in detail how Madam Rosmerta broke up the brawl with her bare hands, and led the two offenders out of her pub by their ears. Severus was impressed, but not surprised - the feisty barmaid took no nonsense, and was not above using physical or magical force to ensure that her customers behaved. He himself had been on the receiving end of the woman’s wrath plenty of times in his youth. He hung his head forward, allowing his hair to obscure the faint blush which spread across his cheeks as he remembered that one time when Rosmerta kicked him out, her ample bosom heaving in annoyance. Oh, what a glorious sight it was!

The sound of Albus clearing his throat shook him out of his reverie. Bosoms, ample or no, would have to wait, for they had matters of much greater importance to discuss.

‘He’s getting more vicious by the minute. I need to bring him something - anything, Albus!’

All of the tone of passionate supplication drained out of his voice now, replaced by a detached matter-of-fact monotone. ‘I barely survived my last Summons. He made me the centrepiece for the evening’s festivities. The Dark Lord will not be so merciful if I fail him again.’

‘We’ll find a way to keep you safe, Severus.’ The older man promised in a placating tone, and Severus ground his molars, sick and tired of empty platitudes. He willingly risked life and limb on a daily basis, and brought valuable intelligence. Surely his usefulness commanded that Dumbledore take thought for his spy's safety, lest he lose all they worked for?

‘Did Tom say anything about his plans?’ Albus pressed, and Severus shook his head dejectedly. Dumbledore’s lack of concern for his wellbeing was to be expected, but the abrupt change of subject still stung.

‘Nothing new, as far as I know. I am not exactly… his favourite confidante right now, Albus. He is planning to launch a series of attacks in the Muggle world soon, but I don’t know any specifics. The Dark Lord… has not included me in his inner council meetings for some weeks now.’

Dumbledore reclined in his chair and stroked his long, silver beard, deep in thought. After a moment, the old wizard stood and paced to the back of his office, towards a collection of strange, delicate instruments set upon a collection of benches of all shapes and sizes. He took his time observing a mysterious, spidery contraption from a variety of angles, nodding and humming pensively. Finally, he poked the apparatus with his wand, eliciting a high-pitched, buzzing sound. Turning around, he
indicated for Severus to come nearer.

The two wizards engaged in a heated discussion, and after an hour, they believed they had come up with a plan which would satisfy Voldemort’s desire for information, and keep Severus alive in the process. The lie was elaborate, but the plan was solid, and Dumbledore had no doubt that the younger man could spin it in a way that would give them an advantage without compromising his own safety.

Ready to set their latest plan into motion, Severus gave a small, formal bow and turned to leave, but Dumbledore stopped him by raising his hand. ‘Oh, just one more thing, Severus,’ the Headmaster began innocently, and the younger wizard turned back to quirk a questioning brow at his employer.

‘It has come to my attention that you have ran into Miss Alice Crowley,’ Albus’ eyes twinkled like diamonds at the younger wizard froze momentarily, then shot him with a milk-curdling glare.

The visibly vexed Potions Master spat out, ‘I have indeed, Headmaster, though I assure you that I took no pleasure from those… unfortunate encounters. The girl is ill-tempered, brash and disobedient, and I was sadly mistaken in my assumption that she is somehow different from the rest of your precious Gryffindors. What I fail to understand is why you would ever think to suggest that she stay in Spinner’s End!’

Blatantly disregarding the spy’s tirade, Dumbledore popped a lemon drop in his mouth. He gifted Severus with another blinding twinkle as he replied liltingly, ‘Well, I’m glad to hear you’re getting along. Miss Crowley is indeed a lovely witch, although perhaps a little awkward.’

At Severus’ contemptuous snort, the Headmaster’s lips stretched into a sly smile. Cocking his head to the side and pinning the man with a pointed look, Albus asked, ‘You won’t mind popping in to check up on her every now and then, will you?’

‘Albus…’ Severus’ silky voice lowered to a dangerous growl, and he clenched his fists at his sides, his narrowed eyes glowering at the older man with unadulterated menace. He knew the Headmaster long enough to know that the old man was not being deliberately obtuse, but was doing an extraordinary job at deliberately playing on his nerves.

‘Now now, no need to get so flustered, dear boy. Miss Crowley’s excellent potions keep Poppy happy…’
‘... they are indeed very well made,’ Severus interjected grudgingly, ‘but - ’

‘And if I may be so honest, you could do with a friend, Severus.’ Dumbledore finished, and flinched when the Potions Master rose to his full height and roared,

‘I HAVE NOT, AND WILL NOT, BECOME FRIENDS WITH THAT DUNDEHEAD… CRETIN WHO CAN’T EVEN BREW ADEQUATE TEA!!’

Dumbledore turned his back on the seething Severus to hide the chuckle that bubbled beneath the surface, threatening to erupt into a hissy fit of giggles at any minute. He pretended to cough into his sleeve to cover up his amusement.

‘Of course not, of course not, Severus… but I still insist that you keep an eye on her. The poor thing…’

Before Albus had a chance to finish his sentence, the fireplace roared with green flames, and the head of the Minister for Magic appeared in the grate.

‘Albus! Emergency session in the Wizengamot chambers! Giants have attacked in West London! Come immediately!’

The Headmaster gave a sharp nod, and the Minister’s head disappeared.

‘Stay safe, Severus.’ Dumbledore shot as a way of dismissal before grabbing his cloak and rushing to grab his cloak. He cast a glance over his shoulder in Severus’ direction and nodded, before stepping into the fireplace and disappearing into the Ministry in a roaring wall of green flames.

Severus turned on his heel and exited the office, slamming the door behind him. He needed a fag.
A million thanks to FawkesyLady, who works tirelessly to ensure that my writing is as good as can be. And fixes stuff for me. And always has the best ideas. And brings me food. And drinks. And pudding. And does my washing. (I wish!)

Barry the Bastard flew into the kitchen at neck-breaking speed. With a great whooshing sound, he circled the room, wings fully spread to show off their impressive width. The Chiefest of All Owls announced himself with a loud, ‘Twit-twoooo!’

He pushed up his chest officiously as he perched on his favourite chairback. It was time to see if his Human was earning her keep. According to Barry, the Human in question had but one job – to make him happy. She was expected to keep his cage clean, to refill his treat bowl daily, to clean up his litter tray and to praise and fawn over him, and whenever it suited him, she might be allowed to scratch his neck ruff. IF she was very good.

So far, the Human was doing well enough. Barry found her to be quite diligent, and it made him very happy indeed that the occasional disciplinary measures he had to enforce seemed to be working. The undesirable behaviours, such as ruffling his feathers, or worse... calling him CUTE, were becoming less frequent. Barry shuddered with revulsion at that particular memory.

Yes, such acts had to be nipped in the bud. A runny shit here and a pellet there kept the Human focused on her life’s purpose, and the periodic bite or a vicious scratch served as a way of encouraging the Human to think about her behaviour, repent, and atone accordingly. The two-legged idiot would treat him with the respect and love he deserved. She chose him, and he deserved nothing less.

It was therefore a great shock to the Owl Overlord’s system as he registered the deeply disturbing scene that played out right before his sulphuric eyes. His own pet Human – the traitorous, double-crossing, back-stabbing, good-for-nothing Jezebel, was sitting at the table, crooning lovingly to a measly wimp of an owl, stroking its moth eaten feathers with a look of unadulterated bliss. Worse, she was hand feeding the miserable wretch treats. HIS treats.

Without any preamble, Barry spread his claws and launched a vicious assault at the surprised pair with a mighty battle cry. His sharp claws found their mark easily, and as he buried them into the Human’s tender scalp, he beat at the air to try and rip away from the tangled mess of hair. The attack startled the tiny Scops owl, who launched himself into the air. He was quite fast as he manoeuvred to
perch on the curtain rail, chirping in panic and confusion.

Pigwidgeon watched in horror as Barry exacted his revenge. Feeling his rival’s eyes on him, Barry flipped around and braced himself on the crown of his prey’s hair, perching and pausing in his attack for a moment to glare upwards. He spread his wings over his pet’s head in an open display of hostility. ‘That’s right, stay right there,’ Barry thought in his little head, ‘I’ll have a word with you later!’

His Human huddled with her arms wrapped around her head. She was reeling from his attack and he could feel her wobble off balance as she used one hand to try and disentangle his claws from her hair and scalp. ‘BARRY!’ She cried out, pain and shock causing her to positively screech. Barry was not done, oh no, so he mercilessly jabbed at her hands with his razor-sharp beak, fending her off.

‘WHAT THE FUCK’S GOT INTO YOU?! STOP THIS RIGHT NOW!’

Barry seethed with righteous anger. The straw-haired ape would know exactly why she was being punished if she would just stop and give it a modicum of consideration. She was a thoughtless traitor - caught red-handed as she committed treason against The Elite Owl Emperor! It was his right and duty to exact revenge.

‘My treats! MINE!’ Barry screeched as the Human’s arms began wheeling around in a desperate attempt to scare him off without falling. This vain attempt at disengaging him from his mission only served to push Barry further into his berserker battle rage. ‘What did you think, you flightless cunt - that you can piss about with another owl without any consequences?! That I would never find out?!” He shifted so that he could bend down and regard her face more closely, using his tail and wings for balance. He batted his wings and lifted one talon to reach down and try to grab onto her nose. He had briefly contemplated scratching out her eyes, but then she would be useless to him. Surveying the damage, he marked how his Human’s head was covered in cuts and grazes, and rivulets of blood flowed down from her hairline, staining her cheeks red and mixing with her tears.

A loud squawk finished this portion of the punishment, ‘ YOU LOVE ME, AND ONLY ME!!!’

And as for you…’ Barry turned his head to the little owl, which was now circling the kitchen rapidly like an idiot, without any sense of direction. ‘DON’T EVER TOUCH MY TREATS!’ Releasing the Human’s hair, he launched himself at the smaller owl. It started to fly about in erratically, hooting shrilly in terror. Barry was much larger than Pigwidgeon, and it only took two rotations about the kitchen before he caught the little git and pinned him down to the countertop.

With his full weight bearing down on the little owl, he leaned in, forcing Pig to look into his eyes as
he made to deliver this last lesson, ‘AND DON’T…’

Before he had a chance to rip this tiny opponent to shreds, he heard his Human cry, ‘Petrificus Totalus!’ Barry froze in midair, hit by a flash of white light, and fell down onto the floor with a loud, dull thump.

Looming above him, Alice panted heavily, and she quivered with the shock of the brutal attack. Her hand had shook even as she successfully fired the Full Body-Bind Curse at her ferocious owl. ‘Enough!’ She growled and took a step toward the terrified little owl, which was staring at her wide-eyed. It flipped upright, and it coiled itself, ready to snap open his wings and fly away from this crazed Human and her rabid bird.

Alice stepped back, holding her palms outward in a gesture of conciliation. She softened her voice and tried to explain, ‘Barry can be a bit of a bastard, I know,’ she crooned to the scared little bird, and held out her arm invitingly. ‘I’m sorry that he attacked you, he’s just being unreasonable. Now come over, so I can tie this letter to your leg,’

‘Hooot!’ The little owl grumbled, and puffed out his chest and neck ruff, as though to say, ‘I was about to leap to your rescue, I had him on the ropes, I did!’ After two beats pause, Pigwidgeon allowed himself to be coaxed back to compliance, stepping onto the proffered forearm, taking care not to leave any more holes in this human’s hide. After all, she did have a treat in her pocket for him, he just knew it.

Holding one leg out, he waited patiently as Alice tied the missive in place with unsteady fingers. She had fumbled the twine twice, but settled on a messy granny knot that should hold. Her bleeding fingers had left a trace of blood on the parchment, an inelegant mockery of a wax seal.

‘There.’ She held up the treat, and the little owl gobbled it up. ‘Now, Pig, go and take this to Fred and George. I’ll see them later.’

As Pig took his leave through the window, Alice turned to Barry, and stared him furiously in the eye. ‘And you…!’ She began accusingly as she picked up the limp bundle of feathers and carried him out the back door and into the yard, setting him down on the dirt. ‘You, are a terrible bully! I cannot believe your behaviour! If you do this again, I’ll take you to an owlery and leave you there forever!’

She put him on the paving slabs and brandished her wand. ‘You can take care of your own supper tonight. Consider it punishment for being an asshole!’ She had thought to leave him there, but the idea of a cat or other predator getting to him while he was stunned was more than she was willing to risk, even as angry as she was.
One expertly aimed *Ennervate* later, and the witch marched back inside the house, shutting the door and the windows closed with a flick of her wand.

***

Barry woke abruptly, and found himself laying on his back in a very unnatural position, staring up at the clouded English sky. A nearby door being slammed shut made him jump up wildly. The ground didn’t seem to be stable, tilting under him. Swaying on his feathered feet, he blinked rapidly a few times in order to bring his vision back into focus, and discovered he was outside, behind the house. In a rush, it all came back to him. As he became reoriented, he ruffled his feathers, sending his skin rippling as a wave of righteous indignation washed over his walnut-sized brain. ‘What the fuck?!’ He thought angrily as he hopped from one paving slab to the next, chirping at the closed door. ‘What the fuck have you done to me, dumb-arsed toad?!’

Flying clumsily onto the window sill, he peeked inside, and saw his precious plate of treats on the other side of the window. His Human was sat at the table with a small mirror, apparently trying to poke her eyes out with a black fluffy stick. He banged at the window with his beak, once, twice, three times, but the Human looked up at him and scowled before turning back to poking her eyes out.

‘Stop your monkeying around and let me in this instant! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!
’ He screeched and jabbed at the glass a little harder. This was strange. Everything had gone pear shaped and he was at a loss as to understand where it all went wrong. Why was the Human ignoring him, when she should have been feeding him strips of bacon lovingly, and properly begging for his forgiveness?!! He had only done what any self-respecting owl would have done in his place - punish the treacherous Human and scare away the trespasser! SHE was the one who had broken faith with HIM!

‘Let me in, fuckwit! Ungrateful cunt!’

The Human was not responding properly and the wrongness of the situation struck him. As he mulled this over, the girl got up, a look of firm resignation on her face. ‘Finally,’ he thought. ‘She’s seen sense, she is going to apologise, and we’ll work on getting things back on track.’ That line of thought abruptly ended when the girl met his eyes and then in one deliberate movement, she drew the curtain closed. Right in his beak. Barry was shocked - was she rejecting him?!

‘Fine! Have it your way, yellow-haired harlot!’ He seethed as he took off in a random direction. ‘You’ll come begging me to come back, but I won’t! I’ll spend my days sleeping peacefully in the trees, and hunting for fat tasty mice at night!’
He mused as he circled the estate, ‘I don’t need your fucking treats! Shove them up your arse, stupid cunt, I can find love elsewhere! Hell - I can even find another Human! Yes, who wouldn’t wish to worship me, hoot?! You can keep that little fucking wimp if you like - see if he’ll deliver your post as well as I do! Hooooooot!’

He wheeled about the house, checking out his territory once before turning away. No, that disgrace of a bird wasn’t here any longer, and there wasn’t a queue of like-minded owls waiting to move in behind him. Not that he really cared. He’d have to tell them all at the Post Office to watch for this human, not to trust her. He contemplated laying in wait to stop others from approaching this vicious, unsafe witch. For their safety, of course.

He swooped down and perched on a battered old fence in the alley not far from his Human’s house. He wanted to stay near. The traitor might come out looking for him. Oh, how triumphant would he be, to not react to her passionate pleas for his return! Surely, she would be worried sick, and he would just sit there, listening in to her torment. Yes, the Human would soon come to miss his divine presence. That ignorant ape would regret her outrageous, unrepentant behaviour.

He imagined how the bitch would come running to him with teary eyes and an armful of dry-cured bacon, thankful for his glorious return, promising to never upset him again. He would give her a final reprimand, and then, he would graciously forgive her transgressions and allow her to love and serve him again. Yes, she would be utterly humbled and desperate to fulfill his every wish. He would hoot and she would ask, ‘How high?’

For now, however, he was still furious with the back-stabbing viper. A viper he had raised on his own feathered breast. He would not forgive easily. He was ready to chase the other owl away and allow his Human to make amends, and she had… shut him out! How unreasonable! How scandalous! Disgraceful!

‘Let her suffer!’ He seethed as he began grooming himself. ‘Let her endure the agony of not knowing where I am! In fact, she should just kill herself. Or shove that stupid swooshing stick of hers straight into her heart! Oh, but she has no heart!’

‘Looks like somebody’s ruffled your feathers.’ An unknown rich, deep hoot came from somewhere to his right. Barry turned his head abruptly, and his acid-yellow eyes widened at the sight of the most beautiful owl he had ever seen. The stranger was perched nonchalantly to his left, regarding him with cool amusement. And oh, she was stunning. Her bright-orange eyes were glowing with the intensity of Fiendfyre, framed with jet-black fringe of feathers reminiscent of heavily painted eyelashes. Snowy-white disks of plumage surrounded those fiery orbs like a mask, enhancing her mysterious allure.
Barry’s sulphuric eyes slid lasciviously up and down, noticing the coarse greyish-brown blotches scattered across her tail and wings, and the exquisite dark streaks upon her soft, fluffy breast.

His heart beat a rampant staccato as he drank in the sight of the goddess, who seemed to have descended from heavens above in order to claim his soul and his heart. When the Enchantress clucked her cute, tiny beak impatiently, Barry shook himself out of his reverie and realised that he must have been staring at her for an inappropriately long time. Clearing his throat, he puffed up his broad, impressive chest, and nonchalantly strutted over to the stranger, making sure to sway his tail feathers this way and that.

‘Why, hello there,’ He hooted in what he hoped was his best irresistible-seducer voice. ‘Do you believe in love at first sight? Or should I walk past again?’ He added, wiggling his eyebrows.

The beautiful owl’s eyes widened momentarily, before she chuckled darkly, obviously entertained. Raising one eyebrow, she hooted, ‘Smooth talker, are we? How cute.’

Barry stiffened. She called him cu… he shuddered, unable to complete the word he resented so much, even in his own thoughts. But she called him a smooth talker. That was a good thing, right? Emboldened, he moved a little closer, and whispered, ‘I, am Apollyon Fionnbharrth Flutterbottom. And who are you, oh beautiful one?’

The stranger smirked as she looked him up and down, before asking, ‘So… Apollyon, what’s got you into such a sulk?’

Barry’s stomach dropped. The owl had tilted her head to the side flirtatiously, and was observing him from beneath hooded lids, her lovely little beak raised slightly in an approximation of an amused quirk of a lip. Quickly gathering his wits, Barry decided to tell her all about his recent fight.

‘My Human,’ he murmured, and clenched the fence tightly in his sharp talons. ‘She’s such a useless cunt. I gave her my best efforts, and she still chose to go knocking about with some fucking worm-ridden, bumblefooted pidgeon! She was feeding that cheeky blighter MY treats!’

‘Oh, poor baby!’ The stranger hooted in sympathy. She clucked her beak in disapproval before moving a little closer. ‘Have you not taught your Human proper treat segregation? Does she not keep the best for you and set aside lesser scraps for working owls? The protocol in this matter is very clear - I don’t know what they are teaching those witches these days?’

‘I have tried to supplement her education, but I must have found the densest witch in all of the Isles!’ Barry stared at his claws in embarrassment. Was she thinking that he couldn’t train his pet-human?
Desperate to save face, he rushed to explain, ‘I have taught and explained and punished accordingly. I have spent a long time drilling the rules into her empty head - yet she remains insolent and treacherous! The moment I turn my back, she runs off to be all lovey-dovey with other owls! Had I not woken up from my daily nap and caught her red-handed, I would have never found out! My Human is a bad, bad ape! I don’t know why I even keep her!’

‘Sometimes I wonder why I keep mine,’ The Stranger drawled with an understanding bob of her head. ‘My own Human is quite well-trained, but still misbehaves on occasion - just to vex me, it seems. The other day, I caught him topping up my food bowl without emptying and washing it first!’

‘No!’ Barry’s beak hung open in disbelief. That was unforgivable and unsanitary - to mix fresh food with old?! Scandalous! Surely, his Human would never do that to him? ‘Was he trying to make you sick?! What did you do? Let me at him! Show me your Human, oh gorgeous one, and I shall shit on his head!’

‘Don’t worry, I dropped a pellet in his food,’ the Owl replied off-handedly. ‘I don’t think he’ll be doing that again.’

‘He’d better not,’ Barry replied gruffly. He was very impressed with how the beautiful owl handled the situation, and filed the ingenious punishment away for future reference. ‘I very nearly scratched my Human’s eyes out, I was so enraged. I thought better of it, though - she would be of no use for me if she was blind.’

He paused, and regarded the stranger with uncertainty, searching her face in an attempt to determine her opinion. She leant forwards slightly, and gave an encouraging nod, clearly wishing to hear more. Barry, relieved and desperate to impress the stranger, continued, ‘I then turned around to mash the wee flobberworm into a pulp - he was only a diddy thing, but fast! There it was, bumbling about in circles like a hammered fly, but I snatched it out of the air in two turns, I did! Pinned him down, and was about to give him a scar to remember me by... but then my Human waved that weird little stick of hers and… kicked me out!’

The fair owl had been listening politely, but at the mention of the wand she could not contain herself. "That is appalling!" Her eyes opened wide in sympathetic indignation. Scandalised by the unjust treatment Barry had been subjected to, she continued,

‘My wizard but rarely uses his magic on me, so I am reluctant to scratch or bite, as much as he provokes me. No, we have come to an understanding and I manage to express my censure in other ways’ She hopped once, repositioning herself to duck closer to Barry, ‘Only last week I introduced a cache of doxy eggs into the sofa. It was so amusing to watch that ridiculous simian dash from room to room, trying to contain the infestation. I had done it while he was away, you see? He will never be certain that it was me.’ She caught the look of confusion as it crossed Apollyon's face. ‘Oh, when I
need to be more direct, I will drop a dead mouse in the chimney, or a toad into his slippers. As boneheaded he might be at times, he does seem to be fairly swift on the uptake.' She shook her wings once, before adding, 'And he is properly devoted to me. Pathetic sod. So alone. I don't know what he'd do without me to keep him company at night.'

The kitchen window opened abruptly, and the stranger turned her head towards the source of the noise. 'And that’s the man himself.' Her voice warmed with amusement. 'I suppose he needs my help. I don’t know what he’d do without me. Helpless as an owlet!' She favoured Barry with a regal nod. ‘Good hunting.’

‘Of course,’ Barry replied, then gave her a saucy wink. ‘Will I see you around? I was thinking of heading to that little patch of wilderness by the mill pond later. I found this fantastic colony of deer mice. Fattest little morsels I've had in a good month. I'd be glad for the company, take my mind off of my woes?’

The beautiful owl had already turned her back to him, flapping her wings as she took off. She turned her head and shot Barry with a look of superior indifference. ‘Maybe. I hope your Human sorts herself out, but there’s always more where that one came from, isn’t there? Oh, and by the way, my name is Sharon La Chasseuse des Souris.’

‘Sharon…’ Barry crooned to himself as he watched her fly into the house.
Alice had no idea why she agreed to this madness. Going out for lunch to a busy pub at rush hour was her idea of hell. Her hands shook nervously as she imagined the throngs of witches and wizards sitting and standing near, making a lot of noise, or worse: expecting conversation complete with verbal responses. Out loud.

And then there was Barry. The infernal creature had attacked and hurt her - and the effort of putting him in a body-bind and healing herself taxed the young witch rather significantly. She sat down at the table with a small mirror, and began putting on a thick layer of makeup. The painted mask, hiding any and all imperfections, provided a sense of comfort and control to the young witch.

She carefully applied a shimmering layer of bronze eyeshadow, taking care to clear any stray fallout from her cheeks. She followed with a tight line of black pencil on her upper lash line, smudged just so, and several coats of jet-black mascara. As she brushed out the non-existent clumps, checking that her lashes were perfectly separated, she heard a loud knocking sound coming from behind the window.

‘That had better not be Barry. I’ll pluck ‘im and fry him faster than you can say, PISS OFF!’ And there he was. Clearly visible through the flawed pane, Barry was furiously trying to break through the glass with his beak. ‘Not letting you in, no fucking chance, mate,’ she muttered as she stomped over to the window and pulled the curtain shut. Abruptly, the knocking stopped, and Alice let out her anger and tension in a single forceful exhalation. The comparative silence was accusatory, deafening even. She refused to care. He could go eat poison-ridden rats after what he did. Even tomorrow morning might be too soon to face his flea-ridden surly gob.

Turning away from the window, the girl took an unsteady step towards the door, and had to catch herself as she nearly collapsed. She wrapped her arm around her middle as she rode out the wave of nausea, holding onto the countertop with a white-knuckled grip. She could not explain why firing a simple Petrificus Totalus had made her feel so weak, as though she had been in a long, tiring duel. Usually, her defensive skills were pretty sharp - an unexpected attack would have given her an adrenaline rush, and she would have fired one hex after another in retaliation without breaking a sweat. This time, however, she ended up with shaking hands and unsteady feet. She didn’t feel up to Apparating all the way to London, and considered cancelling her lunch date with the Twins.
‘Food though… real food,’ she mused as she took a quick look in her cupboard. She had shopped for supplies again the day before, but since her culinary skills were limited to beans on toast or heating up a tin of soup, she thought hard, weighing the risk of Splinching over the allure of actual food. As items from the menu danced across her vision - bangers and mash, all day breakfast, and steak and kidney pie, she made a decision. She would take a half-dose of pepper-up and deal with the jitters. This was too good to miss and she wasn't going to get stronger laying in bed, like she would do if she stayed home.

Walking into the hallway, she took a quick look at herself in the mirror as she gathered her handbag. She decided that the khaki-green skater dress she was wearing was rather flattering. The hemline skimmed her knees, and the round neckline ended just an inch or so below her collarbone - modest enough to not attract unwanted attention. As she slipped her feet into a pair of brown sandals, her hand dipped into the bag and fished out a lip balm, which she applied as the finishing touch. Taking a last quick look, she gathered her courage and Disapparated.

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Diagon Alley was was hotter than Hades and twice as populated. A blur of faces, heavily interrupted by short people buying school supplies, swam past Alice and she felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She looked around the crowd, disoriented, searching for the familiar freckled faces of her best friends.

The loud noises and the mingling scents of humans instantly overwhelmed Alice’s senses, and her hands became sweaty with stress. She was standing in a bad spot, forcing a succession of wizards and witches to bump into her and scrape at her sides with paper bags. After the third, "Right, sorry, love!" and the next, "Get a leg on, witch, you're in the way," Alice ventured into the flow of the foot-traffic. Fred and George were nowhere to be seen.

Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she turned her head this way and that, buffeted towards Gringott’s by the current of people. The air was heavy and thick, and she found herself taking quick, shallow breaths, desperate not to pass out in the heat and humidity. Hot tears of frustration and panic prickled her eyelids as she took a frantic look around, ready to Disapparate on the spot to escape the masses of the Great Unwashed.

Finally, she noticed two fiery heads near the entrance. The twins were waving their arms enthusiastically, shouting over the crowd, ‘Ala! Over here!’

Alice nearly cried with relief by the time she reached the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron. Giggling
hysterically, she threw herself at George, and wrapped both arms around the redhead’s neck without ceremony. George was rubbing her back in quick, soothing circles as the young witch clung to him for dear life. ‘Are you alright, love?’ He murmured in her ear. ‘We couldn’t see you in this crowd.’

‘I couldn’t see you either,’ Alice replied in a shaky voice as she struggled to regain her composure. ‘It’s too busy out here today.’

‘Come on, sweets,’ Fred squeezed her shoulder gently and indicated for them to go inside. ‘I need a cold pint, I do. George and I will make sure nobody bothers you, yeah?’

‘Let them try,’ George grumbled under his breath as he put an arm around Alice in a protective gesture, leading her gently inside. The twins were fiercely protective of their friend, and although they encouraged her to try to be around other people, they were acutely attuned to her uneasiness.

Silently sending up prayers of thanks to sweet Nimue for friends such as these, Alice allowed herself to be led inside by George. The twins immediately began scanning the area, searching for the perfect available table, preferably in a quieter, secluded corner. Placing one hand on George’s arm, she pulled away, bravely declaring. ‘I’ll… be alright in a moment, I just need my back to a wall.’ There was a betraying quiver in her voice, but George nodded understanding, and eagle-eyed Fred gestured for them to follow him to a very recently vacated corner booth on the other side of the pub.

As soon as they reached their table, Alice took a seat that hid her from view. Closing her eyes, she attempted to zone out and forget about all the people milling around in the pub. The sounds of countless conversations were less intimidating now that she wasn’t out in the open, and she mumbled an incomprehensible response when Fred asked her what she wanted to drink. The redhead shrugged, understanding that she needed space to regain her balance, and walked off to the bar to buy her a pint of ale and a cottage pie.

George took a seat to her right, and remained silent, becoming intensely interested in a grease-stained copy of the Daily Prophet left on the table by the previous customer. Turning the pages absent-mindedly, he kept shooting furtive glances at Alice, who averted her gaze and was picking at her cuticles, avoiding interaction.

Fred returned with their drinks, and Alice looked up and gave her friend a small smile as she accepted her ale. ‘Ta, love,’ she said, and took a little sip. She hummed in appreciation and wiped the froth off her upper lip. ‘Just what I needed.’

‘Best pint in town,’ Fred nodded his agreement before taking a large gulp of his own drink. ‘That’s why most nights we come here instead of going home to Mum’s.’
'Unless we forget and work into the night,' George interjected, and seemed to be glowing with pride as he added, ‘The shop is a roaring success, you know. More and more customers coming in each week!’

‘That’s awesome, but you have froth on your nose,’ Alice muttered, and quickly looked away, choosing to study her fingernails once more.

Unabashed, George ploughed on, ‘Had a few problems last week - you know those enchanted gnomes we were selling to them kids? They weren’t supposed to cause much mither, they were only supposed to run around gardens to scare bored housewives, and disappear into thin air the next day,’

‘-But unfortunately they got out of hand. They were destroying people’s gardens…’ Fred looked a little embarrassed as he finished his brother’s sentence.

‘George, you have froth on your nose.’ Alice stated more loudly, but the redhead was oblivious as he continued his story.

‘Well, we got a load of howlers that week, we did. Something went wrong with our spellwork, it seems, and every time someone tried to catch the blighters, they just ended up multiplying!’

‘- That’s just because YOU cast the wrong spell on them!’ Fred cut in angrily, jabbing an accusing finger at his twin brother. ‘You were only supposed to cast the Multiplying Charm on the fireworks, not on the ruddy gnomes!’

‘George, you have froth on your nose!’ Alice tried to talk over the arguing brothers, but the redheads were too caught up in their quarrel to give her any notice.

‘Shut up, Fred, it was an accident, I told you! Anyway, after like, the fiftieth howler, we decided to think of a way to reverse it. So we found that formula for Gnomebegone that you had written down a few years ago, you know, when mum complained about the little buggers. It worked on ordinary gnomes, so we reckoned it would work on the enchanted ones too. And you know what? It did! A best-seller! Don’t worry though, we’ll totally pay you commission on every bottle.’

Alice stood and leaned over the table with amazing speed, and forcibly grabbed George by the ear as she spat in her napkin. Holding him tightly, she caught his nose with her free hand and pinched it, wiping off the foam. ‘I SAID you have froth on your nose!’ She growled as she moved to sit back
George was still hovering, having levitated out of his chair by ear-lift and was in a position to capture Ala’s jaw. Before she could blink he had kissed her nose.

Alice squealed in surprise, and pushed George away. ‘You’ll smudge my face, you erumpent’s pizzle!’

The offending wizard looked impressed and offered a conciliatory, ‘Tit for tat, lovey.’ He flopped back into his seat with a saucy wink and turned his amorous attentions to his grub. He hummed appreciatively at the first bite of flaky crust.

‘Aw, ickle Georgie needed his nose wiping!’ Fred jeered. ‘Oi!’ He leaned back as his brother tried to punch him in the arm, the blow went wide and almost upset Alice’s pint.

Used to this sort of militant exchange, Alice had tucked in with an appetite, but seeing her glass wobble drained the humour right out of her. She brandished her fork threateningly as she barked at the boys, “Settle down right now, afore you get us tossed out.”

The three friends settled into an easy silence, hungry friends sharing excellent food. Fred was farthest into his pie, so he was the first to speak.

‘Have you seen Snape again?’ Fred queried, mouth still partially full.

The unexpected question caused Alice to blush bright red. Lacing her fingers in her lap, she picked at her cuticles as she stammered out her reply, ‘No. Not since last week, I haven’t. Um… since Friday. Why, have you?’

George rolled his eyes as he replied in hushed tones, ‘Yes. He’s been coming to Order meetings over the weekend.’

‘- I swear the Bat was even grumpier than usual, impossible as it sounds!’ Fred spat, his face twisted in an expression of disgust.
Alice stared, confused, at the seething faces of her two best friends. The flush of indignation spread across their cheeks was almost as red as their hair, and George looked away, staring into the middle distance through narrowed eyes. Lips drawn into a tight line, he uttered bitterly, ‘Broke Mum’s heart on Sunday, the bastard did.’

‘How so?’ Alice asked quietly, unsure of what to say or how to react. Molly Weasley was an amicable woman, if perhaps a little smothering at times, but as far as Alice knew, she went to great lengths to take care of everyone in the Order. Alice could think of no reason why anyone would intentionally hurt her, especially one who gave life to these two devils. Intrigued, the girl leaned forwards, encouraging George to continue.

‘Mum offered him a cup of tea - should have spiked it with poison, if you ask me,’ Alice snorted with appreciation, and George grinned bitterly as he continued, ‘She put it right in front of his great big nose sweet as you please, but when he took a sip...’ George motioned as though throwing something away, his usually pleasant expression marred with fury.

‘- The pillock spat it out!’ Fred shouted, banging his fist in on the table in rage. Alice and George looked around in alarm as they simultaneously brought one finger to their lips, urging the angry redhead to keep his voice down.

‘Well, you know Mum’s tea was fit for the Queen, so we were all absolutely flummoxed. When Mum rushed back to help him he slapped her hands away, and threw the brew, cup and all straight into the fire. And if that wasn’t enough had the nerve to lecture her.’ Fred screwed up his face into an approximation of a sourpuss toff and lowered his voice dramatically: “…Witches today don’t know how to brew ANYTHING anymore!” His words, not mine,’ Fred added quickly as he saw Alice’s mouth twist into a scowl.

‘Well, the next thing you know she’s screaming at him, her finger pointing at his face.’

George nodded with a poorly suppressed chortle, ‘She backed him into a corner. Stupid git, didn’t know who he was messing with!’

Fred’s expression changed into the scolding one he used for his mother, and did a pretty good approximation, “Is my tea not GOOD ENOUGH for you, PROFESSOR? I have had ENOUGH of your griping. You can bloody well sod off! Maybe his Highness requires a doily? What next, virgin’s tears instead of water? You’d love that, I wager!”

George cut in here, narrating, ‘Well, Snape didn’t have a chance. Mum burst into tears, and that’s when Dumbledore arrived.’
Trod all over the shards of that cup on his way in. Not enough left for even the Headmaster to Reparo.’ Fred added, ‘He pulled Snape over and we couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Snape hovered in the door for the rest of the meeting, with the foulest expression. I haven’t seen him that angry since…’

‘… we enchanted his inkwell to geyser strawberry jam every time he said ‘dunderhead.’ George and Fred both looked extremely pleased with themselves.

Fred caught Alice’s eyes and said sotto voce, ‘It had excellent aim for an inkpot.’

Clapping his brother on his shoulder, George laughingly supplied for Alice, ‘Always on his nose!’

Alice was forced to laugh at that image, but a long-brewing storm was hovering at the back of her mind. It was one thing for Professor Snape to return incompetence with snark, but he had been a guest, and his behaviour was unforgivable. Come to think on it, ‘Did he even apologise?’

‘Nope. I’m telling you, Ala, he’s fucking mental.’ George folded his arms across his chest and turned his nose up with a derisive snort.

Around a gulp of ale, Fred added, “Mum’s a force of nature who never forgets. Oh, she’ll forgive, but she won’t let you ever forget it.”

‘What an arsehole,’ Alice uttered angrily and took a large gulp of her ale. Slamming her glass down onto the table, she pointed a finger at George as she remembered the Professor’s last visit. ‘Do you know what he did to me?’ She paused for emphasis as the twins narrowed their eyes simultaneously. ‘He came into my bloody house, woke me up at stupid-o-clock, insulted my brewing abilities, and left filthy footprints all over the floor! Honestly guys, I had to get down on my hands and knees to scrub that floor clean…’ She trailed off, waving her arms in fury, and the Weasleys shared an amused look.

‘But, Alice dearest, you’re always scrubbing floors on your hands and knees,’ Fred drawled with a cocky grin, and quickly rearranged his face to a more serious expression when Alice rewarded his remark with a deadly glare. George pretended to choke on his lager, trying to cover up his amused snicker.

‘And what do you mean, he insulted your brewing skills? Why was he in your house at all?’ Fred
raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘He… well, I hardly know what to say. It was a whirlwind and next thing I know he's down in my lab, poking about. He described my potions as adequate,’ she stammered, desperate to avoid answering the second part of the question. How exactly was she supposed to tell them that the man had invited himself in to make her a delicious breakfast? Mentally berating herself for her massive gob, she missed the moment when Fred’s eyelid began to twitch, and George’s face turned beet-red. Fred ground his molars as he clutched his fists tightly by his sides, and a look of pure hatred flashes in his eyes.

‘Don’t you listen to that bullshit, Alice Crowley! Your potions are perfect, and you better know it! We’ve sold 50 bottles of your Gnomebegone last week. Customers are saying that they’ve never come across a better gnome-repellent in their lives - that speaks volumes, Ala!’

‘Thanks love,’ Alice replied with a tight-lipped smile. She knew her potions were good, and judging by the amount of commission she was earning, they were indeed selling pretty well, but Snape’s remark still stung. He was the Potions Master, after all, and she didn’t even have any NEWTs under her belt yet.

‘You should do something nasty to him if he comes again,’ George’s lips widened in a smirk Alice knew so well. The wheels and cogs were turning rapidly under that thatch of copper hair, and he was coming up with a new ingenious plan. ‘Like… make him take his shoes off… or else.’

‘Are you sure she wants to do that, George?’ Fred asked in a stage whisper. ‘Our Alice has delicate sensibilities. She might not want to see his horrible troll feet…’

George’s face twisted into a rictus of revulsion as he added, ‘with those yellow inch-long curved toenails!’

‘...And hairy heels!’

‘Ew, stop this! Stop right now!’ Alice wrinkled her nose and covered her ears, protecting herself from further mental images. ‘But in all honesty, I’d rather see troll feet than dirty footprints!’

‘Well, if you’re sure…’ George began officiously as he pulled a piece of parchment and a quill out of the enchanted pocket in his dragonhide jacket. ‘I’m sure we could devise a charm that would force your unwanted visitor to take off his smelly old shoes,’
‘And make his feet itch like buggery if he doesn’t!’ Fred piped up excitedly, and Alice’s eyes glittered with glee. This was what she truly lived for - using magic to invent innovative techniques which were useful, if at times a little controversial. According to the Terrible Triplets, most witches and wizards were woefully unreasonable and unappreciative of their artistry and creativity, and sometimes had to be encouraged to have a little taste of their talents. They didn’t quite grasp why the hopelessly obstructive adults did not seem to recognise genius when it punched them in the face, sometimes quite literally, but at least the Gleesome Threesome had a steady supply of unsuspecting (and mostly unwilling) test subjects for their projects.

As far as they were concerned, they were the unsung heroes of the wizarding world - did they not almost succeed in driving Umbridge into insanity? Did they not enable students to skive off lessons and detentions? Did they not improve the lives of ordinary witches and wizards with their products? Did they not indirectly expose many a cheating spouse with their Extendable Ears? Did they not provide joy and happiness to the young and the old alike? And yet here they were, still waiting for those Orders of Merlin they surely deserved. Perhaps this latest project, if successful and released to the wider public, would do the proverbial trick.

‘Alright, boys,’ Alice rubbed her hands together as she shifted in her seat to a more comfortable position. Fred was already scribbling notes on the parchment, running a quick set of Arithmetic equations to determine the most efficient way of combining a Compulsion Charm and an Itching Hex, and ensuring that the unpleasant effects would be directed at the offender’s feet.

‘What do you think, guys? The Itching Hex would need to be embedded within the Compulsion Charm, which is doable…’ Fred rubbed his chin as he cautiously added another symbol within the equation. ‘But right now we have no guarantee that the itching won’t spread…’

‘Oh no, no, we want it to stay in place!’ Alice grabbed the parchment and perused it carefully, making a few slight adjustments here and there. ‘So, we need to put a Containment Charm about... here, right here, then close the equation like so…’ She stuck out the tip of her tongue in concentration as she carefully balanced the equation.

‘It should be gradual, too, for your amusement,’ George slid the parchment across the table and skillfully added another row of symbols underneath the original formula. ‘And the effects should last until the shoes are removed.’ He added as he jotted down the symbol that triggered the end of the enchantment.

‘Perhaps… hang on,’ Alice narrowed her eyes as she ran a quick mental calculation, adding up the rows of numbers in search of any errors. She then cross-referenced the symbols and, tapping her lower lip, addressed the twins, ‘You don’t have a numerological chart on you by any chance?’
‘Um… George?’ Fred shot a questioning look at his brother, who rummaged through his numerous pockets and shook his head to the negative with an apologetic smile.

‘Never mind, we’ll have to do this the hard way,’ Alice rubbed her temples and turned her attention back to the equations. She tore off a small piece of parchment, and scribbled on it as she went, nodding periodically.

‘Right - have a look. The numbers add up, but the symbol within the containment charm is in direct conflict with the one in the compulsion charm - see here?’ She pointed at the offending symbols with her fingers, and the twins nodded in agreement, their brows furrowed in thought.

‘If we were to leave it like this - translate it into Runic alphabet as it is, and then turn it into a spell, it’s quite probable that the victim would end up with massive boils… and that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?’

‘Not at all,’ Fred winked as Alice snorted in dark amusement, and picked up the quill and the parchment again. ‘If we were to replace this symbol…’ he muttered under his breath as he adjusted the equation, ‘Then we’d end up with one’s shoes itching, rather than one’s feet.’ He finished irritably as he set the quill down onto the table. ‘George, help us out here, will you?’

‘It’s because you’ve made a third-year mistake, Ala and Brother Dearest.’ George drawled lazily as he elegantly plucked the parchment out of Fred’s hand. ‘Haven’t you learned anything from Vector? First, you have three separate clauses, and each has to be closed…’ He scribbled on the parchment, and looked up to smile at his best friend and his brother condescendingly. ‘Then, you have to encapsulate these, now properly written clauses, within one equation, like so… and there you go. Those symbols are only in conflict if they aren’t within their own, separate clauses. You should have known that!’

‘Well spotted,’ Alice grumbled as she slid the parchment across the table towards herself. She rolled her eyes in disbelief at her own lack of attentiveness. Feeling a little embarrassed, she began translating the equation into Runes, taking extreme care to ensure that her translation was flawless, her runes perfectly sharp and well-proportioned.

‘There, that should do it.’ She announced as she named the spell and tapped the parchment with her wand. The runes glowed a bright blue before fading again into black, and Alice rolled up the parchment and tucked it into her handbag, her expression a mixture of triumph and satisfaction. ‘I’ll try this out at home.’ She announced, and her lips stretched into a malevolent grin as she noticed the anticipation flashing through the twin’s eyes.
'Let us know how it goes. We want all of the gory details… no need to credit us, though!' George threw up his hands in a gesture entitled ‘You’re on your own, woman!’

‘Why, thanks,’ Alice replied as she stood up and stretched her muscles. Her bum had gone numb, and it was time to go home and check up on her potions. Their time together always flew by quickly, and she had notice that the barman was shooting them dirty looks. ‘I guess it’s time to go. I’m tired, so I’ll take the Floo.’

Hugs with the Weasley twins were one of Alice’s happy moments that worked well for summoning a Patronus, and this memory would spawn a strong one. George stepped in to hug Alice on her left, and Fred enveloped her from the right and for that perfect moment, she felt like she was home.

‘We’ll see you soon, aye? Take care of yourself.’ George gave his friend a peck on the cheek, and Alice had a moment’s thrill as he seemed to be considering her nose again. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, daring him to do it, but Fred cut in.

‘And don’t let Snape drive you bonkers,’ Fred whispered in her ear. Alice chuckled, standing on tip-toe, and gave each twin a kiss on the cheek. ‘I’ll be alright. Hopefully we’ll meet up before the start of term. Oh, and don’t forget - it’s payday next Friday, and I expect to see my money first thing in the morning!’

‘As if you’d let us forget’, George muttered, and Alice extricated herself from their embrace. She made her way to the public fireplace, and turned around as she dropped a pinch of Floo powder into the grate, waving at her friends before disappearing in roaring green flames.
Over a Barrel

Chapter Summary

Just so you know, FawkesyLady is the best beta in the Universe. I don't know what I'd do without her, and in fact, I don't even want to know!

‘Oof! Oh! Bloody hellfire!’ Alice grumbled as she clumsily stepped out of the fireplace. She glanced around her living room, and was happy to find everything in perfect order. Bending over to hastily dust herself off was a huge effort indeed, and the uncomfortable feeling of an overfull stomach made her groan. Straightening up, she took as deep a breath as her stuffed belly allowed, and remembered the Shoes-Off spell she had created with the help of her best friends. ‘Better cast that now, before I forget.’ She pointed her wand at the hearth rug, and waved it in a smooth pattern as she proclaimed ‘Shoes Off!’ The hearth rug glowed a bright magenta before fading back to its usual dull blue with a faded pink floral pattern.

The witch giggled impishly as she trundled into the kitchen, pausing in the hallway to cast the same spell on the doormat by the front door. ‘That pie was good,’ she mused as she rubbed her stomach in broad circles. ‘That pie was very fucking good.’

Finding her tobacco tin, she leaned against the counter, running a mental checklist of all the things she still had to do that day. Her various projects would need tending to in a couple of hours’ time, and her bedsheets needed changing. It was something she did every other day, but because it was her least favourite chore, the witch decided to push that task further down her list of immediate priorities, choosing instead to spend the rest of the afternoon in pursuit of more pleasant activities - or non-activities.

She began rolling her cigarette absent-mindedly as she stared out of the kitchen window. The lovely sunny weather reminded her of the warmth in her two best friends’ eyes, and the young witch smiled to herself, amazed at what a hearty meal and good company could do - she could certainly get used to this feeling of utter contentment. All the residual tension drained from her face as she took in a deep, satisfying drag. She wondered if she would find the time to see her best friends before the end of summer. Maybe Fred would be up for one of their occasional lovemaking sessions sometime soon?

‘Productivity can go get fucking,’ She proclaimed merrily as she waddled back into her living room. She perused her bookshelves in search of something to read - it had been a while since she had the time or inclination to read anything purely for entertainment. Having selected several volumes, the witch sat down heavily in her clunky monstrosity of a sofa - another inherited piece, cherished dearly
by her grandmother. The brown, floral upholstery was rough, faded and threadbare in places, but it was divinely comfortable; Alice had almost forgotten how nice it was to lean back against the squishy cushions and feel her body go limp as it hit the cloud-like softness.

‘Alright, what do we have here…’ she muttered as she inspected the covers. ‘Pride and Prejudice … nope.’ She set the book aside with a grimace and picked up another one. ‘The Master and Margarita … Not today, no. Too heavy for me brain today, this,’ she grumbled under her breath, tossing Bulgakov’s masterpiece onto the side table. ‘Hmm… The Godfather … aye, this’ll do, I reckon.’

‘The Godfather’ was indeed the perfect choice for the young witch, who ensured that her collection of rollups was at hand before leaning back and immersing herself fully into the book. She read slowly, savouring each word as if it was the world’s most delectable dessert, turning the pages lazily as she drowned in the literary world of organised crime, power and violence. She snorted lightly as she realised just how much she could relate to Puzo’s characters - while she did not partake in killings or drugs, she knew very well what it was like to live a double life - one in the light, another in the shadows. It was easy enough to put up a front, to hide her involvement in the less palatable magics, but she could not help wondering if, and when, the lines would begin to blur.

The loud chiming of the clock shook the girl out of her reverie, and she reluctantly put the book down on the sideboard before standing, ready to face her responsibilities once again. ‘No rest for the wicked,’ she muttered as she found her wand and double-checked the time. Four o’clock in the afternoon. It was time.

Alice made quick work of checking her basement lab. The latest batch of Pepperup was coming along nicely, with no visible flaws - Madam Pomfrey expected nothing short of perfection, so the young witch took extreme care in brewing each medical potion to the best of her abilities.

She dropped the required amount of crushed violet leaves into the potion, and stirred precisely seven times clockwise before casting a Stasis charm and walking over to the other side of her workbench, where a much smaller bronze cauldron was simmering merrily under a medium flame.

‘Nettle… horsetail… liquorice root… linden blossom…’ She spoke quietly as she added the ingredients, her lip quirking upwards as the concoction changed colour from a dirty brown to an appealing pastel green - just as predicted. This was her side project, a potion to prevent and reverse alopecia in wizards.
The products currently available were completely useless at best, and delivered unpredictable results at worst. Alice found it quite amusing that this was a problem shared by wizards and Muggles alike. She had hoped to have the Hair Restoration Potion completed by the end of the summer, and ready to be mass-produced and put on the shelves at Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes by October at the latest. Judging by the thronging masses of witches and wizards with receding hairlines, and the sheer number of obvious combovers, this product had the potential to become a nationwide hit - one that would provide her with a steady income for years.

Alice’s mind was buzzing with happy thoughts of making a decent profit. Visions of batches flying off the shelves and selling out in a day swam before her mind’s eye, followed by images of her Gringotts vault overflowing with sacks, filled to the brim with Galleons. She could almost feel the thick, springy mattress she would sleep on, and could taste the juicy, perfectly fried sirloin steaks she would eat every day. Motivated and determined, the witch approached her task with burning enthusiasm. Those steaks were not going to fall out of the sky now, were they?

Some time later, Alice finally lowered the flame under the Hair Restoration Potion to let it simmer overnight. Now, she had one more job to do.

She uncorked a phial of Blood-Replenishing Potion and downed it in one go as a preventative measure as she crossed her kitchen and stepped into the backyard. Alice couldn’t tell whether it was just a result of a nice day, or the sun’s gentle glow lighting up the area, but the backyard seemed brighter, more airy and less oppressive than before. Making a mental note to spend more time relaxing outside, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she started dismantling the wards around the brick shed.

The sweet, heady scent of wild roses growing right behind her fence made her pause and inhale deeply, humming in delight. The witch had sometimes wondered why such a beautiful plant would choose to grow among the dull ugliness of Spinner’s End, surrounded by weeds and piles of rubbish - yet Alice was grateful that it did. Beauty could indeed be found even in the most unlikely places, it seemed.

Her attention quickly shifted back to the task at hand as she felt her concentration slip, and she increased the pace of her spellwork, taking extreme care to avoid the nasty hexes embedded within the wards. She snorted involuntarily as she realised that the pleasing stimuli of the great outdoors made it more difficult to stay focused, and a thin layer of perspiration appeared on Alice’s brow as she fought for control over her magic.

When the last enchantment dissipated, she exhaled audibly and stepped inside the shed, grimacing at the horrible squeak of the rusty hinges. She cast a strong Lumos and made her way over to the workbench by the far wall, approaching the tiny cauldron with confidence. As soon as she stepped near and peered into the cauldron, she felt that something was different.
‘Hi,’ she whispered to the mysterious brew, trying to put a finger on the overwhelming feeling of ‘strange’. Greeting the potion was a habit she developed a while ago - something that felt like the natural thing to do - it felt like the potion was waiting for her visits and understood her words, manifesting its answers by rippling the surface or sloshing against the cauldron’s rim.

Sometimes she wondered if the strange pull she felt was some sort of an invisible force which compelled her to come back again and again, and if it was somehow connected to the whispers inside her head that appeared whenever she was in close proximity to the cauldron. For all she knew, it could have just been her vivid imagination running wild, but on some days she could have sworn that if she concentrated hard enough, she could make out the odd word or two. Those ‘whispers’, as she called them, did not sound menacing, and were largely unintelligible, but they were distracting. The witch usually ignored them completely by talking to herself as she worked. The voices would disappear after a session of verbal introspection, and Alice felt relieved to be able to say all of her deepest secrets and desires aloud.

Resting her palms on the table, she craned her neck to stare at her project in confusion, her brow furrowed thoughtfully. Long moments passed. The pull wasn’t there. No voices whispered to her, even as she cleared her mind and strained to listen out for them. The potion’s burgundy surface was glossy and viscous, just like before. It was also perfectly still. It did not move even as she spoke to it, and its surface did not popple even when she blew on it experimentally. It was almost as if the potion was… ignoring her.

‘Well, that’s weird,’ she muttered, unsettled, as she opened the filing cabinet in search of her ritualistic knife. ‘You’re usually far more animated, you know.’ As she reached out to touch the box containing the knife, she paused, her hand hanging in mid air. A strong sense of revulsion cascaded over her consciousness, and she rapidly withdrew her hand, puzzled by the sudden, strong aversion to the object. ‘This is seriously weird. Don’t you want to be fed today?’

The Potion was as calm as a mill pond, and Alice felt uncomfortable in the penetrating silence. A niggling unease registered at the front of her mind - has she somehow ruined it? Everything had been going well up until now. Her project was behaving as expected, but her references were limited. Alice and Dumbledore have been half-playing it by ear and half-walking in the dark from the beginning, using odd scraps of information to predict the different stages of the brewing process. Alice often felt like she was navigating a minefield - the room for error was enormous, the resources were scarce, and one bad step could have destroyed all of the hard work. And yet they could not afford to make any errors. Any unexpected change in the potion’s behaviour was therefore a severe cause for concern. ‘I’ll… leave you to it then,’ Alice cast one last worried glance at the cauldron before heading back towards the door.

She hastily erected the usual wards around the shed, taking much less care than she normally would. Her good mood had evaporated, and she was now seriously afraid. She sprinted into the kitchen and searched frantically for a piece of parchment and a quill, intending to notify the Headmaster immediately - she may have had her reservations about the old wizard’s intentions, but this was something he simply had to know about. Her hands quivered uncontrollably as the young witch
scribbled a note on the small piece of parchment she found knocking about in one of the cupboards. Her handwriting resembled chicken scratch, and was barely legible even to Alice herself, but she made the decision to send it anyway and hope for the best.

‘I need my owl, I need my fucking owl!’ She spat as she ran back outside to call for Barry to come back, hoping the wretched bird would comply. Just as she was about to start yelling his name like an idiot, she heard a loud whooshing sound coming from behind. Alarmed, Alice drew her wand reflexively and peered into the kitchen, a defensive hex hovering on the tip of her tongue. Finding the kitchen empty, Alice decided that the noise must have come from the living room.

Padding quietly along the hallway, she listened for any sounds that could indicate the identity or intention of the unexpected visitor. She could hear the rustle of fabric and a quiet cough, followed by the sound of feet shuffling along her garish, patterned carpets. She had to mentally chastise herself into focus as her mind groused a reflexive, ‘I hope that whoever it is isn’t leaving any dirty fucking footprints!’

With her free hand, she slowly reached towards the handle, intending to push the door open quickly and stun the intruder immediately.

‘Miss Crowley?’

Alice nearly jumped out of her skin as the familiar sound of the Headmaster’s wheezy voice floated towards her from behind the door. She staggered into the living room with an undignified shriek, her wand still at the ready, only to be greeted by the ridiculous sight of Albus Dumbledore, who stood in the middle of the room, dressed in hideous lime-green robes adorned with purple peonies. The old wizard was seemingly fascinated with the bulky contraption placed in the corner, to the immediate right of the fireplace. He was observing the chunky grey box from a variety of angles, and was about to poke its curved glass front with his wand. The witch’s face glowed like a burnished tomato. The oddity of the scene stole the wind out of her fury and she spoke in a querulous alto, ‘What on Earth are you doing? For that matter, why are you here?’ Panic was supplanted by exasperation, and she put her hands on her hips, toe itching to start tapping.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Crowley,’ Dumbledore replied calmly and gave Alice a benevolent smile. ‘I was just admiring your… fishbowl with a window and knobs. Strangely, I see no fish…?’

‘Goodness gracious, Professor!’ She cried, ‘This is a private, slimline, colour television set with built-in VHS facility, and no connection whatsoever to any aquatic ecosystems! It was also very expensive, having come from a highly desirable department store, so please do step away from it before you break it!’
If Alice wore pearls, she would have surely been clutching them by now. The television set was her pride and joy, and the inconsiderate wizard had the audacity to call it a ‘fishbowl’. Alice’s lips thinned in righteous indignation, and she wondered what was wrong with the wizards of today, as it seemed that none of them could recognise excellence when they saw it.

‘Ah, it would send Arthur into paroxysms of joy, no doubt,’ Dumbledore shrugged carelessly and turned to face Alice again. ‘I have called in to inform you about a discovery I made regarding the Potion…’

‘I was just about to send you a letter!’ The witch interjected, her voice unnaturally high. Dumbledore had great timing, that was obvious, but having to explain her failure in person was the very last thing that Alice wanted to do.

‘Is everything alright?’ Dumbledore asked calmly, his face leaning slightly to the side as he regarded Alice over the rim of his half-moon glasses. The witch was visibly agitated, and she averted her gaze, breaking eye contact. Rubbing her eyelid with one finger, she took a deep breath, and explained.

‘Professor, I really don’t know what’s gone wrong with the Potion, I… went to feed it, and it rejected me. It… it usually seems to swirl around the cauldron, to move… oh, I don’t know how to explain it - it was being weird. It was completely still. I don’t know what I’ve done wrong, I really don’t, and…’ She trailed off, not having realised that she had started to pace about her room, waving her arms around as she struggled to get her point across. ‘It’s been taking me longer and longer to feed it lately. It was demanding more and more blood, and now it stopped. It wanted none, I’m sure of it!’

Dumbledore continued to stand there, his posture relaxed, and waited for the girl to finish babbling. A small, amused smile played around his lips as he observed the agitated witch. ‘Miss Crowley!’ He boomed as the girl took a deep breath, ready to launch herself into a fresh monologue. The witch paused mid-breath, startled, and stared wide-eyed at the old wizard, uncertainty written across her features. With a small chuckle, Dumbledore continued, ‘I called in just to advise you that you should expect for this to happen.’

He held up his hand in a halting gesture as the witch opened her mouth to speak. ‘I am glad to learn that my prediction was correct - I only discovered this last night. I had come across a new volume, fascinating story for another time, really. The Essence will grow in spurts, and then go dormant. The text suggested that it will do this three times before reaching peak potency, although more may be necessary depending on the brewer. I am afraid that you can expect to sacrifice even more of your blood and magic over the next few weeks.’ The glow of academic discovery shone from the elderly wizard’s eyes, and he smiled at Alice, fully expecting that she would be as delighted as he was at this new tidbit.
‘My… magic?!’ Alice’s eyes nearly popped out of her sockets, and her face twisted into a rictus of furious confusion as she whipped out her wand and pointed it straight at the old man’s chest. Her previous look of fear and anxiety was replaced by an expression of hateful anger as the witch growled, ‘What the fuck do you mean, my magic, you duplicitous Nogtail?!’

‘Now now, Miss Crowley, there is no need for this.’ Dumbledore indicated the tip of Alice’s wand with a tilt of his chin and a twinkle of his eyes. His deliberate refusal to acknowledge the gravity of the situation infuriated the girl even more, and her eyes glittered dangerously as she refused to lower her wand.

‘I suggest that you calm down immediately, Alice. I might have to silence you if you cannot keep a more civil tongue…’ The threat in Dumbledore’s voice was crystal-clear as the grandfatherly persona began to shatter. ‘I must remind you that you agreed to do this, out of your own free will…’

‘No I fucking didn’t!’ Alice cried at the top of her voice. Heeding the Headmaster’s warning, she lowered her wand, and clutched it in her fist, tightly by her side. ‘What the hell is... it doing to my magic?!’

‘Let’s have a seat.’ Dumbledore walked over to the armchair and sat down, humming in appreciation at the plush cushions. ‘Ah, that’s much better. You really don’t appreciate the luxury of a good armchair until you get to my age. Just celebrated my birthday last week, you know.’ Dumbledore punctuated his remark with a good-natured titter as he leaned back relaxedly, crossing his legs and folding his wrinkled hands across his stomach. Alice, on the other hand, refused to sit down. She was pacing the room like a frenzied lioness, spitting out audible expletives in her anger.

The Headmaster reached into his pocket, and, finding a lemon drop, popped it in his mouth before speaking in a light tone, ‘The Essence is draining the magic in your blood. I am quite surprised you didn’t realise that, Alice - although perhaps I should have made it more clear… It isn’t permanent, and it only weakens you for a short amount of time, depending on how much blood is taken…’

‘Are you fucking mental, you old codger?!’ Alice spat venomously as she paused in her pacing. ‘I’ve been weak for days now! I can’t keep up with brewing Blood Replenishing Potions for myself! I nearly passed out after firing one fucking Stunner at my owl! I thought it was my shit diet that was doing it, but no - there’s a fucking potion draining my fucking magic and you never fucking told me!’ Her last words were so loud and shrill that the Headmaster winced, and held up his hands in a placating gesture.

‘It is only temporary. The end result will be worth it - do try to trust me, Miss Crowley…’ Dumbledore smiled winningly at his student and co-conspirator. ‘Alice. Your strength will come back in no time. Youngsters regenerate incredibly quickly. And the magic you bravely sacrifice now will give the Light an enormous advantage in the war effort once the Essence is complete…’
'I can’t trust you as far as I can throw you, Albus.’ Alice had resumed her pacing as Dumbledore made his speech, and she now whipped around and jabbed one finger in his direction. ‘Is there anything else I should know? Any more surprises?’ She asked in a singsong tone. After a short pause, she gave Dumbledore a hateful glare as she shouted, ‘And why didn’t you tell me Snape lived in the area?!’

‘Ah… yes, that was the other thing I meant to speak to you about…’ Dumbledore shifted in his seat and steepled his fingers, his expression changing to one of earnest gravity. ‘I was hoping that you would never bump into Professor Snape, considering that neither of you is particularly fond of the great outdoors… but alas, I was wrong.’

Alice snorted at this pronouncement, and Dumbledore cleared his throat, adjusting his half-moon glasses before continuing, ‘Never mind - perhaps it is a good thing after all. You are both isolated, and I believe both of you could benefit from an ally… No no, hear me out please,’ Dumbledore raised his hand as Alice opened her mouth yet again, undoubtedly to disagree vehemently.

‘I would like you to look out for Professor Snape - I’m sure you are aware that he is the Order’s Spy in Voldemort’s ranks…’ The girl nodded without a trace of surprise on her face. Dumbledore chuckled lightly, ‘But of course you know - whatever the Weasley twins know, you know...’ His expression turned serious again, the hint of good humour gone as quickly as it appeared. ‘I would like you to keep an eye on Severus for me. He is carrying a heavy burden, and is unlikely to accept any help. Sometimes, even a conversation about the weather can have a positive effect on a stressed wizard…’

‘You want me to spy on your Spy,’ Alice stated flatly, crossing her arms and blocking her chest defensively.

‘I am requesting that you look out for him, Miss Crowley.’ Dumbledore corrected the girl, a hint of tiredness creeping into his voice. The old wizard had had enough of this conversation now. ‘And I absolutely insist that you never, ever mention the Essence to him, under any circumstances.’

‘And what if I do?’ Alice spat venomously. Dumbledore narrowed his eyes, and she gulped audibly as the wizard stood to his full height and pinned her with a steely gaze.

‘You will NEVER mention the Essence to Severus Snape, or anybody else. You will NOT jeopardise the war effort!’
'I never wanted to be part of your fucking war!' Alice shrieked, covering her face with her hands. ‘I never agreed to be involved!’

‘Oh, but you did,’ the Headmaster’s voice lowered dangerously. Scowling, he took a step towards the young witch, who looked ready to burst into tears any second now. ‘Do I need to remind you of your experiments with the Dark Arts? Your skills are forbidden, yet they are valuable. Which is why I gave you a choice - either you work for me, and do your bit for the Light, or you can explain your use of the Dark Arts to the Wizengamot…’

‘It wasn’t a choice, it was blackmail!’

‘Call it what you want,’ Dumbledore shrugged casually. ‘But whether you like it or not - here you are. And don’t say I haven’t done anything for you. You wanted to live independently and earn your own living - I gave you that opportunity. After the war, your career prospects will be limitless… unless you betray our trust, that is. Who would trust a Dark witch, after all? If you ever got out of Azkaban at all, that is…’

Alice dropped her arms, allowing them to hang limply by her sides. She no longer could even look at Dumbledore, her lips drew straight in a thin line of grim resignation. ‘I won’t tell anyone.’

Dumbledore nodded, apparently satisfied. He stood and walked over to Alice, who fought to suppress the flinch as he laid one hand on her shoulder. ‘A wise decision, Miss Crowley.’ The Headmaster took a step towards the fireplace. ‘Good day to you.’

He took a pinch of Floo powder, but something drew his attention back to Alice. In a the tone one might use to critique a good meal, he casually added, ‘By the way - this Shoes-Off charm would work much better if you cast it around the entire floor, not just upon the hearth rug. Fascinating idea. You should submit it to Witch Weekly once you perfect it.’ He gifted her with a patented Dumbledore sparkle, ‘Toodles!’ and dropped the powder into the grate, finally disappearing in a swirl of green flame.

Alice exhaled a long, shaky breath as soon as she was sure the Headmaster was gone. She allowed her control to loosen, and her shoulders shook with quiet, broken sobs. The witch stood alone in the middle of her living room, cradling her head in her hands. At length, her breathing became more regular and her tears stopped flowing as the sky outside dimmed to the grey veil of twilight. She was surprised that only half an hour had passed, marked by the street lamps flickering to life. ‘I better get on with it, then,’ She muttered dejectedly as she walked back into the kitchen and opened the pantry. Three bottles of cheap wine stood on the far shelf, and Alice grabbed them all, plonking them on the table. Aloud, she declared, ‘Alcohol is not the answer, but neither is milk.’ As her hand wrapped around a glass in one of the cupboards, she sent up a silent prayer for relief. Nimue knew, she needed a drink.
In Vino Veritas

Chapter Notes

Fun Fact: Did you know that Witches really exist? FawkesyLady has a magic wand, and she swishes and swooshes it around, turning poorly-written chapters into something nice and readable! It's... magic!

Also, special thanks to Lexi and Nilsia-Tengun for their encouragement and comments. Thank you, thank you, thank you! This chapter was a hell to write, and a hell to revise (ask FawkesyLady, she'll tell you how long we've spent on it), and I hope you'll enjoy it.

Severus was weary. Well, that wasn’t enough of a word, but he lacked a better one. He was stretched to the edge of tolerance, beyond that of most mortals. It many ways, it was more difficult to be Voldemort’s trusted and valued servant than it was to be out of favour.

The Death Eaters were in a merry mood, celebrating a large influx of new members in the last week - the most recent Slytherin graduates, along with the odd Ravenclaw, were all taking the Dark Mark in a rush. The Dark Lord chose to commemorate his roaring success by descending on a Muggle hotel, one on the sea near Cardiff. The newest followers were disturbingly eager to please - the highlight of the night was the slow disembowelment of an elderly pensioner who had dared to organise a sorry defense against their magical attacks. Severus felt bile rise in his throat as he recalled the enthusiastic roar of the crowd when Marcus Flint cut the helpless man open, allowing his entrails to spill onto the back green, egged on by the triumphant Bellatrix Lestrange who took on the role of the director of events, a macabre parody of a wedding planner.

The evening was brought to a close as the group watched the whole place go up in flames from the beach, purging with Fiendfyre the evidence and evil from what had been a beautiful property. The residents at the time were limited to well-to-do retirees who had stayed over after a wedding for an impromptu reunion, the celebration having been held there the weekend before. The bridal couple were thankfully long gone, and Severus wished them well. In all, including night staff, forty-one Muggles died that night. There were no survivors.

For now, he was granted a reprieve - the Dark Lord had greedily taken in the elaborate lie crafted by Dumbledore last week, and found the information sufficiently useful, allowing Severus to escape another round of punishment. To the rest of the Death Eaters, torturing Muggles was far more entertaining than torturing Severus - no limits were in place and they were encouraged to be as creative as they wished. Still, some of the Death Eaters were visibly disappointed by Severus’ good fortune - Bellatrix in particular seemed to hold him in contempt, and ‘putting him in his place’ was her favourite pastime. The rabid witch was very vocal about her distrust of Severus’ loyalty, and the favour with which Voldemort would sometimes grant him vexed her to no end. She was jealous. The very idea made Severus snort derisively.
Severus had lowered his Occlumentic shields as soon as he left the hotel, and nausea hit him immediately. Waves of disgust, shame and frustrated fury threatened to wash away all rational thought. He had waited almost too long, risking corruption of mind and magic - a mind kept under tight reins would always be raw, and when left too long was in danger of insanity. As he trudged up to Hogwarts from the apparition point near the gates, he felt his anger and despair build to a towering pitch. He was in a sorry state when he made his report to Dumbledore, pacing around his office and smashing random trinkets to punctuate each confession.

As he finished the tale of Marcus Flint’s new aptitudes, he sent the Headmaster’s beloved bowl of lemon drops flying across the room, shattering the delicate crystal into a million pieces. Dumbledore remained unperturbed, smiling benevolently as the younger wizard proceeded to destroy the rest of his possessions.

The report necessarily took a long time with new names and 41 victims to regret, so it was a long time before Severus could regain his balance. As he stood, panting and sweating in the middle of the round office, surrounded by evidence of his wrath, Dumbledore waved his wand nonchalantly and put the room back into order with a too calm inquiry. ‘Feeling better now?’

Severus nodded curtly before falling back in his favourite winged chair by the fireplace. He had no wish to look the old wizard in the eye. What an idiotic question. Unless the past could be undone, he would never be ‘better.’ Dumbledore’s question stung like pulverised lemon-drops rubbed into his wounds. If he could wish the geezer out of existence, he would have done it eons ago.

Albus changed the subject abruptly by asking about Miss Crowley, and Severus had to admit that he had neglected his assigned duty to watch over the girl for nearly a week now. Dumbledore’s disapproval was evident - the old codger seemed to believe that babysitting little Gryffindors was the right task for a stressed-out, exhausted spy. He insisted that Severus visit her that very night, although when questioned, he refused to explain why.

Severus found himself walking briskly along the pavement, seething in the chilly air of a summer’s evening. He could feel a vicious headache coming on, and decided to get Miss Crowley out of the way as quickly as possible. He would keep the visit short, limiting their interaction to an enquiry about her well being, and then he would apparate straight home. What he really wanted to do was to forget everything, this night, this war, even his own name, and he wasn't too proud to use a potion to find release. His steps reverberated loudly as he rounded the corner, and on reaching the gate he pulled up short, wondering if the girl was even awake. After a half-hearted struggle with his conscience, Severus pushed the wooden gate open and entered Crowley’s backyard. The light was on, bathing the paving slabs in a soft, golden glow, and the air was thick with the sweet scent of matthiola blooms planted below the windows. The back door was wide open, and through it he
caught a glimpse of Miss Crowley’s back. Good. She was still awake.

Padding softly across the yard, he reached the door and put one foot on the doorstep. Taking a quick inventory of the kitchen, he ascertained that everything was in order – the room was neat and tidy as usual, and he could hear ‘Brothers in Arms’ by Dire Straits playing quietly on the radio. Something about Alice grabbed his attention, and a knot of concern formed in his belly. She didn't react when he entered the room, and her back was turned to the open door. Then he saw the empty glass held loosely in her hand.

Crowley, oblivious to the wizard’s presence, picked up a half-finished bottle with uncoordinated movements, and spilled some of its contents on the table as she tried to fill up her glass. Severus suppressed a groan as he recognised The Happy Harpy - a cheap, nasty wizarding wine that his mother used to favour. It was sweet and easy to drink, and had left him plastered many times in his youth.

Alarmed, he cleared his throat and stepped further inside. Before he had a chance to utter so much as a ‘Good evening,’ the girl swung around abruptly, knocking one of the bottles over and sending it clattering onto the floor. She appraised him with unfocused eyes, squinting as she struggled to put a name to the face.

‘Professor!’ She slurred as she recognised her late-night visitor. ‘Professor Snape has come to visit mee!’ She squealed with delight and dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Propping herself up against the table, she rose on shaky legs, and staggered over to where he stood. Leaning against the countertop for support, the young witch’s eyes darkened as she warily considered the Professor, who towered over her, a menacing scowl printed firmly across his brow.

‘Have you come to criticise me?’ She demanded angrily, and Severus’ took a step back, surprised by the sudden change in the girl’s demeanour. ‘Because if you have, then you might as well save your fucking breath.’

‘You’re drunk, Crowley.’ He stated, looking down on the girl’s angry face. Her scowl matched his own, and she was staring at him in utter defiance – although the effect was lessened somewhat, since her eyes were swimming in and out of focus and her body swayed unsteadily from side to side.

‘An’f I am? ‘S none of your business, sir. We’re not at fuckin’ogwarts!’
Severus ground his teeth in annoyance. He wanted to shake some sense into the girl, but the alcohol in her system guaranteed that it would be a wasted effort. Judging by the empty bottles, the small witch had drunk two full bottles of wine, and was making good progress on the third. Had they been in school, Severus would have sent the Gryffindor House Points into negative numbers faster than one could say ‘House Cup.’ The fact that Crowley was an adult in the wizarding world, allowed to purchase alcohol and drink to her heart’s content, did nothing to alleviate the wizard’s fury.

But they weren’t at Hogwarts. Severus knew that his usual tactic of scaring unruly teenagers into sobriety would not work on this occasion, and irritating a drunken, hostile witch would only make the situation much, much worse. Choosing to proceed with care, he threw up his hand in a placating gesture as he took a step towards her and spoke in calm, silky tones. ‘Calm down, Miss Crowley. I have no interest in how you spend your evening. I’ve come to check on your wellbeing. Sit down before you injure yourself.’

‘Wellbeing, my arse!’ The witch snorted as she took a few wobbly steps before falling heavily into her chair. Her head rolled backwards, and she didn’t notice the subtle swish of Severus’ wand which emptied the glass and the bottle of its contents. She would not be drinking any more of that swill tonight.

‘Well, come in then, cop a squat.’ She rasped out as she cocked her head to the side and opened one eye to look at her Professor. “ You always loom over ush, like a vulture with a taste for haunch of dunderhead. Grates on me last nerve, I don’t mind tellin you.” The disparaged Professor tossed a purple wrapped chocolate bar onto the countertop as he came further into the kitchen.

‘And shut that fucking door, will you? Was you born in a barn?’

Severus wisely chose to ignore the ruddy chit’s appalling lack of respect. He knew better than to poke an intoxicated lioness, although he filed the insult away for future reference. He was a patient man, and would ensure that the witch paid for her insolence at a later date. For now, his task was to keep the chit safe - and as much as he wanted to simply grab the girl by the arm and put her straight to bed, he had a niggling feeling that this wouldn’t go down well at all. He despised his Gryffindor students. They were foolhardy and pompous, but he did try to prevent them from killing themselves whenever possible.

He eased himself into a chair opposite Miss Crowley, and observed the girl intently without saying a word. She had been drinking on her own, he assumed, since there were no other glasses in sight. Her appearance was... dishevelled, Severus thought. The messy waves of golden hair that fell past her shoulders were tangled, her stormy eyes were blood-shot and glassy, and her cheeks were red - a stark contrast to her otherwise porcelain skin. Her head kept rolling back, exposing the pale column of her neck, and Severus could not help thinking that even in her marinated state, the young witch was rather striking.
‘Crowley.’ He stated her name in a low growl, and the girl’s brow quirked upwards as she opened one eye lazily, indicating that she was listening. Leaning forwards, Severus enunciated, ‘How much did you drink?’

‘Not enough,’ she rasped, and reached for her glass to take another sip. Finding the glass empty as she raised it to her lips, she fixed him with an accusing glare from over the rim. ‘Not. Enough.’ She repeated, and slammed it on the table. She reached across for her tobacco tin, and rolled a cigarette with unsteady hands, her eyes never leaving his face. ‘It’s shit, isn’t it?’ She asked as she licked the paper. ‘To be you.’

Severus’ brows shot upwards in surprise as he stared at the witch incredulously, tilting his head in confusion. ‘I’m not sure I understand-’

‘Rubbish!’ she spat, her features twisting into a rictus of spite. Standing abruptly, she sent her chair tumbling down onto the floor with a clatter. When he looked back at her, he found himself pushing his chair backwards. There Alice Crowley was, leaning over the table, sneering at him in a fair mockery of a Professorial pose. The scent of bad booze blasted him in the face as she hissed angrily, ‘I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing...’ She squinted at him and lifted a finger, shaking it close to his face for emphasis with every word, “But. You. Don’t. Fool. Me!’

Severus struggled valiantly to prevent the wave of anger from breaking out of his control - he’d already taken out his ire on Dumbledore. Alice was innocent in this, and furthermore, the girl was pissed. Whatever she was on about, he didn’t even care to guess. What was a certainty was that hammered witches are dangerous. Merlin preserve him, where was her wand? This could be very tricky...

‘For fuck’s sake, Crowley! Go to bed, you’re intoxicated!’ The words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to bite his tongue, and the moment he saw the girl’s eyes darken, he knew she was going to attack.

For all her inebriation, the witch was quick as a snake. With surprising agility, she lunged forward across the table, intent on grabbing Severus by the hair. His reflexes were faster, and he caught her outstretched arm in a vice-like grip.

‘Fuckin’ cunt!’ She shrieked as he walked around the table, maintaining his hold on the girl. Coming to stand right behind her, he gently pushed the witch ahead into the dark, narrow hallway. The witch would not be led - she stumbled and fought like a lioness, yanking them both around as she struggled to shake him off. Severus remained outwardly calm and collected throughout the ordeal, although his patience was running out quickly. When she threw her head to the side with the intention of biting
his arm, he slammed her into the stairwell wall, pinning her wrists above her head, his other hand pressed against her solar plexus to keep her from wiggling away. He kept her legs to the outside of her right hip, assuring that she couldn't make yet another attempt at assaulting his manhood. This left her feet precariously tiptoed on the edge of the step above him. She was helpless.

‘Let go of me, scumbag!’ She roared at the top of her lungs, and Severus had to shift quickly to the side to avoid a poorly-aimed headbutt that threatened to collide with his sternum. As the girl’s forehead hit his pecs, he huffed an audible ‘Oof!’. The impact held no real force, but it was obvious that Miss Crowley would not go down without a fight. He tightened her grip on her wrists, and his onyx eyes bore into her steel-grey ones as he said, ‘Not until you’ve calmed down.’

‘Fuck off!’ Hissed the little witch. ‘How dare you tell me to calm down! Get over yourself! You’ve been bullying me for no good reason for years on end, and now you think you can just come in here and… bring me breakfast and… do what? What the fuck do you want from me, dickhead?!’

The girl’s voice rose to a hysterical shrill and tears welled up in her eyes as she continued hurling abuse at her Professor. Lowering his face to her ear, Severus whispered silkily, ‘Speak to me like that once again, Miss Crowley, and you will find yourself in a very undesirable situation. I want nothing from you. You are my student, and I take my duty to look after my students very seriously indeed - whether you choose to cooperate is of no consequence.’ He seriously considered leaving the witch where she was. Hadn’t he suffered enough to keep the wizarding world safe?

‘Do excuse my disrespect, Professor,’ the girl’s voice was falsely sweet as she batted her eyelashes at Severus. He narrowed his eyes dangerously, sensing a shift in the vaporous wind. Before he had a chance to formulate a scathing reply, the witch continued. ‘How about we kiss and make up?’ Her tone was mock-innocent, but her eyes slid slowly down his face, her gaze coming to a stop on his lips. The tip of her tongue came out of her mouth, sliding lasciviously across her upper lip.

Severus leapt backwards reflexively as though he had been burned. Women did NOT find him attractive, and he could just imagine Miss Crowley, waking up and remembering her outrageous behaviour, feeling ashamed for even considering kissing the greasy git. His cynical nature supplied the most likely outcome - she would run crying to Dumbledore, weeping crocodile tears whilst shifting the blame onto the obnoxious Bat of the Dungeons, who stormed into her house uninvited and took her by force… No, he would not add another conviction to his already questionable track record. He could be accused of a great number of things, but he was NOT a rapist.

The hallway was narrow, and the wizard’s back hit the opposite wall. He leaned against it for support, his heart racing as he stared at the witch in dismay. ‘No.’ He stated flatly. His rejection had the desired effect, and Alice dropped the fatuous smile that had been playing about her lovely young lips moments ago. She pouted like a petulant child, then threw her head back, cackling like a mad woman.
‘What a shame,’ She crooned in mock-regret. She shot him a narrow-eyed glare before she spat hatefully, ‘Picky, are we? Oh, but of course, a Gryffindor isn’t good enough for you, eh? Not when there’s a crowd of pureblooded Slytherin women willing to spread their legs for you!’

The witch was mocking him, and Severus’ patience had finally run out. She had crossed the line, and would not get away with it. With a contemptuous sneer, he turned on his heel and made to leave, choosing to let the little idiot fend for herself. Just as he was about to exit the hallway, her raspy voice assaulted his ears once more.

‘Let me tell you something, Professor. You fancy yourself so fucking clever. You pander to Dumbledore just like the rest of them fools. And you don't fucking see... none of you lot see... that you're nothing to him. Nothing. Just cannon fodder, a tool to be used and discarded at our sainted Headmaster's whim. That's what you are, Severus Snape! And now the bastard's got me too...’

Severus froze mid-step, his head whipping around to gape incredulously at the girl. She was struggling to remain upright, leaning against the wall and staring back at him with the hollow eyes of the trapped, the hopeless. Why was she so thin? Since when was she so… old? He dry swallowed, finding that his tongue was made of dead wood and his legs made of cold lead. He could not move. His mind was spinning. ‘Explain,’ he croaked finally, needing to understand.

‘Obvious isn't it?’ Crowley chuckled blackly. ‘We’re disposable. We are but puppets, caught in a game between two insane wizards.” She hitched an arm up against the step and got her legs back underneath her. He found those too-wise eyes boring into him again. ”Isn't it confusin'? I'd have trouble remembering who was on my side.” She lifted a finger to point at her own chest, ”Us. That's what we can count on.”

The girl took a step towards him and stumbled, coming dangerously close to collapsing in a heap on the tiled floor. Severus stepped forwards and neatly caught the witch about the waist just as she was about to tip over. He searched her face, trying to divine where this had all come from. Her head lolled about, but her eyes were open, and she returned his regard with a strange air, ‘I am not a complete dunderhead, you know. I know you’re keeping me safe.’

‘It is my job,’ Severus replied, swallowing thickly as he held the witch steady. He made an awkward attempt to steer her up the staircase. He needed to get her into her bed safely and leave. Everything about this moment made the hairs on his neck stand on end.

‘Who’s keeping you safe? Who looks out for Professor Snape?’ She cooed sweetly as she rubbed his arm in long, fluid strokes. She giggled as he tensed under her hand. 'So strong...' He shuddered, forcing himself to ignore her manipulations. He knew what to do when he was paying, but this?
was an unfair test that he would fail, no matter how he answered.

He had been silent too long. ‘I am quite capable of taking care of my own safety.’

Crowley rested her head on his shoulder and whispered, ‘But you are never safe, are you? Do you even know... what it feels like?’

Severus had too many limbs to juggle, and he lost track of his own under the increasing weight that the witch... the student was placing on him. He tripped on the step, and rather than allow the whole kit and kaboodle to fall, he clutched Alice closer with his right arm, and flung out his left to brace against the wall. Alice was briefly suspended under him, as one might dip a dancing partner, but there was no grace as he faceplanted into her exposed neck. A swift intake of breath followed as he straightened them both upright once more. The heady mix of smoke, vanilla and sweet witch was even more intoxicating at its source, and he knew that the divine scent of the woman tucked under his arm would later haunt his dreams. A thought struck him - he would tell his owl, Sharon, tonight when he got home, 'She smelled like the Empress of all Kings and Queens.' His owl was his repository for all of his deepest, most aching secrets.

To Severus, safety meant being needed by someone, becoming indispensable. This dream of being loved and understood with no hidden hooks was only that. No one had ever, or would ever look after him. It was touchingly arrogant of this girl to think there was anything that she might have to offer to him, even in her wine-induced wisdom. No, he was the Professor, the protector. He alone understood the evil that he stood up against, had seen it first hand and come back from the edge of such madness to report the tale.

Crowley’s eyes were shut, and the witch wasn’t even trying to walk. He was hauling her up each step - well, he could do better than that. Sweeping her off her feet in one fluid movement, he carefully traversed the remainder of the staircase. A glance down the hall revealed that one of the three doors was left ajar. He gently kicked it open with his foot, and under the dim light from the streetlamps outside the window he could make out the contours of a sparsely furnished bedroom.

The witch had gone completely limp in his arms as he lowered her gently onto the bed. She stretched and yawned before opening one eye to fix on his face in the shadows. Alas, for Severus, she was not done with him. ‘You’re safe here with me, you know,’ her voice was honeyed sweet, and at Severus’ answering scowl, the witch burst into a fresh fit of giggles. Wriggling on the bed in paroxysms of mirth, the witch squealed, ‘Even if you’re a grumpy fuck. A grumpy grump-grump fuckity fuck!’

Severus stood still, praying to Branwen, Morrigan and any Deity who would listen that the girl would tire herself out quickly. She paused for breath, and hiccuped dangerously as she inhaled large gulps of air. After a moment, she snorted, ‘Severus Snape is a grumpy fuck. But, I like having you
here…’ her words were now an effort to hear, each getting quieter than the next in the stillness. ‘You’re smart, and you have pretty eyes and… legs… I could love… grumpy fucker…’

The witch's breath converted to a delicate snore. Dumbfounded, Severus stood staring at Alice, illuminated by the moon’s glow. A dusty back room of his mind spat out orders and he turned away, only to return a few minutes later with a dusty phial of Happy Hangover that he had located in the bathroom cabinet a few steps down the hall. With one last thoughtful glance, Severus set the remedy on Alice's bedside table.

When he apparated back into his own kitchen, he felt soul-splinched, as though he had just cut off something vital and left it behind.
THANK YOU, FawkesyLady, for being the best beta ever. I promise to you an altar in my backyard, and to sacrifice a Barry every Sunday.

And you, dear readers - I hope you're not sick of the angst and drama and door-slamming just yet. We've still got a few oh-so-miserable chapters to go through before things start looking up. But trust me, it won't be too long now. I had to split this chapter into two parts, because it was ridiculously long. I might post the next part within the next few days as an early bonus, but, that will depend on reviews. ;)

The Order should have known better - it was quite funny how they carelessly left the window open, knowing full well that Fred and George would stop at nothing to gather a little intelligence of their own.

‘Budge up a bit!’

‘Ow! Stop it! I’m squeezed enough as it is!’

‘Stop eating pies then!’

‘Shh, I can’t hear a thing!’

The nosey twins were crammed like sardines in a narrow, dusty broom cupboard on the first floor of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Perching precariously on the windowsill, they were attempting to eavesdrop on the Order meeting going on in the kitchen downstairs - a difficult task, considering that every bit of information they managed to catch was punctuated by George’s sneezes, caused by the thick balls of dust floating in the musty air. Fred narrowed his eyes in concentration as he held the tip of an Extendable Ear, hovering it just above the kitchen window underneath.

Truth be told, the young men were irritated with their mother, Headmaster Dumbledore, and all the other Order members who insisted on excluding them from the meetings as soon as the conversation steered towards anything more interesting than casual comments about the weather. They hated being treated as children, especially now that they were financially independent entrepreneurs. They were legally adults and had taken the Oath, making them full members of the Order of the Phoenix. What gave their mother the right to shut them out?! They could be dead useful, and everyone knew
it. Didn’t the fools realise just how convenient it was to spend one’s days in a shop in the middle of Diagon Alley, able to listen in on all sorts gossip on a daily basis?

If only they knew what to look out for and who to keep an eye on, they could become an invaluable source of information. But no. ‘OUT! You will NOT be staying today!’ Their mother would shout at each and every opportunity, and shut the door in their freckled faces. The twins suspected that the reasons for the unfair treatment were currently playing Exploding Snap in a nearby bedroom - Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were still being kept in the dark as much as possible by the overprotective Molly, whose face turned bright-red with motherly wrath every time any one of them hinted at their willingness to contribute to the war effort. Still, it wasn’t like Fred and George could not be trusted to keep their gobs shut and not relay all of the news to the precious children, right? Well, perhaps SOME of the news. And besides, if they could guard the secret formula of Wrinkle Smoothing Elixir with their lives, they could certainly extend the same level of secrecy to You-Know-Who’s movements.

‘What are they saying?’ Asked George, and craned his neck to better hear the muffled voices coming from the Extendable Ear.

‘Something about Slytherins… nasty buggers if you ask me, and… Barrett… Joshua Barrett? You know, the Gryffindor who went out with Angelina?’ Fred furrowed his brow as he tried to make out the meaning of the words spoken downstairs. ‘Stop sneezing, George, they’ll hear us!’

‘I can’t help it… Give me this!’ George grabbed the end of the Extendable Ear and leaned his head towards it, eager to prove he was a much better spy than his twin brother. His enthusiastic grin swiftly melted off his face, replaced by an expression of sheer horror. ‘Joshua Barrett joined the Death Eaters!’ He gasped, and Fred nearly fell out of the window in shock.

‘You’re having a laugh. There’s no way he’d…!’ Fred’s eyes were wide as he processed the terrible news. ‘That’s just…’

‘- Fucked up,’ His brother supplied before bringing his finger to his lips in a silencing gesture. ‘But shut up, I want to hear the details!’

With a little effort, and several painful jabs to the ribs, the twins managed to manoeuvre themselves to a more comfortable position which allowed them both to snoop happily. Unfortunately, it appeared that the witches and wizards below were incapable of holding a civilised conversation, and were shouting over one another like a bunch of boisterous second years in the Great Hall. Something significant must have happened, but the few details they were able to intercept lacked any real context, and by the time the meeting had ended, Fred and George were almost none the wiser.
'If I see Barrett, I swear I’ll transfigure him into a toilet.’ Fred spat at his twin brother, who nodded vehemently with a vicious twinkle in his eyes.

‘We’ll plumb him in here in Grimmauld. All the other loos are infested with doxies and ghouls, so it’ll be nice to do our business in peace!’

‘Wicked!’ The twins snickered, their ginger heads buzzing with vengeful ideas. Suddenly, Fred paused and inhaled deeply. ‘Can you smell…’

‘- Rhubarb pie?’ George whispered with delighted excitement. They closed their eyes as they hummed an appreciative ‘Mmmmm!’ in unison. Their mother may have been terribly unfair at times, but she sure knew how to bake a cracking pie. The twins decided to follow the delicious trail of scent promptly, lest Ron got there first and ate all the custard.

After two failed attempts at exiting the cupboard without getting stuck in the doorway, the merry duo scrambled out of their hideaway and made their way downstairs. As they tiptoed down the stairs noiselessly, taking care not to alert the dreaded Ron to the presence of pie, they heard a door open behind them. ‘Psst! Fred! George! Come here!’

Ginny stood in the doorway, furtively beckoning to her brothers. The twins grimaced, knowing they could wave goodbye to their hope of getting a double helping of custard. The sweet scent of baked goods permeated the air alluringly, and sure enough, Ron’s face appeared right behind Ginny’s shoulder, sniffing the air like a rat searching for cheese. Shrugging, Fred and George quickly jogged towards Ginny and ushered their siblings into the bedroom.

‘What’s up, Sister dearest? You know we can’t tell you little ones anything,’ Fred grinned as he shut the door behind him.

Ginny stood with her arms akimbo, tapping her foot impatiently. ‘Ha-ha.’ She tilted her head to the side with a sour, lopsided smile.

Harry and Ron pounced on the twins like a pair of harpies, gesturing animatedly and shouting over one another. Hermione grimaced, covering her ears whilst shooting them a glare of annoyance. She had tucked herself into a corner to revise for her Advanced Arithmancy exam at the end of next year, and judging by the cards scattered across the bed, the boys had been in the midst of a rousing game of Exploding Snap that had surely distracted the bushy-haired witch. ‘Will you be quiet!’ She hissed like a vexed cat as Harry and Ron assaulted the twins with a hailstorm of questions and exclamations.
The Boy Who Rolls his Eyes threw his hands up in a conceding gesture before turning his attention to Fred and George.

‘Did you find out anything?’ Ginny asked hopefully, more hungry for details than Ron was for pie.

‘Nothing much, in all honesty,’ George lied with a shake of his head. ‘They’re worse than a bunch of first-year girls, screaming and yelling over one another. Couldn’t hear a word.’ He had made an effort at being obtuse, being the more responsible twin.

All was for naught as Fred hadn’t got a handle on his reaction to the news. ‘That BELLEND Josh Barrett joined You-Know-Who, took the Dark Mark and all,’ Fred spat, clenching his fist, looking ready to punch something, anything.

George groaned, shaking his head in disbelief. The twins used to like Joshua a lot, and had spent many evenings laughing together in the common room. He had been a good bloke, and knowing that he dove head-first into the pureblood supremacy propaganda hurt worse than the thought of attending his funeral. He was dead to them. He did add, ‘Barrett wasn’t the only member of the class of 1996 to join this past week.’ After a huff he added, ‘If we had a decent Defense teacher maybe some of those wizards wouldn’t have been so weak minded. Got out in the nick of time, we did.’

Fred crossed the room to glare out the window, his pent up genius for humor struggling with his need to find balance. Unbidden, his thoughts went out to their third twin, wondering what she’d have to say. Aloud, although probably not meant to be, he opined, ‘Alice would probably wonder if it was the shiny membership card, the free pen or the keyring that clinched the deal,’ His mouth stretched into a sour smile, and his voice held no humour. ‘Too bad the good side doesn’t have similar marketing.’

Ron piped up, ‘We’ve got pie.’

Little did the teenagers know that they were being spied on. Severus had left the meeting five minutes early with the intention of perusing the Grimmauld Place library in search of a particular tome that used to belong to Regulus Black. It contained the recipe for the obscure Zaragozian Elixir, one that was very useful for treating nerve damage. Severus hoped that it would ease the persistent
pain he suffered as a result of being repeatedly cursed with the Cruciat - it was already affecting on his day-to-day life, and was sure to only get worse if left untreated. Climbing the steep staircase required unusual amounts of effort. He had to make frequent breaks to shake off the sensation of pins and needles in his leg, and he had just reached the first floor landing when the sound of raised voices coming from behind one of the doors caught his attention. He paused, listening intently, for Gryffindors were always guaranteed to be Up To Something, and his ears pricked up when he heard Miss Crowley’s name being spoken aloud. His heart stumbled, as though it too had stopped on the stair and strained to listen, anxious to hear more.

‘Will you stop talking about that Alice girl?’ Ginny Weasley’s voice sounded distant and distorted through the wall, but Severus could tell the girl was annoyed. He could picture her, rolling her eyes as she snorted, ‘She wouldn’t say that. She doesn’t talk to anyone!’

‘What’s your problem with Alice?’ Another, deeper voice scoffed in a tone suggesting he was ready for a fight. One of the twins, Severus assumed. ‘She’s a little shy, but she’s a good friend. Clever too.’

‘She stayed up all night on many occasions last year, making Skiving Snackboxes so you could get out of detention with Umbridge, you know!’ The other twin cut in irritably. Severus could fill in the scene in his mind’s eye, an image of the twins both standing with arms crossed, fighting off the verbal attacks and finger pointing that Miss Weasley had learned too well from her mother. All in defense of one Alice Crowley.

‘Interesting,’ The wizard thought as he filed the revelation away for future reference. He had always assumed that Fred and George were working alone, and would have never expected such trickery from Miss Crowley. He wondered how else she could surprise him. Thinking about it a little harder, he realised that he did see the girl knocking about with the twins on numerous occasions, but had never deemed it necessary to give her much notice. She was a non-issue, after all. Quiet. Calm. Polite. He shook his head in disbelief at his own naivety.

‘She’s still bloody weird,’ another voice supplied, and Severus instantly recognised Ron Weasley, the bumbling fool. He could not explain why the boy’s comment grated his nerves, and had he uttered it in his direct presence, Severus would have whacked him soundly about the head. Scowling, the wizard forced his breathing to slow, straining to make out the redhead’s next words. ‘I tried to talk to her once, and she just hissed ‘shove off’ and skittered away. Absolutely barking.’

‘That’s more than I got,’ Miss Weasley piped up again. ‘When I was in first year, I asked her if she knew the way to the Charms Classroom. She just stared at me like I was her Boggart, and ran away!’

‘She’s just shy!’ One of the twins shouted with exasperation. ‘Yes, she grunts her way through life, and isn’t really a people person, but she’s alright once you get to know her!’
‘Thanks mate, I think I’ll pass,’ Severus heard Ron mutter unenthusiastically. ‘I think she was raised by alley cats and never learned to speak properly. Do you think Luna likes cats? Those two would get on, they would. With Trelawney to boot.’

‘She’s an excellent potioneer,’ another voice piped up all of a sudden, and Severus recognised the bright soprano of Miss Granger, the Insufferable Know-It-All. ‘I overheard a conversation between Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey. They said they haven’t seen such natural talent since Professor Snape himself was a student.’

Miss Granger’s statement was met with a choir of derisive snorts. Severus’ lip quirked up in amusement at this piece of news - he knew that his little Gryffindor neighbour was good, but he sincerely doubted that her skills were anywhere near as good as his own, even at a like age. His smirk turned into an angry scowl as The Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-A-Thorn-In-His-Side joined the conversation. ‘Well then, I’d watch your pumpkin juice if I were you. If she’s anything like the Greasy Bat of the Dungeons, then she probably knows how to brew a hundred different types of poison already.’

‘It’s Professor Snape, Harry,’ Miss Granger scolded the Boy-Who-Needed-A-Beating. Before she had a chance to elaborate, one of the twins exclaimed, ‘And they were bloody right, I tell you!’ Severus could hear pride in the young man’s voice as he gushed, ‘Our Alice is the witch behind nearly all of our best sellers! Gnomebegone, Acneraser, Nose Hair Lengthening Potion and Bigus Dickus to name a few!’

‘Without her help, we wouldn’t be able to extend our range of beautifying products - Paradeyes and HungerBlaster will be hitting the shelves next week, and the first two batches are already preordered in full!’

‘Not to mention the mischief we got up to… Remember when we sneaked into the kitchens and put Devil’s Tongue in Snape’s personal teapot? Oh, that was a good one… the git was telling porkies all morning! ‘Fred and George Weasley, you are my favourite students. I am sorry to say that Dumbledore will absolutely expel you for arranging this delightful jape.’’ George enunciated nasally in a parody of Severus’ silky drawl. His mockery was met by a choir of snickering, and the redhead’s next admission caused Severus’ hair to stand on end. ‘Snape ended up giving us a month’s detention, he did. And our Alice coaxed Peeves to ransack his storeroom in revenge!’

Severus’ eyes were as wide as black, shiny saucers, and a tiny vein appeared, throbbing on his temple. Now THAT was something he was glad to have learned. He clenched his jaw with righteous anger as he remembered opening his storeroom one morning, only to find a heap of chaos and destruction, and a triumphant Peeves, swinging his legs and blowing raspberries as he sat on the top of the ladder. Severus’ furious roar had woken up the entire castle, and his attempts to chase the
Poltergeist away were met with taunts and rude singing. It took an intervention from the Bloody Baron himself to get rid of the unwanted visitor, and many hours of hard work to return the storeroom to its proper condition. Not to even mention the expense of having to replace many of the shattered ingredients.

He was about to apparate straight to the little idiot’s house to strangle her mercilessly, but Miss Weasley’s next statement caught his attention once more. ‘Yeah, but her skills didn’t help you enter the Triwizard Tournament, did they? If I remember right, you were stuck as old men for three days!’

Severus’ eyebrows shot up to his hairline. So, it was her who brewed the Aging Potion? Severus couldn’t help but feel impressed - despite its shortcomings, the potion was extraordinarily powerful and well-brewed if it allowed the twins to cross the Headmaster’s enchanted Age Line at all.

‘It took her three days to work out the remedy! She had warned us that we didn't have time to carry out proper tests…’

Clear as a bell, Miss Weasley interrupted her brother, ‘I don't care how brilliant you think she is, Fred. There is no way the Hat could have been right in sorting her to Gryffindor, and I hate having her lurk around.’ There was a stunned silence, ‘No, George. I mean it - don't bring her around. Mum might have pity on her, but that doesn't mean I should have to put up with her outside of school.’

In an obvious gambit to change the subject, Miss Granger interjected, ‘Um. I was wondering if someone could explain to me what the Woollongong Shimmy was again? Like they used at the match last week?’

Having heard enough, The Greasy Bat of the Dungeons changed his mind and doubled back down the stairs, slamming the front door with too much force behind him.
Severus apparated home in a gloomy mood. His angry query about whether anybody cared one jot about the Slytherins who had pledged their allegiance to the Dark Lord was dismissed with, ‘It is the Slytherin way.’ To make things worse, the Order had not forgiven him for his mistreatment of Molly last week. Secretly, he regretted his lapse. He knew that he was taking out his anger on her in a passive aggressive way, but he couldn’t stop himself. The tea was quite bad, however his reaction was well out of proportion to the offense. He wondered what they would have done if it had been Lupin who had lost his temper in a similar manner. Surely the comparison was apt - the man was also an agent who had to rub elbows with some of the most reviled beings in wizarding society, and do it convincingly. Who was he kidding? They’d all coo and get him another drink and mentally check the lunar calendar. That must get old for the old wolf. No, he would be forgiven instantly.

A group of people who willingly accepted Remus Lupin for who he was, and was willing to give Sirius Black a second chance, shunned Severus Snape openly. In spite of years of service, in protecting the Potter boy numerous times over the past five years, he still had not been deemed worthy of consideration. The hard line of prejudice held him ever back. Severus would never be one of them. Not really. The Headmaster had openly written off the entire House of Slytherin, and its provisional leader with it. Concern was a luxury reserved for the brave and bold. It was not the first time today that he had to remind himself of who he was, and why he kept labouring for so little regard or reward.

He decided to put the Order from his mind, since it was so easy for them to do the same. The Death Eaters would be sleeping off last night’s festivities. Severus should finally be able to get some well-deserved rest. He fixed himself a cup of properly brewed tea and sat down in his armchair, contemplating what to do with himself now that he had so much free time on his hands. He could read the newest *Potions Weekly*, or brew that potion he wanted to try, but neither of these would do. He felt strangely restless.

There was the problem of Miss Alice Crowley, itching at the back of his mind. He had learned a good number of new things about his neighbour as a result of listening in on the infernal adolescents. He snorted - appearances could truly be deceiving. The Miss Crowley he knew from Hogwarts was a quiet, timid girl who worked hard in Potions. He would have never described her as devious. On the upside, at least he had found the missing phial of unicorn tears among the devastation, one he had thought lost or stolen and nearly impossible to replace. Unicorn tears or no, he now knew who the culprit was, and would find a way of making the witch pay very dearly for
her impudence. This, he would not forget.

Last night’s debacle with Crowley was still very fresh in his mind, equally unforgettable. The witchling might be awake. If she wasn’t awake at noon, she’d be nursing a vicious hangover soon enough. Not for long he hoped. He had left that cure on her table. How had her pain become his responsibility?

And what exactly had Dumbledore done or said to get her into that state? After he had left and his head had cleared, he had put the clues together. Alice was angry, trapped into something by the Headmaster. Severus couldn’t help but find himself agreeing with Molly Weasley. Wars were meant to be fought by adults, not children. Having Harry even in the same house as the meeting made Severus worry. He had worked for years to keep the boy safe, and safety was nothing but a fragile illusion, one that Severus needed to believe. Alice Crowley had been heretofore untouched by the ugliness that he voluntarily wore like a cloak. He did not know what Albus was about, but what he saw last night were not the fat tears and mewling of an innocent. It was the wise despair of a witch who had glimpsed her own strings and named her puppeteer.

The parallels between The Order and the Death Eaters were stacking up. It disturbed him that she understood, drunk as she was, how perfectly balanced he had to be, dancing on the edge of Dumbledore's sacrificial knife. Maybe Trelawney should switch to Happy Harpy wine, it might lend her some needed clarity.

He pinched the bridge of his nose as he recalled Crowley’s inappropriate advances. He had surprisingly mixed feelings about her. Part of him remembered her appalling attempt to kiss him, and his chest tingled with the memory of the pressure of her body against his. And that mouth, usually so sharp and coarse… uttered sweet promises, sent his blood racing. She was barely a woman, she could not possibly know what she wanted - it was the wine talking.

He sighed heavily, staring into the middle distance. His solitude was his penance. What witch would ever want his black, betraying heart? He disgusted himself most days, but he had to keep going. Every action, every word was another mea culpa on the rosary of Lily’s death and his own mistakes, worn smooth under his fingers.

A rattling sound behind the window shook him out of his maudlin introspection, and he looked up to see Sharon, his pet owl, who was beating the glass with her beak. Severus’ knees creaked in protest as he got up and walked into his kitchen to let her in. ‘Hello, Madam,’ he smiled warmly and the bird. ‘Are we hungry?’

‘Twit-twoo!’ Sharon flew gracefully inside and perched on Severus’ shoulder, taking care not to hurt him with her sharp talons. Her friendly greeting made him chuckle. No matter what happened with his life, he knew he had an eternal friend and confidante in his familiar. He stroked her feathered
breast with the side of his finger, and the owl’s eyes drooped at half-mast in an expression of contentment.

The wizard tossed a handful of treats into Sharon’s bowl, and she jumped off his shoulder and attacked them immediately. Severus leaned against the countertop to observe her, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement. ‘One would think I never feed you, my ladybird. I am going to go bankrupt if you keep gobbling up all these treats!’

 Abruptly, Sharon’s head whipped around, and she stared at her human accusingly, as if to say ‘What? Are you saying I’m fat?!’

Meeting his owl’s glare, Severus perceived his gaffe. His own eyes widened in alarm as he hastened to repair the breach. Throwing his hands up placatingly, he rushed to explain, ‘No no no, Sharon. I apologise, I misspoke. Your feathers are as sleek as ever,’ Severus courteously placed a few more treats in the bowl with a theatrical flourish. Sharon cocked her head to the side as she considered Severus warily - was he being sincere? Perhaps she shouldn’t eat those extra treats… With a mental shrug, she decided to feast. She could always burn them off later with Barry.

She hopped closer to get a better look at her wizard. She was used to seeing him exhausted, and had even come to accept that he would sometimes be in a vile, rotten mood, throwing things against walls and barking at her like a rabid beast. Today, however, his eyes were red-rimmed and haunted, his whole posture tense even as he made polite conversation. ‘Twoooo?’ She cooed with concern, wanting to know what was bothering her favourite pet human.

‘I’m alright, Sharon,’ her Human replied and stroked her wing affectionately, although his tone was that of resignation. ‘I’ve… had a rough night, milady. Witches are insane.’

‘Witches?’ Sharon’s feathers stood at attention. She had a feeling that her wizard had some juicy gossip to relay, and her magmatic eyes bore into his as she edged closer still with an encouraging hoot. ‘Do tell!’

‘Miss Alice Crowley,’ the Human shrugged and turned his back on her, busying his bony hands with lighting a cigarette. He exhaled a large cloud of smoke with a shuddering breath before elaborating, ‘Got herself drunk as a skunk, then told me to kiss her. Daft.’

‘Well?’ The owl gawked at her Human in confusion. ‘You did kiss her, did you not?’ She had always thought that her pet human was in desperate need of a mate, and whilst the mating rituals of humans were mostly alien to her, she did understand that the ridiculous two-legged creatures enjoyed smashing their beaks together as a way of showing affection.
‘I would never oblige her, of course, the girl was inebriated! I would never consider it!’

Sharon rolled her vibrant eyes in exasperation. ‘What do you mean, you silly ape? Why didn’t you eat her beak if she was asking you to? Is she not to your liking?’

‘She’s my student, for Merlin’s sake!’ Severus was pacing around his kitchen, waving his cigarette around for emphasis. Sharon’s head was rapidly turning this way and that, following her Human’s agitated movements. She really did not understand what the fuss was all about.

‘She is a fully-fledged witch, not a hatchling! What is the impediment?’ Sharon quipped with a mental quirk of an eyebrow.

‘She is a woman now - she made very sure that I could not miss how lovely she has become. I could ignore such things in the classrooms and hallways, I am a man of principles.’ A whine of frustration preceded his next admission, ‘But I am a man all the same. I passed the test of temptation this time. It wasn't bloody fair.’ The wizard turned to face Sharon, and looked at her with pleading eyes before continuing his soliloquy. He cradled his face in his hands, and his next words came out as a tormented groan. ‘She wanted me last night. But she was drunk. She won’t want me today - she is not for the likes of me.’

‘And why would that be?’ Sharon flapped her wings in irritation, narrowing her glowing eyes at the stupid wizard. He was overcomplicating things for himself, despite her helpful advice. Honestly - how unreasonable could humans be?! The owl was seriously tempted to nip him on the ear. Maybe that would shake some sense into the obstructive idiot.

‘She’s so naive. She has a youthful attractiveness. And yet, it is her frightening insight and natural brilliance that define her true beauty. Why in the name of Morgana would she want an old bastard like me? I have nothing to offer. Nothing but destruction and death…” The wizard grunted in self-disgust, and opened his ancient fridge to find a few rashers of bacon, wrapped in brown paper on one of the shelves. He deftly chopped the bacon into tiny strips before igniting the gas hob in the corner with a quick flick of his wand. As the bacon cooked, he continued his miserable musings.

‘If she was being sincere, then she must be a fool. And I am an even greater fool, for wanting to believe…”

‘Why don’t you just ask her?’ Sharon interjected. She was getting tired of the self-loathing monologue, and craned her pretty neck towards the hob, intensely interested in the delicious-smelling
meat. She hoped that her Human would share.

'It just... can never be. And the wine will wipe any memories of our conversation. Small comfort.'

Feeling that she had endured quite enough of her Human’s drama, Sharon began grooming herself with excessive vigour, wondering how the silly apes managed to get through the day without hurting themselves. It was even more baffling that they procreated at all - surely it couldn’t be THAT difficult to find a partner? Her wizard made lovely bacon, that had to count for something!

As soon as she deemed her feathers sufficiently groomed, Sharon puffed her chest up in a truly regal manner. Radiating patient superiority, the owl decided to make her idiot-pet’s life a little easier and share some tried and trusted relationship advice. ‘You know, I think you should do what any self-respecting owl would do. If you wish to woo a mate, simply kill a big tasty rabbit and drop it at her feet. Show her how splendid you are.’ She clacked her beak, ‘Mark my words, works every time. Without fail!’

Severus turned off the hob and transferred the perfectly fried bacon onto a saucer. He placed it at Sharon’s feet before marching out of the kitchen, muttering under his breath, ‘Obviously, the stress is doing things to me. I am going to let off some steam before it destroys my better judgement.’

He slouched across his living room and opened the door of the cupboard under the stairs. Bending his back, he descended a small staircase which led to his basement lab. Inactivity did not suit him at all - strange and frightening thoughts bred in his mind when he was idle, and a good, long brewing session would surely chase them away. As soon as he set foot in the lab, he marched straight to his ingredients cupboard and perused his impressive selection, trying to think of the most intricate and time-consuming potion he knew. He needed something fickle, something that would require his undivided attention, and finally decided on a small batch of Felix Felicis. Merlin knew, he needed some luck in his life.

Having collected his ingredients within a small basket, Severus walked around his lab towards an enormous dresser where he kept all of his tools of the trade. He inspected the innumerable ladles, stirring rods, knives, tubes and beakers of all shapes and sizes, weighing each and every one with the trained eye of a Master, choosing only the ones which would help him brew as efficiently as possible. As he held up two stirring rods and compared them against one another, an unbidden memory of Miss Crowley’s basement lab came into his mind. It was so similar in layout to his own, yet so poorly equipped in comparison, and Severus imagined the girl, standing in front of her own brewing equipment, choosing the right tools for the job with the same care and precision as he did. ‘Sod off,’ he spat aloud and picked out his instruments in haste, tossing them carelessly onto the workbench. He refused to give Alice Crowley any more time of his day.

He washed his hands thoroughly at the sink and began chopping, grinding, slicing and dicing his
ingredients. Immediately he noticed that his efforts weren’t up to his usual impeccable standards, and a small bead of perspiration appeared on his temple as he crushed Occamy eggshells more forcefully than necessary. Severus felt like an Apprentice again. He was distracted, his mind’s eye supplying a picture of a different, delicate wrist, one he had last seen two decades ago, twisting and turning in the Hogwarts classroom. The witch in his thoughts looked up from beneath a curtain of auburn curls, and smiled at him lightly, her emerald-green eyes sparkling with happiness, her alabaster skin radiating the joyful glow of youth. Severus growled in the back of his throat, and ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head to clear his mind of the image. He grabbed the edge of his workbench for support, inhaling quick, shallow breaths. ‘Lily, please, no!’ He needed to focus. He needed to work.

He dropped the required Ashwinder egg into the cauldron and added the finely diced horseradish. As the cauldron began heating up, he juiced the squill bulb, managing to get the juice all over the front of his shirt. Grinding his teeth in irritation, he waved his hand to clean up the mess with a wandless spell, and made another, more cautious attempt. His wayward brain chose that very moment to picture Miss Crowley once again, waltzing around her own workstation. He could see the witch, picking up a bulb by its tip with her dexterous fingers, clenching them into a dainty fist as she squeezed. His treacherous mind seized onto the image of a teasing apron ribbon, swaying this way and that just below the girl’s narrow waist.

He hissed angrily and shut his eyes tightly as his cock sprung to life in his trousers. Brows drawn and features twisted in a rictus of torment, he chucked the squill juice carelessly into the cauldron. He stirred furiously for minutes, or perhaps hours, willing his breathing to slow and his erection to disappear. He stirred until his arm felt like it was on fire, then tossed the wooden rod onto the floor with an anguished cry. He didn’t even have to look at the potion to know that he had made a complete mess of the expensive brew.

Indeed, a quick inspection showed a mass of green, clay-like goo, bubbling lazily at the bottom of the cauldron, rather than the thin, canary yellow liquid he was aiming for. He seriously doubted that even Longbottom himself could have made a worse effort if he tried. ‘Substandard!’ Miss Crowley’s low, feminine voice announced in his head, and Severus felt sick. His heart was beating frantically in his chest as he sprinted out of his lab, leaving the place in a frightful state.

When he entered the bathroom, he peeled out of his clothes, using magic to undo the rows of buttons that usually made him feel so secure. Today he had no patience, anxious to get free. He was falling apart, and he yearned to reach for the control that Occlumency provided. He was more and more dependent on that art, and he could hear his mother, tsking at his lack of personal discipline. After he pulled his feet free, he stepped into the shower and switched on the tap. Ice cold water hit his face, and he flung his arms out for support as his heartrate dropped precipitously for a moment. Forced to focus on such simples as breathing and counting heartbeats, his mind was afforded a moment’s release, imposed by a physiological reflex. It was a different kind of pain, this cold. It brought numbness. Peoples of the North considered hell to be an ice-kingdom, but in that moment, Severus thought them very mistaken. A bitter laugh escaped his lips as the strains of Comfortably Numb started to play in his mind. ‘There is no pain, you are receding. A distant ship smoke on the horizon.’ Mechanically, he sluiced the rest of himself down, scrubbing away his agonies.
When he reemerged to find a fresh set of clothes, he had regained his balance. Shaving always braced him, and the splash of aftershave’s sting was a familiar pain. He had decided what he was going to do and it was time to be about it. He selected his best everyday suit with clinical detachment, and dressed himself in quick, controlled movements. Wand out, he used it to polish a scuff from his left boot before turning to survey his work.

A flutter out of the corner of his vision altered him to his owl’s presence. A quick glance confirmed that she had no complications tied to her leg. It was simpler to ignore Sharon’s questioning hoot as he came to stand in front of his mother’s oval mirror. Satisfied that he was fit to be seen, he steeled himself and disapparated in a neat twist.
What Went Wrong?

Chapter Notes

This chapter took its time to evolve. It had been drafted, re-drafted, written, re-written, read, re-read and revised so many times that I am frankly sick of it and would rather never see it again in my life. I really struggled this one, but I hope you'll enjoy it. Yep, there's more door-slamming, more temper and more arguments here, but I promise that it won't be like that forever.

Initially, I was going to include smut in this chapter, but ended up deleting it as I felt that, at this point, it wouldn't add much to the story and would in fact weaken it. Still, I have to say that this fic WILL contain smut, and I won't always fade to black as I did here - you'll just have to wait a little longer for it.

A thousand thanks to my beta, FawkesyLady, who had put up with my constant revisions with no complaints, and must have read and re-read this chapter enough times to be as tired of it as I am. I even ended up asking her to hex me if I tried to make any more changes. FawkesyLady - you are a treasure, and I can't thank you enough for your help!

The bright red door of Madam Clementines gleamed brightly in the afternoon sun, a splash of lurid colour that stood out like a sore thumb against the overwhelming soot and grime of the neighbouring establishments, hidden in the far end of Knockturn Alley. Severus stood, concealed in a gap between a pub called The Headless Wizard and a boarded up shop whose owner used to deal with Dark artifacts before getting himself fatally cursed by a curio of unknown origin, carefully scanning the area for any errant students who might have followed him with the intention of sticking their nose in his business.

Determining the coast was clear, Severus stepped out of the shadows and confidently walked up the three stone steps that led to the brothel. He knew he wouldn’t be spoilt for choice - technically, the ladies would not entertain clients until the evening, but Madam Clementine had always made an exception for Severus. He was a regular, valued customer who expected to be served efficiently and adequately, and was happy to pay extra for discretion.

The red door swung open as he tapped it with his wand. Inside, he was immediately assaulted by the smell of stale booze, skanky perfume and dirty underwear, mingled with the unmistakable scent of human sweat. Last night must have been busy.

Looking around, he noticed a sparse cluster of worn-out whores around a low table in the far corner, some napping on velveteen sofas after a long night of pleasuring wizards, others tightening their corsets and covering their faces in thick layers of vulgar makeup in preparation for the next shift. Another group of haggard-looking witches, far too old and unsightly to sell themselves anymore,
bustled around in an attempt to clean up the place. Severus’ lips tightened in distaste. Their efforts were a hopeless endeavour. This filthy slum was beyond help.

The patterned carpet crunched under Severus’ feet as he navigated the front room, avoiding the many stains splattered across its threadbare fibres. He made a conscious effort to ignore them, preferring not to know what they were, although the sour stench gave him a fair idea.

A lone woman sat at a table, counting up last night’s revenue. She must have heard his footsteps, and shouted, ‘We’re not open, bugger off!’ before looking up sharply to chase the intruder away. Severus watched her eyes widen in recognition, and the next angry rebuke died in her mouth, transforming into a piercing squeal of delight. She stood up quickly, and knocked over the stacks of coins she had on the table as she rushed to greet Severus with a wide smile that revealed her crooked, yellow teeth and rotting gums. ‘Ooooh! Mr Snape!’

Madam Clementine was a witch well past her prime, short and stocky, with garish orange hair and a face so caked with makeup that one could scratch her cheek and never touch the skin. Severus always thought that she looked like a painted nag with a curly wig, and the strong floral perfume she favoured always made him queasy.

‘What a lovely surprise!’ She beamed, and batted her heavily made-up lashes at him in a pathetic parody of girly flirtatiousness. Severus cringed inwardly - those thick, clumpy lashes reminded him of big, fluffy acromantulas that wouldn’t entice any sane or sober wizard. Except perhaps Hagrid.

‘Madam Clementine.’ Severus nodded his head in a curt greeting. Really, he despised the woman. She was loud and greedy, but she was exceedingly hospitable and considerate, and her whores were the cheapest in all of Knockturn Alley.

‘It has been too long, hasn’t it? Oh, but we’re so glad to see you!’ Clementine’s eyes glittered, undoubtedly at the thought of the Galleons in his purse. ‘You have caught us indisposed, but for you, my dear sir, I am certain we will rise to the occasion!’ She bit her lip and made a throaty, suggestive noise before turning to apply motivation to her tired cast of expert prostitutes. They were a motley bunch, largely preferring to work under a witch and a roof over gutter-crawling. Many had the suggestion of worn-out prettiness, and all wore the burden of soul-deep exhaustion. Severus understood that, as he often felt that way himself.

She turned around to the witches lounging in the corner. ‘LADIES!’ She bellowed, clapping her thick, manly hands, making them jump. A worn-looking brunette in a cabaret dress and a feather headpiece woke abruptly, and shrieked, ‘Who’s died?!’ Before rolling onto the floor with a loud thump. The loud snoring that followed a few seconds later indicated that she was still drunk, and had gone back to sleep.
Clementine thinned her lips in disapproval, and shouted, ‘Come on, ladies! Up, up! Mr Snape requires attention!’

The ‘ladies’ groaned in unison, but collected themselves promptly and sauntered over to where Severus stood. It was obvious that all they wanted to do was to get some rest before the next influx of wizards came looking for entertainment, but word in the brothel was that Mr Snape always paid and usually tipped for a job done tolerably well. This bolstered the flagging morale and a few of the women mustered an effort at enthusiasm and charm. It was repulsive at best.

Severus perused the harlots presented to him carefully, and a younger woman caught his eye. He guessed that she was probably in her late twenties to early thirties, and was considerably cleaner-looking than her co-workers. She stood off to the side with a thin cigarette pinched between her teeth, picking at her nails, her whole posture screaming boredom. She had a pointy chin, blonde hair that reminded Severus of tangled straw, and green eyes adorned with smudged black liner. She was dressed in an eye-catching set of burgundy robes, sleeveless, with a black underbust corset cinched around her waist. Severus thought that she would have looked quite pretty had she brushed her hair and removed most of that makeup.

He must have been staring too intently, and Madam Clementine raised a questioning eyebrow. ‘Ah, Sylvia? She’s new, you know. A good choice if you ask me, Mr Snape. She may not be as experienced as the other girls, but she’s certainly fresher...’ The woman chuckled - and ugly, gurgling sound which turned into a wheezy smoker’s cough, and shooed the remaining whores away with a wave of her fat hand. ‘You lot, go away! Bedroom Six had just been cleaned, Mr Snape.’ She turned to face Sylvia, and wiggled a bejewelled finger at the younger woman in a clear warning. ‘Mr Snape is one of our best customers, girl. Show him every courtesy!’

Sylvia turned her back to Severus, and sent him a sultry look over her shoulder, saying, ‘Follow me.’ Her voluminous skirts swayed from side to side as she glided away towards the dark wooden staircase.

Severus’ face was an expressionless mask, concealing the tingle of anticipation that rose in his chest with each step as he trailed after the woman up the stairs. He kept his eyes fixed on Sylvia’s swinging hips throughout the ascent, knowing that this was what he wanted and needed. A woman of flesh and blood, who would soon cure him of this strange, unwanted obsession with one stormy-eyed witch. Not long now.

Upstairs, Severus took a quick inventory of Bedroom Six, a habit developed over the years of playing his role as a spy. The Specialis Revelio he had cast on the doorstep revealed no hidden hexes or cursed objects, and he stepped inside, ignoring Sylvia for the time being as he did a quick visual inspection of the small room. It looked similar to all the other bedrooms in the brothel, with dark, patterned carpets and walls lined with thick oxblood wallpaper, deeply embossed and peeling around the edges. A mock-Baroque dresser stood in one corner, its countertop filled with numerous massage
oils and pleasure-enhancing potions of dubious quality, and a massive bed made of battered wood dominated the cramped space, with a vast headboard decorated with coarsely carved scenes that once were lewd, and now had blurred and chipped with decades of clumsy neglect. Above the bed, a replica of Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’ hung in an ornate plaster frame, painted gold. Severus suppressed a snort at the idea of discussing Renaissance art with one of Clementine’s whores. How absurd.

Housekeeping had made a satisfactory effort at cleaning - the bedding appeared hastily straightened, and the edge of a thin mattress peeked out from underneath the purple bedding. The room still had the faint tang of sex, but overall, it was sufficient. There were no suspicious stains, the furniture was dusted, and there was no obvious grime in sight, save for the single cobweb that hung from the chandelier overhead. They had even opened the windows to let in some fresh air.

The sound of rustling skirts reminded Severus of Sylvia’s presence. He turned around, and his heartbeat quickened as he slowly looked her up and down, his stony gaze softening a little at the sight of the woman who would bring him the much-needed relief. She was standing with one hand placed on the bed’s tall footboard, the other resting on the curve of her hip in a seductive pose that made his heartbeat quicken. He would soon have her naked, and the thought caused his cock to twitch in his trousers, eager to get on with it.

Severus beckoned for her to come closer, his long, elegant finger curling ever so slowly. She tipped her chin down slightly, and looked at him through her eyelashes as she crossed the room. She took her time, swinging her hips in broad circles to allow him to get a good look, the corner of her full lips quirking upwards in a coquettish smile.

His eyes never left hers as he buried his hand in her hair, tousled and curled into tight ringlets that fell past her shoulders and down her back. He began undoing his belt with one hand, and with the other, he gathered her hair in a loose fist at the nape of her neck, dipping his head to whisper in her ear.

‘Disrobe,’ He ordered in a low, silky purr. ‘No kissing. No chit-chat. If you must speak at any time, you will address me as “Sir.”’

Madam Clementine had sat herself down behind the front desk and was reviewing her books over a lovely cup of tea doctored with a splash of fortifying rum when she heard the heavy thumping of Mr Snape’s boots descending from the upper floor. Hardly half an hour had passed since he had disappeared upstairs with Sylvia. His usual sojourn with the girls was considerably longer, and a few of his prior picks had asked after him, seeming interested in his habits. Just last month, Susan had cornered her after he left, ‘Aw Clemmy, he was a sweet one, when’s he expected back? I’d like to be here!’
One look at his closed expression caused a mingled rush of anxiety and anger to rise like a gorge of bile in Clementine's throat, constrictive and bitter. Pushing her books to the side, she stood and fixed an ingratiating smile on her face. 'Why, going so soon, Mr Snape? May I offer you a glass of wine, or perhaps a shot of Firewhiskey? If Sylvia had somehow displeased you, I am sure we can find someone more agreeable to amuse you…'

She was still working out what to say to try and mend the gap as the tall and dark customer dropped a neat stack of coins in front of her on the desk before turning his back to her and stalking out the door. She called after him, 'Call anytime, sir! Always welcome, right you are!'

A raised hand flicked careless acknowledgement as he opened the front door a crack, just enough to slip back out into daylight. She added a hopeful lilt to her tone, 'Come back soon!'

As soon as the door closed with an audible click, she turned to address the stairs, her voice modulating from her previous carefully crafted Cockney accent to her native one, full of harsh edges and cannibalised consonants. 'SYLVIA! You have explaining to do, you day-old tart! If you spoiled him for the rest of us, you will be serving the lateshift every night for the next month! Mark my words, I'll have you crawling the gutters, I will!'

Silence was her only answer, punctuated with a bitter cackle from a sleepy girl who stood leaning on the banister upstairs, smoking. With a huff, Madam Clementine mounted the stairs, preparing to divine the reasons for what she believed to be a dissatisfied customer.

Alice woke up in the early afternoon with a raging headache. As soon as she opened her eyes, she wished she hadn’t. A throng of elephants was tap-dancing on top of her brain, the thunderous rhythm reminiscent of a hammer, pounding at the base of her skull with a steady *thump, thump, thump*.

This raging headache was nothing compared to the nausea that hit her immediately as she sat up, cradling her head in her hands and wishing fervently that she would make it to her bathroom before throwing up.

She clumsily pulled herself upwards, groaning, 'Fuuuuck!', her back creaking in protest as she stood and stretched in an attempt to alleviate the strange aches and pains in nearly all of her muscles - even ones of whose existence she was previously blissfully unaware. It was no good, and only made her head spin faster. She felt at least as old as Methuselah himself.

The trip to the bathroom was slow and torturous. She had to shield her throbbing eyes against the
blinding assault of a single narrow sunbeam coming in from between the curtains. Even the smallest amount of natural light inflicted unbearable pain as she slowly waddled across the first floor corridor, swaying on her feet like a newborn fawn, struggling to hold on to the contents of her stomach.

The bathroom was annoyingly bright and smelled strongly of citrus cleaning spray. Alice turned her back to the window like a vampire repulsed by natural light, and her eye caught a glimpse of her own face in the mirror, staring at her with blood-shot, puffy eyes. Alice gasped, her various aches momentarily forgotten as she stepped closer to inspect her appearance more closely. The mirror was unforgiving, and confirmed her worst suspicions - she had gone to bed unwashed, in her day clothes, and with a face full of makeup that had now oozed all around her cheeks. ‘I look as rough as a bear’s arse!’ Covering her mouth with one hand, she lamented the heavy blow to her vanity.

She turned her back to the mirror, preferring to face the blinding light of day over her own appearance, which in her opinion was bad enough to scare a Boggart. She undressed as quickly as her stiff body allowed, and wrinkled her nose at her own smell. ‘Ugh. Minging.’ Cursing her own physiology, she tossed her stale clothes into the washing basket and shut the lid firmly before stepping under the shower. To Alice, habitually groomed to within an inch of her life, the sensation of being grubby and sticky was almost as unpleasant as all the other signs of a hangover combined.

‘I’m never drinking again. Ever.’ She moaned as she stood under the steaming water, taking time to scrub herself even more thoroughly than usual, starting with her hair. Massaging her scalp with her fingertips in light, circular motions, the witch wondered how her own mother managed to cope with this on a daily basis. She snorted bitterly as she tipped her head back to rinse her hair. ‘Well, she barely functions, doesn’t she. Always bloody pissed, her and her mates.’

She picked up her shower gel, and her eyes darted to the strange marks and bruises peppered all over her arms. Alarmed, she immediately began searching her body for any other injuries. Her wrists were black and blue, and she could feel that the skin on her back was tender and hot under her fingers. An ugly bruise was starting to appear just below her right knee, and her neck was so stiff she could hardly turn it to the side, having to resort to acrobatics that caused her pounding headache to triple in force. She strained her leaden brain as she tried to remember - she knew she had drank one full bottle of Happy Harpy, bemoaning the day she received her acceptance letter from Hogwarts, but beyond that, she could not remember a thing.

Stepping out of the shower, Alice proclaimed, ‘There. Fresh like a fucking daisy.’ The idea of anointing her body with anything with a fragrance was repulsive, and her stomach tensed with warning at the very thought. Choosing to put up with non-silky skin for a day, she towelled herself off, huffing and puffing with the effort. She felt marginally better now that she was clean, but her body still felt like a sack of stones.

‘Let’s see the damage.’ She wiped the steam off the mirror, hoping that the long session with soap and water would have improved her appearance. Alas, no such luck. The dark streaks of smudged
makeup were gone, but her skin was patchy and as dry as parchment, and the dark shadows under her eyes made her look like a victim of a brawl. Even her lips were dry and cracked, and stung like buggery at the corners as she opened her mouth to brush her teeth meticulously. She brushed twice for good measure, and gulped down four glasses of cold tap water before venturing out of the bathroom in search of some fresh clothes to wear. The water did nothing to alleviate the nausea - if anything, it made it even worse, and her stomach protested vocally with a shockingly low belch.

Fighting lightheadedness, Alice stepped into her bedroom and immediately wished she hadn’t. The stench of digested alcohol mixed with perfume and her own body odour assaulted her senses, and the girl heaved, covering her mouth in another desperate attempt to stop herself from soiling the carpet. She held her breath as she rummaged in her wardrobe, grabbing the first things that fell into her hands - an old, faded football shirt she liked to sleep in and a pair of white cotton shorts that had frayed at the hem and were only worn for doing chores. Hardly the most sophisticated outfit, but Alice felt only vaguely human, and the shabby clothes would simply have to do.

She fled the bedroom, balancing with one hand against the wall on the landing as she pulled on the clothes, sans underwear. The girl attempted to collect herself as she descended her creaking staircase, expecting to find a battlefield in the kitchen. Every noise was amplified tenfold in her ears, and with each step down her temples throbbed, every squeak and groan resonating around her skull in a torturous ripple. Anxiety rose in her chest as she dragged herself down the darkened hallway, her mind’s eye presenting gloomy visions of chaos and destruction.

Surprisingly enough, the kitchen was in pretty good shape. One of the chairs was overturned, and one bottle had spilled, leaving a red, sticky trail of wine and tobacco on the tabletop. Easy enough to clean up, although the Argos catalogue she had picked up in town was now a sodden mess, only suitable for throwing away. The very sight of the three empty bottles made the witch shudder, her body reflexively responding to their presence with a clear warning of strong revulsion, reinforcing her resolve to never touch alcohol again. She made quick work of putting the empties in the bin under the sink. Out of sight, out of mind.

‘You’d think there was a bloody fight in ‘ere judging by the state I’m in,’ She mused, glancing at her bruised wrists as she lit a roll-up and took a drag. ‘Stranger things have happened…’ Alice’s thoughts ground to a halt, and the witch froze, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. The floor was covered in muddy footprints.

All blood drained from her face, only to return seconds later in a flush of bright red as a rush of shock washed over her like a wave of horror. She would recognise these prints anywhere - the memory of scrubbing them on her hands and knees less than a week ago was still fresh and vivid in her mind.

‘Snape!’ She gasped, her eyes darting around the room in panic, as though expecting the man himself to jump out of one of the cupboards. ‘Snape was here!’
She stood, glued to the spot and frozen in time, gawking at the evidence of the Professor’s presence in her home with one hand planted firmly across her mouth. As much as she tried, she could not remember anything. ‘He must have put me to bed… ‘ She finally whispered, her brain slowly processing the ramifications. He had seen her drunk. What happened? Did he… no, he would never, would he? Her distressed mind reeled with questions she did not want to be answered as the witch abandoned her half-smoked cigarette and mechanically filled a bucket with soapy water. Muttering hateful invectives under her breath, she fell to her knees once more.

Alice scrubbed, rubbed and scoured. She rinsed, wiped and dried with abandon, and so absorbed in the task was she, her nose almost touching the patterned lino, that she never heard the door open, nor did she see the wizard who stood on the doorstep, watching as she channeled her frustrations and fears into her work.

She had closed her eyes, reaching out in front of her to wipe the floor in broad semi-circles. She soldiered on through the throbbing pain in her head and the burning in her throat exacerbated by the continuous back-and-forth motion. Even in her miserable state, her brain could not stifle the compulsive urge to purify her surroundings of the smallest specks of dirt.

Her hand bumped against an obstacle, and she opened her eyes to inspect it. A mighty shriek escaped her mouth as she saw a pair of black boots mere inches below her face, one of them glistening where she had wiped it with her cloth. The unexpected appearance scared the living ghost out of the witch, and she jolted into a squatting position, losing her balance in the process. Waving her arms helplessly, she fell backwards, and ended up sprawled flat on her back in a particularly wet and sudsy spot on the floor.

The witch groaned, and struggled to sit up, her hands sliding in the slippery suds and failing to support her. Her cheeks flushed pink with embarrassment as she looked up to see Professor Snape, looming over her with a sardonic sneer which only added insult to injury.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Crowley.’ His words were polite, but his tone was ice-cold as he uttered the greeting in clipped words. He added, ‘My my, I see you are tidying up after last night’s… misadventure.’ His eyes had darted to the side as he uttered the last word, enunciating the syllables as they rolled off his tongue in a low, quiet drawl.

‘Misa-what? Um…’ Alice rubbed her temple awkwardly, shielding her eyes against the onslaught of daylight coming from behind the door. ‘Afternoon, Professor…’ Her voice came out raspy and harsh, and she cleared her throat before continuing, ‘Ang on, it was you that were ‘ere last night, weren’t you? These are your muddy footprints all over me clean floor. Again.’

Snape didn’t reply immediately, and Alice felt it necessary to stand. The wizard made no move to
assist her as she scrambled to her feet, her legs shaking as though she had been hit with the Jelly-Legs Jinx. The look on his face was one of evident contempt, and she wondered if she had vomited on his boots last night. After another moment’s silence, she rather hoped she had.

The idea would amuse her later, but right then she was too befuddled by her headache and the infernal Professor’s altered manners. Why couldn’t he revert to the nicer version just for this occasion?

‘Unfortunately.’ He finally replied, and widened his stance, crossing his arms in front of his chest. He looked her up and down, his upper lip curling in distaste, the crooked, tea stained teeth adding to the impression of a snarling alley rat.

Alice hugged herself, feeling any confidence she might have had fly out of the window. She knew she looked terrible - Snape didn’t have to make it any clearer. He might as well have been a scarecrow for all of the humanity he possessed. The pain of abasement sparked a flame of rebellious indignation, and under the power of this new negative energy, she straightened her spine, raised her chin, and met his glare with one of her own.

‘If my company is so unpalatable to you, then I do not understand why you bother to come back.’ Alice stared him straight in the eye, her anger threatening to erupt any second now as her hand darted to her side, reflexively seeking out her wand. It wasn’t there.

The ornery wizard was unperturbed by her glare. He relaxed his shoulders and held her gaze with appalling aplomb, the corner of his mouth stretching in condescending amusement, as though to say, ‘And what do you think you are going to do?’

Alice’s lip began to tremble. She held up her bruised wrists, her voice rising to a near-shrill pitch as she squealed, ‘What have you done to me? What are these? I should like some answers!’

Professor Snape’s expression darkened. Lifting one eyebrow, he spoke blandly, enunciating each syllable with painful accuracy as one might use to address a deaf person, or a particularly dim-witted child. ‘These, Miss Crowley, are the result of your childish and frankly unbecoming behaviour last night. Let me assure you that you have brought them upon yourself, and that I merely assisted you in getting to bed safely. Unless of course you would have rather spent the night sleeping on the floor - and considering the undignified and entirely distasteful way in which you had conducted yourself, I should have left you to it.’

Alice gritted her teeth. She was exhausted, and wanted to toss him out on his arse, him and his smug attitude. He needed a bit of dirt on that nose, bit of honest earth. She pointedly looked away, digging
deep for calm.

At length, Snape tilted his head to the side as he drawled on further in his usual stern tone, reserved for the most obtuse dunderheads, ‘I have noticed that you haven’t seen fit to take advantage of the Hangover Potion I left at your bedside.’

This made her look up sharply, sending another blinding flash of pain through her skull. ‘What potion at my… you’ve been in my room?!” She squealed accusingly as a parade of mortifying possibilities swam across her mind’s eye. This was bad, this was really bad. What else had he seen?!

Snape narrowed his eyes with irritation, and stepped forward, his shape blotting out the light behind his back, darkening the room. Alice recoiled reflexively, an instinctive voice reminding her of a very important fact she had forgotten. Professor Snape was a very dangerous man who probably didn’t give a shite if her knickers were left out on the floor.

She continued her retreat until her back brushed against the wall. Somehow, he had rewound time, and she was a first year again, cowering under the stern Professor's unforgiving chastisement. She flinched as he waved his hand sharply, and moments later, the dusty bottle whisked through the air and slapped firmly into his palm with unnerving precision. The show of power alone was staggering. She almost missed it as he carelessly tossed it at her chest.

He snarled, ‘Ungrateful and goat-brained, just like the rest of House Gryffindor. Take that, silly girl. And while you're at it,’ He paused, his lip curling up in derision once more before he continued, ‘Do something about your stench. Unless you prefer to reek like a human distillery.’

Alice could only gape, her voice and will chased away by the low blow. Professor Flitwick was the champion duelist at Hogwarts, but Professor Snape was the a master of verbal fisticuffs. He could not have hurt her with more precision if he had taken a week to study the problem and laid out a strategy using top experts from around the globe. He shot her one last contemptuous scowl before turning neatly on his heel and walking away, leaving Alice to watch his retreating form. The sound of the gate slamming shut with enough force to rattle its hinges brought home the finality of the wizard's absenting his presence.

‘Well fuck you!’ She called into the empty space where he stood not a minute ago. ‘Back like a stray, with paws just as muddy!’

She stood, struggling to pick up the shattered pieces of her feminine dignity. It was a fruitless endeavour, as nothing seemed to fit, the sharp edges too jagged to handle without cutting herself with
her own recriminations. Her confidence was excessively fragile, its shaky framework likely to
crumble to dust with each renewed effort at reinforcement. When her brain registered a whiff of the
Professor’s lingering scent - a mixture of his own aftershave, laced with cheap, feminine perfume and
fresh sweat, her stomach finally gave up and turned itself inside out in a neat flip. She staggered over
to the sink and was violently sick, cursing Severus Snape to the deepest, darkest pits of hell.

‘I swear, I don’t know what happened!’ Sylvia wailed, wringing her hands, for the seventh time by
now.

She had barely managed to put on her brassiere and her petticoat before Madam Clementine burst
into the room not five minutes after Mr Snape took his leave, with a mighty screech loud enough to
wake the dead. Immediately, Clementine launched into a vitriolic tirade, bellowing a hailstorm of
insults that grew in pitch and savagery by the second. The sobbing witch cowered under the never-
ending trail of questions, her attempts at describing what had happened drowned out by Clementine’s
lament.

‘... my best customer! None of the other girls had ever given him any reason to complain, and then
you turned up and did what?! Ruined everything! You have ruined everything, you stupid, cretinous
cow! I knew you were bad news when you turned up looking for work, and I knew I should have
left you to rot on the streets, but my heart was too soft, too kind, and that’s how you repay me for it?!
Mr Snape has standards, girl, STANDARDS! And you, you useless, good-for-nothing halfwit... strutted around and offending respectable wizards, thinking you’re something special just because
your cunt is tighter…!’

At length, Clementine paused for breath. She began pacing around Bedroom Six, fanning herself
with her fat hand as sweat soaked her brow, her face as red as a ripe tomato after a long time of
screaming. ‘What am I going to do now, what am I going to do?!’ She whined dramatically at
nobody in particular, her hoarse voice breaking in a mixture of worry and rage. Attracted by the
commotion, a couple of sleepy whores appeared in the doorway, tutting in sympathy at the Madam’s
troubles.

Seizing the opportunity, Sylvia spoke up, her pathetic explanations punctuated with miserable sniffs
and sobs, ‘I swear on my dear mother’s ashes, Madam, he seemed happy, until…’

‘Until WHAT?’ Clementine interjected, turning sharply to face the disgraced witch and whipping her
wand out of her pocket. She pointed it at Sylvia’s chest and stepped towards her menacingly, like a
Black Mamba closing in on its prey. The girls in the doorway gasped at this turn of events. Madam
Clementine rarely punished her girls in this way, but when she did, she was exceptionally heavy
handed.
Sylvia recoiled and ducked her head, fresh tears pooling in her eyes as she stuttered, ‘He… he t-told me to undress, Madam, so I did,’

Clementine gave a curt nod, tapping her foot impatiently. Sylvia, grateful for the chance to speak, took a deep breath and continued, stumbling over her words, ‘Then he twiddled me fanny. W-with his fingers, that is, and I did all the t-things you t-taught me to do, I faked an orgasm and all, and I faked it really well, made sure to flutter my…’

‘Very well, girl, but why did he run out like he was being chased by the devil himself?!’ Clementine trotted over to where Sylvia stood, their heads nearly touching as the Madam leaned closer to look her employee in the eye. She was so close that Sylvia could smell her breath, sour and sharp, laced with whisky and cheap cigarettes, causing bile to rise in her throat.

‘WHAT the hell went wrong? TELL ME NOW! ’ Clementine hissed hatefully, her heavily made-up eyes bulging in irritation, her nostrils flaring uncontrollably. The point of her short, stubby wand hovered in the air like an executioner’s axe, itching to fall on its victim’s neck.

Sylvia eyed it with apprehension, teeth chattering as she rushed into another round of explanations, the small flicker of hope that she could talk herself out of this situation diminishing at a rapid pace. ‘Hand on heart, I don’t know! He told me to suck him, but then stopped me halfway through - I didn’t bite him, I promise!’ Sylvia’s eyes widened in fear as she spotted the small vein that appeared, throbbing on Clementine’s temple. She now knew that her fate was sealed regardless of what she said or did, but ploughed on in a last desperate attempt to reduce the severity of the punishment for the terrible crime she had unintentionally committed, ‘He told me to lie down, shagged me, spurted inside me, then got dressed and left without a word! That’s all that happened, but I swear I did nothing wrong, he seemed pleased when…’

‘YOU OBVIOUSLY DID SOMETHING WRONG!’ Clementine erupted. Her outburst prompted a collective groan from the audience that had gathered around the doorway to observe the proceedings.

‘HE SURE DIDN’T LOOK PLEASED WHEN HE LEFT! NOW OUT! OUT! GO BACK DOWNSTAIRS AND GET YOURSELF READY FOR THE NIGHT SHIFT! IF I CAN’T TEACH YOU HOW TO DO YOUR JOB, I’M SURE THE CUSTOMERS WILL!’

Stepping back, the unforgiving procuress slashed her wand through the air sharply, baring her teeth as the Stinging Hex collided with Sylvia’s shoulder. She yelped, and hugged herself in a protective gesture that only fanned the flame of Clementine’s fury. The Madam chased the harassed, shrieking witch out of the bedroom and down the stairs, casting one ferocious hex after another in rapid succession, unmindful of Sylvia’s pleas and desperate apologies. As their voices faded away in the
distance, the little company gathered in the corridor disbanded, shaking their heads as they left the scene of the crime to go back to their own duties, their mutterings barely audible among the sounds of rustling skirts and clicking heels, ‘There’s nothing worse than best customers who leave with a scowl.’
Potions, Pensions and Nasty Goblins

Chapter Summary

FawkesyLady should be Minister for Magic, she's just that good. I don't know what I'd do without her!

This chapter contains a... situation between Alice and Fred. You have been warned. They are most definitely not a couple, but witches have needs, right? I hope you'll enjoy!

July rolled into August, and Alice sat on her kitchen doorstep, enjoying her first cigarette of the day. She had a steaming mug of strong coffee at her feet, and was contemplating the chores that needed doing, sorting them in a neat mental list in order of importance. She dipped her head to the side, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she observed Barry, who had returned a couple of days ago, and was now hopping across the paving slabs, merrily gobbling up the pieces of bread she had tossed at him earlier. They had buried the hatchet over a meal of gammon and eggs, and were friends again.

Time management was the order of the day. Between the endless cycle of washing, dusting and sterilising, she had a long list of potions to brew, formulas to adjust and experiments to run. She soon settled into a comfortable routine of housekeeping in the day and pursuing academic activities in the night - those she deemed worthy of her attention. She had fallen behind on her schoolwork, having only done the assignments for the subjects she enjoyed, and merrily relegated the dreaded Herbology essays to the very bottom of her list of priorities. She would do it later in the month. Or not at all. With her days structured and running like a Swiss watch, she had little time for idle pondering.

Life was as good as it could get, considering the circumstances. As Dumbledore predicted, the Essence required the minimum amount of attention and had stopped feeding, and Alice felt her strength return with each passing day. Her contact with her boss was mercifully limited to an update regarding their project's status, in exchange for her wages, which were paid out in Muggle cash. Once again, her too-thin frame had reacquired the softness appropriate to a young witch, and she no longer had to apply blush to better distinguish herself from a corpse. She was full of energy, and was now able to take pleasure in experimenting with potions again, often staying up late in her basement lab, brewing until she could no longer keep her eyes open.

That’s not to say that she was entirely without trouble. A week had passed, but her last encounter with Professor Snape was never far from her mind. She had spent many fruitless hours trying to work out what had prompted the wizard to address her with such viciousness, but her memory failed her, refusing to bring forward the events of the night before. It was one thing for him to criticise her work in class - it was to be expected, and he wasn’t the kind of teacher who minced his words. The personal remarks were a whole different story. His cruelty stung and confused her, even after all this time.
Alice had tried to convince her obsessive brain to stop analysing the odious wizard. She had lost count of the amount of times she firmly told herself that everyone had been right in calling him a bastard and an arsehole who could not be trusted. His venom had wrapped itself around her subconscious and poisoned it, releasing its vile fumes in moments of weakness, criticising her every action with revolting clarity, as though the man himself was standing there, whispering in her ear.

She kept herself busy, and took some comfort in the idea that this time next year she would be finished with school, and would never have to deal with Professor Snape again.

‘But Gods, he’s a nasty bugger,’ She snorted with a shake of her head and stood, intending to busy herself with something that would break her obsessive train of thought. Just then, the unmistakable sound of flapping wings caught her attention. She squinted, shielding her eyes as she looked up to see an unfamiliar Eagle owl, slicing through the air at neck-breaking speed. The daft thing was carrying a Cadbury’s chocolate bar in its talons, and appeared to be working rather hard to stay aloft with a fat brown envelope clutched in its beak. Coming in fast, it dropped the envelope at her feet, sending it skidding dangerously close to her forgotten coffee mug. Not waiting for a response, it winged away with a throaty hoot of relief.

Alice’s eyes lit up as she recognised the logo of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes - she had been waiting for this letter all month. Having torn the envelope open with greedy fingers, she stared, slack-jawed at the small rectangle of parchment. One-hundred and twenty Galleons, seven Sickles and two Knuts. Her very first real payslip, containing all the commission she had earned by brewing for Fred and George. It was a decent amount, roughly the same as she would expect to make in a full-time retail job, and the knowledge that she had earned it herself - truly earned it through hard graft, made it all the more special.

‘Thanks, my lovelies.’ She kissed the payslip and hugged it to her chest, her heart going out to her two best friends. The payslip contained her Wizarding National Insurance contributions, and she smiled fondly, thinking of the lovely wizarding pension she would receive in a hundred and odd years.

The missive couldn’t have come at a better time, as the laughable allowance she received from Dumbledore barely covered her overheads, basic food and of course tobacco. The start of term was approaching slowly, and Alice had wondered how she would afford her textbooks, supplies and new robes. Even buying second-hand was a big expense for a witch on a low income, but these wages would easily cover all the essentials, and she would probably have enough left over for some small luxuries.

The sweet taste of true independence filled the girl from within, radiating in a burst of renewed vitality as she danced around her kitchen with a squeal of delight. She made the decision to go to
Diagon Alley immediately to cash in her cheque at Gringotts, chores be damned. She could visit a few shops and buy some supplies, and visit Fred and George after. Oh, she would gladly work twice as hard from now on - after all, the more potions she developed, the more commission would flow into her account, and the higher her pension would be!

She put on a pretty blue summer dress with a floral print and a pair of brown sandals. She spent a long time in front of the mirror, making sure her makeup was immaculate and checking her overall appearance could not be criticised. Snape’s comments had hurt her far more deeply than she would ever admit, and she felt even more paranoid about her image than ever before. She twisted her hair up into a simple bun, then let it down, only to put it back up again - she thought she looked good, but would the bastard agree? Or would he just sneer at her in disgust?

She paused, her eyes widening in disbelief at her own stupidity. She knew she was pretty. Her mother may not have given her much in life, but she did give her a lovely face. She knew that her hair was clean, shiny and fragrant - unlike Snape, she made an effort to wash it every night. She could wear it down with pride, and if the Greasy Git had any complaints… ‘Why do I even care what that ugly bugger thinks?!’ She grimaced at her reflection in befuddlement. ‘Alice Crowley, you are being ridiculous!’

She rummaged in her handbag, which was the only completely disorganised thing in her possession, and found the key to her Gringotts vault. It was only a small key, silver, with no ornaments - the intricate, bejewelled keys were reserved for the most prominent and wealthy wizarding families, those with vaults that required a cart ride around the bowels of the bank. Her own vault was located in one of the uppermost levels of Gringotts, where the ordinary magical folks kept their modest incomes.

Steeling herself, Alice closed her eyes and clutched her key in a white-knuckled grip, forcing her breathing to slow in an act of mental preparation as her stress levels began to rise. ‘Alright, Alice. You can do this.’ She told herself firmly. ‘Yes, there will be people there, but no, they won’t bite you. You’re neither the first nor the last to cash in a cheque.’

With one last deep breath, Alice turned on the spot and apparated to Diagon Alley.

The wizarding shopping district was calmer that day than the last time she had visited. The crowds were thinner, and there were less ankle biters running up and down the cobbled streets. Those who liked to be prepared had bought all of their school supplies already, and the slackers would leave it until the last week of August. The thought of being able to peruse the stores without the risk of being stampeded to the ground by a horde of procrastinating shoppers was unspeakably lovely to the young witch. Clutching the brown envelope to her heart, she navigated her way to Gringotts with a spring in her step, making a mental shopping list of all the nice things she would finally be able to
afford. Brand new robes. Shiny, fragrant textbooks that haven’t been dog-eared and abused by Merlin knew how many students. Decent quality parchment, and maybe even a pot of ink, pitch-black, rather than the cheap ink she usually bought that quickly faded to grey. And if she had any money left over from her spree, she would treat herself to some pretty new shoes - she had seen a beautiful pair of black, shiny mid-heel leather pumps at Madam Malkin’s the other week, very sleek and outrageously pointy. Yes, that was a good way of spending her first proper payday.

Mind swimming with sweet ideas for spending her Galleons, she reached the bank before she knew it, and stepped inside the great snow-white building. The marble floors and sparkling chandeliers of the vast main hall had always intimidated Alice, making her feel painfully out of place among the grandeur and opulence.

Her eyes darted around the hall, searching for an unoccupied counter. Her senses were instantly on high alert, registering the sounds of scratching quills and shuffling feet, as well as the general humming of numerous conversations echoing all around the vast space. The enchanted chandeliers were unnaturally bright, reflecting beams of dancing, shimmering light onto the enormous columns that stood in neat rows to her left and right. Alice gulped, frightened by the sensory overload, her heart hammering in her chest as her instincts screamed at her to turn around and run. She eyed the exit, worrying her lower lip in indecision, feeling lost and alone in the milling crowds. The idea that she was brave enough to do this flew out of her mind, and a flush of shame burned her cheeks. ‘An embarrassment to House Gryffindor,’ the familiar, hateful voice drawled lazily inside her head. ‘Incapable of performing even the simplest of tasks. Useless.’

Just then, she spotted a free counter and trotted towards it. A Goblin sat imperiously behind his tall, imposing desk, polished to a high shine, looking at her with obvious distrust. She blushed as she put the cheque on the desk’s gleaming surface and pushed it towards the nasty-looking creature, the weight of his gaze making her feel like a criminal. Her eyes darted to the nameplate on his desk, where the goblin’s name, ‘Ulnar’, was engraved in gleaming silvery writing.

Moments passed in an uneasy silence. Ulnar drew his brows together, and began drumming his long-taloned hand on his desk in impatience, prompting the witch to state her business. Alice cleared her throat, searching for the right words to say, her tongue twisting itself in knots as she finally stammered, ‘Um… hello there,’

The shifty bastard inclined his head, his beady eyes trained on Alice’s beet-red face. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, and after a short pause, she managed to gather her wits enough to continue in a small voice, ‘I’d like to cash in a cheque, and withdraw twenty Galleons from my vault.’

Ulnar croaked suspiciously, his voice reminding Alice of the sound of nails scratching down a blackboard, ‘And does Miss have her wand?’
The witch presented her wand to the goblin with an awkward nod, and squeaked when he swiftly plucked it out of her outstretched hand. Beetle-black eyes observed the dark piece of wood carefully, whilst one long, curved nail glided smoothly across its length. Ulnar nodded his head, seemingly deep in thought as he continued his examination for a few moments longer.

Abruptly, he flipped the wand in his fingers and returned it to Alice, hilt first, before raising one bushy eyebrow questioningly. He asked, ‘And does Miss have her key?’ His tone was less suspicious now, although no less unpleasant.

‘R-Right here!’ Alice squealed, and with shaking hands, she placed her key on the counter along with the cheque. He greedily snatched both items, and placing the silver key to the side, perused the cheque with narrowed eyes, muttering something unintelligible. Each second felt stretched to infinity as Alice stood, her nervous hands fiddling with the strap of her bag. She examined her shoes, desperately wishing to be a million miles away. That nasty little pointy-eared twat wasn’t making it any easier - she only wanted to cash in her rightfully earned wages, for Merlin’s sake, not steal the Black family gold!

At last, Ulnar picked up Alice’s key and inserted it into an ancient-looking mahogany till. A small drawer popped out, and he pressed some buttons and pulled a small handle, which elicited a loud, drawn out creaking sound from the ancient-looking contraption. Seconds later, the drawer began filling itself up with golden coins, and Alice’s eyes widened at the sight. This was hers.

‘Twenty Galleons,’ the goblin proclaimed as he stacked the shiny coins in towers of five and dropped them in front of the witch. Lifting a flap just above the drawer, he pushed the cheque through a narrow slit and shut the till forcefully before returning the key.

Alice felt a strong wave of relief wash over her tense body as she promptly collected her money in her handbag, happy to finally be able to leave this wretched place. She wondered if Fred and George would send her wages straight into her vault. She could not imagine repeating this particular task every month.

The sound of snickering right behind her back made her turn around sharply, and all blood drained from her face as she recognised Draco Malfoy, standing a couple of paces away with a sour-looking Pansy Parkinson on his arm. They were pointing in her direction, and obviously sharing a good laugh at Alice’s expense. Alice clutched her handbag close to her chest in a protective gesture as she took a step towards the exit, wishing to avoid confrontation. Her stress levels were through the roof as it was, and she was not willing to add to it by getting herself involved in a fight. Malfoy may have been a year younger, but he was almost a head taller, and never passed up on an opportunity to taunt Muggleborns.

‘Twenty Galleons!’ Draco howled, dramatically bending over as he held his sides. His pug-faced
companion giggled along, staring at the amused Malfoy heir with worship in her enormous green eyes. Alice thought that she looked rather like a cow gawking at a painted gate, and before she had a chance to think better of it, a loud snort escaped her lips. Bad move.

Draco’s cackle died in his throat instantly, twisting his elegant features into a look of burning hatred. Scowling, he took a step towards Alice, and hissed, ‘What’s so funny, Mudblood? I wouldn’t be laughing if I were you.’ His eyes slid down, and came to rest on Alice’s handbag. ‘Aww, look at this little Mudblood, with her twenty Galleons… And who did you steal them from? Or have you started selling yourself already?’ He snorted, and chuckled at his own joke, sending Pansy into fits of silvery laughter behind him.

Alice dry-swallowed. Her heart was pounding a rampant staccato, and she clenched her fist, tempted to punch the little bastard and wipe that contemptuous smile off his face. Instead, she squared her shoulders and rose her chin, looking the little prat straight in the eye with an air of calm superiority. ‘Says the one who’s never done an honest day’s work in his life,’ She enunciated coldly before her lips quirked up in a venomous smirk. She leaned in a little closer, as though about to relay a particularly juicy piece of gossip, and whispered sotto-voce, ‘And how is your daddy nowadays? I hope he’s enjoying Azkaban… I bet he can’t wait to see you again. But don’t fret! You never know, you might be joining him soon enough!’

The boy’s face turned white, making him look as transparent as a ghost. Mere moments passed before he regained his composure. Tapping his upper lip with one finger, he measured Alice with narrowed eyes for a long time, as though valuing an inanimate object. At length, he cocked his head to the side, and said offhandedly, ‘Oh, so you can speak! I thought you were dumb - or so they say…’ He shrugged, ‘Never mind. I suggest that you watch your back, Mudblood. You obviously don’t know who you’re messing with.’

Alice bared her teeth, her discomfort replaced by a spark of uncontrollable wrath. In one short moment, she forgot the lectures on civilised conduct, drummed into her head from her first day at Hogwarts by Professor McGonagall. She was, once again, a violent girl from the council estate, following her thug of a father’s example. She knew she was going to make the situation worse, but found that she didn’t care. She blurted, ‘Oh, do I not? I thought I was messing with a piece of Hippogriff shite and his pug-faced slut. Honestly, Malfoy, have some standards. Is your family so disgraced that you have to fucking dogs? Or should I say, bitches?’

In one sharp move, Malfoy reached inside his sleeve and whipped out his wand, but Alice was quicker, her reflexes sharpened by the adrenaline in her veins. She dipped her chin, fixing the boy with a predatory calm, her wand pointed at his chest in challenge mixed with warning. A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips, and she felt a rush of power, a lust for vengeance. Her excitement grew by the second, her entire being itching for a brawl.

Pansy looked about them, visibly alarmed. ‘Are you two mad?!’ She whispered, tugging at Draco’s sleeve, her eyes wide.
The interruption alerted Alice to the whispered hisses and mutterings circulating around the lobby. A crowd had gathered around them, transfixed by the unusual scene. Alice kept her eyes trained solely on Malfoy, her concentration preventing her from feeling any discomfort at being the centre of attention. Ignoring the spectators, the witch and wizard continued to stand with their wands drawn, their gazes locked, their bodies taut. Somewhere in the background, an infant began to cry.

As if on cue, the floor manager, a goblin with an extra fancy watch, pointed at the three young wizards, shrieking, "Desist at once before I call the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol on you! We won't have any fools dueling on premises!"

Alice’s rush dissipated as quickly as it appeared, and she lowered her wand, stepping back a pace, cautiously keeping her eyes trained on the two Slytherins. She would not turn her back first.

Malfoy and Parkinson muttered their apologies to the manager, and turned to depart with a casual air, as though what happened minutes before was unworthy of their attention. Unhurriedly, they strolled towards the exit in silence, with heads raised high, leaving Alice to watch their retreat. As the heat of battlesong stilled in her heart, she heard Draco call over his shoulder, ‘We'll talk later, Mudblood. Enjoy what's left of your Galleons and summer.’

‘Enjoy your freedom, whatever’s left of it.’ Alice muttered under her breath. Looking around, she realised that the manager remained nearby, glaring in a clear warning. She blushed, discomfited at the weight of his gaze. The hostile girl from the council estates was gone, and a small, vulnerable witch now stood in her place, embarrassed and humiliated.

Ducking her head, she hugged her bag to her chest and trotted outside, desperate for a gulp of fresh air. All thoughts of her highly anticipated shopping day flew out of her mind. The very thought of facing any more crowds made her chest feel tight, and she was sure to splinch herself if she attempted Apparition in her flustered state. What she needed was a hot drink and a place to hide. She needed Fred and George.

She kept her eyes fixed on the pavement beneath her feet as she scurried around Diagon Alley in the direction of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, bypassing all the shops she was going to visit. Her heart ached a little at the thought of the lovely shoes, but her stress levels were through the roof, threatening to erupt in a panic attack. Her breathing became more and more laboured with each step, and she felt chills running down her spine, reinforcing the all too familiar feeling of impending danger. She walked faster, putting as much distance as she could between the bank and herself, making a conscious effort to remember to breathe. ‘I didn’t... fucking... steal that... money,’ She ground out between deep breaths, a tiny spark of indignation flickering back to life in her heart. She broke into a brisk jog, ignoring the increasing pressure in her chest as the front of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes materialised before her eyes.
‘I fucking earned it.’

Her throat contracted, and her eyes stung as relief, anger and a profound sadness rolled through her mind like a ball of thunder. Alice refused to cry. The place where she earned her living was right there before her, a safe haven in a hostile land. She would never allow anybody to make her feel worthless ever again. Not Snape, not Malfoy, not Dumbledore, not Anybody. Not ever.

Finally, she approached the shop entrance and peered inside through the window. The shop floor was frighteningly busy, with throngs of sugar-high children seemingly bouncing off the walls, filling their shopping bags with piles upon piles of sugar quills, snackboxes and prank paraphernalia, chased by exasperated-looking parents who struggled to contain their boisterous brood. Even through the layer of thick glass, Alice could clearly hear the mighty din that awaited inside. She dared not set foot in there.

Instead, she walked around the back of the building and opened the service door, wondering if either twin would find a few minutes to sit with her. She felt a little selfish in expecting them to abandon their duties in favour of taking care of her, but she was sure that her friends would let her sit in the office by herself if necessary. Maybe she could even make herself useful. As long as it didn’t involve facing any customers, that is.

She climbed the stairs leading up to the first floor, and made a beeline for the office, navigating the stockroom with ease. It was filled with innumerable products from floor to ceiling, and Alice was pleased to see that the potions section contained several open boxes and seemed to be running low. ‘Good.’ She thought, ‘They must be selling well.’

The office door was wide open, and Alice immediately spotted Fred, sitting at his desk with a quill in his hand and a steaming cup of tea to his side, squinting at the small collection of parchments laid out before him. A wave of warmth and affection spread across Alice’s chest, and she quickened up her pace, running the last few steps as she stormed into the office, crying, ‘Fred!’

The wizard looked up sharply, visibly startled. ‘Huh? Ala! What brings you here? Are you alright?’ He stood quickly and walked around the desk, spreading his arms wide in invitation. He huffed, ‘Oof!’ as Alice collided with his chest at full speed, threatening to knock him off his feet. He hugged her tightly, his strong arms providing the reassurance she needed so badly. She was safe now.

‘What’s up, love? Has something happened?’ Fred placed two fingers under her chin and tilted her head upwards, his brows knitting together in an expression of concern as he took in her visibly distressed state. ‘Go on, tell me. I can tell that something’s upset you. What’s wrong?’ His voice was soothingly sweet, and he reached out to brush a stray strand of hair away from her face with his
fingertips lovingly, the simple gesture draining away the remaining tension in her posture.

‘Fred, Fred, Fred!’ She chanted, and buried her face in his neck, breathing in deeply. He smelled of juniper and dragon leather, familiar and comforting. Clutching the front of his jacket tightly in her hands, Alice babbled in a rush, ‘I got the payslip, and I went to Gringotts, and Malfoy was there, and I nearly hexed him, and the goblin was a nasty piece of work, and I’m so sorry to just storm in here like…’

Chuckling, Fred interjected, ‘Whoa! Slow down, lass! Here, sit down and tell me everything. Slowly.’ He took her gently by the elbow and led her towards the comfy chair in the corner, waiting patiently as Alice slumped down in it, making herself comfortable with a drawn-out sigh. Fred closed the door, and brought his own chair over and sat opposite the witch. He grasped her shaking hands and held them tightly in his own, crooning, ‘It’s alright, Ala, you’re safe. Would you like a drink?’

‘Tea would be nice,’ Alice’s eyes shone with wonder as the redhead conjured a mug of steaming tea with a lazy flick of his wand. She was impressed - since leaving school, her friends’ magical power seemed to bloom, unrestrained by rules and safety regulations. She smiled lightly, considering the thought.

‘Here.’ Fred pecked his friend on the forehead as she accepted her drink with a nod of gratitude. Easing himself back into his chair, he lifted up her legs and placed them in his lap. He began massaging her calves, applying gentle pressure with his warm, soothing hands, calming the last signs of tension in her body. He smiled, and prompted, ‘Talk to me.’

Alice drew a shuddering breath, reorganising her thoughts and getting them back on track. The massage was really rather nice, and the tea was lovely and fragrant. She couldn’t help but smile as she recognised her favourite jasmine green tea, a rare treat. Her best friend really knew her too well. Still grinning like a loon, she took a small sip of her beverage, wincing as the scalding liquid burned the tip of her tongue. ‘I got the payslip today - thanks very much by the way,’

‘Don’t thank me, love, you’ve earned it.’

‘Yes, well, I went to Gringotts to cash in the cheque, and to withdraw some money, because I wanted to do a bit of shopping, shoes and stuff…’ Alice giggled nervously, her head swinging forward to hide her face behind a curtain of golden hair. ‘And the goblin was a prick, staring at me as though I was a soddin’ thief,’

Fred nodded in understanding, ‘Yeah, they do that. Nasty little wrinkled buggers.’
'And then Malfoy… Draco Malfoy. Yeah. He was standing behind me with that bint, Parkinson. He was… laughing at me. He called me a Mudblood, and asked if I had stolen the money, or sold myself for it... '

Fred hissed, his eyes flashing with anger at this report. Alice snorted, and shook her head dejectedly, ‘I’ve never felt so humiliated in my life. And then the people were staring…’

‘Alice.’ Fred interjected firmly. ‘Alice Crowley, you are no thief. A bit rough around the edges maybe, but then, so am I. And George too. You’ve earned that money, and you better know it. I don’t understand why you’d pay any attention to what that bloody ferret says anyway.’

The witch nodded, and Fred smiled at her warmly, caressing her cheek with the side of his thumb. ‘I hope you hexed his bollocks off. And if not, I could arrange…’

‘No, no. I didn’t hex him. Well, I almost did.’ Alice raised one eyebrow with a cheeky grin, ‘Instead, I decided to be civil and enquired about his father…’

Fred’s eyes widened in disbelief. Slapping his thigh, he threw his head back and roared with triumphant laughter, the muscles in his belly visibly crunching as the boy’s form shook with malicious mirth. At length, he finally managed to catch his breath, wiping the corner of his eye as he exclaimed, ‘That’s my girl!’

Alice’s smile widened, exposing a pair of adorable dimples, thinking that Fred really did look glorious in throes of mirth. Clearing her throat, she continued, her voice dripping with disdain, ‘He didn’t look too happy when he walked away, you know. But he did threaten to ‘’deal with me’’ at school. I wish him luck.’ She waved her hand vaguely, dismissing the not so subtle threat.

Meanwhile, Fred had resumed his tender ministrations, and Alice allowed herself to relax completely, her troubles floating away like clouds after rainfall, pushed to the back of her mind by the sensation of Fred’s slender hands rubbing the spot just above her knee in broad, soothing circles. Alice moaned in the back of her throat, her eyes fluttering shut as Fred’s hand glided up her leg, leaving goosebumps in their wake, and started fondling the edge of her dress, pushing the fabric upwards to expose her thigh.

Alice smirked and stretched like a cat in a sunbeam, knowing what the cheeky wizard was up to. ‘Hey Fred,’ She purred, and lifted one leg and placed it on his shoulder.
‘Mmm?’ Fred murmured, a low, sensual sound. He turned his head and leaned in closer, placing slow, open-mouthed kisses along Alice’s calf.

‘Nnnnothing…’ Alice shuddered, her leg muscles tensing under Fred’s kisses. He was slowly making his way up to her knee, his supple lips leaving goosebumps in their wake. Alice’s breathing deepened, her belly clenching as a small spark of arousal flickered to life in her blood, manifesting itself in a pink flush that began spreading slowly across her face and chest. She hooked her leg on his shoulder in a tight grip and pulled him closer, her awareness narrowing down to the wizard before her and her own growing desire.

Fred looked up, locking his eyes with hers, and without a word slid his hand under her dress, skimming her thigh with his fingertips, his touch as light as a feather. Alice gasped, her pupils widening as Fred cupped her gently and began grinding the base of his palm into Alice’s core, applying moderate pressure. She wriggled her hips in encouragement, breathing audibly as her undulating body found its rhythm, meeting Fred’s hand with a thrust of her own. Soon, the air in the office felt hot and short of air, silent, except for the sound of heavy breathing punctuated by Alice’s moans of exquisite pleasure. She picked up the pace, rubbing her sex against Fred’s hang with increased urgency, the slick juices gathering in her knickers heightening her arousal.

He paused abruptly and stood, eliciting an irritated groan from the witch. She looked up at him, her brows knitting together in annoyance, and opened her mouth to complain. She never made her point, silenced by Fred, who swooped down in one fluid movement, and captured her lips with his own in a searing kiss. Alice melted away, parting her mouth to grant him entrance as he ran his tongue across her lower lip. They kissed, nipped and explored, their tongues sliding against each other with growing urgency. It was not a graceful kiss - all bumping noses and clinking teeth, but Alice was aflame, all conscious thought obliterated from her mind as Fred slipped her knickers to the side and slid one finger inside her tight, wet channel.

Alice groaned, breaking the kiss. She kept her eyes fixed on Fred’s face, drinking in the sight of his swollen lips and clouded eyes, knowing that his look of sheer lust mirrored her own.

The corner of Fred’s mouth quirked up in a small smirk, and he removed his finger from Alice’s pussy in one drawn-out, deliberate movement. Without breaking eye-contact, he brought his sodden finger up to his face and inserted it into his mouth with a hum of appreciation as he savoured her juices. Alice’s breath hitched, and she began whispering, urging him to do it again.

The sudden sound of approaching footsteps made the two teenagers jump, disentangling themselves from each other with the speed of the latest Nimbus. Fred hissed, ‘Shit! George is coming!’ , and sprinted to sit behind his desk. Meanwhile, Alice closed her legs and sat back in a more ladylike pose, rearranging her hair and smoothing her dress over her knees. Within seconds, Alice and Fred
were the picture of propriety.

Finally, the door opened, and a very flustered George walked in, his posture suggesting utter exhaustion. His hair was sticking out in all directions, and his freckled face was covered in mud, straw and tiny clusters of pink and purple fur. Gesturing wildly, he whined, ‘Fred, these blasted Pygmy Puffs have shat all over the shop floor again. I don’t know…’

‘Hello, Georgy, it’s nice to see you too!’ Alice piped up from her spot in the corner. She had rested her elbow in the armrest of her chair, and supported her head in the palm of her hand. George paused, and turned his head in her direction, his stormy expression transforming into a wide smile of happy surprise.

‘Ala! Helloooo, my dear! I didn’t know you were here!’ George beamed like the sun, his voice full of delight as he stepped closer and opened his arms to greet his friend. Alice darted out of her chair and sprinted straight into George’s embrace, giggling happily as her friend squeezed her hard and swayed them from side to side.

Rising to the tips of her toes, she pecked him on the cheek and explained, ‘I really only popped in five minutes ago. Had a bit of a crap experience at Gringotts - a long story, Fred will tell you about it. I just needed somewhere to hide, and really should get going. I see you’re quite busy today.’

‘Yeah, it’s been mental,’ George sighed, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. ‘Bloody Pygmy Puffs. I swear we are turning into victims of our own success. Oi, Fred, you won’t mind going back to the shop floor for a bit? I could do with a rest. I’ll finish the paperwork.’

Fred replied, ‘Sure thing,’ and put his arm around Alice’s shoulder, leaning in to whisper in to kiss the side of her head. ‘I’ll leave you in my brother’s capable hands then, love.’ Alice nodded in reply, and turned to give Fred a quick hug before he made his way to the door. ‘Well then, I better get moving. It was great to see you, Ala, but all these wares won’t sell themselves, you know!’ He sent Alice a quick wink before walking out of the office, closing the door behind him.

Alice turned to George, her lips stretched into a radiant smile. ‘I should be going too. I’m sorry I can’t stay longer this time, but I still have a lot of brewing to do.’

Slumping his shoulders, George looked at Alice with pleading eyes, ‘Oh Merlin, please! We’re running low on everything already, and the customers were fighting on the remaining bottles of… well, everything! We can barely keep up with the demand, Ala, you’re just that good!’
'How long will the current stock last you for?'

‘About a week.’

Alice nodded thoughtfully, rubbing her chin with her thumb. ‘You should have said earlier, really. But I think I’ll manage to have everything ready within a week.’

George sighed, ‘Thanks, sweets. We’re a bit understaffed, and forgot all about sending you the stock list. Floo us when you’re ready and we’ll come and collect, aye?’

‘Aye. Alright then, I need to go now if I want to start tonight.’ She stood on tip-toe again and ruffled George’s hair affectionately. ‘You be good, and I’ll see you soon. Bye, ducky!’

She wiggled her fingers in the air, and disapparated without further ado.

‘Two, three, four, aaand stop.’

Alice counted under her breath, stirring her potion in controlled, precise movements. She had placed three cauldrons on her workbench, and was dividing her attention between them, her concentration unbreakable as she rapidly moved from one cauldron to the other, stirring, adjusting, adding ingredients, her hands steady, her movements balanced with the grace of a dancer, her eyes fixed upon her work.

The cauldron to her left contained a thick, mustard-yellow paste. It was her latest invention, Cut’n’Graze, slower-acting than Dittany, but without the terrible itching and scarring caused by the original. She was stirring it slowly with one hand, and with the other, she was adding crushed Bulgarian Rose petals to the cauldron in the middle, dropping them into the whirling potion in tiny increments.

She could feel the paste thickening under her stirring rod, and applied more pressure as she continued to stir until it was thick enough that she could let go of the stirring rod and have it remain upright. She could tell that the paste was perfect just by feeling its consistency, and the paste’s pearly shimmer promised perfection. She took the cauldron off the heat, leaving it to cool as she jogged over to stand between her two remaining cauldrons.
The potion to her right began to boil, and she flicked her wand, lowering the flame. Taking advantage of the few precious minutes she had before it needed her attention, she turned to the simmering WrinkleShrinker and added the bitter orange peel, immortelles and cinnamon in rapid succession, stirring furiously until the dusky-pink liquid whirlpooled again. White, glistening fumes began rising from the surface, filling the small lab with an sweet, intoxicating fragrance.

‘Mmmm. Stunning.’ Alice hummed, breathing in deeply. ‘Effective and pleasant to use, no wonder it’s a best-seller.’

Aware of the ticking clock and the sound of steady simmering to her right, Alice turned around to her workbench. She had laid out a small collection of ingredients there, measured out and placed in small jars, ready to be prepared, along with a piece of muslin cloth and a piece of string.

She rough-chopped her jasmine flowers, narcissus stalks and wisteria petals, her dexterous hands moving fluidly, with an easy confidence that spoke of undeniable skill. She worked quickly, not wasting any precious seconds as she placed her ingredients on the small square of muslin, along with the pre-ground honeysuckle and lemon peel, and gathered the lot in a small bundle. She tied it with the string before turning back to the cauldron and dropping it into the bubbling potion.

Immediately, its surface began to ripple and foam at the edges, its colour transforming from a dull grey to a brilliant blue and then to a deep shade of blue-green. Alice nodded in apparent satisfaction, and turned her attention back to the WrinkleShrinker, which was now giving off puffs of salmon-pink fumes that twirled and undulated in the air, continuously releasing their beautiful fragrance. She picked up a tiny phial from a nearby tray, and brought it to eye-level, squinting as she perused its contents under the light from the ceiling lamp. ‘I’ll need to order some more,’ She muttered as she uncorked the phial. ‘Two drops of Veela tears and your face will be as smooth as a baby’s bottom.’

She carefully dropped the small amount of the precious tears into the potion and took the cauldron off the heat immediately. It was tricky - she had to get the timing just right, lifting up the cauldron by its handle just as the tears hit the surface. She had ruined her first and second-ever batches by picking up the cauldron one second too late, and was not prepared to make the same mistake again - Veela tears were rare and eye-wateringly expensive, and she still remembered the anger she felt as she poured the failed potions down the drain, knowing just how much profit was now making its way through the sewers.

This time, her timing was perfect, and the WrinkleShrinker sizzled and fizzed as expected. Three large bubbles rose and burst at the surface, and it was still, a thin liquid the colour of rosé wine, with a barely visible silvery shimmer, detectable only under a strong source of light. This innocuous sparkle was a signature of sorts, obtained through a technique she had developed whilst experimenting with Fred and George, modifying existing recipes to suit her needs and inventing new
ones if necessary. She took enormous pride in her work, and so each of her products available at Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes contained that signature shimmer, a mark of impeccable quality and craftsmanship.

Humming tunelessly, Alice walked back to her last cauldron and took a peek at its contents. ‘Perfect!’ She proclaimed as she stirred it twenty times anti-clockwise and turned off the heat, leaving it to cool down where it was. It was slowly darkening, now green-blue rather than blue-green, and by the time it had cooled, it would be a striking shade of a deep grass-green. It smelled strongly of narcissus - grassy, vegetal and earthy.

‘Well!’ She breathed as she gathered a collection of tubs, phials and jars, ready to transfer her three products into their final containers. ‘I believe I have just solved the problem of alopecia, or I’ll eat my own shoes!’

When Alice's head finally hit the pillow around the ass-crack of dawn, she slept long and deeply, dreaming of Fred's sweet caresses and balding wizards with state pensions. Or was it Fred's state pension being caressed by balding wizards?
Cold

Chapter Notes

Poor Severus is depressed. Things never seem to go well for him, do they? The good news is that this is one of the last doom-and-gloom chapters for a while. I know I've been saying it for a few weeks now, but now we only have three miserable chapters to go through before things start looking up, so bear with me. It has to get worse before it gets better. Let me know what you think, your comments motivate me to type faster.

Great big massive thanks to my fantastic beta, FawkesyLady. She is living proof that witches live among us, and they are awesome!

Severus forced himself to stay awake despite the late hour. He avoided sleep, for the landscape of his dreaming mind was a frightening place, where all of his darkest fears came out to play, to taunt him with his own shortcomings. He was afraid to look them in the eye.

He was aware of what was wrong with him. He hadn’t been himself since his last disastrous visit at Crowley’s two weeks ago, and had gradually allowed himself to sink into depression since then, welcoming it like an old friend. He still functioned well enough - he answered the Dark Lord’s Summons and took his punishment. He reported to Dumbledore and attended Order meetings. He ate when he remembered to and slept when he absolutely had to, and fantasised about it all coming to a sudden closure. Outwardly, he still maintained the iron grip on his self-control, but here, in the privacy of his childhood home’s walls, he allowed himself to slip, too exhausted to bury his weaknesses in the depths of his soul.

He sat in his favourite armchair with the latest issue of Potions Weekly, attempting to focus on the fascinating article about the recently discovered, previously unknown uses of Acromantula venom, but the dull headache behind his eyes was making it difficult to read the tiny print. Yawning loudly, he rubbed his eyes, squinting against the fuzzy veil which had wrapped itself tightly around his brain, slowing down his thought processing abilities to a near-Longbottom pace.

‘A recent accidental discovery by the French Potions Master Julien Clement suggests that Acromantula venom possesses paradoxical but undeniably favourable healing abilities when added to a mixture of Blood-Replenishing Potion and Pomegranate Juice. Although the exact proportions are not yet known, trials have shown promising results, particularly with regards to the treatment of the Blood-Borne Curse, also known as Blood Malediction, previously believed to be incurable.’

When Severus realised that he had read the same passage thrice, he tossed the journal aside irritatedly, admitting defeat. As he steepled his fingers on his stomach and stared into the fire burning in the grate, his mind veered, unbidden, to Dumbledore. Severus could not be bothered to stop the
train of thought. He reflected on the man’s odd behaviour, his red-rimmed eyes boring into the
dancing flames as though they could give him some desperately coveted answers.

Albus had been strangely elusive, sometimes going missing for days on end, and Merlin himself
knew where. He appeared only briefly at Order meetings, and would leave before anyone could
catch a private word. Severus had every reason to believe that the Headmaster was actively avoiding
him. To make things worse, Dumbledore was distracted and disinterested during his debriefings,
dismissing Severus with only vague, make-work orders. He might as well have been talking about
his own breakfast. Severus was unsupported, and his inability to produce valuable intelligence
beyond the usual dissimulation put his life at a very serious risk. The Dark Lord was merciless, and
Severus no longer possessed the strength to heal himself properly, and truth be told, he wasn’t certain
how much more he could take. He was painfully aware that before long, the favoured servant would
become useless chattel to both of his fickle masters.

The frustration he felt breathed a rush of nervous energy into him, making him restless. Searching for
something to occupy himself with, Severus walked over to the window, brushing the curtain aside to
look out at the street. The weather outside was cold, dark and empty, a mirror image to his own
emotional state.

He caught sight of Crowley’s house in the near distance, a few doors down on the opposite side of
the street. The light upstairs was on, a solitary bright spot among the overwhelming darkness.
Severus brushed his fingers against the cold glass, wondering why she was up so late.

His heart lurched in his chest as his eyes fixated on the small square of light, and he entertained the
idea of paying Crowley a visit. He could try to talk to her, explain and apologise, but bitter
experience told him to stop fooling himself, that he would only end up turned down and ridiculed.
He wouldn’t be surprised if she had changed the wards to demand an even more ridiculous object.
Decent tea, or fags for starters.

The light in Crowley’s window flickered out, and Severus found himself isolated and hopeless once
again, staring at the empty street in the dead of night. As rain started pattering against the window, he
felt the familiar pang of another old friend, regret. ‘Good work, old chap, you have masterfully
managed to alienate the only person who was prepared to give you the time of day. Bravo.’

He was shivering, as though the cold wind whistling outside had somehow penetrated the brick walls
of the building and slipped under his skin, chilling the very marrow of his bones. Severus walked
over to his liquor cabinet and filled a dusty glass with a hefty amount of brandy, wincing as he
necked it in one go. The alcohol burned his throat as it went down, but did nothing to warm him up.
Returning to his chair, he leaned forward, close enough to the fire to make the skin on his face burn,
but the cold he felt was a different kind - it came from the depths of his very soul, and neither the fire
nor the brandy helped ease the ache.
Looking about the living room, his eyes fell on his collection of books, stacked in neat rows in the floor-to-ceiling bookcases he had had fitted in his early twenties. His personal library was his pride and joy, and he reflected gloomily that those dusty tomes were the most stalwart friends he had. They never judged him, and were always right where he left them, full of answers. Tonight, the answers he sought could not be found between those covers. Neither were they in the covers of Madam Clementines. His eye was drawn back over his shoulder to the darkened window once more. The house down the road might have held answers to the questions asked by his heart. Why go on? What do I stand for? Am I doing the right thing? Would anyone notice if I disappeared tomorrow?

Severus reached out to pick up his cigarettes, ignoring the stacks of dirty plates scattered all around, and the numerous ashtrays placed on the low table and the armrest of his chair, filthy and overflowing with hundreds of butt-ends. He didn’t care. He hadn’t even had a proper wash in days, never mind looking after the house. What was the point? Even his owl preferred to be out and about nowadays, and rarely came home.

He took a deep drag, mulling over the newest bane of his life that was Alice Crowley for what seemed like the millionth time in the past two weeks. He had dissected their last confrontation minute by minute, and it still wouldn’t leave him alone. The spectacular fiasco replayed itself in an endless loop, his mind’s eye mercilessly presenting him with vivid memories of his failure over and over again. He didn’t even try to stop it anymore, embracing these memories in ritualistic self-flagellation.

He had tried to convince himself that he was better after his session with the prostitute, whose name and face he had forgotten as soon as he was out of the door. It wasn’t that she was bad - after all, she did a good enough job of bringing him to completion, but she was… wrong. Yes, that was a better word. Her hair, as blonde as Crowley’s, was not the soft ribbons of golden silk he wanted to slide between his fingers. It felt like bundles of straw, bristly and coarse to the touch. Her hands, with their long, red fingernails, were rough and chapped - far from the smooth, delicate hands he imagined, lovingly caressing his cock in his wildest dreams.

Ultimately, Madam Clementine’s girls could not bring him the release he needed. He had gone back to the brothel twice, but each time he returned home more frustrated than before. The whores lacked veracity - every movement, every sound was carefully scripted and rehearsed for maximum effect. Severus had never noticed it before, but now it was obvious that the women he bought were merely skilled actresses. Their lust was an illusion. Their bodies were tools, used in the same way he would use a cauldron or a ladle. He could see it now, and felt like a fool.

And Crowley… Crowley had been drunk, that was true. But one quick look inside her mind confirmed that in that moment, her desire for him was sincere. In a split second, she had managed to turn everything he accepted as truth on its head. For the first time in his life, Severus Snape understood what it felt like to be desired by a woman for himself, regardless of the money in his pocket. He was worthy of a woman’s attention. He struggled with this new concept, his heart crying out for this connection it desperately needed, whilst his mind refused to accept that any witch would
find him, sour man that he is, remotely appealing.

For that very reason, he needed to distance himself, to put her back in her place as Just Another Gryffindor and bolster his authority as the Professor. Truly, his intention was only to ascertain what, if anything, Crowley remembered of the previous night. He was prepared to do damage control, if need be. Instead, he made a bigger mess of things. The deliberately cruel way in which he addressed her was merely self-defense, a necessary evil done to protect his own sanity when he realised that, even with his passion spent, he still desired her. That even hungover and covered in suds, she still aroused him in ways that she had no right to. And then he panicked.

He tried to reason with himself, that he was doing it for their mutual safety. That he was a doomed man, and any association of his with her would shorten her future - acutely so if she attracted the attention of Lord Voldemort. Even then, his explanations fell flat and he could hardly believe in his own words. If his motives were so noble, why was he agonising over what he had done to her? The image of her crestfallen face would not leave his mind's eye, it ached as though it had been burned into his heart with a branding iron. It reminded him too much of another wounded soul, doubly painful, for it echoed back and forth. It was all too much.

With a deep sigh, he crossed the room to pour himself another drink. This web he had found himself caught in was becoming too tangled, the emotional rope around his neck tightening with every breath he took. He could not believe that he was comparing Alice Crowley to Lily. He had hurt them both, but Lily was his friend, his best friend, and the secret love of his life. Crowley was, for all intents and purposes, a stranger. She was one of his students, and yet he knew next to nothing about her. How could the two be compared?

He felt pathetic, drowning his sorrows in a glass like a maudlin, love-sick idiot as he continued his pointless argument with his conscience. Alice Crowley had stolen his thoughts in the day, and haunted his dreams at night. Those dreams frightened and disturbed him to the point of near-madness, as though the Dark Lord himself planted them there to torture him. Severus knew that as soon as he closed his eyes, she would be there, waiting in her little lair within his mind.

He wanted to go and throw himself at her feet and beg forgiveness. He wanted to wipe her off the face of the Earth. He wanted to kiss her and keep her, and to chase her away with his venom in the next breath.

These circular arguments meant nothing. The damage was done. Hateful words struck home with cruel accuracy. There is no counterspell to recall them, no way to vanish the rift he had forged between them that day.

Crowley would probably hex him on sight. Even if her amorous feelings were merely the result of the wine, she could have been... a friend. She understood his position, and Merlin forgive him, she
seemed to be in her own inescapable predicament. He had been tasked to help her, and instead she wanted to help him. She could see through his facade.

He gripped at his hair, pulling on it in distress. Instead of accepting her hand, which she had extended to support him, he had bitten it, burned it, and flung it away. Another opportunity like that was unlikely to come his way again. He laughed bitterly, relaxing his grip on his head. Soon enough he’d be dead, surely. Even if he could repair the gap, she would be better off without him lurking in her shadow.

No, he must forget her.

He initiated one of his standard meditative exercises, imagining himself to be the nothingness in the belly of a starving wolf. Gradually, without meaning to, Severus slipped into sleep. The hunger stared back.

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He was in the kitchen. Their kitchen. It was warm and airy, and he was sitting at the table with a cup of Earl Grey, enjoying the quiet serenity of early morning. The first rays of sunshine were peeking in through the window nets, and Severus closed his eyes as he soaked it in, its warmth as soft and gentle on his face as his woman’s caressing hand. Here, he was safe, and it was easy to breathe.

There were no Dark Lords, Death Eaters or Dumbledores. The monsters were gone, kept at bay by the purple-wrapped chocolate bar that appeared on the table next to the saucer, and he knew that She would chase them away should they ever rear their ugly heads again. He was a free man, unchained. The sensation was alien, yet exhilarating.

When he opened his eyes, She was there, standing in the doorway in her sleepy-eyed, messy-haired glory. She stood silently, leaning against the doorframe with one hand on her hip, a small smile tugging her lips upward as she regarded him carefully with a glint of mischief glittering in her eyes. Severus could feel the weight of gaze, sliding slowly down his face and chest, causing the fine hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. She looked… inclined, and he felt his heartbeat quicken in response to the woman’s appraisal.

Without so much as a ‘good morning’, she stepped inside the kitchen, and brought her hands to the belt of her short dressing gown, untying the ribbon slowly, deliberately. Severus swallowed thickly, his breathing becoming increasingly deeper as she approached with dainty steps, filling the room with her presence. He had to lean back in his chair for support, his lips parting in wonder as she locked her hungry gaze with his.
She rolled her shoulders back, allowing the piece of dark blue satin to fall down onto the floor in one fluid movement. A strangled groan escaped Severus’ mouth as she stood naked before him, her lithe form exposed to his lustful gaze. In that moment, she looked like a goddess, the contours of her delectable body illuminated by the golden light of the sun behind her back. Her face seemed to glow from within, radiating warmth of unconditional love, and the smile she bestowed upon him could not be mistaken for anything other than an invitation.

Severus did indulge, allowing his eyes to slide lasciviously down her body. He would never get enough of the gentle slope of her narrow shoulders, and the two tiny, perky breasts with their dusky pink nipples, jutting out proudly under his appreciative gaze. He growled in the back of his throat, a low, dangerous sound, as his gaze slithered across her flat stomach, and the dip of her waist, so small that he could almost encircle it with his hands. It was incredible how she could affect him so, awakening his passion just by presenting him with the wonder of her nakedness.

He felt his cock twitch in his trousers, hard as steel and aching for her touch. He wanted to reach out and seize her, and lay her down on the table, and ravish her right there and then. Instead, he stretched his control that little bit further, wishing to sate his eyes fully, for she was a feast, a feast she had laid out for him alone.

She turned sideways slightly, allowing Severus to catch a glimpse of her sweet arse, revelling in her own femininity, her body relaxed, her posture indicating an easy confidence that showed Severus just how comfortable they were around one another. Her amused smirk told him that she knew the effect she had on him far too well - she could just stand there, naked and silent, and watch him combust.

It was clear that she, too, was beginning to lose control. The flush that coloured her face and neck in a lovely shade of pink indicated that his undivided attention aroused her, and her chest rose and fell slowly and heavily, as though she struggled to rein in her lust. The air around them was dense, crackling like electricity that threatened to go up in flames at the smallest hint of a spark and reduce them both to a pile of ash. Severus’ restrain began to crumble, and he realised that he was grasping the edge of the table in a white-knuckled grip. He rose from his seat, slowly and gracefully like a panther, his teeth bared, his movements fluid, predatory. When the woman’s eyes flew wide open and she exhaled audibly, he knew it was Time.

He gave her a split-second warning before he strode over and pounced. Grasping her waist, he lifted her off the ground as though she was as light as a feather. His mind was hazy, clouded over by scorching, all-consuming hunger, his instincts screaming at him to possess her, to fuck her senseless, to claim her as his. He needed her. Now. Splaying his hand across her lower back, he began rocking his hips, grinding his confined erection against her exposed sex.

She had wrapped her legs around his middle, mewling and panting as she met each of his thrusts with one of her own. She was liquid in his arms, malleable, warm and willing, her body undulating
alongside his frantically, her desire for him etched across her face. As Severus navigated the kitchen, walking towards the table with his arms full of wanton witch, she placed her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down for a passionate kiss, causing him to nearly lose his balance. Severus held her tightly, as though she was the world’s most precious treasure, and groaned as she nipped his lower lip with her teeth. She sucked it into her mouth, flicking her tongue across it, her kisses growing in force and urgency as she buried her hands in his hair and raked her nails across his scalp. Severus lunged forward and placed her on the table, hooking his arms around her knees to bring her closer to its edge, and she arched her back, supporting herself on her arms. Looming over her, he returned her kisses, continuously rubbing his groin against her sex, twisting and turning his hips with unrestrained fervour. The sensation of her lips against his was exquisite, her sweet, pleading noises causing a rush of masculine power to surge in his chest.

Severus grunted, and captured her head in his hands. Seizing control, he claimed her swollen lips in a deep, possessive kiss, fucking it with his tongue, languidly sliding it in and out of her mouth. He reached down to undo his trousers with one hand, making a strangled noise in his throat as his cock sprung free.

As he pulled back to gulp for air, something tickled at his face and neck. His eyes snapped open, and in place of his lover, reclined Albus Dumbledore in his arms. With a yelp, Severus jumped back, swearing profusely. "Bloody hell, what the FUCK is this?" The Headmaster’s trunk was largely obscured by his long beard, but his bandy legs were encased in black leather thigh-highs. The image burned into his mind.

Burning...
Severus woke abruptly, his body jerking upwards reflexively as the brand on his arm burned with the searing pain of a Summons. He blinked rapidly, reorienting himself. The world outside the window was still dark, but the dying embers in the grate indicated that he must have slept for a while.

He hissed as he rose from the couch, cursing under his breath as he realised that his leg had gone to sleep. He hobbled about, retrieving his Death Eater garb from the peg by the front door. The intensity of the pain told him that this was urgent. He had to hurry.

He quickly pulled the Death Eater garb over his frock coat, and fixed the abominable mask upon his face. He suspected a last-minute raid - better to come ready and prepared. He looked around frantically, trying to ascertain whether or not he had enough time to alert the Order. Even if he did, the Dark Mark burned like molten lava, boiling the blood in his veins. Severus was on the verge of screaming. It was never a good sign if the Dark Lord summoned him with such ferocity.

Doubled over with pain, he grit his teeth against the pounding in his head as he wrapped his hand around the Mark. Just as black spots began floating in his vision, he felt the familiar violent pull that started in his arm and radiated out to engulf the rest of his body, transporting him to meet his Master.

Severus fell to his knees as soon as his feet touched the polished marble floor of Malfoy Manor, light-headed and disoriented. He bowed his head, as was expected of him, the picture of subservience and willingness to obey. He was secretly grateful for all the ceremony. Taking up the proper position of a faithful servant allowed him to compose himself quickly, to bury his emotions within the elaborate walls of the labyrinth within his mind.
He continued kneeling elegantly on the cold, hard floor, keeping his gaze low for what seemed like eternity. His face was set in stone, as emotionless and blank as his mind, even as his knees began to protest. ‘Focus. Control yourself.’

At last, Lord Voldemort’s tenor floated towards him. ‘Severus. How nice of you to join us.’

The tone with which he spoke froze the blood in Severus’ veins. His instincts picked up immediately, the sense of imminent danger pricking at the edges of his consciousness. He reined them in, pushing all traces of fear behind his mind’s walls, and remained on his knees, awaiting further instruction. Choosing to proceed with exceptional care, he murmured, ‘My Lord. I came to you immediately.’

The Dark Lord replied, ‘So you have, so you have… Stand up, Severus.’

Severus rose in one fluid movement with apparent confidence, but his heart was beating a rampant staccato in his chest. He forced himself to breathe steadily, willing his heartbeat to slow, to conceal any outwards signs of agitation that could be interpreted as guilt. The Dark Lord’s calm and modulated voice was a sure sign of his displeasure, and not for the first time, Severus was very grateful for the hideous mask as he paled, wondering what had gone wrong this time.

He could not control the grimace of disgust that briefly twisted his features as he regarded the repulsive snake-like face, pale and unnaturally shiny, resembling a poorly-done wax sculpture. Red eyes gleamed with malevolence, and Severus could tell that the evil wizard was thinking hard, weighing his words carefully. Another bad omen.

‘Remove your mask, Severus.’

Severus took off his mask and stood perfectly still, making a conscious effort to not curse his bad luck. The mask allowed him some degree of shelter, and he felt exposed without it, knowing that he was not at his best, and one bad move could cost him his life, not to mention the war effort. He waited, redoubling his resolve to keep himself calm and collected. Not a raid then. This could only mean that something else had happened, something that would most likely lead to a very unpleasant outcome.

‘You must be wondering why I have called you to my side so urgently,’ Lord Voldemort began, his lilting voice reverberating around the vast space of the de-facto throne room. Severus inclined his head in a gesture of polite curiosity, registering the sounds of subdued whispers behind his back. He
now knew that the others were there, but continued looking straight ahead, fixing his attention on the grotesque creature before him.

Voldemort stood and began pacing leisurely, rubbing his chin with his long, bony fingers, as though he was contemplating something important. His regal robes, finely cut and made from rich, purple velvet, pooled at his feet and trailed after him as he walked, a parody of an Emperor addressing his subjects.

‘I am confused, Severus. You claim to be my most loyal servant, wholeheartedly committed to our most noble cause…’ Voldemort’s voice was carefully modulated into a sound of deep-hearted concern laced with surprise, as though he was speaking to a son with whom he was profoundly disappointed. He sighed dramatically, turning to face Severus with an expression that dripped with razor-edged regret. ‘And yet you choose to hide important information from me. Why is that, Severus? Do you no longer share our ideals? Perhaps you never believed in them in the first place?’

Severus’ heart skipped several beats. He broke out in a cold sweat as he realised that this was a trap, one that felt like a punch to the stomach. He tried to kick his tired brain into gear, searching frantically searching for the words that would get him out of this situation, but a panicked voice in his head told him that he would not be getting out of this place alive. *This is it. You’ve been found out.*

Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, Severus forced his features into an expression of surprised incomprehension before falling again to his knees. He hung his head low, avoiding Lord Voldemort’s eyes, feeling like a cat who had ran out of its nine lives. Death was now taking form of a terrible certainty, and he dug deep for courage, concentrating on his survival. ‘My Lord, I am afraid I don’t understand. If I have displeased you, please tell me how, and I will do my best to prove my undying loyalty.’

He could feel Lord Voldemort’s gaze, boring into his kneeling form like a predator closing in on its prey. He had to continuously remind himself to keep up his Occlumentic shields, determined that if this was the end of his life, he would take his secrets to the grave. An alien presence appeared at the edges of his mind, probing his surface thoughts. Although the Dark Lord believed himself to be subtle and undetectable, Severus could always tell the precise moment when the Dark wizard used Legilimency on him, instantly recognising the pin-prick sensation as he attempted to penetrate his mind. He pushed a small collection of fabricated thoughts and emotions up to his mind’s surface, allowing them to float in front of his mind’s eye, ones that spoke of eternal admiration and faith in Lord Voldemort. For good measure, he presented an image of Dumbledore, complete with an emotional background painted in shades of anger, hatred and disgust. Many of those emotions were not merely pretence.

Severus suppressed a shudder as Voldemort withdrew abruptly, leaving his brain tainted with the foul, poisonous traces of his presence. A swift intake of breath indicated that the Dark Lord was about to speak, and Severus braced himself, hoping that the thoughts he had presented were enough
to placate the ruthless monster and postpone his own execution.

Finally, the Dark Lord spoke, ‘I have received some interesting news lately, news that call your loyalty and competence into doubt, Severus. I continue to put my trust in you, even when so many of your brothers and sisters express their concerns regarding your true allegiance. Lord Voldemort remembers how useful the intelligence you’ve provided in the past was, and rewards his loyal servants accordingly… however, you have failed me repeatedly in the recent weeks, Severus. I have warned you of the consequences should you fail me again, and yet all I get is useless drivel!’ The wizard whipped around sharply. Malevolent red eyes gleamed as Lord Voldemort took a step towards his servant, his flat nostrils flaring as he continued in his cold, unmerciful voice, ‘I have been lenient. I have listened to your excuses and explanations, always giving you the benefit of the doubt, always choosing to believe that your devotion is sincere... ‘

Severus wished that the Dark Lord would make his point with every fibre of his being. He was not a religious man by any stretch of imagination, but in this moment, he prayed for it all to be over with. He continued to kneel, counting breaths, knowing that each one could be his last. Hopefully his death would be quick.

‘Tell me, Severus. Have I not been kind to you? Have I not been accepting and forgiving? Have I not turned a blind eye to many of your shortcomings? Have I not taken you under my wing, taught you and shaped you into the brilliant wizard you are today? Tell me, Severus, have I done all these things in vain?’

Severus answered impassionately, ‘My Lord, I swear that I have done everything in my power to serve you in the best way I know how. Without your favour I would be nothing more than a Potions teacher, less than that even. Tell me how I have failed you so that I may serve you better in the future and make most earnest amends now.’

Voldemort chuckled bitterly and shook his head with theatrical regret. ‘Such beautiful words, and yet I remain unconvinced. You see, Severus, your brothers have conducted a raid on a shop belonging to one Abundantius Butterfield… an ancient scrolls dealer, you may have heard of him. He wrote that disgusting piece on the Muggle education system. As I was saying, your brothers were looking for one particular scroll, but found something infinitely more valuable. Before old Abundantius gave up the ghost, he told Bellatrix here that the recipe for the Dark Essence had been found, and happens to be in Dumbledore’s possession!’

Severus gasped, whipping his head up sharply at this news. The shock to his system was so great that he jumped to his feet, looking around the room as he processed this unexpected revelation. With eyes as wide as saucers, he stared dumbly at his Master for a long moment, his jaw opening and closing several times before he finally found his voice again. Finally, he managed to croak out, ‘The… Dark Essence… My Lord?’
The Dark Lord nodded slowly in reply, as though he had just said the most obvious thing in the world. White as a sheet, Severus put one hand on his heart, his voice shaking with disbelief as he appealed, ‘My Lord, I swear that I wasn’t aware…! The Dark Essence… it is only a legend! Surely it can’t be true? Dumbledore has been acting strangely, but I should have been the first he went to…’

A flicker of doubts flashed across Voldemort’s face. ‘Obviously, Dumbledore is not such a great fool after all, having chosen to keep this information from you, Severus… however, this begs a plethora of questions regarding your usefulness as my Spy…’ He stepped closer to Severus, stage-whispering, ‘I always believed it to be a legend myself, but it appears that the Essence does, in fact, exist.’

The whispers circulating around the room died instantly as Voldemort stood to his full height, turning to address the entire gathering. ‘This has come as a great surprise to us all, brothers. In the past, I have searched high and low for information about the Dark Essence. From the fjords of Norway to the most remote corners of Russia, I have travelled far and wide to locate this elusive potion, alas, to no avail. Nobody could give me any answers, other than that it is merely an old wives’ tale, and finally, and I had come to accept it as such… ‘

Severus was mesmerised, listening to the Dark Lord’s speech as his mind reeled, one terrifying thought chasing another rapidly, threatening to spiral out of control. Light-headed and sick to the stomach, he prostrated himself on the floor once again, the edges of his vision blurring as he held onto the small tendril of hope that he would escape with his life one more time. As he listened, his brain was going into overdrive, constructing a desperate plan.

‘... Is it not disappointing, and yet typical, that Dumbledore would choose to keep such a treasure to himself? He must be aware of the extraordinary properties of the Essence and the power it can bring. As far as I’m aware, nobody had ever managed to brew it to completion since its invention around the year 900. Dumbledore, in his arrogance, believes himself capable of unlocking its true potential.’ Voldemort turned to address Severus specifically, ‘When he has a formidable Potions Master at his disposal, with skills far superior to his own…’

Severus was consumed with dread as he considered the implications, his overtaxed brain breeding questions he dared not answer. As a Potions Master, he was aware of the legendary Essence, but never, not in his wildest dreams, believed it to be anything other than myth. Suddenly, Dumbledore’s mysterious disappearances made sense.

As if sensing his thoughts, Voldemort continued, ‘Indeed, it is a shame, and a massive waste, is it not? Just imagine the research you could do, Severus, if Dumbledore wasn’t so entirely self-serving…’ His voice hardened, ‘I have every reason to believe that Dumbledore is trying to brew the Dark Essence. He will strive to extend his own power to infinity by stealing our magic, and the innocent souls of our children. He will either destroy us, or force us to live underground like rats, while he presides over his beloved Mudbloods and blood-traitors, hailed as an eternal hero. Make no
mistake - his hypocrisy knows no bounds. He will use the Essence selfishly, and will undoubtedly turn his back even on Harry Potter.'

A collective gasp went up, and Voldemort paused for breath. He began pacing, his visibly agitated. ‘He must be stopped. This is an opportunity which, if seized, will change the course of this war. If old Abundantius told the truth, a new dawn will break on the world. I will return magical people to their rightful stations as rulers and protectors. We will step out of the shadows and into the light of day, no longer fettered by the fears of old men in closed velvet rooms. It will be glorious!’

A roar of cheers broke out from the back of the room, reverberating from the marble floors and up to the decorative ceilings in a soaring wave of eager anticipation. The Dark Lord allowed this to continue for a long moment, basking in his servants’ adoration, before holding up one hand. ‘Let’s not praise the day before sunset, brothers. Severus, you will go back and find out the truth. Dumbledore is a blind, conniving fool without an honest bone in his body, but I am willing to put my trust in you once more…’

Severus chanted, ‘Thank you, my Lord. I will do everything I can.’

‘I expect a detailed report at your earliest convenience, Severus. I admit that even I am reluctant to believe, however, I’m sure you can provide me with a definite answer.’

Severus muttered, ‘My Lord is wise.’ His tense body relaxed a fraction as relief washed over him. His execution has been postponed once again, and he would confront Dumbledore as soon as he was out of here, whether he would speak to him or not. He would force him to speak if he had to. He was about to ask to be dismissed, so he could get to work immediately, but it looked like the Dark Lord had other plans.

‘But first… Brothers, before Severus arrived, I promised to enlist your help in his execution. I must inform you that this is no longer the case.’

Disgruntled muttering could be heard around the throne room, and the Dark Lord stepped up to the podium, turning to face his Death Eaters with a dramatic billow of his robes. ‘Lord Voldemort is wise and values loyalty and talent. Severus had failed me, it is true. However, only he possesses the ability to uncover the truth.’ He looked pointedly in the direction where, Severus assumed, stood Bellatrix Lestrange, ‘I know some of you will be disappointed at this turn of events, but I urge you to remain focused on our goal. Severus must not be killed tonight.’

Voldemort dipped his head, his voice softening, ‘However, I will not deny my Death Eaters their pleasure. As promised, Severus will be your entertainment for tonight. Severus, know this will hurt
Severus’ breath hitched in his chest as sounds of approval echoed through the room. He could hear the approaching footsteps of the enthusiastic crowd. He could feel their bloodlust, curried to a fever pitch, pressing on him. Meanwhile, the Dark Lord sat down in his throne, petting Nagini with one hand. He seemed pensive, troubled as he casually waved his free hand, signaling for the revel to begin.

Rhys Millar stood at the back of the room, partly hidden behind a decorative sculpture of a warrior in a horned helmet, sitting on a horse with his sword raised high. The young man observed the proceedings with an odd mixture of bafflement and apprehension - as one of the newest recruits, he was eager to prove himself as a capable Dark wizard, but the idea of hurting his former Head of House, who had nurtured and defended him and his fellow Slytherins against the prejudice of Mudblood-loving traitors for the last seven years was utterly repulsive. Alas, he had no choice. He knew the drill. He would have to partake in this sadistic performance to ensure his own safety.

Swallowing thickly, Rhys abandoned his spot behind the sculpture and reluctantly stepped towards the centre of the room. Bellatrix Lestrange was already orchestrating the events, twirling from one side of the crowd to the other like an excited fly. Giggling in her harsh, high-pitched voice, she explained her plans to the attendants, waving her wand around like a choir mistress, urging people to move this way and that, so that everyone was able to participate without restrictions.

Rhys took his place on the outer edge of the broad semi-circle, among the other novices, and a quick glance told him that most of them obviously shared his discomfort, with jaws set tight and clenched fists, as though they too would rather not raise their wands on their mentor and protector. The older Death Eaters, however, were beside themselves with malicious glee. Rhys could read it from their faces that they were itching to begin casting curses at the condemned man.

Rhys shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Every revel was a display of unimaginable horrors, but Rhys could not understand why the Dark Lord would choose to punish his own so harshly. Hunting and torturing Muggles and Mudbloods was nothing but a bit of normal, harmless fun. It was natural. After all, their very purpose was to serve and entertain. This, however, was different. Wrong. The Death Eaters were supposed to be a brotherhood, supporting each other as they worked towards their common goal. If Professor Snape himself, one of the Dark Lord’s most trusted servants in the Inner Circle, could be tortured like this, when would his own time come?

A raucous cacophony of cheering and whistling jolted Rhys back to the present. Fenrir Greyback stood in the centre, towering over Professor Snape, who was swaying on his feet, clutching the side of his face in his hand.
Bellatrix was jumping up and down nearby, cackling, ‘Aw, Sevvy! Not so tall and proud now, are we??’

The werewolf stood to his full imposing height and rose both arms in the air like a victorious gladiator, basking in the overwhelming sounds of approbation. Spurred on by the cheering, he bared his teeth in a predatory grin before taking another swing. He brought his fist down with tremendous force, punching the Professor in the chest. The impact sent him flying backwards, and he collapsed in a heap a few yards further.

Goyle Senior stepped forward. He was met with applause as he paused in front of Snape’s huddled form, looking down at the panting wizard, apparently considering something. Then, he stepped back a few paces, and taking a run up for dramatic effect, he kicked the Professor soundly in the ribs. A strangled groan escaped his throat, and Rhys winced, grimacing as Snape’s ribs yielded to Goyle’s foot with a loud crack.

Bellatrix called out, ‘Can someone improve his ugly nose? He’s the spitting image of that filthy swine of a father of his. As if keeping it turned up so high could change that!’

Seconds later, all hell broke loose. Eager to get their share, Yaxley, Rowle and the Carrows joined in, jumping into the centre like a pack of famished hounds. Rowle forced Snape to stand, pulling him up by the hair, and threw a well-aimed punch at the Professor’s nose. Snape staggered backwards, covering his face as blood began gushing out of his nose, only to be caught mid-fall by Amycus Carrow, who kicked him in the stomach with a loud huff of effort. Snape was then passed on to Yaxley, who spun him around and high-kicked him in the back, pushing him towards Goyle. Snape was tossed around like a sack of sand for a long time, until he collapsed in the middle of the ring of wizards.

Rhys started fidgeting, looking nervously around to catch the eye of the other novices. They all kept their gaze fixed on the Professor, but their drawn brows and narrowed lips indicated that many were struggling to remain composed. One novice, a Ravenclaw called Howie Edmunds, was positively green in the face, and Rhys hoped that, for his own sake, he wouldn’t be sick there and then.

Snape was lying on his side, curled up in a ball, breathing laboriously. Rhys watched in fascinated horror as the man rose on shaky hands and knees with effort, his joints cracking audibly. His face, scrunched up in pain, was turning an ugly shade of purple, streaked with the ribbons of blood that poured out of his nose and mouth. One side of his face was massively swollen, and his jaw stuck out at an odd angle. Heaving, Snape screwed his eyes shut and started spitting blood, tainting the show-white floor with droplets of red.
Bellatrix, whose face shone like the sun as she watched the punch-up with an expression of sheer euphoria, skipped merrily into the middle and beckoned at the attendants, waving her hands in broad, welcoming circles. ‘Gather round, children, don’t be shy!’ She chirped cheerfully, ‘The big boys had their fun, and now they need a little rest, so it’s your time to shine! Take out your wands, and auntie Bella will teach you how to play!’

Rhys felt a pang of nausea, but did as he was told, forcing himself to move against the horror that pushed heavily on his chest. All around him, Death Eaters old and new brandished their wands, ready to continue this vile show. Peter Pettigrew snickered as he traipsed towards the centre, looking like he was about to wet himself with excitement. Rhys glowered at the back of his head, wishing that he could drown the rat-faced coward in a spoonful of water.

Snape fell back onto his side, panting and wheezing. So far, he had not screamed once. His black eyes, barely visible beneath the swollen bruises, were clouded over with pain, but the man was undefeated, facing his fate with indescribable bravery. Rhys regarded his battered form with sorrow. His respect for the Professor soared in that moment.

As the Death Eaters reorganised themselves in a broader circle and Bellatrix explained the proper casting of the Crucius Curse in great and gruesome detail, Mrs Malfoy took the opportunity to scuttle over to where Snape lay. Whizzing around him like a silvery sprite, she pointed her wand at the Professor, muttering incantations in a shaky voice. Rhys guessed that the hostess must have been trying to heal him, her lips drawn into a narrow line of obvious disapproval. Considering that her husband had fallen out of favour, imprisoned and disgraced, Rhys thought that the woman must have been extremely brave, or foolish, to show her displeasure in the Dark Lord’s presence.

Snape did not react at all to Mrs Malfoy’s ministrations. He ignored her questions of, ‘Are you alright? How are you feeling?’, and continued to lie as still as his injured body allowed, waiting for the next round of torment. His disfigured face was impossible to read, but Rhys suspected that his thoughts mirrored his own. He snorted under his breath, wondering what it was that Mrs Malfoy expected to hear. It was quite obvious that Professor Snape was far from alright. As Rhys briefly caught the Professor’s eye, he found that he had to look away, consumed by the feeling of utter helplessness.

Bellatrix’s piercing squeal made him look up sharply. The rabid witch widened her stance, her ugly, crooked wand pointed at Snape. She exclaimed joyously, ‘Now that my dear sister has finished messing about, let me show you how it’s done. Can everybody see me?’

A murmur of agreement broke out around the room, and Bellatrix beamed at her audience, delighted to be the centre of everybody’s attention. ‘Good. Now, watch and learn, children, watch and learn!’ She leaned in dramatically, a black widow ready to attack a defenceless insect. In a great show of exaggerated concentration, she narrowed her black, heavy-lidded eyes before crying out, ‘Crucio!’
Professor Snape had a split second to visibly brace himself, eliciting an amused giggle from Bellatrix. As the wizard began to jerk and twitch uncontrollably, Rhys found that he too had tensed in sympathy, staring wide-eyed at the distressing image of his Head of House, flailing about like a fish out of water, his limbs curling up on themselves as though he tried to escape the unbearable agony that twisted his body almost to breaking point. Rhys held his breath, half-expecting to hear the sound of breaking bones, amazed that the man still refused to scream. His principles began to shatter, his ideals tumbling down like a house of cards as he watched the Dark witch whom he had admired so greatly, laughing hysterically as she tortured one of their own more ferociously than she did Mudbloods. This was not the typical punishment that a Death Eater could expect for failing to fulfill his duties. This was a twisted show of dominance that went against the laws of nature, against the sense of brotherhood and common purpose that had been used to lure him into this madness. Yes, he could see it with painful clarity. He had walked into this trap blindly, like an unquestioning child led to his doom by the Pied Piper of Hameln. This was his life now. The cave was shut now, and there was no escape.

One by one, the Death Eaters shuffled forward to cast their curses at Professor Snape. Flashes of green, red and purple flew through the air, dissipating into clouds of shimmering sparks as they violently collided with the wizard’s body. Peter Pettigrew stood over Snape now, sniggering as he hit him with short, repeated bouts of Crucius, whilst the Carrow siblings were busy arguing over who would go first, waving their fat, dirty hands in each other’s faces.

The youngest recruits joined in now as expected. Some of them made a token effort at casting a weak Crucius, figuring that scoring points was in their best interests, although without much enthusiasm. Those who have never cast Unforgivables before pretended to still be incapable, and opted for lesser hexes and jinxes instead, inflicting minor burns and scratches. Bellatrix seemed beside herself with glee, and looked like she was going to start handing out gold stars and sweets.

Soon it was Rhys’ turn. Chanting mental apologies, he hit the Professor with a Stinging Hex to the shoulder, feeling his ears burn with shame when Snape hissed, but did not look up. Any contempt Snape might have felt towards him paled in comparison to the contempt Rhys felt towards himself. Before he had a chance to mouth his last apology, he was pushed aside by Joshua Barrett, a Gryffindor novice who, unlike the rest of them, seemed very eager. Barrett’s twisted grin made it very clear that the lad could not wait to prove his worth. ‘Move over, Millar! My turn!’

Barrett tensed in concentration, clenching so tightly that Rhys thought he was going to crap himself with the effort. The Crucius he cast was a rather pathetic attempt, and the sparks dissipated before they reached their target. Disgruntled, Barrett cussed under his breath, and made another try, this time casting a strong Diffindo. Rhys watched in dread as the spell sailed through the air, coming dangerously close to the Professor’s neck. Barrett’s Severing Charm missed, barely skimming the side of Professor Snape’s head, but the fresh blood that began pouring down the wizard’s ear neck made Rhys weak in the knees. Barrett walked away, looking somewhat pleased with himself, and the murderous glares of the other youngsters made it very clear that the Gryffindor would pay for this later.
The crowd ahead of Rhys parted as Draco Malfoy was led towards the centre by his aunt, who stood behind him with her long-nailed hands on his shoulders, whispering in his ear. Rhys could not hear what was being said, but judging by Draco’s face, which was now a shade of green, it was not at all pleasant. Draco gulped visibly, and took a half-step forward, his hand shaking as he cast the curse.

When Draco lowered his wand a short time later, he looked on the verge of tears. Bellatrix spun him around and kissed him soundly on the cheek, gushing with appreciation. Rhys observed the pair, transfixed, and jumped when a loud ‘Aaaaaaay!’ rose among the audience. As his eyes darted to Professor Snape, he realised what caused the uproar. The wizard had vomited all over his robes.

Once again, Mrs Malfoy stepped in. Flicking her wand, she vanished the mess and cleaned Snape up as best as she could in the few stolen seconds she had. She bustled around, casting one healing spell after another, when Bellatrix whines, ‘Oi, Cissy! You’re destroying all of our hard work!’

Mrs Malfoy turned to face her sister, and raised her elegant chin in defiance. ‘Our Lord said that he is not to be killed, Bella.’

A heavy silence fell on the room as heads whipped around to look at Lord Voldemort, who sat in his throne, fiddling his wand between his long fingers with an expression of mild boredom. He inclined his head at Mrs Malfoy, saying, ‘Indeed, I have given explicit instructions to keep Severus alive. I must remind you all to not get carried away. Do not worry, Narcissa - Severus won’t die in your home tonight. You may continue.’

The Death Eaters muttered amongst themselves as they moved out of the way, allowing Mrs Malfoy to carry on healing the Professor for a few minutes longer. She made a clumsy attempt at fixing some of the worst injuries, but it was obvious that healing was not her forte. Rhys, having a good grasp of the basics of healing, could only hope that she wasn’t causing him any further discomfort, but dared not intervene.

Bellatrix tapped her foot impatiently. She shot her sister a nasty glare that spoke of intense anger and jealousy, and her voice dripped with mock-sweetness as she uttered patronisingly, ‘There, Cissy, I think you’ve done all you can, and I think it’s time to move on to the feast.’ She looked around with a sly smile. ‘I propose a toast!’ She exclaimed, summoning a bottle of alcohol from a nearby table. ‘To our brother Severus, and to loyalty!’

Rhys’ mouth went dry. He knew what would happen next - he had seen it done enough times over the past weeks. He sent a silent prayer to Merlin as Professor Snape was hoisted up by Greyback and Yaxley, and led over to a nearby table laden with food and drink. There, Bellatrix stood waiting, a madman’s grin plastered across her face.
When the Professor was dumped in the chair without ceremony, Bellatrix grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled his head back. Her eyes glittered as she shot an impish look at the Carrows, who rubbed their hands, chuckling dumbly like a pair of witless trolls. At Bellatrix’s nod, the siblings moved to stand at either side of the chair and pried Snape’s jaw open with their hands. Bellatrix made a great show of uncorking the bottle. It appeared that, in her twisted mind, she believed to be building up the tension, giving the audience the show of their lives.

She poured the contents down Snape’s open mouth, squealing, ‘Drink, brother! Drink and be merry!’

Her exclamation was punctuated with snorts and laughter, and Rhys stepped back, leaning against one of the many columns for support. He did not want to witness what he knew would be the ultimate humiliation of Professor Snape, but his eyes were glued to the scene as the man choked and spluttered, forced to drink to himself in this macabre parody of a party.

The Carrows, Yaxley, Greyback, Gibbon, Goyle and the ever-present Bellatrix surrounded the Professor in a tight circle. At Bellatrix’s signal, they dragged him out of the chair and pushed him onto the table, face down. Rhys saw Bellatrix raise a questioning eyebrow at the Dark Lord, and turned his head in time to see him nod in response with a beatific smile. Then, it happened. Professor Snape was held down, and numerous hands grabbed at his robes, viciously tearing them off and throwing them across the floor.

When Greyback moved to position himself behind the wizard, Rhys felt that he couldn’t take any more, and had to look away.

Seconds later, Snape finally began to scream.
Does Dumbledore Shit In The Woods?

Chapter Notes

Well, guess what. After this, the worst will be over and our couple can start bonding. Also, expect to see just how messed up Alice's personality is. I was very tempted to put her over my knee. Originally, this chapter was supposed to be two chapters, but I am so very sick of all the angst and drama that I decided to merge them into one, longer chapter, just so I can start posting the nicer bits sooner. Phew!

Fun Fact: FawkesyLady is the greatest beta and deserves to be made Minister for Magic. She helped me ensure that this double-chapter flows smoothly even though she had one hell of a day at work. She's just so awesome!

Severus was slipping. Through a haze, he could hear them, laughing as they made another cut, another bruise, another burn. He tried to speak, but his voice failed him, hoarse after an eternity of screaming. His was aware to their bodies, warm and rough and slippery, their hands holding him down to the table’s cold surface. His body had gone limp a long time ago. Why were they still holding him like that? He would not run. He was exhausted.

His whole being was reduced to the all-consuming pain. He had accepted it, merged with it. There was nothing beyond the endless agony. No escape. No end.

Somewhere in time, Severus’ pleas had ceased, lost among the excitement of the revellers. He no longer cared. His body was broken, and his mind would follow soon. And then, perhaps, it would be over.

His thoughts became a ridiculous parade of sounds and images flashing across his mind’s vision - Neville Longbottom’s pitiful essays. Sharon’s food dish. Potions Weekly’s cover. His mother’s collection of soppy romance novels. The heart-shaped stain on the rug in his Hogwarts office. Two slices of buttered toast he had eaten for breakfast. Harry Potter, strutting about the castle long after curfew. James’s hateful sneer. Harry’s eyes. Lily.

He grasped at the image desperately. Stay with me. Her lovely lips, stretched into a wide smile as he presented her with a bunch of conjured flowers. Stay with me. Her sparkling emerald-green eyes, wide in sheer wonder as they stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, looking down at the vast grounds of Hogwarts. Stay with me. Her cheeks, lovely and pink from cold and exercise after a snowball fight. Stay with me.

Despite his best efforts, his grip on her loosened. Slowly, her form began to fade away, the contours of her face blurring, her emerald eyes fading to a dull jade, and then to black. Severus fought, holding on to the last reddish glint of her hair, but before long, it too was gone, leaving him alone again.

More images appeared. Dumbledore’s bowl of lemon sherbets. Minerva, sharing a brandy and a bit of friendly banter with Severus after a Quidditch match. Lucius, holding his newborn son, a lifetime ago. Severus’ acceptance letter. Hogwarts Express, shiny and red, puffing huge clouds of smoke at King’s Cross station. Potions ingredients, carefully labeled and organised in his personal stores. A

Severus seized the kitchen with all his willpower. A low, feminine voice crooned, ‘You’re safe here with me.’ It was distant and distorted, echoing through his brain. Severus recognised the voice, but could not put a face to it. It did not matter. If he stayed the kitchen, he would be alright. Nobody would find him there.

Holding onto this promise of relief, Severus’ mind began its laborious descent towards the very bottom of his soul.

A million years later, a cold voice reached him from the top of the well, telling him he was free to go. He felt a strong pair of arms lift him up, and then he was standing on his own weak legs, swaying from side to side like a willow pushed by strong gusts of wind. He would soon be home.

Standing in his mind’s construct, he half-turned and half-fell, disapparating Home.

Alice woke abruptly as a bang erupted downstairs, loud enough to wake the dead. Her sleep-addled brain supplied that it was merely Barry, coming home and flying into one of the cupboards, and she fell back on her pillow with the intention to deal with the stupid bird in the morning.

Bang.

There it was again, followed by the sound of footsteps. Human footsteps. She bolted out of bed and grabbed her wand, instantly alert and ready to tear the intruder into shreds. ‘Let’s fucking have it, then!’ She seethed internally as she tiptoed down the stairs, listening intently for any more sounds. She had her wand at the ready, a curse hovering on the tip of her tongue. Whoever broke into her home tonight would not be getting out alive.

The downstairs hallway was empty, as was the living room. Quiet as a mouse, Alice padded to the end of the hallway, straining to make out any unfamiliar shapes or noises as she went. Her heart skipped a beat briefly as she noticed that the kitchen door was ajar, but she quickly calmed herself, remembering that she had left it like that when she went to bed. Gently, she kicked the door open with her foot, and carefully peeked inside.

Immediately she noticed a large, shapeless form, slumped down on the floor, darker than the black of night, unmoving. Her breath hitched in her chest as she sneaked towards it with her wand drawn high, its point fixed firmly on the unfamiliar lump. ‘What the hell?!’ She thought as the shape made a raspy, wheezing noise, loud enough to make her jump. Frightened out of her wits, Alice flicked the electric switch with one sharp, rapid movement and jabbed her wand forward, crying, ‘Stupe -’

The spell died on her lips as the ceiling lamp illuminated the kitchen. Instead, a loud gasp escaped her lips as she stared at the shape. Next to an overturned chair, what looked like a man dressed in black was lying at her feet in a puddle of blood. Wide-eyed with shock, Alice padded closer mechanically, with one hand planted firmly across her mouth. She swallowed thickly, and gently prodded the man with the tips of her toes.

With a mighty shriek, she jumped back in alarm as the intruder coughed and spluttered, turning his
head to face her. A pair of black eyes, obscured by swelling, opened slowly and darted to her face. He rasped out, ‘Fuck off, Crowley. Get out of my kitchen.’

His voice was hoarse and barely audible, but Alice now knew that she was staring at Professor Snape, mutilated almost beyond recognition. Frozen in place, her mind had gone completely blank as she stared at his distorted face, covered in dark, purple bruises and numerous cuts of varying sizes. Even his jaw stuck out at an odd angle.

The neat flip of Alice’s stomach brought her back to the present as she caught a whiff of the stench emanating from the man - a mixture of metallic blood and sharp sweat, and other fluids she would rather not name. Heaving, she concentrated on not throwing up right where she stood, and wrung her hands, unsure of how to proceed. She finally managed to croak out, ‘It’s my kitchen. What happened to you?’

‘Hell.’ He groaned, ‘No tea.’

Alice’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. ‘You’re not making any sense.’ At first, it appeared that the sardonic man was merely rolling his eyes at her, but before she could berate him further, he dropped his head back to the linoleum with the tell tale thunk that one might expect of a dropped pumpkin, his head coming to a halt at an awkward angle. The man had cut off all possibility of further defense of Alice’s tea making skills by passing out. The twat.

She knelt down beside him, wincing as she caught a whiff of alcohol. How ironic. Not long ago, he had scolded her for drinking, and now here he was, all black and blue and reeking of booze. Her grandmother’s voice rang out in her memory, ‘Instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish the sinners, bear patiently those who wrong us, forgive offenses, comfort the afflicted…’

Alice wet a flannel and started cleaning his face, gently wiping away the patches of dried blood. It was everywhere, even in his hair, which was stuck together and gleamed black and red under the electric lamp. ‘Fuckin’ell,’ she muttered, and summoned her collection of various healing potions, the latest batch to be shared between the Hogwarts Infirmary and the Weasleys’ shop. A general Healing Potion. Bruising Salve. Cut’n’Graze paste. Painkiller. It wasn’t much, but it was all she had, and these would simply have to do.

Steeling herself, she took his head in her hands and turned it to the side gently, as though she was holding a newborn baby. Shuddering repeatedly in disgust, she patted him dry, and hissed in sympathy when she encountered the nasty laceration behind his ear. ‘Ooooh, you poor bugger…’ Features twisted in an ugly grimace, she cleaned the wound as best as she could and applied a thick layer of Cut’n’Graze, wondering what sort of trouble he had got himself into. She muttered, ‘Dunno who did this to ye, but it must’ve been one hell of a pub brawl.’

While the paste absorbed into the cuts, she started working on the bruising. With gentle circular motions, she rubbed the Bruising Salve into his skin with her fingertips, taking care to keep her touch feather-light. The salve worked fast. Within minutes, the swelling went down considerably and Snape’s face was recognisable once more, allowing Alice to take a better look at his jaw. It was not broken as she had feared, but looked dislocated. His nose was a different story - broken, and badly so. She giggled hysterically, ‘ Didn’t think your nose could get any worse, but obviously I was wrong.’ The bruises have faded from the angry bluish-black to a nasty yellow, and she knew he would have to wait for the rest to go down naturally. She could see that his skin was flushed and covered in cold sweat, and he was starting to shiver.

She pointed her wand at his nose and muttered, ‘Episkey!’ , setting it back to its original state with a loud crack. The wizard woke abruptly with a growl of pain, tensing his stomach muscles as his upper body jerked upwards. Reflexively, Alice caught his head and slowly eased him back onto the
floor. ‘S’allright,’ She said, locking her gaze with his. ‘I need to set your jaw now, but I swear I’ll break your nose again if you bite me.’

The wizard’s eyes were glassy, his face pinched as he shook his head from side to side, mewling, ‘No. No, no, no, no.’

Alice thinned her lips, annoyed that he was now awake and that setting his jaw the Muggle way was obviously out of the question. Choosing to ignore his whining for now, she worried her lower lip in concentration, and waved her wand at his face, hoping for the best.

Snape’s jaw clicked as it fell back into place, and the wizard inhaled sharply, with his eyes tightly shut. ‘Oh fuck,’ he gasped. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!’

Panting, he curled up in a ball and brought his hand up to cover his face, hiding the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Unsettled by the sight, Alice snapped, ‘What?! Not my bloody fault, is it? You show up here in a right state at two in the piggin’ morning, and expect me to do what?’

She got up and began bustling around aimlessly, refilling the bowl with clean water and finding fresh flannels. She grumbled under her breath, ‘My name isn’t Florence fucking Nightingale. I know naff all about healing. And if you think you can go get hammered and then expect to be nursed, you should’ve gone St Mungo’s. Or Hogwarts. Bet Pomfrey would shit herself with joy, she would.’

The vitriolic tirade died in her throat, the grumbled expletives morphing into a gasp of terror as Snape began convulsing on the floor without warning, wailing, ‘My Lord! I didn’t know! No, I didn’t… I didn’t… it hurts…!’

Alice ran over to him and knelt at his side, staring in shock as he twitched and shook uncontrollably. As he flailed, a silver object fell out of his robes, clattering across the floor and towards Alice. Grateful for something to busy herself with, she picked it up for closer inspection, and held it in trembling hands. Immediately she recognised the Death Eater mask. ‘Oh dear.’

It hit her with painful clarity. Snape had not been to the pub. He had been with Lord Voldemort, and something dreadful must have happened. Alice may have been a shy student, but she was an excellent listener, collecting all the pieces of gossip circulating around the school. Of course she had heard the whispered rumours about the violent nature of Death Eater gatherings, and had read the various reports of the cruelty with which they tortured defenseless Muggles, but took the tales of how the Dark Lord punished his own followers with Unforgivable curses with a large pinch of salt. Until now.

‘Bloody hell…’ The clues clicked together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and Alice felt sick at the revelation. There was nothing she could do about the convulsions, which she now recognised as the tell-tale aftershocks of the Cruciatius Curse. She berated herself inwardly, wondering why she hadn’t seen it earlier - after all, she had spent long enough studying the Unforgivables in-depth in her own time. Spurred into action, she stood up quickly, motivated now that she knew what she was up against. She summoned a vest and a pair of trousers from her wardrobe, and busied herself with transfiguring them to fit the Professor’s taller frame, feeling a hot flush of embarrassment rise in her cheeks.

She had let her grievances cloud her good sense, and judged the man harshly without checking all the facts first. She strongly suspected that the man’s heavy robes concealed other injuries. He was a bastard, that was true, but she could not leave him like this. She may have been selfish, but she was not completely heartless.
At length, the spasms receded, and Snape laid on his back, whimpering incoherently. Alice sat down heavily with the transfigured clothes in her hands, planning her next move. ‘Um…’ She began, and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand as the gravity of what she was about to do hit her. ‘I need to change your clothes and move you to the bed.’

‘I did not know… he never told me… Dumbledore…’

‘Is not here,’ Alice interjected firmly, wincing at the sound of the Headmaster’s name. Digging for courage, she pushed down the anger that began simmering inside her chest and forced her body to move. Huffing and puffing like an angry cat, she removed his outer garb, having to move him this way and that to pull the sleeves off his arms. He was too heavy for the tiny witch, and the periodic twitches and tension in his muscles, punctuated with sounds of extreme discomfort, slowed down her efforts considerably, forcing her to take frequent breaks. ‘I know, I know. This is crap. But it’s either this or I’ll have to cut your clothes. You probably wouldn’t like that, and I don’t know if You-Know-Who provides replacement uniform at no extra cost. I’d bloody burn these if I were you, though. Urgh, hell…’

She paused, holding the black robes in her hands. They felt heavy and slick, and stained her fingers in red. A wave of nausea washed over her at the stench that rose up to her nostrils, and she ran over to the sink, heaving. As her brain processed the image of blood, splotched over Snape’s snow-white shirt, the Witch shuddered once, twice, and vomited into the sink. It was too much to bear. She wasn’t ready to continue, not yet, and Snape was reasonably calm. His body tensed and trembled, but not terribly so, and he was throwing his head periodically from side to side, mumbling unintelligible words.

Keeping a close eye on the wizard, she rolled a cigarette with shaking hands and took a deep drag to calm her nerves. The short intermission allowed her to consider the absurdity of the situation. He shouldn’t even be here. She shouldn’t let him stay. She should Floo the Headmaster immediately and have him transferred to the hospital wing - taking care of an injured wizard was too great a responsibility for somebody who knew next to nothing about healing beyond the magical first-aid course she had taken in her third year, most of which she had forgotten a long time ago. Yes, this was the reasonable and responsible thing to do. She could not be expected to play nurse. It was beyond her capability.

Resolutely, she walked into the living room and stood in front of the empty fireplace, eyeing the bowl of Floo powder with apprehension. ‘This is the right thing to do,’ she stated firmly, and reached out to take a pinch of the powder, constantly reassuring herself that she was doing it for his own good. Besides, Snape hated her. He had made it clear enough. Surely he would be happier to be cared for by Madam Pomfrey.

‘But he came to me,’ A small voice piped up in her head. ‘Not to Dumbledore and not to Pomfrey, but here.’

‘But he hates me!’ She responded to the voice angrily. ‘And the feeling is mutual. And Merlin knows why he ended up here. I can’t care for him - I don’t want to! And he might bring me trouble. I don’t want any repercussions should the other Death-Eating Muppets find out where I live! He’s bad news, Snape is!’

Something held her back. Hesitantly, she withdrew her hand and waddled back to the kitchen, unable to explain why she was so reluctant to release the Professor into Dumbledore’s care. The idea of the Headmaster being anywhere near him sent a shiver of revulsion down her spine - if the old bastard could send him out to face Voldemort time after time without batting an eyelid, how likely
was he to look after him in his hour of need?

Grinding her teeth in anger, she marched over to Snape’s prostrated form and took a quick inventory. He was breathing steadily, and had passed out again. Good.

‘We might hate each other, but we’re on the same side.’ She whispered as she started to work on his clothes once more. ‘Dumbledore is just as responsible for this as You-Know-Who, or whoever did this to you. I won’t let him near you.’ She asserted, deftly undoing the many buttons of his shirt. ‘Don’t expect me to put up with any crap, though. You owe me, Severus Snape.’

She discarded the filthy garments to the side with the intention of throwing them in the washing machine at the earliest opportunity. The sight of the extensive bruising around his middle made her wince, but she was able to clean his chest and and stomach with a certain degree of clinical detachment, refusing to stop and think, knowing full well that a moment’s rest would only cause her to break down. ‘Bastards, bastards, bastards.’ She chanted as she covered his upper body with copious amounts of bruising salve. She only hoped that she had a sufficient supply.

Without pausing, she undid his belt and opened his trousers, ignoring her own discomfort at this interference with the wizard’s privacy. She worked as briskly as her shaking hands allowed, tugging and pulling at the black woolen fabric. To distract herself, she imagined that she was only changing the bedding - a familiar task, deeply ingrained into her day to day life. This was just another chore that had to be done, and then her world would be clean and tidy again.

One quick look at the Professor’s legs revealed more cuts and bruises, and confirmed her suspicions that he had lost control of his bladder, but she could not explain the large patches of blood around his thighs - she could not see any deep wounds, and his legs were, overall, in a much better state than his upper body. Alice could not bring herself to remove his underwear, breathing in through her mouth to avoid the revolting stench of piss. It was as though all of her greatest fears of disorder, bad smells and bodily fluids had morphed into one giant Boggart, except that there was no simple spell to turn it into a bunch of violets. Struggling to contain the hysteria, Alice hugged herself with both arms, half-sobbing and half-laughing as her capability reached its limits. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ She squealed, frantically rocking back and forth. ‘What should I do…?’

Her grandmother’s voice rang out in her mind again, ‘Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless…’

Clearing her throat nervously, she hooked her fingers underneath the waistband of Snape’s soiled underwear, carefully easing them off his hips, unveiling the nightmare inch by inch. She was transfixed in soul-wrenching horror as the extent of the man's injuries were laid bare before her eyes. She missed the signs that should have warned her that he was rousing, so she was taken unaware by the deceptively strong right knee connecting with her chest, sending her sprawling back onto the linoleum. It knocked the wind out of her.

It was some time later and a great deal of swearing that brought Alice back around to attempting to connect with the man, who was hunched defensively, his moans intensifying to a terrible growl anytime he sensed her trying to get close enough to touch him. His eyes were unfocused, wild, and so scared. How was she going to get him off of this floor? Out of pure exhaustion, she settled nearby, where she had the best view of her patient's eyes, and started to talk quietly. At first it was strange. She told him about the house, about her Gran, and how much she missed her and the sausages and mash that she would make when Alice was scared or sad. She talked about going to church with the woman. It was helping Alice at least, and as the words flowed, she could feel the tension relaxing from her, and she imagined that her Gran's spirit might be nearby, watching.

Snape had quieted when she sat in clear view, but she observed that his once ragged breathing had
evened out, giving the appearance of sleep. She was disquieted to see the reflected light of his eyes watching her from shadow. She held her breath, and at length she was surprised to hear his deep voice comment, ‘You aren't Jacqueline Crowley.’

‘No, it’s Alice. It’s alright. You’re safe.’

Professor Snape stopped kicking. A spark of awareness flashed through his eyes as he grated out, ‘Crowley? Is it really you?’

‘Does a bear shit in the woods?’, She quipped, grasping his hand in her own. ‘I changed your clothes, and now I need to get you in bed. I need you to co-operate. Do you think you can do that?’

He nodded weakly in reply, and Alice sighed, relieved that he was willing to work with her on this at least. Carefully, Alice gathered the wizard in her arms, supporting his back as she encouraged him to recline against her chest. ‘I’m going to side-along you upstairs.’ This was not without risk, but it seemed safer than levitation, or, Merlin forbid, hauling his weight up the stairs.

‘Are you ready?’ She asked as she wrapped her arms around his waist and closed her eyes in preparation. When he failed to reply, she opened her eyes and looked at his face, rested against her shoulder. The empty look in his eyes indicated that his period of half-awareness was over, and he had now slipped into delirium again, moving his lips, but no sound came out. With a sigh of disappointment, Alice held him tighter, resuming her mild meditation. The warmth of his body against hers was a calming influence, and the steady beat of his heart provided the desperately needed reassurance that allowed Alice to relax. Soon, her breathing matched his, and she extended her magical senses, encapsulating them both, grounding him.

She concentrated on the image of her own bed, firmly fixing her willpower on the precise spot where she wanted them to land. When her awareness narrowed down to her destination, wiping out any other memory and thought, she turned, opening the channel that allowed them passage.

Usually, Apparition happened so quickly - a split second of an uncomfortable sensation, as though one was being squeezed through a very tight tunnel, followed by a moment’s disorientation, and then it was over. This time, it was different, as Alice took her time in Neither Here Nor There, gently pulling her passenger through the channel. It felt like pushing through a dense wall of warm air, and made her slightly breathless as she ensured that the Professor travelled smoothly and slowly. Before she led them out of the Channel, she double checked that she had not Splinched him, that not a single eyelash had been left behind. Their traverse lasted much longer, and took an extreme amount of effort and concentration, but they both made it to their destination in one piece. Their landing was softer too. Instead of struggling for balance, as was the norm in normal Apparition, they simply appeared in the middle of the bed, sinking into the mattress as it made contact with their bodies.

Alice was elated, and felt like she could dance for joy. It worked. She transported him safely. She eased him down with gentle hands, and covered him with a heavy blue blanket, observing the bead of sweat that appeared on his temple. He was flushed and shivering, and she wrinkled her brow, brushing a stray lock of hair off his forehead.

She held up a small collection of phials. ‘I need you to drink these. General Healing Potion, Blood Replenisher, Sleeping Draught and Painkiller.’
Snape had been a million miles away, staring into the middle distance with fluid eyes and mumbling to himself, and it surprised Alice greatly when he turned his face to look at her, a glint of awareness appearing in his gaze once again. He eyed the phials warily, and Alice rolled her eyes, annoyed at his distrust. ‘It’s good stuff, I brewed them myself.’ She began uncorking the phials. ‘Now, I know that nothing I do is ever good enough for you, but that’s tough. It’s all we have. You can either take them or not. Your choice.’

He stared at the proffered potions for a long time, and Alice huffed impatiently, ‘Well?’

Finally, the wizard gave a weak nod, and fell back on the pillow with a heavy sigh, seemingly resigned to his fate. Alice thinned her lips, thinking, ‘Oh, ye of little faith!’ and supported his head with one arm as she eased the contents of the phials into the Professor’s mouth. ‘Alright… easy…’ She muttered as he swallowed the potions. He coughed and spluttered periodically, and managed to dribble all over himself, but eventually drank all of the medicine. Alice was aware of how dreadful it tasted.

Aided by the Sleeping Draught, Professor Snape closed his eyes and fell asleep within seconds of swallowing the last mouthful, his haggard face relaxing, his breathing evening out. Alice stood over him for a long time, observing his skinny, abused form. Outwardly, she appeared stoical and indifferent, but inside, her heart was bleeding, torn apart by this new-found knowledge of just what Professor Snape had to suffer in order to keep them all safe. There, in her bed, lay the embodiment of courage and sacrifice, the likes of which she had never before imagined. A new strength filled her from within, and she whispered, ‘Dumbledore had failed you, but I won’t.’

Outside, the sky had turned to a dark grey, announcing the approaching dawn. Reassured that the Professor was in a natural slumber, Alice rubbed her eyes and padded out of the bedroom and down the steps. She pulled back, retreating down to her basement lab, intending to bury herself in her work. She reflected that the Sorting Hat would have felt entirely justified in its decision of six years prior. She had been very brave, but now she was spent and confused, feeling as though she had aged a century.

Down in her basement lab, Alice worked, bent over a cauldron, unaware of the first rays of sunlight that were slowly creeping up on Spinner’s End. She had been there for hours by now, brewing one of the most challenging potions she had ever encountered, following the recipe from an old, battered book that hovered in mid-air above her cauldron. It was a fascinating tome, one that Fred and George had smuggled out of the Order Headquarters a few weeks prior, full of obscure recipes for healing potions she had never heard of before. The thick, grey fumes that rose from the cauldron obscured much of her view, and the witch squinted, straining her brain as she committed each step to memory.

Weary and drowsy after the night’s events, Alice picked up the mug of strong coffee she had placed at her side. Her eyes never left the text as she necked the lukewarm beverage in one go. It tasted disgusting, and left a sour aftertaste in her mouth, but she was aware of just how desperately she needed the energy if she was to help Professor Snape.

By now, she was quite sick of being his personal nurse, having had to divide her time between brewing and tending to the man himself without a moment’s rest. He was still slipping in and out of delirium and had developed a high fever. He was now mercifully asleep after a particularly violent fit of convulsions, and Alice was grateful for the moment of peace which allowed her to restock at least some of the necessary medicine.
She was as exhausted as her supply of healing potions, and the only thing that kept her going was the thought that the sooner he was healed, the sooner she’d be rid of him. By now, she was unable to count the amount of times she had to clean him up - a difficult task, as the man would often become either violent in his delirium or a dead weight in periods of unconsciousness, and at some point, his vomit had become streaked with blood. It worried her immensely.

Reading aloud, she muttered, ‘Drop nineteen pine needles into the potion and stir ten times clockwise with an iron rod… stir one quarter-turn anti-clockwise…’

The cauldron contained a dull grey liquid that felt thinner than water, providing almost no resistance against the stirring rod. Alice struggled to judge whether or not she was brewing correctly. The instructions were frustratingly vague - they provided the precise amounts of ingredients that had to be used, as well as all the right tools and methods of preparation, but did not describe what the potion should look like at the various stages of brewing. She had to trust her own abilities, and hope that the finished product would resemble the thick, opalescent grey liquid with a thin layer of apple-green scum on its surface, the one somewhat-helpful description at the end of the recipe.

‘Leave the potion to swirl and simmer for three minutes. Crush the juniper berries and soak them in castor oil for thirty seconds…’

She began crushing her berries, closing her eyes to give them a moment’s rest as she worked, counting the seconds in her head. When the time arrived to add the castor oil, Alice struggled to keep her eyes open, feeling as though she had heavy weights stuck to her eyelids, pulling them down. Her fingers had gone stiff, but still she persisted, aware of the ticking clock behind her back.

‘Pour the berries into the cauldron and add a pinch of coriander. Wait for the berries to sink and the oil to float, then leave to simmer for three minutes…’

She supported herself on both arms placed on the edge of the workbench, and leaned forward, staring into the cauldron as the pulverised berries sank languidly to the bottom. The hope that sparked in her heart as the potion thickened and darkened flickered out as the fumes darkened too, and soon turned into thick clouds of acrid smoke. She shielded her face against the assault of the stench of old leather and burning rubber. It stung her eyes and threatened to singe her eyebrows with its intensity, and she waved her hands to clear some of the smoke away, desperate for a gulp of air. A few minutes later, the lab was tinted grey, and the cauldron revealed a smattering of a gloopy substance in a deeply unpleasant shade of tar.

Alice’s heart sank in her chest, the bitter taste of defeat causing bile to rise in her throat. She swallowed thickly, blinking against the tears that pricked her eyelids as she stared at her work in dejection, wondering where she went wrong. Hours of hard work, ruined by an unknown mistake. She inhaled a shuddering breath, allowing the tears to fall.

Long moments passed before Alice finally opened her eyes. She massaged her temples, wondering if she had made a huge mistake in keeping Snape in her house. She should have sent him to Hogwarts, where Madam Pomfrey would look after him better than she ever could. What on earth had possessed her, what sort of idiotic pride made her believe to be capable of caring for a beaten, cursed, traumatised wizard?! Her arrogance may cost the man his health, or worse, his life. His sanity had already gone, and she felt her own, straining to run around the bend after it.

A strong tingling sensation washed over her brain like pins and needles, and she straightened her spine in alarm as the wards on her bedroom informed her that Professor Snape was awake. ‘Not a moment’s peace!’ She wiped her eyes and nervously combed her hair with her fingers before apparating upstairs, ready to tend to him again.
Professor Snape laid on his back, spread out on the bed like a snow-angel. The curtains were drawn, and in the semi-darkness, Alice observed his face, drawn and white as a sheet save for the red flush across his sunken cheeks. His forehead glowed with a layer of cold sweat, and he was shaking, the incessant chattering of his teeth sounding like death rattle to Alice’s ears.

His eyes darted to her face as she approached. They were blood-shot and glassy, and from his face she could read that he was in a lot of pain. She wrinkled her brow at the pleading look she shot her, and leaned forwards, trying to ascertain what was wrong. ‘Can you hear me?’ She asked, gently wiping his brow with the back of her hand.

Snape did not answer. Not coherently. She could hear his mumbling, quiet whispers the meaning of which she could not quite decipher. Even with eye contact, he seemed to be looking through her, rather than at her. She soaked a flannel in cold water, and gently wiped around his mouth. ‘I need you to drink.’ She said, and inserted the flannel into his mouth. She dared not let him drink from a glass, not after the last attempt, when the man started to choke. She was relieved when he began to suck on the flannel greedily.

He drank for a long time, half-emptying the jug on the bedside cabinet, and when he finished, rejecting the flannel, Alice wiped his face again and turned to the cabinet, taking a quick visual inventory of the remaining stocks. She had made enough Blood Replenisher and Sleeping Draught, but was down to the last phials of General Healing Potion and Painkiller. The two measly doses wouldn’t last, and the new batches were still simmering downstairs.

The sound of Professor Snape’s voice shook her out of her anxious ponderings. She whipped around sharply, and leaned forward, listening. ‘Um… Professor?’ She asked when he didn’t speak after a while, her tone laced with uncertainty.

‘Crowley…’ His voice was wheezy, barely audible, and she leaned closer still as he continued, ‘You’re fucking beautiful, Crowley. You know that, don’t you?’

His pronouncement caught her completely off-guard, and she stared at him, wide-eyed, for a long moment, her weary brain processing the wizard’s words. Unable to come up with an appropriate reply, she finally managed to croak out, ‘Um… as a matter of fact, I do.’ She averted her gaze, clearing her throat nervously. ‘You’re not too bad yourself, actually.’

Snape gave a quiet snort. ‘Good. Now listen, girl. I need to tell you something, and it’s very important.’

Alice had busied herself with lining up the potions on the bedside table, ready to be administered. ‘I’m all ears,’ She said, and yelped as a hand grasped her wrist, tugging at it. ‘What the...!’

Snape pulled her down with surprising strength, so close that their foreheads nearly touched. Alice stared, baffled, into his shiny black eyes, boring into hers with a searing intensity that sent a chill down her spine. She nearly missed it when he said her name again, entranced in the depths of his gaze, but caught herself quickly and turned her head, allowing him to whisper in her ear.

She shuddered as she felt his warm breath tickle her ear. When he spoke, she recognised his professorial tone, now softer and more transparent as he instructed, ‘I need you to boil fresh, cold water. Take it off the heat when it comes to a gentle boil.’

Alice wrinkled her brows in confusion, but listened intently, striving to memorise every word in the hope that the wizard was giving her instructions for a potion that would help his healing process.
‘...add the... amount of... leaves into the pot and pour in the water...’

‘Professor, can you repeat -’

‘Steep for three minutes. Three minutes, Crowley, do you understand?’

‘Yes, yes, but what exactly am I -’

‘Good. Now you know how to properly brew tea, so there will be no excuse if you ever present me with a dreadful brew again.’

Alice’s face fell. In a rush of indignation, she grasped the edge of his blanket, fighting the urge to shake him. Tea. There she was, fighting for his life with tooth and nail to save his hide, and he was telling her about tea?!

She clenched her fists and set her jaw tight, lifting the blankets to check whether or not he had lost control of his bladder again. She had her wand tucked behind her ear, having decided that she would clean him with magic. She was too tired to go through all the ceremony of washing and drying the Muggle way. She carefully inspected his lithe body, checking his dressings. She was glad to see that the Cut’n’Graze seemed to be working rather well, and that his bruises were fading. The bedsheet, however, was cold and soaked with sweat.

Alice marveled at how skinny Professor Snape was. His usual frock-coat added quite a bit of bulk, concealing the fact that he was literally skin, bone and sinew. She could easily count all of his ribs, but his long, lean muscles gave the impression of a black panther, svelte and strong and agile. She reflected that whilst he was no oil painting, there was a strange kind of beauty to the sour Professor. Even his feet were lovely, long and sleek and groomed, without a toe hair in sight. Fred and George would never believe her if she told them.

Now that she was looking at him, she was not surprised that he liked to cover himself from the neck down to the tips of his fingers. A multitude of scars covered his limbs, chest and stomach. They varied in shapes and sizes, some thick and gritty and raised, others clean-cut and thin. While most appeared old and long-healed, Alice could tell than many were fairly fresh, and that after tonight, he would have more.

His chest and stomach were the worst. The flesh there was so abused that Alice struggled to find a spot that wasn’t in some way damaged. A particularly nasty scar, inch-wide and eight inches long, ran from the base to his ribs and down across his stomach, raised and an angry shade of pink. She had seen those scars many times during the course of the night, but every time she lifted his vest, it felt like the first time, making her breath hitch. She remained outwardly composed, but inside, she was cursing all humanity to the deepest pits of hell and beyond.

She finished her inspection, pleased to see that the Professor was clean, and that a simple freshening charm on the bedsheets sufficed to make them dry again. She began shaking out the blankets, ready to wrap the wizard back in his cocoon, when a mild twitching of his limbs caught her eye. She dropped the blankets and jumped back with an audible gasp, coming to stand at the opposite wall, a safe distance away. It was starting again.

Snape stiffened and threw his head back, groaning through clenched teeth. Beads of sweat appeared on his temples, soaking his raven hair as they ran into his hairline. His body tensed and relaxed continuously, the twitches growing in strength by the second. His scrunched-up features spoke volumes about the pain he had to endure.
He was struggling to breathe, inhaling sharply and holding his breath until the contortions subsided, only to pick up again a few seconds later with a vengeance. Alice’s knees buckled under the pressure of her own impotence. What was there she could do? Her mind raced, reviewing her options. She made the mistake of trying to restrain him earlier, and she was sure she’d have a foot shaped bruise on her chest for her trouble. Besides, it only made him wilder, and he was likely to do himself a harm. She had hoped that the Zaragozian Elixir would ease the spasms, but her attempt to brew it this morning was a spectacular failure, and now he had to ride them out on his own. A helpless keening escaped Alice’s throat. She forced herself to stay, to bear witness to the brave man’s suffering, if only so he would know he was not alone.

Snape opened his mouth, screaming hoarsely at the top of his lungs, filling the bedroom with a sound of agony that pierced Alice’s heart like a dagger. Every tear that trailed down his face was another stab, another soul-deep wound that she knew would never heal.

He grasped the sheets in a white-knuckled grip and fixed his gaze on the ceiling above him, taking in quick, shallow breaths, his body tense like a string drawn taut. His hips rose off the bed in a picture of indescribable suffering, and he kicked, twisted and turned, his head whipping sharply from side to side as he screamed, ‘I DIDN’T KNOW! TELL HIM I DIDN’T KNOW! PLEASE! NO!’

Alice sat huddled in her spot by the wall, struggling to control the racing of her heart. Her quiet wails were drowned out by Professor Snape’s screams, and the witch began to tremble, an uncontrollable fury soaring inside her chest once again. Her hatred was so strong that had Dumbledore been standing in front of her, she would have been able to cast the Killing Curse without any effort. She listened to the sounds of agony, letting them fill her from the inside out and resonate through her skull, wishing that she could ease his suffering and absorb some of his pain. The framework of her quiet life had been feeble before, an illusion of relative safety inside these walls, but now it was crumbling in front of her eyes. This thrice-damned war had come to her doorstep, and the reality of the revelation felt like a punch to the gut.

She began rocking back and forth, praying for Snape to stop screaming, but he continued, his strangled voice slashing through her skull, ‘DO SOMETHING! PLEASE, NO MORE! I CAN’T… NO MORE! I HAVE GIVEN YOU EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING! WHY?! WHY DO YOU JUST STAND THERE…!’

Abruptly, the screaming stopped, and Snape’s voice rose in pitch to a strangled howl, ‘He’s going to kill me, he will kill me next time, I can’t die yet!’

He fell back onto the mattress, and turned onto his side, hugging himself as he tucked his head down, closing his eyes. The convulsions subsided, and he lay there, defeated and broken, crying in muffled, wracking sobs. Alice rose and wiped her eyes, approaching him carefully, like she would a wounded animal. He ignored her cautious, ‘Professor?’, continuing to sob in his curled-up position, apparently stuck in his own world. She wondered what was going on in that brilliant mind, what horrors he must have seen and been through. It was too much to consider.

Her mind was swimming as she picked up the discarded blankets again, wanting to give him some warmth and comfort, compassion for the wizard and hatred for his oppressors fighting for dominance. A glimpse of red appeared in the corner of her vision, and she froze, her hand hovering in mid-air as her gaze followed the pool of blood growing rapidly around his lower body. She gasped, ‘Oh Merlin,’ and ran out of the bedroom in panic, her face as white as a sheet. ‘I’ll be back… don’t move!’

‘Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck!’ She repeated as she sprinted down the stairs and into the kitchen, frantically looking around for what, she did not know. Guided by instinct, she bolted into
the backyard, leaving the door wide open. Without thinking, she attacked the wards around her shed, dismantling them one by one with amazing speed, her mind screaming at her to work faster, knowing that every second could well be the difference between his life and death.

When the last ward gave way, she pushed the door open and made a beeline for the cauldron at the far end of the shed. There, she gathered the first ladle and phial within the reach of her hand. She vaguely remembered Dumbledore’s order to never, ever use the Potion on herself or on another, but she shoved the memory aside, muttering, ‘Fuck you, Dumbledore. Fuck you. Just fucking die already.’

She continued her furious muttering as she took out her ritual knife, and caught herself, freezing once again just before the ornate blade touched the skin of her palm. She retracted the knife, standing still, trying to calm the hateful voice in her head. ‘No, no. No. This isn’t about Dumbledore. Intention. Intention is everything. My intention is to heal. Heal, heal, heal…’

She breathed deeply, concentrating on her intention to heal with every fibre of her being, obliterating the Headmaster from her mind. Then she felt it, a rush of power running in her veins as she continued repeating, ‘Heal Snape. Heal Snape. Heal Snape’ until her wish filled her completely, imprinting itself in her magic. She brought down the knife and slashed her palm in one quick movement, and allowed her blood to fall into the potion’s gleaming surface.

Alice healed herself as the Potion accepted her blood, bubbling and hissing before becoming still again. She picked up her ladle, and filled the phial with shaking hands, praying fervently that it would work. ‘You are his last resort,’ She whispered aloud as she stoppered the phial and turned away. ‘Please work.’

She ran up the stairs and into the bedroom, tripping and falling numerous times she sprinted up the creaking staircase, her quivering legs failing to keep up. In the bedroom, Snape was still exactly as she left him, shivering and mewling quietly. Frantically, Alice snatched the last dose of Healing Potion from the bedside table and opened it with her teeth. Carefully, she poured one drop of the Essence into the Healing Potion, chanting, ‘Heal, Heal, Heal,’ for good measure. She swirled the phial to mix the contents, and fell to her knees at Snape’s side, gently turning his head so she could open his mouth.

He mouthed, ‘It hurts.’

‘I know it does, love. But it’ll stop hurting if you drink this. Please, trust me.’

He sniffed and whimpered in reply, slurring his words, ‘You said it would stop hurting. Still hurts.’

Alice sighed, sending a quick mental prayer for patience. She brought the phial to his lips, and crooned sweetly, ‘I know. But I need you to trust me one more time. It’s good stuff, I brewed it myself.’

Snape drew in a shuddering breath and parted his cracked lips, allowing Alice to pour the potion into his mouth. He swallowed and winced, groaning, ‘Fucking ‘ell, Crowley. Worse’n your tea…’

‘It’ll do you good.’ She interjected firmly, feeling a little cross. He was a bloody ungrateful bastard, that was obvious. ‘Now stop biting the hand that heals you, you cantankerous tosser. Just rest, you...’
She was interrupted by the sound of snoring, and as she looked up to see his face relaxed and calm, a
look of relief spread across her face. She rose and busied herself with cleaning up the bloody mess as
she finished her thought aloud, ‘You sweet, tortured man.’
Alice looked around her kitchen one last time, finally satisfied with its state. It was almost noon by the time she had finished scrubbing up the last traces of blood and dirt, and as much as she wanted to go down to the basement and clean up her lab, her exhausted body would not allow her to move now that she had sat down at the table. Even coffee did little to keep her fully awake, and she was glad to get some well-deserved rest.

‘Alright, Barry?’ She asked as her owl flew inside by the back door and made a beeline for his bowl of treats, ignoring her as he gobbled up a good amount. A short time later, he turned his head towards Alice and shot her a questioning look.

‘Sorry mate, no bacon today. Had a right tough night, I did. I’m knackered.’

Barry flapped his wings with an angry clucking of his beak. Glaring, he picked up a talon-full of treats and flew out of the kitchen without bothering to drop the usual shit or pellet, as he usually did whenever Alice refused him bacon for whatever reason. Alice found his behaviour odd, but decided not to complain.

She rubbed her temples in an attempt to calm the dull headache that had appeared behind her eyes hours ago. As nice as it was to finally be able to sit down, she found that having nothing to do made her anxious for Professor Snape, who was still sleeping in her bedroom. Thankfully he had no further episodes of convulsions, and Alice could now only wait and hope that the Essence would work as intended.

Alice felt a tingle of self-doubt creep up on her again as she searched for her tobacco tin. For what seemed like the millionth time, she wondered if she had done the right thing by keeping the Professor in her house. She reflected that the man should better live, lest she had gone to all that trouble in vain. Not to even mention the sheer expense of brewing all those potions for him. Her ingredients stash would cost a pretty penny to replace, of that she was sure, and a dead man would not cough up the cash.

‘Oh, bugger.’ She groaned as she opened her tobacco tin, only to find an empty pack of papers, a couple of filters and the tiniest bit of tobacco dust that would not make even the thinnest of fags. She drummed her fingers on the table irritatedly. The idea of going without fags was too unpleasant to entertain, but she had no energy for a trip to the shop. Even if she did, she was reluctant to leave Snape on his own, even for a quarter of an hour. Anything could happen in that time.
‘No fags, no sleep, nothing. Bugger.’ She grumbled, rising from her chair. As pleasant as it was to do nothing, she was unable to ignore the washing basket she had placed next to the washing machine. It was full of Snape’s soiled robes, and Alice had planned to wash them later, unable to muster up much enthusiasm for this particular chore. She could no longer bear the faint whiff of stench that traversed the length of the room, and decided to get it over and done with.

She picked up the filthy garments one by one, holding them inbetween pinched fingers, her nose wrinkled as she searched his pockets for anything that should not be washed. She found his wand, hidden in the sleeve of his frock coat, and placed it on the floor next to her. It was a lovely piece of wood, polished to a shine, long and slim and dark, just like its owner. It was darker than Alice’s rosewood wand, and Alice thought that it must have been made of ebony.

She was surprised to find that Snape didn’t carry a lot on his person. In one pocket, she found a leather pouch. She gave it a shake, and the jingling sound it made indicated that there was quite a bit of money in there. She also found a tiny book that appeared to be written in a foreign language, a cheap plastic lighter, and a pack of cigarettes. Her eyes lit up as she opened this particular treasure, and she squealed with joy when she saw that it was almost full. She pocketed it quickly, reasoning, ‘Well, it’s his own fault for leaving his fags where I could find them! And besides, he owes me.’

The breast pocket was empty, save for the solitary chocolate bar, molten and out of shape. Alice starred at the purple wrapping for a long time, a peculiar wave of warmth rising from the pit of her stomach. Unbidden, a thought slipped into her mind. ‘He kept it!’

Grinning at the fuzzy feeling in her belly, Alice put the chocolate next to the rest of Snape’s possessions. She made quick work of stuffing everything into the washing machine. She added more washing powder than necessary, reasoning that the clothes really needed a good, thorough wash, and that nothing short of the longest and hottest cycle would do.

The washing machine was relatively fancy - a white front-load contraption she had picked up second hand. It was pretty cheap due to a small fault, and a massive improvement from her grandmother’s 1960s top-load. She pressed the start button and kicked the machine soundly to get it running, and gathered up Snape’s possessions, putting them in one corner of the table. Falling onto the chair with a heavy sigh, she opened the cigarettes with greedy hands, a self-satisfied grin plastered across her face as she lit up one of the expensive fags and took a deep, contented drag. ‘Oooh, this is good stuff. Very good stuff. And free.’ She remembered the time Snape offered her one of these. It was heavenly, but at the time, she was too shaken up to truly appreciate just how superior it was to her cheap tobacco. ‘Might as well treat meself.’ She decided as soon as she was finished, and lit another one. And then another.

Lost in a meandering maze of loosely connected, pleasant thoughts, Alice put her head down for a moment, just to rest her eyes for a little while. Cool against her cheek, the formica surface of the old table was as comfortable as any feather bed, and within minutes, the steady purr of the washing machine soothed her the rest of the way into the deep slumber of an exhausted soul.

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‘Ala?!’

‘Are you there, Alice?’

‘Hello-o0000000?!’
Alice bolted out of her chair, startled awake by the mighty din. Wand in hand, she ran out into the hallway, her heart fluttering in her chest as she checked her immediate surroundings, trying to determine the source of the disturbance.

‘I thought she’d be right here. Maybe she’s downstairs? Let’s shout louder.’

Fred’s familiar voice was coming from the living room, and Alice breathed an audible sigh of relief, dismissing the idea that the Death Eaters have somehow followed Snape into her home and were out to get her. She called out, ‘I’m here!’, and reflected sourly that it seemed like the wizards of the world were conspiring against her to ensure that she could never get her quota of uninterrupted sleep ever again. She walked into the living room and shut the door behind her, mindful of the noise, and sat cross-legged in front of the fireplace. ‘Hello.’ She said. Tiny green flames were burning in the grate, and two speckled faces grinned at her immediately, squashed cheek-to-cheek.

‘Alright, Ala? We thought you weren’t in.’

Alice sighed, ‘I’m alright, yeah. Just tired. I haven’t slept all night.’

Fred wrinkled his brow. ‘How come? Are you sure you’re alright? You… you don’t look too well. Are you sick?’

Alice snorted with a roll of her eyes. ‘Thanks very much. No, I’m not sick. I’ve been… brewing. All night. Downstairs.’

George piped up excitedly, ‘Ooh! Anything good? Do tell!’

She rested her chin on the base of her palm. ‘Just bits and bobs. Some experimental stuff. Failed miserably, the lab’s in a right state. It’s why I didn’t hear you two.’ She suppressed a smirk at this white lie. Oh, if only they knew.

Fred’s eyebrows quirked upwards, and in a careful tone, he asked, ‘Failed miserably? That’s unusual. Are you sure you’re not coming down with something?’

‘I am most definitely not coming down with anything, for fuck’s sake!’ Alice snapped waspishly. The chatter worsened her headache, and she shut her eyes briefly in an attempt to contain her temper. Really, she didn’t have the energy to deal with them and their questions today. ‘And it isn’t unusual for things to go wrong when experimenting. What did you want, anyway?’

The twins shared a look, and Alice could have sworn that she saw Fred mouthing, ‘I think she’s on her period.’ She shot them a nasty look, and George rushed to explain, his voice subdued, ‘We just wanted to see how you were, that’s all. And ask if you need anything. See if you wanted to come over and work on that Shoes-Off Charm maybe, the shop’s pretty quiet today…’

Alice cut in sharply, ‘Not today, no. I’m absolutely knackered. I’ve been working all night and the last thing I want is more work! Even I deserve a bit of rest sometimes, you know!’

Fred threw up his hand in a placating gesture, ‘Whoa, lass! Alright, alright, we get it! What’s up with you today, love? Do you want us to come and help clean up your lab - ‘

Alice shrieked, ‘NO!’ and clenched her fists at her sides. Apparently, Fred and George were hell-bent on pestering her today. They winced at her outburst, growing visibly more confused by the second. She cleared her throat, and continued, ‘I want to be left alone today. But if you really want to make yourselves useful…’

She summoned a piece of paper and a pen, and quickly scribbled a list in her chicken-scratch
handwriting. ‘Here’s a list of ingredients I’m low on. Can’t brew anything until I have them. Just send them over whenever.’ She tore off the page and tossed it in the grate. She needed to get them off her back, and a quick mental calculation told her that she would have to dig deep into her pocket to replace all the ingredients she had used up on Snape’s healing potions. It wouldn’t do any harm for the boys to replace them - after all, he was a fellow Order member, and besides, they never had to know that her so-called ‘experiments’ had nothing to do with their shop stock.

George glanced at the list, looking like a whipped dog. ‘Alright.’ He added quietly, ‘You know, if there’s anything wrong, you can always tell us.’

Alice grumbled, ‘Everything’s fine.’ She wished with all her heart that the twins would just leave her alone. She could read it it from their crestfallen faces that their feelings were hurt, but found that she simply couldn’t care. They would have to get over it and seek comfort from each other this time. She had enough on her plate.

Fred opened his mouth and was about to say something when Alice’s ears pricked up at a creaking sound from above. Scrambling to her feet, she dusted off her knees and said, ‘Right, I have to go. Can’t keep my eyes open. Maybe I am coming down with something. I’ll, erm… speak to you soon.’

Without waiting for an answer, she waved her wand at the fireplace and cut off the connection, ignoring the pang of guilt as she caught a final glimpse of her two best friends, confused and miserable, staring at her as though she had killed a kitten. In a snit, she stomped upstairs to check on her patient, muttering, ‘Not a moment’s peace in this madhouse.’

‘Well?’ Sharon asked, looking up at Barry with hopeful, shiny eyes.

‘No luck.’ He replied as he perched next to her on the fence, which had become their usual meeting spot. ‘But I got these,’ He added quickly, noticing the distress etched across his lady love’s pretty face. He dropped the collection of treats at her feet and fluttered over to stand at her other side as she ate.

‘Thank you.’ She said gratefully, and when she finished eating, she moved closer to Barry, who extended his wing in an offer of comfort and shelter. Quietly, she added, ‘My wizard always returns by morning, or sends me to the big castle if he knows he’s going to be out late. I am so worried!’

‘Don’t worry, my dear’. Barry put his wing around Sharon protectively, and gently prodded the side of her head with his beak. ‘He’ll be back soon, I’m sure. If he doesn’t come back shortly, I’ll go back home and see if there are any of those funny purple things knocking about. I’ll keep you safe.’

‘You will?’ Sharon looked up into Barry’s eyes, breathing, ‘My hero!’

Barry puffed out his chest. ‘But of course! I couldn’t leave you all alone!’

‘Won’t your Human chase me away? She does sound pretty dreadful…’

‘Oh, she is dreadful. But I promise to scratch her eyes out if she causes any trouble. She won’t chase you away, don’t worry. I’d never let that happen!’

Sharon sighed, and turned her head to bury her beak in Barry’s warm neck. Nuzzling it lightly, she said, ‘I don’t know what I’d do without you. Thank you for staying with me all night.’
Barry stroked her gently with his wing feathers, crooning, ‘You’re welcome, Sharon. And if you want, I’ll shit on your wizard’s head. Just so he’ll remember never to lock you out again!’

*** Later In The Evening ***

Alice had spent the day taking short naps and tending to Snape, who was still asleep in her bedroom. Physically, he was recovering incredibly well. He would wake periodically, but when he did, he wasn’t making much sense. Sometimes, he would scream and yell at her. Other times, he would go as far as to proposition her, making lewd comments whenever her hands came into contact with his body.

Most of the time, she ignored him, blaming his delirium. On one particularly memorable occasion, however, he called her over, mumbling that he needed her help desperately. When Alice leaned over him to better hear what he wanted to say, he inhaled deeply, and looking her straight in the eye, whispered, ‘Now, Empress. Be a good little witch and suck my cock, will you?’

She wasn’t sure what had possessed her then. Equally taken aback, intrigued and amused, she replied silkily, ‘You want me to suck your cock, you dirty, dirty man?’

Snape looked at her through hooded eyes. ‘Yessss…’

Tempted as she was to dip her head under the covers and sample the taste of Severus Snape, Alice held back. She placed the tip of her finger on his lower lip, gently tracing its outline, and chuckled when the man shuddered as she slowly slid it down his chin and neck. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what. If you ask me again, in your right mind, I’ll give you the best blowjob of your life. But you’ll have to shag me afterwards. Is that a deal?’

‘Gods, Empress. I’ll give you the best, hardest Slytherin fuck you could possibly imagine.’

‘Good.’ She purred, rising from the bed and walking towards the door. Before she left, she called out from over her shoulder, ‘But first, you’ll have to have a proper long wash.’

His answering smile nearly knocked her off her feet. It completely transformed his face, turning his usual sour demeanour into something different, warm and radiant and utterly attractive. In that moment, he was gorgeous to her eyes.

Seemingly amused by Alice’s expression of wide-eyed surprise, he started laughing, a deep, rumbling sound coming from the depths of his belly. Alice left the bedroom and closed the door behind her then, not entirely sure what had just happened.

Now, as she laid down on the living room settee with an episode of Coronation Street on the television, she mused that perhaps finding out how the Slytherins fuck wouldn’t be such a bad idea. As unlikely as he was to remember this exchange, he had awakened her curiosity, and perhaps she could be persuaded to take him up on the offer. If only to find out if he was as grumpy in bed as he was everywhere else.
Hello again after a long break!
I must explain my absence - I restarted my educational journey and I'm still finding my rhythm, basically. My amazing fantastic wonderful beta, FawkesyLady, also needed a break after her own exams. I am posting this chapter today because my fingers were literally itching to do so, and I miss all your reviews!

From now on, I will continue to try to post one chapter a week, but I can make no promises. I have three assignments due in next week and they have to take the front seat, I'm afraid, but I'll still do my best. The chapters might also be shorter, but this story will probably end up running into hundreds of thousands of words anyway.

Important Information - In this chapter, I am going to introduce another OFC. My beta is American, and so I decided to include a US character largely for her!

From now on, forget all about canon. Forget everything you know. Well, not everything, because I am still going to keep some parts and events of HBP and beyond, but in this fic I let my imagination run wild and so I am going to rewrite history in order to suit my needs. I mean, I have two OCs, and of course they need to have a purpose of some description. ;)

Anyway. Here's the new chapter. Enjoy. :)

Severus blinked rapidly, straining to see in the semi-darkness. He was disoriented, his eyes darting rapidly from side to side, and he perceived that he was in a bed, in an unfamiliar room decorated in warm, outdated shades of yellow and orange. Fixing his gaze on the wall ahead of him, he was greeted by a massive Muggle poster depicting a quintet of smiling young men in daft poses on a blue background. The writing underneath read, 'Backstreet Boys' and Severus scowled at the grinning goons, wondering if this was his own, personal hell.

He looked around the bedroom as much as his stiff neck allowed, taking in his immediate surroundings. The bedroom was sparsely furnished, with a solitary window to his right, hidden behind thick velveteen curtains. Next to it stood a large wooden wardrobe with a matching dresser in the opposite corner, and a quick glance to the left revealed a single bedside table on which stood a jug of water. Severus deducted that the furniture must have been quite old, but was very well cared for a polished to a high shine. Still, it was nothing he could immediately recognise, and to add to his discomfort, there was nothing magical about this place.

The comfortable warmth and silence suddenly became oppressive and deafening, and he rolled over to one side with the intention of escaping this strange household immediately. He tried to prop himself up, but found that his arms could not support his weight. He fell back onto the mattress heavily, groaning as a twinge of pain awoke in his stomach. He found that he couldn’t lift his legs, they would only slide up and down the mattress by a few inches at best. Yes. Definitely hell.

A folded piece of paper on the bedside table caught his eye. He reached out to grab it, struggling to grip it properly with unco-ordinated fingers. With growing frustration, he managed to roll over onto
his back again and held the paper in shaking hands. At first, the crude stokes scrabbled across the page like startled spiders, but with concentration his eye finally divined meaning. It might have been easier to read tea leaves or throw the bones because the handwriting was atrocious. The note read, ‘Gone shop, back soon’. Severus crumpled up the note and stared at the arched ceiling, considering. Obviously, somebody was looking after him, but who were they? He was reluctant to believe they were a friend, but could only continue to wait for Merlin-Knew-What, be it his doom or salvation.

When the door latch clicked unexpectedly, Severus instinctively reached for where his wand should have been. His heart began beating a rampant staccato in his chest as he found himself unarmed, and he held his breath in anticipation, cold sweat breaking out on his back, his senses on high alert.

A petite woman stepped into the bedroom. Ah, Alice Crowley. Bugger. He could barely remember his own name, but it was impossible to forget her. He had suspected before, but now he knew for sure that her life’s ambition was to make his miserable life even more unbearable. She had her hair up in a high ponytail that made her resemble an onion, and wore a red strappy vest and dark denim shorts. In her hands she carried a plate, and approached him warily, never taking her eyes off him, as though he was some kind of dangerous creature.

Severus seethed. He had no idea why she was there, or why he was there for that matter, but he did know that she was the last person he wanted to see. Waspishly, he spat, ‘Get out.’

‘And a very good morning to you too.’ Her tone was surly, but laced with exhaustion and lacked any real bite. Brows drawn together in confusion, Severus took a closer look at the girl’s face. She was heavily made up, with thick layers of concealer and mascara on her eyes, but even with all that product, Severus could see the dark circles beneath her red-rimmed eyes. She looked positively haggard.

Severus looked at her with distrust. His instincts prickled his brain like sharp needles, warning him of potential danger. ‘Who are you?’ He asked, his eyes boring into the witch who looked like, but may well not have been, Alice Crowley.

The witch’s brows shot up in surprise. ‘You really have gone ‘round the bend, haven’t you?’

Severus ground out, ‘Who. Are. You?’

‘Alice Crowley, obviously. Do you know who you are, or shall I have you transferred to the Janus Thickey ward?’ Her voice rose a fraction, taking on a raspy, gritty quality one might expect of a heavy smoker. She thinned her lips into a tight line with downturned corners as she took another step towards him, and he held up a hand to stop her progress.

He looked her up and down with a sneer. ‘Prove it.’

‘Prove what?!’ The witch stopped in her tracks and placed one hand on her hip, visibly agitated.

‘Prove that you are who you’re claiming to be.’ He bluffed, ‘I won’t warn you twice. I am a dangerous man, a Death Eater, and the Dark Lord had trained me himself. You would do well to take this seriously.’

She took a cautious step back, eyeing him with apprehension, her bravado visibly dimmed. Severus was pleased to see the hint of fright in her face. ‘What was your last Potions assignment before the end of term?’ He asked, his eyes boring into her painted face menacingly.

The girl swallowed audibly. ‘Um… Fourteen inches on toxicity of Aconite leaves…’ She paused for a couple of seconds, thinking. ‘Their uses in brewing of poisons, and known antidotes. Did I pass?’
Severus snorted lightly, ignoring her question. ‘I once put Messers Fred and George Weasley in detention for slipping Devil’s Tongue into my tea. How did you retaliate?’

Crowley blushed and stammered, shifting her gaze from side to side. ‘I, erm… um…’

Severus raised an eyebrow. ‘You…?’

‘I - I broke the wards on your personal stores and…’

Severus prompted in a deceptively soft tone, ‘And…?’

She sighed heavily, her posture slumping. Shifting her eyes to the side, she muttered, ‘And let Peeves in.’

Severus relaxed in his certainty that the girl standing before him was in fact truly Alice Crowley. His voice dropped by half an octave, as he settled into the familiar, silky drawl of the superior Potions Master, ever attentive to the most pleasant of duties - disciplining uppity Gryffindors. ‘That, Miss Crowley, is a very serious offence. 1780 Galleons worth of damage that the school had to pick up the tab for. Rest assured that it won’t go… unpunished.’

‘That was AGES ago!’ She shrieked, and the plate she was holding came dangerously close to slipping off her hand. She caught it just as it was about to tip over. ‘Surely you have better things to do than digging up minor misdeeds from ancient history??’

‘Minor misdeeds?’ Severus pinned her with a glare that could curdle milk, his voice rising. ‘Do you truly consider it a minor misdeed to allow an unruly Poltergeist to ransack my personal stores and damage countless precious, or in some cases nearly irreplaceable ingredients? Do you have any idea how much disruption, not to mention expense, your idiocy had caused? Do you realise that your minor misdeed caused a significant and prolonged shortage of essential healing potions in the Hospital Wing??’

He paused for breath, feeling a flush of fury rise up in his face. ‘ Sick students didn’t have access to the potions they needed to stay healthy because of you, Miss Crowley. But of course, I wouldn’t expect an arrogant, dim-witted Gryffindor to understand such difficult concepts as just punishment for pranking a Professor on duty, or respect for personal property, or the idea that some people have had to put a lot of effort into straightening out the results of your minor misdeeds, for that matter.’

He fell back onto the pillows. His nostrils flared, and he was breathing laboriously, realising that this tirade had cost him a lot of precious energy.

Crowley crossed the room without comment and placed the plate on his stomach. ‘I see you’re feeling better.’

Severus looked down at the proffered dish. It contained what looked like a piece of toast, cut into thin strips, and a soft-boiled egg in a dotted egg cup. His brows knit together as he looked up at Crowley, pointing at the food with one finger. ‘What’s this?’ He asked flatly.

‘Eggy soldiers’, She replied, tilting her head to the side at Severus’ disbelieving glare. ‘It’s what sick people eat.’

‘I’m not eating this. It doesn’t even look like food.’ He pushed the plate aside and folded his arms decisively, narrowing his eyes at the ridiculous witch.

Crowley shrugged with apparent indifference. ‘Don’t know what you expected, smoked salmon and cream cheese? With some artisan crusty bread to boot, maybe? Well, you’re not getting any of that.
Don’t eat if you don’t want to. You can starve for all I care.’ She walked to the window and brushed the curtain aside. ‘But if dying was your intention all along, you should have warned me earlier, so I wouldn’t have spent two sleepless nights saving your sorry arse.’

Severus ground his teeth. His brain refused to present him with any fresh memories of how he ended up in this house, and Crowley was the only person who could provide him with answers. From his spot in the bed, he considered the girl, who was muttering lowly as she looked out of the window. He was composing his list of questions and deciding what to ask next when the pitch of her grumbling penetrated his reverie.

‘... He’s shagging her next door, he is. Thought he was in jail… oh bloody hell, I swear if she lets that fucking dog of hers shit on me doorstep again, I’ll- ’

‘BOLLOCKS!’ Crowley turned away from the window and bolted out of the bedroom faster than a Snitch without so much as a word of explanation, leaving the door wide open. Severus stared after her, bewildered, listening to the thumping sound of her footsteps, stomping angrily down the stairs. Not long after, he heard her voice, coming from the outside of the window.

‘WILL YOU CLEAN UP AFTER YOUR FUCKING DOG?!’

A high-pitched, feminine voice replied, ‘MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS YA NOSEY TIT-LESS CUNT!’

Crowley’s voice rose to a furious roar. ‘HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF I WENT AND TOOK A DUMP ON YOUR FUCKING DOORSTEP?!’

Severus, finding that the needs of his stomach outweighed the needs of his dignity, had snuck a bite of toast but the language coming out of the girl made him choke. Suppressing his gag, he wondered if this was Crowley's idea of dinner and a show. She and her neighbour were making enough of a din to wake the dead, and the screeching threatened to make his ears bleed. As he laid there with his hand hovering in mid-air, a new male voice joined the argument, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

‘WILL YOU TWO BINTS SHUT UP! PEOPLE ARE SLEEPIN’ERE INNIT!’

The two harridans paused mid-shout, turning their attention to their new interlocutor. In unison, they began hurling abuse at the idiot, and Severus was only able to make out, ‘GET A FUCKIN’ JOB, YOU BONE-IDLE TWAT!’

After this, the quarrel escalated to a shrieking cacophony of insults, with expletives flying left right and centre. Severus missed most of it, unable to contain the violent fit of laughter that erupted like a first year’s cauldron boiling over after adding too much heat to mooncalf milk. Tears of mirth appeared in his eyes, and he held his trembling stomach, guffawing until the muscles in his face began to hurt.

Alice Crowley really was Jacqueline’s granddaughter, of that he had no doubt.

Crowley came back upstairs some minutes later in a thundering grouch. Severus stopped laughing as soon as he heard her ascend the staircase, and now observed her with only a hint of mild amusement.
hovering around the corner of his lip.

‘Curtain twitching, Miss Crowley?’ He asked. ‘I never took you for a prying type. That performance was… tremendously entertaining.’

The witch huffed and placed a small collection of phials on Severus’ bedside. Gesturing, she commanded, ‘Take these.’

Severus stared at the phials as though they contained dragon dung. Squinting, he read the labels, written in Crowley’s diabolical scrawl - Blood Replenisher, Painkiller and Strengthening Potion. He pronounced, ‘I refuse to imbibe inferior potions.’

Crowley sat down heavily at the foot of the bed and rubbed her eyes with a sigh that screamed of defeat and exhaustion. ‘It’s good stuff, I brewed them myself. You’ve been surviving on these for the past, ahh… thirty-six hours or so. Don’t take them if you don’t want to. I really can’t be arsed to argue with you anymore.’

Grunting dramatically, Severus made a great show of unstoppering the phials and drinking the potions one by one, checking each with a stealthy sniff to ensure that they were what Crowley claimed them to be. Swallowing loudly, he shuddered against the vile taste. He offered a simple, ‘Thank you, Miss Crowley.’ He couldn’t bring himself to go as far as complimenting her work. After all, it was his skills as a teacher, wouldn’t it be like complimenting himself, would it not? He wondered just how far she’d get with the individualised instruction of Apprenticeship. Too bad he refused to take them on, but he had too many cauldrons on the burners as it was.

Crowley turned her head slowly and favoured him with a tight-lipped smile. ‘You’re welcome.’

They fell into an uneasy silence, and soon, Crowley began fidgeting. As she got up to leave, Severus asked abruptly, ‘How long have I been out?’

She leaned against the doorframe, avoiding eye-contact. ‘Oh dear… let me think. You’ve been unconscious last night, all day yesterday, and the night before… It’s nearly noon.’

Severus’ hair stood on end. ‘How… how did I get here?’

Crowley shrugged. ‘You tell me. You just turned up in my kitchen at two in the morning. I assume you must have apparated.’

He swallowed thickly. This was bad. ‘Where is my wand?’ He asked, shifting to sit upright. He had to report to Dumbledore. He had wasted too much time.

‘Downstairs, with the rest of your things. Except the cigarettes. I smoked them.’

‘You’ve gone through my things?!’ Severus spoke up sharply, staring knives and daggers at the witch. ‘You had no right to -’

‘I had to wash your robes.’ She interjected firmly. ‘They were absolutely filthy. You might be happy enough to put on clothes that stink to high heavens and are covered in… stuff, but I will not have such things under my roof. Your possessions are safe. I took none of your money. But I took the fags, because I ran out of tobacco and could not leave you to go to the shop. You were in no state to be left home alone, believe me.’

Severus stared at Crowley for long moments, not knowing what to say. His memories were jumbled up and unclear, but the things he could remember made his skin crawl. He had to know.
‘What happened to me?’

Crowley stood, staring at the carpet beneath her feet. Quietly, she said, ‘They… brutalised you. You were bruised and beaten, and they… ah.’ Severus could see that she was tense, her features pinched in a poor attempt at self-restraint. ‘They… they…’

Severus noticed the tears forming in her eyes, making them look even redder than before. The last thing he needed was her pity, and he was too tired to comfort her. He'd better say something before she started to cry in earnest. He cut in, ‘Enough.’ Slowly, he felt snippets of memories return, and he moved to wedge the floodgates of recall closed, lest he lose his tenuous hold on reality.

‘I cleaned you up and changed your clothes. And dosed you with these.’ She pointed at the empty phials with her chin. ‘I thought you were a goner.’ She admitted quietly.

Severus snorted lightly. ‘Silly girl. I wouldn’t have died. You managed to heal me with basic potions. My injuries probably looked worse than they were.’

‘The damage I could see was bad enough at first, but then… you started to bleed. Heavily. Down there.’

Severus’ expression froze, and his emotional walls slammed into place. Behind them, the tides of shame vied with boiling spots of rage. His mind’s eye presented him with an image of his body, scarred as it was and soiled, laid bare for her to see. He hated her eyes, the eyes that had seen what no student should ever see, and the mind that was now oh so intimately acquainted with his privacy, with his history and the ugliness he carried beneath his woollen robes every day of his life. This girl, who should have been innocent, had torn his dignity into shreds. Death seemed almost preferable to this shame.

He could just imagine what Crowley must have been thinking when she found him. He pictured her, standing above him smugly, sneering down at him in judgement. He could taste her revulsion in his mouth. Did she think he would feel grateful, even beholden to her for her efforts? That she’d get special treatment in his class? Was she going to announce his humiliation to all of her little Gryffindor friends? Was she going to blackmail him into… buying her fags, and Merlin knew what else? He needed to set her straight, immediately.

‘Why do you always dress like a common strumpet?’ Severus hissed, baring his teeth at the girl who had by now managed to compose herself.

She tilted her head to one side, her ridiculous ponytail hovering above her shoulder. ’So you can admire my cracking arse.’

THAT was below the belt. Her face was open, the corners of her mouth turned upwards in what looked like a light, indulging smile. Severus scowled at her, knowing that smile for what it was. Gryffindor deceit.

He looked her up and down, his expression cold, as though he was judging a sample brought to him by a student, cataloguing each and every fault with sharp accuracy. ’I assumed it was to draw away the attention from your pathetically flat chest.’

Crowley inhaled sharply. The sweet smiled disappeared, twisting her features into tight lines of indignation. Pouting, she spat, ‘Bugger off, Professor Snape’, and turned neatly on her heel to leave, muttering, ‘Ungrateful. goat-brained… DUNDERHEAD.’
Severus leaned back with a self-satisfied smirk. The girl's anger realigned his world - it felt right. Very quickly, his pride at his victory withered as her parting words sunk in, and he found that he couldn't tear his eyes away from her as she left. She swung her hips in deliberately languid figure-eights, a witch grown and confident in the power of her fine, nay, cracking arse.

Albus Dumbledore sat behind his mahogany desk, reviewing the contract sent to him by one Tina Tchihende, the newest Defense professor and ex-Headmistress of Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who had consented to come out of retirement and travel all the way from the States to teach at Hogwarts. Tchihende was an extraordinarily powerful witch and a living legend, and although her list of requirements was almost as long as Albus’ beard, the correspondence was promising and Albus looked forward to welcoming her towards the end of August.

If anything, Albus was glad to have found a suitable teacher, especially after last year’s trouble with Dolores Umbridge. He had been somewhat apprehensive at first, wondering if it was strictly necessary to search for a teacher all the way across the pond, but conceded after receiving pressure from Minerva, whose idea it was in the first place - two witches had met at some point during her years in the Ministry and had been in touch ever since, and Minerva was beyond thrilled when Tchihende accepted the job. She spoke fondly of the mischief they got up to many decades ago, and Dumbledore could not help but wonder how he would keep the two women in check.

Despite the good news, the old wizard was deeply troubled and found himself unable to concentrate on the paperwork. He kept glancing nervously at the mantelpiece clock and then at the door, as though by doing that he could make Severus appear. The spy had not been in touch in days now, and all attempts at making contact had been unsuccessful. His Patronus returned with the message undelivered, as did the School owl. The Floo was unresponsive, and subtle enquiries among the Order members revealed that nobody had heard from him. Albus was sick with worry, the knot of anxiety tightening in the pit of his stomach with each passing hour. Severus had never gone so long without so much as a word.

Albus put down his quill and rose from his chair with a heavy sigh. The work that needed doing did nothing to assuage his concerns. Pushing the mountain of parchment to the far corner of his desk, he reached for his bowl of lemon sherbets and popped one into his mouth out of habit. It fizzed and burned his tongue, its acid as repulsive as the fear that enveloped his brain and twisted his guts into tight loops of distress that would not let him rest.

Hands behind his back, he began pacing the room like he usually did whenever his mind was burdened with troubles great and small. The fireplace was a constant distraction as he made his rounds across the patterned rug. His head kept jerking towards it with each flicker of the flames, and the periodic sounds of the crackling wood made him jump and turn only to step back again in disappointment when Severus’ raven head did not appear in the grate.

‘Severus, where are you?’ He thought, sending up a mental prayer to Merlin. ‘Please, give any sign you’re alive. You don’t even have to waste energy on niceties. I’ll take a ‘fuck off’...’

Next to his desk, Fawkes appeared in a cloud of red smoke. Albus trotted up to his perch, his brows drawn in an expression of hopeful anticipation. ‘Any luck?’ He asked, and looked down at his feet sadly when the phoenix shook its head to the negative. ‘I will have to alert the Order... conduct a search...’ He resumed his pacing, his ancient mind reeling with the ramifications. ‘I can’t believe my own foolishness, Fawkes.’
The phoenix chirped, a low, drawn out sound, offering comfort to his life-long friend. Albus stroked his feathered neck slowly, a sketch of a plan forming in his mind. First, he would have to Floo the Headquarters, then he would speak to Minerva. No - he would speak to Minerva first, then the Headquarters. Arthur would need to be notified and asked to see what he could find out at the Ministry, and of course he might have to search for a new Potions professor…

That last thought felt like a Bludger to the head, really driving home the probability that Severus would never return and would need to be replaced. But how was Albus supposed to replace the irreplaceable? He could find a new Potions teacher, but how could he ever find another spy? The chances of victory have never looked so bleak, and he only had himself to blame.

Shoulders slumped, he walked over to the fireplace with the intention to Floo Minerva in her home in Scotland, and nearly jumped out of his skin as the flames in the grate sprung to life violently with a great whooshing sound, changing in colour to the typical green of the Floo network. Eyes wide with anticipation, Albus peered into the fire, but the glint of hope disappeared as fast as it had appeared when the caller turned out to be Alice Crowley.

He cleared his throat, and before he could greet the young witch, she spat, ‘We need to talk.’

Albus replied firmly, ‘I don’t think this is the best moment, Miss Crowley.’

The girl snorted. ‘Yes it is. We need to talk right now, while Snape is sleeping. It’s important.’

Albus’ hair stood on end. Frozen, he felt a parade of sensations wash across his brain in rapid succession. Relief, anxiety, guilt, elation and shock spun and collided inside him, fighting for dominance. Did she really say what he thought she was saying?

He finally croaked out, ‘Come through,’ the only thing he was capable of saying. She nodded, and moments later, she stepped out of the enormous grate with ease, wiping her slippers on the hearth rug.

Dumbledore observed her as she methodically wiped dust off her arms and knees and tidied her hair. Despite his excitement, he was grateful for the few precious moments to arrange his own thoughts, to compose the hundreds of questions he wanted to ask.

‘Is Severus…’ he began, but Miss Crowley cut him off sharply.

‘He knows. You-Know-Who knows about the Essence. And I demand a pay rise.’

Albus paled. ‘What - how?! Miss Crowley, what are you talking about?’

Miss Crowley put her hand on her hip, a picture of teenage sulkiness. ‘I’m not talking, just relaying what Snape told me. Basically, Lord Thingy knows and now we’re buggered.’

Albus walked over to the comfortable chairs by the fire and sat down heavily, gesturing for Miss Crowley to do the same. All of this was terribly confusing. ‘Please sit down, and start from the beginning.’

Miss Crowley fell into her chair gracelessly, as though she had been on her feet for hours on end, and Albus noticed that she looked exhausted and very annoyed, although the latter was not that unusual for the notoriously moody, unlikeable girl.

She sat with her back slumped forward and her knees wide open, resting her elbows on her thighs. ‘Well he turned up at my house, Snape did,’ she began without much preamble. ‘The other night. At two in the morning. He was in a state, and I assumed he had been to the pub and got himself
completely hammered, but then I saw his robes and that ugly mask, and realised he had been with Lord Thingy.’

Albus nodded patiently, gesturing for her to continue.

‘Not going to tell you what they’ve done to him - put it this way, if I could erase those memories, I would. Never seen such brutality in my life. He was screaming and crying and pleading, and mentioned the Essence. He was saying he didn’t know about it.’

Albus straightened in his chair, slipping back into his Commander persona, all cold facts and no emotion. ‘Are you absolutely sure he was referring to the Essence? Did he say anything else?’

Miss Crowley thinned her lips. ‘Oh, he was saying all sorts of weird stuff, but I wasn’t exactly listening because I was too busy saving his life, like. But yeah, he was speaking of the Essence, of that I have no doubt.’

Dumbledore inhaled deeply, keeping his composure. ‘And you didn’t think to inform me earlier, or to have him transferred to the infirmary?’ His tone was accusing, sharp.

The girl held his gaze without so much as a flinch. Her expression changed from one of petty annoyance to that of disdain. ‘Oh yes, yes I did. But I decided that it wasn’t in his best interest to have you anywhere near him. This is all your fault, Dumbledore. You’re remarkably free with other people’s lives. You’ve already ruined mine. Saving his was a considerable effort, and your own peace of mind was at the very end of my immediate priorities.’

A hint of guilt rose up in Albus’ chest, but he refused to let it float up to the surface as he processed the girl’s words. Each one was dripping with hatred, and Albus understood where she was coming from. He only wished that the girl would understand him too - he had to make difficult decisions, ones he would rather not make, but if he was to help Harry Potter fulfil his destiny and end this war once and for all, he had to do what it took. ‘How is Severus?’ He asked quietly, unable to hide his concern.

‘Better.’ Miss Crowley smirked and straightened regarding him smugly. Obviously she could tell that her words had an effect on Albus, and was having a merry old time twisting the knife just that little bit more. ‘He was alert and aware earlier on, but he’s still weak, very weak. Too weak to go back to his duties, if that’s what you’re asking.’

Albus shook his head. ‘No no, of course.’ He continued, ‘I appreciate that he needs to recover, but I hope you realise that if what you told me is true, we are in a very serious situation indeed. You must tell me everything you know.’

Miss Crowley sneered. ‘How touching. On Snape’s behalf, I am ever so grateful for your concern and generosity.’

Albus shot her a hard look, and she cleared her throat, acknowledging the warning. ‘But anyway. I already told you the relevant bit. Everything else is… none of your business, frankly, and nothing to do with the war. Except…’ she pinned him with a steely glare. ‘He was begging, you know. Begging for you to come and help him.’

In his mind’s eye, Albus imagined the scene, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. His heart twisted at the idea of Severus, the brave brilliant boy, reduced to wailing and pleading for help that would not come. Swallowing thickly, he had to look away, unable to look the messenger in the eye. ‘You… seem to care for him, Miss Crowley.’
She snorted, ‘Care? That’s pushing it, but he’s been absolutely lovely. No, honestly!’ Albus raised a surprised eyebrow, noticing the faint blush that spread across the young witch’s cheeks. ‘He’s a handful, Snape is, but nothing I can’t handle. He’s actually alright outside of the classroom. Cracking sense of humour, and thick-skinned. Doesn’t mind a bit of banter either. Top bloke.’

Albus smiled lightly, studying his steepled hands. ‘That’s very true. There’s more to Severus than meets the eye. I assume you that you did not fuss over him too much?’

‘I’m not his nanny.’

A faint chuckle escaped Albus’ lips. ‘I’m sure he appreciated it. He always complains that Madam Pomfrey mollycoddles him too much.’

Miss Crowley crossed her arms decisively. ‘Well, I don’t. But anyway. What do we do about Lord Thingy?’

Her question brought Albus back to the problem at hand. His expression morphed to one of extreme seriousness, and he considered his response for a long moment. ‘If he knows about the Essence, he will do his best to get his hands on it.’

The girl supplied, ‘And if he doesn’t?’

‘Then Severus’ life will be forfeit. It looks like he was very lucky to escape with his life this time.’ Another difficult choice, another impossible decision. ‘Severus cannot know where the Essence is located. If we assume that Voldemort wants Severus to find it and bring it to him, which is likely, then…’

‘I don’t know.’ Crowley interjected, wincing. ‘It looked to me like he had gone to extreme lengths to ensure that Snape would not survive.’

Albus sighed. ‘If Voldemort wanted Severus dead, he would have killed him there and then, believe me.’

Ignoring Miss Crowley, whose expression suggested that she was not entirely convinced, Albus continued, ‘As I was saying, if Voldemort wants Severus to bring him the Essence, we can safely assume that he will not be summoned again for at least a couple of weeks. Even Voldemort knows that missions such as these require time. I don’t know how he knows, but what I do know is that Severus will have to give him something. Solid proof, if he wants to live.’

Miss Crowley’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline, and she stood up abruptly and began to pace around the office, waving her hands in agitation. ‘Well we can’t just give it to Snape to present to You-Know-Who, now can we?! We don’t even know what it DOES! And I don’t necessarily want the fruit of my labour to go to that… that… that DICKHEAD of a Dark wizard!’ She stopped pacing, and after a brief pause added, ‘Innit.’

Nodding thoughtfully, Albus regarded the witch through his half-moon glasses, the corners of his lips drawn in a lopsided smile. ‘I don’t see any other way out of this. You do want Severus to live, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do!’ Miss Crowley threw up her hands, looking at Albus as though he just said something incredibly stupid. ‘He’s an absolute delight and I’d rather keep him as my neighbour. And stuff.’

Albus smirked inwardly, and spoke softly, drawing on his powers of persuasion. He knew very well that Miss Crowley could not care less about the Greater Good and the wizarding world as a whole -
she was far too selfish and immature for that, but the ‘‘and stuff’’ told him everything he needed to know. ‘Then we must do whatever we can to ensure Severus’ safety, don’t you agree?’

‘Yes. But how do you intend to do it? Do I go back home now, and give him the cauldron, and -’

‘No.’ Albus cut her off sharply. ‘Severus must not know that the Essence is in your possession. I must rely on your discretion, Miss Crowley. I want you to produce a sample, a single phial will do, and bring it to me as soon as possible. I will handle it from there.’

‘A sample?’

Albus could see the cogs working at double-speed in the girl’s brain. ‘What’s the point of that?’ She shook her head. ‘Nevermind. Any special instructions? Should I make it so it’s a deadly poison of some description?’

Albus chuckled darkly, ‘If a simple poison could finish off Voldemort, we would have won the war before it even started. No, just bring me the sample, Miss Crowley. Let… Let Voldemort think the blood in it is mine.’

Miss Crowley considered for a moment before sitting back down in her chair and crossing her arms in front of her chest. She grumbled, ‘I don’t think I like the idea of HIM having anything containing my blood. I don’t want to strengthen him.’

A spark of humour lit up Albus’ face. ‘In all honesty, I doubt you could make much difference. Please forgive me, but I must say that in terms of magical power, you are really quite average.’

She grimaced. ‘Oh, thanks. Especially considering that I can knock out several opponents in Defense without breaking a sweat.’

‘There is much more to a wizard’s power than brute force, Miss Crowley.’ Albus leaned forward, favouring the surly witch with a mild smile. She obviously didn’t like his explanation, and replied with a grumpy roll of her eyes. Albus continued, ‘More often than not, it isn’t quite enough to make a witch or wizard great. You will understand it in time, I’m sure, but for now, let me tell you this - there is nothing wrong with being average. What matters is what you do with what you have.’

The girl rested her head in her hand and looked away with an expression of casual boredom at Albus’ little motivational speech. After a while, she said, ‘He’s going to harm me, isn’t he? Thinking the blood is yours.’

‘I can make no promises, Miss Crowley. We both know that the Essence will not be used for good, but I have no idea how it’s going to affect you, if at all. However, its uses are rather limited in its current state, and I doubt that Voldemort would know more about it than we do.’

‘I don’t even know why you wanted me to brew this, you know.’ She muttered, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. ‘The Essence is dangerous. Why didn’t you just destroy that pigging recipe? We wouldn’t have this problem now if you did.’

Albus considered her question, unsure whether or not it was wise to divulge his reasons. Finally, he answered, ‘Initially, I wanted to. But then I decided that it might be useful, and wanted to have it at hand should the need for it arise. You need not concern yourself with my reasons, Miss Crowley. And as for our problem… I had hoped that Tom would never find out. And now that he knows, we just need to deal with it. And if I did not ask you to brew the Essence, you would have nothing to occupy yourself with during the past few months, besides maybe schoolwork. And we both know that you are allergic to that...’
She snorted blackly. ‘I am also allergic to interfering old codgers with long beards and garish robes. And what if What’s-His-Name demands the recipe?’ Miss Crowley looked up at him from beneath hooded lids, obviously unconvincing.

‘One challenge at a time.’ Albus shrugged with apparent indifference, but inwardly, he was asking himself the exact same question. ‘For now, please provide the sample.’

Miss Crowley rose from her chair and walked over to the grate, picking up a spindly object from the mantelpiece and examining it closely with mild interest. ‘I don’t know, Dumbledore. This,’ she gestured widely, ‘is like a house made of matchsticks. Your plan doesn’t hold water. I’ll get you that fucking sample, but if the Death-munching loons come knocking on my door, I will point firmly in your direction.’

‘Nobody will come knocking if you do what you are told.’ Albus’ expression turned serious once more. ‘I need you to co-operate, Miss Crowley. For your own good, and for Severus. The Light cannot afford to lose him. If Harry Potter is to fulfil his destiny…’

Miss Crowley pulled a face, as though confronted by a very unpleasant smell. ‘Harry Potter is a complete moron. I doubt he can tie his own shoe laces. How he’s supposed to kill You-Know-Who is beyond me!’

Albus sighed. ‘Be that as it may, he is the Chosen One and we must do everything we can do help him.’

He was growing tired, feeling every ounce of this new weight on his shoulders. He was truly happy to learn that Severus was alive, but he knew that Miss Crowley could not be fully trusted. Lowering his voice, he said, ‘Remember that should you disregard my instructions-’

‘Yes, yes, I know.’ Miss Crowley turned her back to him with a sour grin. ‘You will have me rot in the deepest pits of Azkaban. I remember.’

Albus’ brows knit together. It was necessary that she remembered not to step out of line, that she felt the threat and heeded his warning.

She said, ‘I have used up my supply of potions ingredients saving Snape. As our employer, I expect you to cover the cost. I am going to send you a list.’

Without further ceremony, Miss Crowley dropped a pinch of Floo powder and stepped into the grate, disappearing from his office. Albus continued staring into the fire for a long time after she left, his relief mixing with new, terrifying anxieties. After what seemed like an age, he turned around to look at Fawkes, who had obviously been following the exchange and was now staring at Albus with open curiosity.

Albus petted the phoenix absent-mindedly. ‘You know, Fawkes, whatever pact or friendship the pair of them have, and wherever it might lead them, it is probably the best thing that could have happened for them. I don’t know if the same can be said for the rest of us…’

Fawkes chirped questioningly, making Albus chuckle. ‘Oh yes. The very fact that Severus had gone to Miss Crowley in his hour of need speaks volumes. Who would have thought?’ The man trailed off thoughtfully, staring into the middle distance. ‘Alice Crowley… young, bad-tempered and a Gryffindor who cannot see past the tip of her nose had somehow managed to gain Severus’ trust. Absolutely bizarre.’

‘I think you’re being hypocritical, Albus.’ A new voice piped up, and Albus looked up at the portrait
of Dilys Derwent, scowling at him from her gilded frame. ‘You speak of forgiveness and second chances, and yet this doesn’t seem to apply to a child whose curiosity and impressionability resulted in committing one single mistake.’ The witch waved her finger. ‘Don’t look at me like that, young man! I remember very well what happened in this office two years ago!’ Dilys crossed her arms, thinning her lips in disapproval.

‘I stand by my decisions and I have to live with them every day, Dilys. I am not a monster.’ A wave of sadness crossed Albus’ face. ‘I only wanted to prevent Miss Crowley from going off the rails.’

Dilys scoffed, ‘By dragging her into a war against her will? Using manipulation, threatening her and resorting to outright blackmail? And the Snape boy, oh, I remember that too. Both times you saw an opportunity and you will continue to exploit them both for as long as you possibly can. My heart breaks for those children!’

Dumbledore averted his gaze and turned his back on the portrait, ending this line of conversation. What was he supposed to say? How could he refute the truth? He stared into the bare ugliness of necessity, the consequences of not taking every opportunity to defeat Tom Riddle. The Muggleborn witch would be just as surely dead if Tom won, so while she never consented for all of this, Dumbledore knew that sooner or later she would be swept up in it. That idea loosened the pang of guilt that twisted in his chest, and he looked down, surprised to see his own fingers fisted over his heart. Miss Crowley was a crude, common witch, but she was in danger, and if she didn't help, she would surely have been killed or imprisoned later for stealing magic.

Alice Crowley and Severus Snape were allies in the fight and at least had one another for all that was worth. What a waste it will be when both unfortunate souls were ultimately sacrificed on the Altar of the Greater Good. Well, Dumbledore would be sure that they would receive public accolades after all was said and done. In fact, the story had wonderful potential for winning over skeptical hearts. He rubbed his hands together, his mind pleasantly occupied with composing bylines for articles in the Prophet, lauding the doomed, tragic heroes he would build up in Alice Crowley and Severus Snape.
Severus woke up after another delightful nap, well rested and strengthened after three days under Crowley’s tender care. He was remarkably free of pain, as though nearly two decades worth of damage had been erased without a trace. Whilst nothing had changed in terms of his outward appearance, even that pesky ulcer on his stomach seemed to have settled. It was quite bizarre.

As nice as it was to laze about in bed all day with a pretty (and moody) Crowley at his beck and call, he knew that it was time to get up and get back to his duties. He had been out of the loop for far too long, and could not afford to waste any more time if he was going to find out about that thrice-damned Essence. Crowley never mentioned it and seemed to remain ignorant, thank Merlin - he would have had to Obliviate her otherwise. The Dark Lord, however, was a different kettle of fish. Severus could not explain the strange twitching of his Dark Mark that seemed to happen periodically. The snake branded into his arm seemed to twist and writhe under his skin, as though searching for something just out of its reach. He was used to it burning or even itching, but this was new, and despite being painless, it was deeply worrying.

Ah, but it did not matter. He would be dead soon anyway, so surely it wouldn’t hurt to stay in bed, warm and comfortable and cared for, for a little bit longer?

He stretched luxuriously, musing over food. He could either get up now or call out and have the girl bring his lunch to bed. Her grudging responses to his demands amused him to no end - the previous day he had happily indulged in making her re-brew his cup of tea until it resembled an acceptable beverage, and by the time he had sent it back for the sixth time, she looked just about ready to tip the tea over his head. Really, she was a never-ending source of entertainment.

Chuckling lightly to himself, he remembered how she walked into the bedroom last night with a thin roll-up hanging out of the corner of her mouth and a carrier bag swinging off her wrist. In her usual cantankerous manner, she proclaimed, ‘Here. Got you an Indian takeaway. If chicken korma isn’t good enough for your poncey tastes, then I’m afraid that’s your problem.’

What she did not know was that although Severus rarely indulged in a curry, it was one of his all-time favourite foods, and he really would rather not sample any more of her dreadful cuisine, so her thoughtfulness on both accounts was greatly appreciated. Still, he was eager to bait the short-tempered witch, and turned up his nose at the curry, skillfully hiding the fact that his mouth had watered at the very idea of a delicious, creamy, sweet korma. He had expected her to stomp out of the bedroom then, leaving him to enjoy his meal in comfortable solitude, but instead she dished up and sat at the foot of the bed to eat.

Severus wasn’t sure how they ended up chatting away about politics and the current affairs. Crowley
had proven herself to be quite switched-on and opinionated, and an interesting interlocutor to boot. Ever the devil’s advocate, Severus would often take up the opposing view to encourage discussion, and found that Crowley’s debating skills were sound, if lacking in refinement. She defended her opinions with solid arguments punctuated with swearwords appropriate only for sailors, and seemed to consider it necessary to highlight her point by jabbing her fork in his direction, a piece of chicken breast stuck to its tip. He discovered that she was surprisingly bright for a Gryffindor, although her cynicism was astonishing. By the time Severus finally drove her out of the bedroom with a well-aimed insult, he realised that her company was truly tolerable in moderated doses. Even the stomping and swearing did not bother him anymore - she had called him an arsehole, a dickhead, a tosser, and a multitude of other, more colourful names, and yet still he knew that she’d come back later and they would both act as though nothing had happened until the next round.

And now, it was time to leave.

Alice had just finished tidying up her basement lab when she heard footsteps on the staircase. Smiling lightly to herself, she asked without turning around, ‘Feeling better?’

It had occurred to her earlier that day that Snape was going to be gone soon. He’d test his legs and be off like an antelope calf chased by a lion, like the one she saw on ‘Wildlife on One’ reruns the other night. It never ceased to amaze, the depths of miracle a few days rest and care could do, but frankly she was ready for a proper lie-in herself, something that proved impossible with the demanding Potions Master in the house, making messes and needing things, deprecatory and incorrigibly grumpy. Heart sinking, it hit her that she was going to miss the snarky bastard.

‘I am much better today. Thank you, Miss Crowley.’

Alice did a mental eye-roll at the honorific, and turned around to see Snape, standing in the doorway and looking around with an unreadable expression.

‘Well, come in then!’ She beckoned with a tilt of her head. ‘I’m sure you’ll find plenty of things to criticise in ‘ere, so best to get it over and done with, aye?’

Alice could have sworn that Snape snorted quietly before stepping into the lab. Indeed, he looked much healthier and stronger. The bruises on his face had faded almost completely, and if it wasn’t for the loungewear he was wearing, he would look just as powerful and imposing as he usually did. As she took in the sight of him alive and well, a sense of pride mingled with satisfaction. She brought him back from the brink of death single-handedly. It had to count for something.

Snape betrayed no body-consciousness in spite of being robbed of the usual layers of black wool. The transfigured clothes left little to the imagination as he casually looked around the workbenches, peered into cauldrons and inspected the various jars and phials aligned in neat rows on the countertop. Having sat herself down on her stool, Alice shamelessly stared at him as he walked around, ogling his bare midriff and the smattering of black hairs on his belly. Without realising, she licked her lips lasciviously at the sight of the hint of pubic hair peeking out of the outrageously low waistband, knowing precisely how well endowed he was.

‘What are these, Miss Crowley?’ He asked, turning his head to face her, his eyebrow arched in mild interest.
The question broke her out of the very pleasant fantasy of what would have happened had she agreed to suck his cock, and she craned her neck to see what had piqued his interest. He stood in front of one of the benches, pointing at a row of long phials filled with brightly coloured, glittery potions with one finger. One long, elegant finger that could surely work wonders…

‘Oh. Um.’ Alice stammered before hopping off her stool and trotting over to where he stood. ‘These are Christmas potions.’ She rushed to explain at Snape’s questioning look. ‘Limited edition. For Fred and George’s shop. I know it’s only August, but I thought I’d get a head start, and…’

‘What do they do?’ He picked up one phial and held it up for closer inspection, a thick white liquid with flecks of glittering green and gold particles.

‘This one? Oh, this one is fairly harmless, it makes your semen sparkly and gives it a nice sweet minty flavour.’

Snape whipped around sharply, staring at Alice as though she’d grown a second head. ‘Trite.’ Visibly discomfited, he turned away to glare at the rest of the samples. ‘And these?’

Alice’s mouth stretched into a wide smile, and she started picking up the different phials, explaining their properties in graphic detail with unabashed enthusiasm worthy of any inventor eager to showcase her achievements. ‘This one gives you a Christmas Tree-shaped rash on your belly, a really nasty one.’

Unmindful of the disgusted fascination etched across Snape’s face, she continued, ‘This one is called “Winter Storm”. It makes you shoot snowflakes out of your cock. And this one, ah, this one is also fairly innocent, it just makes your nose glow red. This one makes your poo look like a yule log - a nice nod to our neighbours on the continent, don’t you think? This one makes you grow antlers, this one gives you pine-scented pubes, and this one, oh, I am so proud of this one!’

She held up a golden phial, ‘This one is called “Jingle Balls”. It makes your testicles jingle to the tune of…’

‘Enough already!’ Snape’s eyes had been growing increasingly wider with each pronouncement, but now he jumped back, positively repulsed. ‘Put them away, Crowley! I don’t want this… this… madness to go anywhere near my person!’

‘What a shame,’ She replied liltingly, happy to hear that he had dropped the honorific. ‘I was just going to ask if you’d like to be my test subject. Oh well!’

‘Not in a million years.’ He replied gruffly, glaring at the fruit of Alice’s ridiculous imagination with obvious distrust. ‘How you came up with these, I don’t even want to know. I assure you, however, that I will assign you detention for each and every one I find on Hogwarts’ grounds!’

Before Alice could reply, Snape turned his attention to a solitary cauldron discarded in the corner. He peered into it, brows drawn together in curiosity. He pointed at the blackened, melted cauldron. ‘And this?’

Alice had hoped that he wouldn’t notice the evidence of her failure. No such luck - this man could spot an error from miles away. Shoulders slumped, she walked towards him, the crushing sense of defeat washing over her once more, obliterating her good mood. ‘This is a potion I tried to make when you were out. Erm. I kind of failed.’

‘I can see that.’ He scraped up a small amount of the dried up tar-like substance from the bottom of the cauldron and rubbed it between his fingertips. ‘Interesting. May I ask what potion it was?’
Although if it was anything like what you’ve just showed me, perhaps it is for the best that you failed.’

‘It was a potion called the Zaragozian Elixir. It’s supposed to be very good with nerve damage.’

Snape froze, his eyes fixed on the wreckage. ‘Where did you find the recipe?’

Alice looked at him innocently. ‘Fred and George found that old potions book and brought it to me. They do that sometimes. Living alone gets boring and lonely, so they bring me stuff to amuse myself with.’

‘May I see the book?’

‘Sure. Right here!’ Alice jogged over to one of the cupboards and presented Snape with a slim, leather-bound volume. It was tatty and obviously ancient, the leather cracked in places and the writing on the cover almost completely faded.

Snape quickly plucked the book out of her hands and opened it, skimming the contents until he found the recipe he was looking for. He began reading greedily, his nose almost brushing against the yellowed pages, his eyes darting rapidly from side to side. Alice decided to let him read in peace, and moved to pick up the mangled cauldron, but Snape stopped her by raising a hand.

‘When did this happen?’ He pointed at the tar-like substance.

Alice wrinkled her brows, straining to remember. ‘After I dropped the pine needles… no, after I added the castor oil. The stench was horrendous.’

Snape nodded thoughtfully. Alice could not help but feel a little embarrassed. She had never let him see her botch a potion, not even when she was a barely literate first year. She did not have to be reminded of how merciless he could be in his judgement, and she rushed to defend herself. ‘I’m sure I followed the recipe to the letter, but I was so tired, and this potion is quite complicated… I don’t know where I went wrong,’ She finished lamely, knowing that he would begin his verbal dressing-down shortly. And he would be right.

‘I think I know.’ He said, and her eyes widened in curiosity. ‘You used Scots Pine needles, did you not?’

Alice nodded, and a flash of satisfaction flickered across Snape’s eyes. He explained, ‘Scots Pine needles are the standard ingredient used in most potions today, but this particular recipe calls for Swiss Pine needles, which were far more popular centuries ago. The recipe does not specify the exact type of pine needles needed, as is the case with many other ancient potions where instructions are often vague. In school, the instructions are adapted to our modern times. Working individually with original texts requires contextual knowledge.’

Alice didn’t know what to say. She stared at him in wonder before turning around abruptly and leaning on the workbench behind her, processing his words. Really, she couldn’t have known, and now she could not help but wonder what else she may have missed in recipes that were old and held unspecified assumptions.

She heard him move. He came to stand close behind her. Leaning in, he spoke softly over her shoulder, ‘You are a very talented potioneer, Miss Crowley, but there is still much for you to learn.’

His warm breath tickled Alice’s ear, and she shuddered, acutely aware of his strong, lean body inches away from her own. Swallowing thickly, she replied, ‘I would love to find out what else you can teach me, Professor.’
He inhaled sharply and stepped back, causing Alice to turn around and look at him. He was tense, his fists clenched tightly by his sides, his dark eyes glittering with something intimidating and unspeakably exciting.

Long moments passed, each second stretched out to infinity before he clutched the slim book to his side and turned around sharply, making his way towards the door with a grunt.

‘Er, Snape!’ Alice trotted up behind him and poked him sharply in the upper arm, making him stop. ‘The book. It’s mine.’ She held out her hand, tapping her foot impatiently.

‘I am keeping it.’ He replied gruffly and held it tighter to himself, gripping it possessively. ‘I’ve been looking for it for a long time. These potions are far too complicated for you. Now get out of my way, Crowley. Where are my clothes?’

Alice giggled inwardly - so it was ‘Crowley’ again, huh? Meanwhile, her greedy little brain was presenting her with all the things she could get in exchange for this old tatty book. Oh, this was delicious.

‘You’re not having it. Bloody freeloader. Besides, these wards won’t let you take anything out of my house without my permission. And I’m not letting you keep it. Not for nothing, anyway.’

Snape bared his teeth, a little vein appearing on his temple like it did every time he was about to lose his temper. Alice could have squealed in delight - he was so pretty when he was angry.

He ground out, ‘What do you want, Crowley?’

Alice tapped her upper lip in mock-thoughtfulness, pretending to consider for longer than necessary, knowing that she was testing his patience. ‘Hm. Well, let me think… I used up an awful lot of my potions and ingredients on you…’

Snape interjected, ‘Fine, I’ll get you the fucking ingredients. Just say what you need.’

‘Oh no, you don’t have to.’ Alice smirked mischievously. ‘I already told the twins to re-stock my supplies, and then I went to Dumbledore and told him the same, so essentially I’ll be getting twice as much as I’ve lost and then some!’

‘And you dare call me a freeloader?!’ Snape called out, a hint of barely-suppressed humour in his voice. ‘How very Slytherin of you. I’m impressed.’

Alice shone like the sun, basking in the warmth of his praise. ‘A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do!’

Snape chuckled, then turned serious again. ‘Indeed. Now seriously, what do you want?’

‘Potions Weekly. And Monthly. And Quarterly. All the ones you have and all the future ones. Read them first then bring them to me.’

‘Deal.’ Snape replied. ‘Freeloader.’

‘Well, I’m not going to pay for a subscription. A Galleon here, a Galleon there… it all adds up, donnit?’

‘It does indeed.’ Snape began ascending the staircase and Alice followed, excited to finally get her hands on a never-ending supply of the trade journal she had coveted for Merlin knew how long.
‘Oh, and one more thing.’ She said when they reached the top of the stairs. ‘You’ll show me how to brew all these potions. Properly. Just so I know how to treat your damage in the future.’

Snape fell silent for a long moment, staring into the middle distance in consideration. Finally, he pronounced, ‘Fine.’

Alice clapped her hands. ‘Excellent.’

A deal firmly in place, the two made their way to the kitchen.

‘WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, CROWLEY?!’

Snape roared, red-faced with righteous anger, gripping a bundle of black wool in his fist. ‘WHAT IN THE NAME OF CIRCE POSSESSED YOU TO DO THAT?!’

‘They were filthy!’ Alice cried defensively. ‘I had to wash them!’

‘In ninety degrees, no less!’ Snape tossed the bundle sharply onto the table and resumed pacing around the kitchen like a vexed lynx. ‘Very clever of you, very clever. What the fuck were you thinking?!’

Alice glowered at the discarded clothes. How unfair. So she had washed his woollen clothes on a ninety degree cycle. How was she supposed to know that they would shrink? She didn’t own any wool herself - wool was for posh poncey gits, something she was most definitely not. She only wanted his clothes to be nice and clean for him to wear. His ungratefulness was scandalous.

The git in question continued his pacing, muttering something unpleasant and undoubtedly directed at her - the poor, innocent angel who only had the best of intentions. For the umpteenth time, he picked up his ruined trousers and held them up for inspection. They would be a perfect fit for Flitwick, no doubt, but there was no way that they would fit Snape’s long form. Oops.

‘Thankless twat.’ She grumbled, calculating whether or not it was worth turning on the waterworks just yet. Not that he’d care, the heartless bastard. After all she’s done for him…

Snape sighed and ran a hand through his hair. ‘For fuck’s sake, Crowley, what am I going to do with you?’

‘I can think of a thing or two,’ she muttered under her breath.

Snape did not seem to have heard that. He flicked his wand and transfigured his borrowed loungewear into a pair of black slacks and a white long-sleeve shirt. ‘I’m going now.’

Alice groaned inwardly. His delicious midriff was now gone, his sharp hip bones and the hint of abs obscured by the crisp white fabric. How utterly unfair. And now he was going, leaving her all alone. Prick.

She turned up her nose, her posture radiating indifference. ‘Fine, bugger off then. I’ve had enough of you.’ After a second she added, ‘And don’t forget my journals.’

‘Go fuck yourself, Crowley.’ He replied, stuffing his possessions into his pockets. ‘I’ll expect my tea to be brewed correctly from here on out. Or there will be hell to pay.’
‘Is that a promise?’ Alice piped up, her eyes glittering with excitement.

Snape rolled his eyes and shook his head. After sending a last scowl her way, he turned neatly on the spot and disapparated, leaving Alice alone again.

In the late evening, Alice fell asleep in her bed for the first time in days. She had worked tirelessly all day in an effort to drown out the silence, and had caught herself listening out for the sound of Snape’s voice numerous times. It was odd, not having him around, not being called to his side every half hour. She had got so used to him, and his absence was far more irritating than his presence ever was.

Despite her reservations, she deliberately chose not to wash his pillowcase, and found that the world did not end when she laid her head down and buried her face in it to inhale his lingering scent, wondering if they would ever share a bed. She fell asleep easily that night, safe in the knowledge that the object of her rapidly developing affections would soon darken her door again.

Severus laid in his very own bed, one arm tucked behind his head. He kept glancing at the clock and out of the window, waiting for the light in Crowley’s bedroom window to disappear. It was strange to be back within the familiar four walls of his home, without the comforting sounds of her bustling about downstairs.

Eleven o’clock. The light was still on. What was she doing? Severus pictured her, reading in her bed with a cigarette between her teeth, or putting the washing away. He wondered if she felt as strange now as he did. Or maybe she was relieved to be rid of him? Far more likely. Or was it?

His eyes darted to the bedside cabinet and the small phial he had placed on top. He had stormed into Dumbledore’s office demanding explanations, and came out with this.

He picked up the phial and held it up. He had stared at it for hours in awe and wonder - the legendary Dark Essence, right in front of his very eyes. This utterly fascinating liquid was not only the key to his own survival, but also a thing of beauty - a dangerous, morbid beauty that would soon find its way into Lord Voldemort’s hands. Severus’ black eyes widened in avarice. He caressed the phial with his fingertips, allured and repulsed by this treasure. It seemed to swirl around the phial lazily as though it had a will of its own, enticing and gleaming, promising and threatening. He heeded Dumbledore’s warning and stopped himself from opening it. Merlin knew what would happen if he dared.

His Mark twitched again, the snake gliding smoothly under his skin, stretching, reaching out for what, he did not know. The best explanation he came up with was that it was the Dark Lord’s way of checking if his servant was still alive. The Mark was an old, nasty piece of Dark magic, and even Severus himself, well-versed in the Dark Arts as he was, had not yet uncovered all of its secrets.

Half eleven. Her window was still bright. Did she ever sleep?!

Severus put the phial back on the bedside table and stared at the ceiling, wishing that she was here,
sitting at the foot of his bed, making conversation. Technically there was nothing stopping him from going out to town and picking up a takeaway and then turning up at her door - nothing except for his pride and propriety, the latter massively frayed by now. He could no longer see her as merely a student. Severus figured that this… alliance, or whatever it was, was something he held dear, and despite the fact that each one of his visits bred more questions than answers and put his integrity into question, he could not imagine letting it go.

Being around her felt as natural as breathing. She was bitter and spiteful, thick-skinned and rude. She dished out one insult after another, but never mocked his appearance, never made fun out of his scars or his damned nose. Severus snorted, knowing full-well how ridiculously vain he was sounding even to himself. He knew he was no oil painting, but when he tested the waters, she didn’t move away, didn’t seem repulsed. Perhaps the wine-induced attraction from weeks ago wasn’t so wine-induced after all.

And now he missed her presence.

How utterly daft.

Midnight. Severus looked out of the window once more, having forgotten about the time. The window was now dark, and he waited for another ten minutes before walking out of the house and padding softly across the street towards her front door. There, he began searching for holes in her wards, aware of the new life debt in his collection. He strengthened the existing protection charms and added new ones of his own invention, weaving an intricate net that would ensure her safety and inform him of any danger. By the time he was finished, Crowley’s house could not have been made any safer save for making it Secret-Kept. So well protected she was that even the Dark Lord himself would have a hard time disturbing the sweet girl’s peace.
In for a Knut, In for a Galleon

Chapter Notes

Alright folks, we have come to the end of Part One, but this story isn't over! ;)

I'm kind of glad that this part is over. I can now move on with the plot and see what happens when our couple arrive at Hogwarts. As always, massive thanks to my wonderful beta, FawkesyLady. She's just amazing, and she is currently spoiling me with a lovely Christmas fic called 'Trahe Me, Post Te' which you should totally read if you haven't already.

Alright, enjoy the chapter, and don't forget to let me know what you think!

Spinner’s End was a bleak and miserable place, where greenery and trees were few and far between among the rows of identical terraced houses. Sharon perched comfortably in one of those rare trees, one that she had claimed as her own ever since she arrived years prior, and was waiting for Barry to come back. He had been gone for a long time, and Sharon was growing impatient, since he had promised to take her out on a rendez-vous among the factory ruins, where a lot of tasty prey could be found. His insufferable Human had sent him out to deliver mail in the early morning. By now, the sun was high in the sky and Barry was nowhere to be seen.

Sharon had observed the Human in question in passing on a number of occasions, and her owl intuition told her that she was a truly infernal character. Unlike her own human-pet, who was elegant, gentle and courteous, Barry’s yellow-haired ape was ill-bred and noisy, with no consideration for owlish naptimes. Barry, bless his tortured soul, complained about her frequently, and if his recounts of the terrible treatment he had suffered were to be believed, she was truly the worst kind of Human-pet an owl could possibly keep. Sharon snorted delicately, wondering why he even bothered to stay. Surely an owl as lovable and kind-hearted as Barry would have no trouble finding a loving Human somewhere else.

The pervasive heat wave that held Greater Manchester in its tight grip for most of August had finally remitted after a heavy summer squall treated Cokesworth to a hard rain reminiscent of the hosing down Barry had to endure weekly, and Sharon privately thought the grimy town could have used another once over. As such, the day was ideal for napping. Shielded from the shining sun in her little spot on the branch, Sharon had the most perfect vantage point, overlooking her and Barry’s respective territories. She was more than happy to look after his kingdom when he was away - it simply would not do to allow a rogue owl to come and steal their prey now, would it? Ever the picture of statuesque beauty and patience, Sharon continued to wait.

At long last, she spotted him, a small dot on the horizon growing increasingly larger as it flew towards her at neck-breaking speed. Soon he came into view, flapping his enormous wings with feathers spread like silky fans, cutting through the air with strength worthy of a thestral as he made his way home. In his beak he carried a thick brown envelope, and he only shot Sharon a quick glance of acknowledgement as he began circling the estate, initiating his descent. Judging by this, Sharon could tell that he was carrying a missive of high importance, his entire concentration narrowed to delivering it swiftly and safely.

She was glad to see him return, as she had been growing bored. She began grooming her feathers
impatiently, wanting to look her best. It wouldn’t be appropriate to let him think that she had been sitting here and minding his business so passionately. Or worse - that she had been missing him. It would only be appropriate to appear nonchalant, to keep him on his talons. After all, she was a refined owl who could not afford to appear too easy to get, was she not?

After a last sharp turn, Barry swooped down and flew inside with the accuracy of an arrow, choosing to enter via the window rather than the wide-open door, presumably to show off his skill and precision. Sharon chuckled under her breath, not at all fooled. This owl had all the grace of a blast-ended skrewt. Only last week, she had talked him into finding her a snake, and the poor sod had gone out hunting, not knowing that he would be hard pressed to find such a specimen in this area. He had returned triumphant some time later, carrying what appeared like an old, deflated bicycle tyre in his beak, and dropped the sad piece of rubber at her feet, pronouncing it an enchanted snake that was eating its own tail. Sharon struggled not to break out in squawks of unbecoming laughter at the memory - Barry was dafter than daft, but she guessed that it was part of his undeniable charm.

As she checked her feathers again, ensuring that they were as flat, shiny and beautiful as possible, a sudden noise made her jump and take to the air in surprise. Distressed, she rotated her head towards the source of the commotion just in time to see Barry as he flew out of the house like a projectile missile, riding on the bow-wave of a barely human shriek, so piercing that it rattled windows throughout the project. Eyes wide and glowing, he almost broke the sound barrier in his bid to escape, chased by the head-splitting sound.

‘HE DID WHAT????!!’

Alice entered the Headmaster’s office unceremoniously and without invitation, like a stink bomb catapulted inside a classroom window by a rogue student hell-bent on causing vandalism and disruption. Like Caligula poised for attack on Neptune, she stalked towards Dumbledore’s desk, bent at the waist, clutching a rolled-up envelope menacingly. Her scowl twisted her features with repressed rage, a rictus of unrestrained fury just waiting for a target to present itself. Her hands clenched into fists and a whole body tremor warned any with eyes to see that her control was as tenuous as the gossamer strands of a spider’s web that had caught a prey rather larger than the creature intended. In a fit of pique, she crossed the remaining distance between herself and the Headmaster in a few short strides and tossed the shiny new badge that Barry had delivered earlier that day onto the desk, where it skipped like a stone thrown at water with a loud clinking sound.

Pinning the old wizard with a glare worthy of a homicidal maniac, she growled, ‘Head Girl?! Are you INSANE?!’

Dumbledore looked at her through his half-moon glasses, smiling beatifically as though he did not understand the reason behind her anger. ‘Ah, Miss Crowley. My mental faculties are doing just fine, although your concern is appreciated. How may I help you today?’ He steepled his fingers on the desk’s surface and lifted his eyebrows in casual interest. ‘I see that you received your badge?’

‘What *are* you playing at?!’ Leaning forward, she placed both hands on Dumbledore’s desk and spread out her fingers in her best Professor Snape impression. She hissed, ‘I can’t be Head Girl! I don’t want to be Head Girl! Is this your idea of revenge?!’

Unperturbed by her attempt at intimidation, Dumbledore pushed his bowl of lemon drops in her
direction. ‘Lemon drop?’ He asked, and shrugged habitually as she declined with a shake of her head. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, Miss Crowley. Why would I wish to exact revenge?’

‘Because I know what you’re like, that’s why!’ She spat, wishing that she could pick up that stupid bowl of stupid lemon drops and smash it into his stupid face. ‘No good deed goes unpunished.’

The Headmaster leaned back in his chair and began rolling his thumbs relaxedly, a facsimile of a good-natured smile plastered across his mouth. ‘I am afraid that you’ve got the wrong end of the stick, Miss Crowley. Head Girl is an important role and a great honour, and I had hoped that you would rise to the challenge. I am sorry to see that it is not the case.’

Baring her teeth, Alice banged her fist on the desk. ‘I know this is just another one of your twisted schemes. And what exactly am I supposed to do with this great, unsolicited honour? And what’s next, eh? Filch teaching Charms?’

Dumbledore chuckled in reply, causing Alice to inhale sharply. His dismissive attitude only fanned the flames of her fury, and she ground out, ‘The other students hate me. The teachers hate me. I’m not doing this.’

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side. ‘Nobody hates you, Miss Crowley, please, do not exaggerate. I admit that the staff were a little… surprised when I announced you as the new Head Girl in the meeting last night, but we eventually agreed that this is an excellent opportunity for you to come out of your shell, so to speak. What’s more, we hope that your new rank will motivate you to make more effort in your classes.’

Alice’s voice was laced with desperation as she left his desk and began pacing around, searching for a way out of this madness. ‘How can you expect me to cope with school work, my job, the Essence, and now this as well? Why can’t somebody else do it? Cho Chang is an excellent student and very popular, surely she deserves the role far more than I?!’

‘Miss Chang is indeed very bright and popular, but she… is not in the right emotional state to carry out the Head Girl duties. Yes, Miss Crowley, she is still grieving, and for that reason I would rather not place any more responsibility on her shoulders. She is going to remain a Prefect.’

Her reply died on her tongue as he held up one hand.

‘My decision is final. Whatever you might think of me, please try to not look at this situation with such negativity. For all you know, this might turn out to be a wonderful experience.’

The shock to Alice’s system was too great to bear. Feeling her chest constrict dangerously, she fell back into the chair behind her, taking in small, quick breaths and burying her head in her hands, her escape routes cut off by the devil in disguise before her. ‘This isn’t fair.’ She sobbed, unable to control the shaking of her body.

‘Miss Crowley… Alice. Are you alright?’

She winced at this attempt at familiarity. This kind, grandfatherly persona was unsettling. She would appreciate it a lot more if he did not try to cover up his callousness, at least not around her. She looked up at him with hollow eyes that glittered with unimaginable hatred, her eyelashes clumped together by the fat tears, her mascara spread all around her cheeks. She shook her head to the negative in disgust and disbelief, the corners of her thinned lips pointed downwards, as though the man standing before her reminded her of a heap of rotting meat.
Dumbledore sighed heavily. ‘I know this is a lot to ask of you, but there is no other way. You will carry on working on the Essence in a small lab attached to your bedroom. You will patrol the corridors, and you will extend a helping hand to any student who might need it.’

Alice’s breathing quickened. She let out a quiet whimper, her eyes widening in terror as she processed the job description, each word more horrifying than the last.

‘You will be working closely with the staff, the Head Boy and the Prefects to ensure that the school runs smoothly. In many ways, you will be the link between the student body and the Professors. Twice a week, you will spend your lunch break in the library, where you will assist younger students with their homework. You will also check up on first year Gryffindors and help them if necessary - many first years tend to get very homesick in the first weeks of term.’

Alice leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, searching for calm. She could feel another, fresh wave of tears coming on, and fought hard against it, determined not to humiliate herself like this. Nothing could be done about the overwhelming, all-consuming sense of panic that twisted her guts into tight knots, or the weight on her chest, threatening to crush her lungs.

Dumbledore continued. ‘Your attendance will be mandatory at all Quidditch matches, where you will help to police the crowd. You will carry out chaperone duties during Hogsmeade trips. You will assist with decorating the school for Christmas and other holidays, and you will do anything else that’s asked of you in order to help the school and its students.’

If there was a God, he was a monster - a monster who had abandoned Alice in her hour of need. Abruptly, she stood up, ready to fight like a mother-dragon, having marked the Headmaster as her eternal enemy. ‘You bastard!’ Her voice rose to a furious roar. ‘You utter twat! Evil fucking scumbag, why don’t you just fucking die already?!’

Alice’s outburst was met by a choir of gasps and yelps coming from the gallery of portraits on the nearby wall, some of them covering their mouths and clutching their pearls, others scowling at her in outrage. Soon, all hell broke loose with the painted witches and wizards yelling over one another, a cacophony of voices quick to express their censure.

‘How unbecoming!’

‘Have you heard this?!”

‘Such disrespect!”

A snide, dusty voice broke out amid the chaos. ‘Well, well, well!’

The attention of everybody in the room, living and dead, shifted to the tall bookcase on top of which sat the Sorting Hat, scowling down at Alice through its ancient leather folds. ‘Isn’t this the young Alice Crowley? Oh, but of course - I would recognise this lack of manners anywhere. Unfortunately, I see that nothing had changed. How very disappointing.’

Alice blushed bright red, narrowing her grey eyes at the Hat. In for a penny, in for a pound. Placing her hand on her hip, she bellowed, ‘And what do you want, you mouldy old bag?! Haven’t you been eaten by moths yet?!”

The Hat’s point shot up towards the ceiling before curling downwards in a slow, exaggerated motion. It seemed to consider the seething witch carefully before uttering, ‘I see that you had managed to rid yourself of the lice. An improvement, I suppose. Your nasty attitude, however, seems to remain intact!’
Alice ground out, ‘I. Didn’t. Have. Lice.’

The Hat chuckled darkly. ‘Oh, but you did. Trust me, I shudder at the very memory. It took me a long time to free myself of them after your head darkened my brim.’

This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Alice trotted over to the bookcase and grasped its edges in a white-knuckled grip. Like a woman deranged, she began shaking it violently, growling at the top of her lungs like a banshee.

‘I’LL FUCKING GET YOU! COME DOWN HERE, YOU MANKY OLD DISHCLOTH, AND I’LL FUCKIN’ SHOW YOU!’

The forceful jiggling of the bookcase caused the Hat to slide dangerously close to the edge. Alice’s mouth stretched into a wide, cruel smile of excited, morbid anticipation. Like an acromantula waiting for its victim to fall into its trap, her eyes flew wide with wild savagery, her hands ready and itching to tear the pestilent artifact into a million pieces.

‘ALICE CROWLEY!!!’

Dumbledore’s deafening voice reverberated around the office, piercing through wood and stone, shaking the castle down to the foundations.

The portraits covered their ears, some leaving their frames in a rush to seek quietude somewhere else. Fawkes, startled by the outburst, covered his head beneath his wing. Alice froze, abruptly snapping out of her fury. She turned around with eyes as wide as saucers. Dumbledore was in the middle of the room, his spine stretched to his full height, a thunderous scowl plastered across his face.

The saintly smile had bled from his face, and he took a half-step towards her, jabbing his finger in her direction as he said, ‘I have been lenient with you for far too long.’

The Headmaster towered over her, powerful and frightening. Alice swallowed against the lump that had formed in her throat, knowing that this time she had gone too far. Damn and blast, why could she never keep her mouth shut when appropriate?!

‘As Head Girl, you will be held to much higher standards. I will not tolerate such deplorable behaviour in this school. Twenty points will be taken from Gryffindor, and for the first six weeks of term, you will spend every Wednesday evening in the greenhouses. You may use this kind of vile language in your own home, but in this castle, you will behave like a civilised person.’

Alice, shocked into silence, stared at Dumbledore and concentrated on breathing steadily in an effort to contain the hysteria that simmered beneath the surface. Everything about Dumbledore’s demeanour suggested that she was now treading on very thin ice and that his patience had now reached its end. Like a rat under a kneazle’s gaze, she could only nod, not daring to argue any further, not daring to move a muscle.

Dumbledore stopped scowling, but his expression was still hard as he said, ‘After the Sorting Ceremony, you will report for duty with the Head Boy and the Prefects.’ He handed her a large piece of parchment. ‘I expect you to read this carefully. This contains all of your new rights and responsibilities.’

He picked up the discarded Head Girl badge and walked to where Alice stood, handing it to her. ‘Do not let me down.’

Alice nodded again. She could not find her voice. Fighting back tears, she picked up the badge from his outstretched hand, shuddering as her hand made contact with his. As she clutched the badge and
the parchment, Dumbledore gave her a tight-lipped smile.

‘You may go.’

Alice did not have to be told twice. Swallowing her shame, she sprinted into the Floo like a Firebolt, and as the green flames carried her home, she could hear Dumbledore telling the Hat in no uncertain terms that its goading was absolutely unacceptable. It did nothing to make her feel better.

Severus entered Alice’s kitchen through the back door without knocking, as was his habit by now, and tossed the chocolate bar onto the countertop absentmindedly. He carried a bag of groceries in his hand, ready to be made into a delicious beef stew with dumplings that seemed to be Crowley’s favourite.

The past week had gone like a dream. Two days after leaving her care, Severus knocked on her door in the morning to ask if there was anything she needed from the shop, as he was just on his way to pick up some cigarettes. Crowley asked him to pick up some foodstuffs for her, and when he returned, she invited him in for breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. And smoked most of his cigarettes. Severus was surprised and even a little giddy when she handed him her spare set of keys and said, ‘Just let yourself in will ye, and don’t stand there bangin’ on me door like a bloody loon.’

Since then, he had been visiting her daily. He brought enough food to feed them both every day, since he usually ended up staying at her place till late. They would usually brew together or watch television, and Severus discovered that he was quite partial to ‘Question Time’. Although he would never admit, he could quite happily spend all day glued to Crowley’s state of the art television set - how she got her hands on it, he had no idea, and decided it safer not to bother asking.

They were getting on splendidly. They certainly seemed to share a sense of humour, and often ended up laughing together, holding their stomach and in stitches. They also quarrelled over any old thing, and at least once a day one of them would storm out of the house and go to the nearby park to calm down whilst the other put the kettle on. When the defector returned, they would share a cuppa and carry on with their day until next time. Severus was slowly coming around to the idea of having a friend - he was certainly reluctant to call her that, although all the earthly and celestial signs seemed to be indicating that indeed, he did have a friend in Alice Crowley.

His little freeloader seemed very happy to consume anything that Severus cooked, and would often help herself to his cigarettes. Every morning he would find a pot of awful tea waiting for him under Stasis, and he would read his paper as he waited for the bone-idle Sleeping Beauty to have her lie in and drag her bony, yet decidedly cracking arse downstairs.

How was he supposed to explain to this sweet little harridan that things would have to change, he did not know. His decision to cook the most amazing stew in living history was intentional. Term would start in two days, and he had to leave tonight.

In two days, he would have to go back to playing his role as the Bat of the Dungeons, the reviled, cruel Professor with no human feelings to speak of. He wondered if she would understand. He wondered if she could be trusted not to appear too familiar with him. He wondered if their friendship would survive outside of Spinner’s End.

He was willing to do his best to make sure that it did.
Severus looked around the kitchen. She wasn’t there, which was not that unusual - he would often find her in her basement lab, her thin brows wrinkled in intense concentration as she brewed, completely oblivious to the world around her. Unhurriedly, he put the shopping away and placed some food in her owl’s tray. He had been formally introduced to that infernal bird a few days later, and decided that Barry was an extraordinarily horrible bird, loud and obnoxious and primitively aggressive - very different from his own beloved bird, Sharon, who surely would never dream of behaving in such a manner.

He smiled lightly, his heart warming at the thought of his perfect owl, and wondered if she would approve of Crowley. He would have to introduce them at some point, preferably without that cretinous excuse for a familiar lurking about. He would only upset his precious ladybird, that’s for sure, and we couldn’t have that, could we?

He stepped into the hallway and noticed that the door under the stairs was shut. How odd. Just as he was about to go downstairs to investigate, a muffled sob caught his attention. He walked towards the sitting room door and found the door shut. Knocking gently, he called out, ‘Crowley?’

The door opened seconds later. There stood Crowley, her face swollen and blotchy, her eyes as red and wet as her nose. She sniffed inelegantly and opened the door wider, inviting him in without a word.

Concerned, Severus asked, ‘Are you alright?’

She let out a loud, high-pitched wail. Unexpectedly, she ran up to him and buried her face in his chest, wrapping her skinny arms around his neck. Severus embraced her reflexively, wondering what had shaken her up so badly. ‘Alright, Crowley?’ He asked again, quietly into her ear.

‘I don’t… want… be… Head Giirrll!’ She sobbed into his chest, her voice hoarse and nasal, her tears wetting his coat.

Ah. That. Severus wrinkled his brow, mildly confused. ‘Whyever not? It’s a good thing. Why are you so upset?’

‘You don’t understaaaand!’ She howled and sobbed loudly, her lithe form shaking in his arms. Without realising, Severus started rubbing her back in small, soothing circles. This was an odd reaction, but then, was there anything about this girl that wasn’t?

‘Then explain,’ he prompted.

She rambled, ‘I don’t want to interact with other students and I don’t want to help them with homework in the library and I hate Quidditch and I hate Hogsmeade and I hate talking to people and I don’t want to help out with decorations and I don’t want people to stare at me and I just want to be left alone and, and, and…’

She broke into a fresh fit of tears, and Severus began swaying them gently from side to side, hoping to the heavens above that he was doing the right thing. Comforting distressed witches was not his forte, but this time, he was willing to at least try. All the while, he was processing her woes, and found that actually, it all made sense. He was now used to this outspoken Crowley, but remembered the very different, quiet and subdued Miss Crowley he had known, and sympathised. He too was not exactly comfortable with other people in his youth, although he had grown out of it by the time he was her age.
‘Shush, girl, don’t cry. Think of the perks.’

She looked up at him and exclaimed dramatically, ‘There are no perks to this!’

Severus chuckled, which was apparently the wrong thing to do, since she was now scowling at him nastily. ‘Oh, but there are!’ He said, and led her gently to the settee. When she was comfortably seated, he explained, ‘You know you’re going to have your own room, don’t you?’

She nodded and sniffed, a picture of anguish and misery.

Severus continued, ‘You will also have your own bathroom. Think - you will have your very own space to clean as much and as often as you like!’

Crowley considered that for a long moment. ‘My dormmates are a bunch of slatterns, you know. They don’t make their beds, and they don’t fold their knickers into squares in the drawers.’

Severus had to remind himself not to laugh. Really, in his personal opinion, not folding one’s knickers was not reason enough to call somebody a ‘slattern’ - this was Crowley, however, whose impossible standards caused her to have all sorts of insane ideas. Instead, he put on his best sympathetic face and nodded solemnly. He then said, ‘You won’t have a curfew and you will be able to order food directly to your bedroom - so if you wake up in the middle of the night craving beef stew with some trifle for dessert, you will get just that.’

Crowley had found some tissues and was now blowing her nose loudly, like a little elephant. ‘I like trifle.’ She muttered.

‘Well, there you go then. And…’ Severus hesitated for a minute, his own insecurity making him wonder if she would consider this a perk. ‘You will be able to, um, see me in the evenings.’

Alice’s face brightened a fraction, her eyes widening in what looked like hopeful anticipation. ‘I will?’ She breathed, leaning forwards like a child in awe.

Severus cleared his throat. ‘Head Girl and Boy would normally make their reports to Minerva. She deals with that, being Deputy Head. This year, however, she will be… busy, so I volunteered to do it instead.’

‘You did?!’ Crowley squealed and sat up straight. Her wide smile reached her puffy eyes, and at his answering nod, she said, ‘Well, that changes everything, donnit?! I was so worried that I… that you… that you and I… oh gosh, Snape, this is great!’

Severus smiled. A warmth spread across his chest as he realised that she really, genuinely wanted to keep his friendship. He had more good news in his sleeve, news that had cost him a heated private argument with Dumbledore. ‘You will also be allowed to come home most weekends, unless you’re needed in school. This way, you will be able to develop your crazy potions for the Weasleys. And I guess it’ll be an opportunity for you to escape the hustle and bustle.’

Crowley giggled. Then, she started laughing hysterically, rocking back and forth in her seat, covering her face in her hands. Abruptly, the laughter died on her tongue and she turned to face him, once again serious and visibly unsure. ‘You… um. Do you come home at the weekends?’

‘Would you like me to?’ Severus raised one eyebrow, seemingly calm and collected, although his heart was dancing the can-can and he had to remind himself to breathe as he waited for her answer.

‘Yes, I mean, yes, if you can, I mean, if you want, I mean…’ Crowley gestured widely before slumping her shoulders. ‘Of course I would like you to come. Here.’
Severus swallowed thickly. ‘Then I will do my best to come as often as I can.’ After a brief pause, he added, ‘Do you feel better now?’

‘Yes.’ Crowley drew in a shuddering breath. ‘Much better. I still don’t want to be Head Girl and I don’t know how I’m going to do this, but… ah. Thank you, Snape. You’re a good’un.’

Slapping his knees, Severus rose from the settee. They still had much to discuss, but really, it could wait until later. He reached inside his pocket and produced his cigarettes. As they lit up, an idea sparked inside his head.

‘How would you feel about going to the pub for lunch?’ He asked carefully, avoiding her gaze. Immediately he knew he had made a mistake - she may have enjoyed his company within these walls, but surely she would not wish to be seen with him outside.

Seconds passed without a reply, and Severus tensed, recognising her rejection. It was therefore a great shock to him when she asked quietly, ‘You want to take me out on a date?’

Severus’ hair stood on end, and he rushed to explain, ‘No no, of course not, I didn’t…’

He was cut off by Crowley’s excited squeal. ‘Eee! We’re going out on a date!’ Her voice rose in pitch to near-whistle register. Waving her hands, she gestured for him to sit back down. ‘Right, wait here, I’m just going to get ready. A date, a date, we’re going out on a date!’

She bolted out of the sitting room and up the stairs, leaving a very confused Severus in her wake. Really, he did not quite mean it like that, but it didn’t seem right to correct her assumption. It wasn’t such a dreadful idea at all - quite the opposite, in fact, and it wasn’t like they had to… no, best not go there. All of this was absolutely insane, and Severus found himself smoking one cigarette after another, trying but not quite managing to contain his excitement and his trepidation.

Crowley came back some minutes later, dressed to the nines in a pastel-blue cotton dress with a fitted bodice and a full-circle skirt, and a pair of high-heeled sandals. She had let her hair down, and her face bore no trace of distress - instead, she appeared radiant and youthful, her makeup done in light, subtle shades that enhanced her natural beauty, a stark contrast to her usual heavy layers of product. Severus wondered how on Earth she had managed to go from miserable and puffy to fresh as morning dew - witches, it seemed, knew many useful spells.

As she stood there, vibrant and happy, beaming at him from the doorway, Severus grew uncomfortable. If this was indeed a date, it meant that, at the ripe age of thirty-six, Severus was about to go on a date - a real date, for the first time in his life. Unprepared and unequipped for this sharp turn of events, Severus stiffened up his upper lip. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon.

‘Shall we?’ He asked. It came out colder than expected, although Crowley didn’t seem to notice.

As she twirled on the spot and opened the front door, Severus’ eyes were drawn to the movement of her dress. Fascinated, he watched as it made a full circle around her thighs and gently fell down to her knees again.

How very feminine. How utterly pretty.

She called out, ‘C’mon then Snape, you’ll miss our date!’

Severus was seriously considering hexing or Obliviating the witch, and cursed himself for his own stupidity. He seemed to have a great talent for putting himself in undesirable situations. Thanks to his uncharacteristic lack of thinking, he was now supposed to take her out, undoubtedly pay for it too, and… what?
He snorted under his breath and told himself to get a grip. He wasn’t completely wet behind the ears, after all. Throughout his life, he had heard many a conversation relating to the mating ritual that was dating. He recalled the innumerable evenings spent in the Common Room in his student years, centred around one shining goal - to woo a young lady and not end up slapped by the end of the day. If his memory served, the fool-proof recipe for a successful date was to buy the lady a meal and a drink, to offer his coat if she was cold, and to act like a gentlewizard. Straightforward enough - surely he was capable of all that?

There was only one problem. Alice Crowley was no lady.

He stepped outside to find that Crowley was waiting a few paces away, bouncing on her toes in apparent impatience and excitement. Severus felt rather flattered that she seemed so dreadfully happy to be going on a ‘date’ with him, of all people, but he quickly pushed the feeling aside. For the hundredth time he had to remind himself that this was only a date according to her, and for all he knew, she might have been excited to get yet another free meal out of him, this time with some drinks to boot. He briefly entertained the idea of Apparating to a more upmarket part of Greater Manchester and inviting her to a rather good, middle-class pub he preferred nowadays, but thought better of it. Oh no, this girl belonged firmly in the local Pig & Elbow, a nearby boozer with cheap, simple food and uncultured customers. Merlin knew she would probably get them both barred from any half-respectable establishment.

She welcomed his suggestion with open arms. Not hard to please, it seemed. As they made their way towards the pub, Crowley chattered incessantly, and Severus stayed largely silent, praying that he wouldn’t be recognised by the neighbours or worse - his father’s old workmates.

It hit him then, that he was a middle-aged man, going to the pub with a very young woman - too young to be drinking in fact, although the bartender was known for serving just about anybody, including the spotty adolescents from the local secondary. He could only hope that they would avoid controversy by finding a nice secluded corner at the back of the pub. In times like these, he was glad to be a wizard. His wand, stashed away in his sleeve, would come in handy should any problems arise.

As they approached the pub Severus lengthened his stride and opened the door for Crowley, stepping inside behind her. The air was heavy, thick and stale, with clouds of smoke tinting the room a dull grey, the smell of ale rising from the patterned carpets. He led her to the backroom and found a small, private table, where he asked her to sit down and wait for him to get the drinks.

The ‘date’ had officially begun.

Some hours later, the witch and wizard left the pub and were strolling home after what turned out to be a pleasant date. Severus had relaxed a fraction, confident in his assumption that Crowley had enjoyed herself. They shared a good meal of scampi and chips, and the Freeloader had one too many pints of stout. The soft clicking of her shoes echoed as she walked alongside him unhurriedly, swaying lightly on her feet which only caused the skirt of her dress to sway languidly from side to side. It made for an alluring sight, and Severus wasn’t going to complain. After a few yards, he felt a dainty hand slip into the crook of his arm, and had to force himself to stay relaxed. The feeling of her warm body against his was as pleasant as it was strange.

This… date, as he was forced to reluctantly call it, cemented his view that Crowley was as far
removed from a lady as possible, and quietly hoped that perhaps some of his own well-polished, acquired manners would rub off on her in the future. She seemed to object to using a knife and a fork, and instead preferred viciously stabbing at her food with only a fork. She had stolen a good portion of his chips without asking and managed to spill her drink all over the table, but the quality of the conversation more than made up for it. Severus was no longer surprised that such an ill-mannered wench was able to discuss advanced alchemical concepts with incredible ease, although the sheer contrast between her plebeian disposition and the strength of her arguments bewildered him to no end.

‘Won’t you come in for a coffee?’ She asked as they reached her front door. Severus grimaced mentally at the thought of the beverage she would most likely present him with. Although he really wanted to spend just that little more time with her, he knew that he had to go. Before long he would leave for Hogwarts, two days early, as he always did to ensure that everything was ready for another year of teaching, and he hadn’t even finished packing yet - this was Crowley’s fault, actually, since he preferred spending his days at her place rather than concentrating on the things he was supposed to be doing.

‘I’m afraid I can’t.’ He replied. ‘I am leaving tonight.’

Crowley dimmed visibly. ‘Ah.’ She bit her lower lip for a short moment. ‘I had a great time, and I don’t mean just tonight. Thank you, Snape. For everything.’

Severus smiled lightly. ‘Likewise. And I shall see you again soon.’

‘Yes.’ The sweet smile appeared on her face again. ‘Kiss me.’ She said abruptly. ‘It’s what people do at the end of a date.’

Severus’ eyes flew wide open as a ripple of shock descended down his spine. Glued to his spot, he stared at the deranged nutter for what seemed like infinity. His expression could not be more confounded if she had grown another head. Or two.

‘Well?’ She demanded, tapping her food impatiently. ‘Are you going to kiss me or not?!’

‘I…’ Severus began, but before he had a chance to tell her just how wildly inappropriate she was, the outrageous bint took matters into her own hands. Standing on tiptoe, she grasped his shoulders and pulled him down towards her.

Her arms locked around his neck, she planted a kiss on lips. It could have only lasted seconds, but for Severus, time stood still in that moment. He closed his eyes against this forceful onslaught, his body as stiff as a rock. His heart skipped several beats, his lungs forgot how to breathe, his brain forgot how to think - all that mattered in that moment was the witch, her embrace and her lips, pressed firmly against his. As he felt her start to retract, his arms came up rapidly, as though of their own volition, and gripped her tightly for a few seconds longer, prolonging this graceless, unsophisticated, wonderful excuse for a kiss.

When they came apart, he drank in the sight of her, cataloguing her reddened cheeks, sparkling eyes and the widest, most radiant smile. Reeling, he felt his mental faculties return excruciatingly slowly, his guts falling back into their rightful places after turning themselves back to front and inside out.

Crowley smirked. ‘See you Monday.’

She turned on her heel and opened her front door. Before walking inside, she sent him the naughtiest, cheekiest wink he had ever seen from over her shoulder.
Severus nodded curtly, having reverted back to his expressionless mask, hiding his confusion. As he started walking in the direction opposite to his own home, as he usually did just in case Crowley decided to follow him, his mind began analysing the insanity that just happened. Scowling, he kicked a pebble out of his way, it dawned on him that he had been fooling himself all along.

He was so fucked.
Part 2: Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, dear readers, and I hope you've had a good Christmas. Gosh, it's been a long break, hasn't it? Not sure about you, but I've missed you all terribly. Especially your comments. Have you seen the comment count? A nice, round 100! Thanks so much for your input and support, this story wouldn't go on without you!

Please note that this chapter is only partly beta-read. My fantastic beta, FawkesyLady, is busy saving lives, and my fingers were itching too much to resist posting. I will likely post a revised version of this chapter, when Fawkesy can find a little free time, but right now she deserves her short and infrequent breaks to herself! So watch this space, dear readers, there might be updates.

For now, enjoy! And don't forget to comment. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first day of September saw Alice standing on Platform 9¾ at King’s Cross station, waiting for the Hogwarts Express. Dressed in a black jersey skirt, a pair of flats and a dark denim jacket for the occasion, she had found a quiet spot some distance away from the milling crowds and she lit up a cigarette, her back pressed comfortably against the wall. She had pulled her trunks to the front and stuck the cage containing a stupefied Barry on top, increasing her privacy and shielding her Head Girl badge from prying eyes.

The platform was buzzing with life on this warm, sunny day. The British wizarding population were coming in their droves, and Alice observed them through narrowed eyes, making unpleasant mental remarks about the people she recognised. ‘She’s lost a lot of weight, she has. But Ranson still looks like a bloody lardon. Buckley has acne growing on his acne, and Giles… fancy new hair, eh. Look at her. What a shame that a new haircut can’t fix her teeth.’

Holding her cigarette between index and forefinger, she inhaled languidly, allowing the smoke to circulate around her mouth before drawing it into her lungs, relishing the taste. These weren’t just any old fags; she discovered the packet this morning on the doormat beneath her front door. It had been posted through the letterbox along with a note which read, ‘Good luck today, Crowley’, written in the familiar spikey script that made her heart skip a beat. A rush of warmth diffused across her chest as she picked up the gift, marvelling at Snape’s thoughtfulness - the note bore no signature, but she knew that it had to be him.

She checked her watch. Half an hour until the train’s arrival. Her head lolled back against the cold stone of the wall as she exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, smiling lightly, reassured that Snape was still thinking of her over their two-day separation. She took the time to daydream, knowing that soon she would see the wizard she had fallen head over heels for again. She could picture him in the castle, waiting for her as desperately as she did for him. Was he glancing at the clock with impatience every now and then, wishing for time to run faster? Did he ramble aimlessly around Hogwarts’ labyrinthine corridors, his black robes billowing as he struggled to find a place for himself in his impatience?

Did he reminisce about the times they’ve shared during the summer break between one boring staff meeting and another? And did he toss and turn in his bed late at night, remembering the kiss she had
stolen from him on her doorstep?

Merlin knew, Alice herself could not stop replaying that perfect moment in her mind over and over again. It haunted her, a phantom feeling of the softness of his clean-shaven cheek, the hardness of his lips against her own, the pressure of his grip on her arms as he held her so tightly, refusing to let her go. If she closed her eyes and concentrated, she could almost feel him there and then, the memory of his smoky scent so fresh and so real in her head. She was a witch in love with her stomach aflutter, and she could no longer deny her own feelings. Not to him, and certainly not to herself.

She would have to ask him out. She had formed a plan in her head, to become Severus Snape’s girlfriend and to lure him into her lair as soon as possible. He may have escaped her once, but next time, there would be no escape. Perhaps she had been too subtle and he simply hadn’t realised that her offer of coffee could be roughly translated to ‘I want to shag you senseless’.

A sly smile appeared on her face. She would shag him senseless if it was the last thing she did.

The chugging sound of Hogwarts Express slowly pulling into the station broke Alice out of her reverie. The enormous machine huffed and puffed laboriously, releasing clouds of white steam onto the platform, its fresh paintwork glistening in the afternoon sun, promising new beginnings and adventures to the many young witches and wizards who now flooded the platform’s edge like a swarm of locusts. Alice stuffed her cigarettes into her pocket and unhurriedly double-checked that she had everything with her. She decided to wait until the parade thinned out a bit. Even from a distance, the sensory parade was nauseating. All around her, a broad spectrum of colours and textures swirled across her vision like shiny pieces of glass inside a kaleidoscope, the people’s voices ringing in a grinding symphony with an unlimited range, confusing and discordant to her ears.

Breathing in the heady mixture of hundreds of scents mingling in the heavy air, Alice snorted under her breath at the sight of many mothers’ tear-streaked faces, her throat constricting with envy as she watched the loving families say their farewells and promising to write often. Whilst she was far happier in Spinner’s End than she ever was in her family home, in times like these she longed for a loving family to say goodbye to, knowing that she would be missed dearly. ‘Oh, shut up.’ She thought to herself angrily, grabbing her trolley and pulling it sharply onto the platform, a lone spot among the masses. ‘It’ll do them kids good to escape their stupid mothers’ coddling anyway.’

Alice pushed her way through the crowd, tutting at the rude gesture sent her way by a couple of kids she had elbowed out of her way. As she handed her trunks to the attendant, a feminine voice broke out just behind her back, making her blood run cold. ‘Alice, dear! How lovely to see you!’

Clutching the handle of Barry’s cage in a white-knuckled grip, Alice turned around sharply just in time to see Mrs Weasley trotting over to where she stood. Her heart beat a rampant tattoo as she stuttered, ‘Uh, hello, Mrs Weasley’.

The plump, ruddy-cheeked housewife had her two youngest in tow, along with Harry Potter, who seemed to tag along wherever they went like a mongrel following a skulk of foxes. Mr Weasley was nowhere to be seen, and Alice was grateful to miss out on the hailstorm of question regarding Muggle household appliances, although the four pairs of eyes that were now fixed on her felt like balls of fire, boring into her skull and burning her sanity to ashes. She desperately wished for Fred and George, who always provided a solid wall between her and the cheek-pinching matron, but this year, she was forced to face the boisterous family alone.

Unperturbed by the reserved greeting, Mrs Weasley pulled Alice into a tight hug, squeezing the air out of her lungs as she held her tightly to her remarkably ample bosom. Alice forced herself to stay relaxed, her mouth stretched into a wide, beaming rictus, although her jaw was set so tightly she thought it would break, her open eyes giving her the look of a cornered, terrified animal. She never
knew how to react to such displays of affection that seemed to be a daily occurrence in the Weasley household, and chose to wait it out, breathing in the pleasant smell of spiced apple crumble that emanated from the witch as she counted down the seconds - one, two… and done.

Alice was desperate to get away, but Mrs Weasley was not done with her despite the fact that the train would be leaving shortly. Mouth stretched in an indulged smile, she crooned, ‘Alice dear, you must be so excited to be going back to school! We missed you in the holidays, you simply MUST visit us at the Burrow over Christmas!’

Alice gave a tight-lipped smile and nodded, shifting her weight from side to side. In a thin voice she replied, ‘Erm, thank you, Mrs Weasley. Yes, yes, that would be lovely.’

‘Fred and George would be delighted to see you, I’m sure! Oh, I still can’t get over how they dropped out of school.’ The red-headed witch raised her gaze to the heavens and sighed heavily, and Alice couldn’t help but wonder how the woman managed to stand upright with a bust as huge as that. ‘But of course, as long as they’re happy…’ She paused, and reached behind her to give the rest of her brood a shove forward. ‘You are always welcome to come and visit us, you know that, don’t you?’

Without waiting for a reply, Mrs Weasley gave Alice a long, searching look, and continued, ‘You seem to have lost a lot of weight again, dearie. I swear you get skinnier and skinnier every time I see you. Just remember that there’s always room for one more at our table, isn’t that right, children?’

The ‘children’ in question rushed to nod dutifully, assuring that of course, Alice would always be welcome to join them. Faking enthusiasm, Alice grinned through gritted teeth, hiding her embarrassment. She had no doubt that Harry and Ron were possibly sincere, but Ginny was a completely different story. The two young witches narrowed their eyes at each other for a split second in hostility, making their feelings clear. Alice would rather shove wasps up her arse than spend Christmas with that two-faced little bint.

The conductor’s booming voice reverberated around the entire platform. ‘All aboard!’, causing Alice to exhale in relief. Before Mrs Weasley had the chance to pull her into another lung-crushing hug, she made a big show of turning around and inhaling sharply as she pointed in the direction of a bushy-haired girl who was walking among the crowds, searching. ‘Oh, look! Isn’t that Hermione Granger?!’

This tactic worked as a charm, and soon Mrs Weasley turned her attention to the last member of the Golden Trio, urgently waving at her to come and join them. Alice excused herself then, explaining that she wanted to find a quiet seat on the train. Mrs Weasley waved her off, reminding her to be good and to eat all of her meals, and Alice was finally free to drag herself and her familiar to the Prefects’ carriage, reflecting that perhaps a loving family wasn’t such a great idea, after all.

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‘Ah, there you are!’

A tall, handsome lad with a strong jaw, dark eyes and swishing chestnut hair broke away from the loose cluster of students gathered in the centre of the Prefects’ Carriage and made his way towards
Alice with a spring in his step. Mouth stretched in a warm, welcoming smile that would surely send many a witch’s blood racing, he put one hand on her shoulder and led her gently towards the group. Alice immediately recognised him as Roger Davies, a Ravenclaw and a fellow seventh year, and the badge, proudly displayed on his breast, told her that he had been made Head Boy.

She stiffened reflexively. Feeling like she’d been hit with a Jelly-Legs Jinx, she allowed Davies to lead her towards the group who had now paused mid-chatter and were staring at her with open curiosity. Davies, damn his heathen soul to an eternity of hell, spoke up excitedly, ‘Here’s our new Head Girl, ladies and gents! I was wondering where she was!’

The reactions to Davies’ pronouncement was a parade of blank looks and surprise across the Prefects’ faces. Some appeared puzzled, obviously struggling to put a name to the face, and others raised their brows in mild interest, muttering something incomprehensible to their companions, not bothering to hide their bemusement at Dumbledore’s choice of Head Girl. That said, Alice detected no open hostility, except for Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson who were quick to express their disgust, their faces scrunched as though confronted with an unpleasant smell. The atmosphere in the carriage was, however, decidedly awkward.

In an effort to put her best foot forward, Alice smiled weakly, wishing for the Earth to open up and swallow her whole. She cleared her throat, intending to introduce herself properly, but before she could utter so much as ‘hello’, Davies took the lead with the natural ease of a born commander and began briefing the team, assigning tasks to each person. His charisma worked wonders, and within minutes most of the Prefects were jumping up and down and nodding their heads enthusiastically, eager to get to their duties. The girls in particular did not seem able to take their eyes off their leader, drinking in the words that flowed from his mouth. Alice reflected that they reminded her of a group of excited House Elves or a pack of tail-wiggling puppies. She would much rather deal with Malfoy’s surliness than this bunch of goody two-shoes do-gooders, but was grateful for the opportunity to Not Speak.

The train began picking up speed, and soon the Prefects trickled out of the carriage to find their friends and get to work. Alice stayed behind, pleading the need to change into her school robes in private, and sat herself down on one of the worn upholstered seats that surely had hosted many a Head Girl’s arse in the past, her pulse quickening in dread as the gravity of the situation hit her squarely in the chest. This was real. The time had come.

She had been asked to patrol the first and second year carriages, and the mental image of innumerable round, red-cheeked little faces made this nightmare all too real. ‘You can do this,’ she thought to herself, stroking the blue upholstery as though it could offer comfort and advice. ‘It’s just kids. Annoying, high-pitched, sharp-toothed ankle biters. Nothing to be scared of…’

Abruptly, the carriage door opened and Hermione Granger entered and stomped towards Alice, her bushy, bouncing curls making her look like an agitated lioness. With a great sigh, Hermione slammed a small flask on the table right in front of Alice, her amber eyes narrowing as she spat, ‘I confiscated this from a group of seventh-year Slytherins. It’s vodka.’ She crossed her arms and closed her eyes, breathing in deeply, her pretty, regular features creased as though she was trying hard not to cry.

Alice bit her lower lip in indecision as she watched Hermione, wondering if she should say something. Really, she told her everything without telling her anything, and Alice could only imagine the abuse that the fellow Muggleborn witch must have received. Alice herself had been called every name under the sun simply because of her blood status, but she was well aware that this was nothing compared to what Granger must have dealt with on a daily basis as a friend of Harry Potter.
Suddenly, Hermione turned neatly on her heel and made to exit the carriage, the red flush of indignation slowly bleeding away from her face. Alice called out, ‘Wait!’ and trotted over to Hermione with an apologetic smile. ‘I’m sorry. They’re twats. Don’t let them get to you.’

‘Thanks.’ Hermione’s amber eyes lit up somewhat as she opened the door. Before walking out, she added, ‘Congratulations, by the way, on being made Head Girl.’

Alice nodded, and when Hermione left the carriage, she snatched the flask and shoved it into her pocket. Rubbing her hands in glee, she muttered, ‘I’ll dispose of this, alright. We wouldn’t any of the little ‘uns to find it and pinch it, now would we?’

Keeping the flask close to her chest, Alice scurried away to the toilets where she wouldn’t be disturbed. She couldn’t believe her luck - this was just what she needed, and she would take good care of it, no doubt. The idea of doing her rounds seemed a lot less daunting now that she had seen with her own eyes the treasures that sat hidden in the students’ pockets, just waiting to be found.

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The rattling of Hogwarts Express concealed the swaying of Alice’s feet as she exited the toilets some time later. The vodka provided a pleasant buzzing sensation in her head, lending her strength to a much better extent than the Draught of Courage and veiling her mind, pushing her insecurities aside. Propelled by the promise of finding more contraband, Alice began her patrol.

She stormed into the first carriage, her gaze sliding across a cluster of kids who looked up from their game of Exploding Snap as she entered and stared at her questioningly. Everything seemed just fine. Thinning her lips, Alice shot the children a warning glare and hissed, ‘Keep the noise down!’ before slamming the door shut. Feeling like an utter idiot, she stomped to the next carriage, and even Filch himself would have been hard pressed to mutter things more unpleasant than she did right then.

‘What a waste of bloody time.’ She thought as she entered the second carriage as abruptly as she did the first. There, a bunch of pupils had gathered around one plump, freckled boy who resembled a glazed doughnut and was bawling his eyes out. Alice took in the scene before her and tilted her head to the side, putting her hands on her hips. ‘What’s going on here?’

The little boy wailed, ‘I… miss… my… mummyyyyy!’ and broke into a fresh fit of tears, sniffing loudly inbetween sobs.

Alice considered the boy. Crying for one’s mother was an alien concept to her, something she had never experienced herself and could not begin to relate to, which elevated her unease to sky high levels. The rotund lad looked like a coddled, pampered prince, and Alice suspected that he could benefit from being made to toughen up. She spat, ‘Well I bet she’s not missing you if you’re always being such cry-baby.’

Six faces looked up sharply, staring at her with disgust and disbelief. The doughnut boy erupted into a wailing fit, his face swollen and red as he struggled to catch his breath. This was not the reaction she expected to her on-the-spot guidance. Confused and annoyed at this unexpected turn of events, Alice crossed her arms defensively. ‘Stop crying!’ She commanded, the cogs in her brain turning at neck-breaking speed, trying and failing to understand what’s gone wrong. ‘Stop crying, or I’ll give you something to cry about!’
She considered making a sharp exit there and then, but Doughnut Boy had descended into hysteria, his squeaky voice crescendoing to an unimaginable scream that reminded her of a newborn, his toffee-coloured eyes spewing out buckets of fat tears.

Hands shaking in panic, Alice bellowed, ‘FIVE POINTS!’ , and the boy quietened abruptly, panting as he stared at her in horror. When she was sure that she had his attention, Alice continued, ‘From whatever House you’ll get sorted into, for being a wimp.’

After that, she turned around and escaped from the carriage, slamming the door shut with all the strength she had, not willing to find out if Doughnut Boy was going to continue his head-splitting fit making full use of a coloratura that would put Lucia Popp to shame.

Leaning her forehead against the wall, Alice allowed the train’s steady chugging to soothe her. ‘Five points…’ she whispered, letting the words roll off her tongue, testing them out. ‘Five points…’ it felt so good, so empowering. And above all, it shut him up nicely. She could understand now why Snape delighted in deducting points. It worked.

A smirk appeared on Alice’s face as she relished her new-found power. She had done the boy good. Hogwarts needed a Head Girl who was willing to do her job properly, and now, Alice was willing to be that girl. She imagined being showered in praise for proving herself as the one who took her duties seriously as she made her way to the next carriage in search of other students to bestow her wisdom upon.

The enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall depicted a clear night sky illuminated with millions of sparkling stars as a throng of students old and new entered through the enormous double doors. Severus sat at the High Table, observing the influx of children led, as usual, by Minerva, who had donned on her most impressive pointed hat for the occasion. He couldn’t help but notice the aura of gloom among the new arrivals. It was not unusual for the first years to appear nervous or awestruck, but he certainly did not expect to see so many first years looking as though they were being led to the gallows pole.

‘Oh, just look at the little darlings!’ A feminine voice broke out to his right, soft and twangy, belonging to Professor Tina Tchihende, the new Defense professor who had arrived a couple of days prior. She was an ancient witch, older than Dumbledore himself and, if rumours were to be believed, just as powerful. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes that shone with intelligence and mischief disappeared among the web of deep wrinkles etched all over her face as her thin lips stretched into a wide, indulging smile. The witch seemed to radiate a profound love for every soul within the castle.

Severus found the woman oddly fascinating. Despite her very advanced age, she seemed energetic and full of life, and for the first time in forever, it seemed that Hogwarts would finally have a worthy Defense teacher. He had only met her briefly in a couple of staff meetings, but it was enough to ascertain that Tchihende’s reputation as a living legend was justly deserved. She possessed a solid teaching plan, abilities that would put his own to shame, and an upbeat attitude coupled with taking no nonsense. She seemed to be precisely what Hogwarts needed, all wrapped in one, but a small part of Severus remained sceptical. After all, he knew better than anybody that these great, idolised figures often had a darker side to them that did not match the romanticised public image. To host the great witch was an honour, no doubt, but he was curious to see if she would truly live up to the expectations. For this reason, he would keep a close eye on her.
Either way, the one thing he knew for sure was that Tina Tchihende was not to be underestimated. The Dark Lord’s reaction to her arrival more than made up for any dismay he might have felt as a result of his own application being rejected once again. During a private meeting, Severus discovered that it was possible for Lord Voldemort to go even paler than usual. His wax-like skin turned a shade so white it almost rendered him see-through, his grotesque features twisting into an expression of pure, unadulterated fear. To Severus, the sight was almost as good as watching Greyback being subjected to the same degrading treatment he had to suffer over the summer. He himself was now safe from it, elevated to the very top of the ranks thanks to that small, black phial he had received from Dumbledore. For now, he had no need to fear for his life or wellbeing, but that came with the heavy burden of more work.

Ah, there she is. Severus’ heart skipped several beats as Crowley entered the Great Hall and made her way to the top of the Gryffindor table. As she walked, their eyes locked for a split second, and Severus could barely contain the warmth that spread all around his chest at the very sight of her. He had missed her immensely during their two-day separation, and had found himself restless all day, counting down the hours until he would see her again. He was glad to see that his little flea, as he had started to call this freeloading bloodsucker, appeared happy and well, and he felt his heart swell with pride as he noticed the Head Girl badge displayed on the front of her robes. ‘Good girl,’ he thought to himself. ‘I knew you’d be alright.’

Whilst the Sorting Hat performed its traditional song, Severus took the opportunity to take stock of the House tables. He was relieved to see that Potter and his sidekicks had arrived in one piece and were currently Not Paying Attention, which made it very obvious that they were Up To Something, which could only mean More Work for Severus. He took a mental register of all of the Muggleborn students whilst performing a rapid rerun of all of the necessary steps to protect that particularly vulnerable group. A couple of Muggleborns did not make it back to school this year, and the knowledge of what exactly had happened to them reinforced Severus’ resolve to do his best to keep them safe.

As the Hat’s song died down and the Sorting began, Severus watched the proceedings with undivided attention, carefully studying the children who were being sorted into their respective Houses. This year’s influx was slightly higher than last year’s and the year before, with twelve new students in Slytherin, ten in Ravenclaw, eighteen in Hufflepuff and eight in Gryffindor. Among the cheering and clapping that rankled the Great Hall every time the Hat called out the name of the appropriate House, Severus recognised most of the youngsters sorted into Slytherin and made a mental note to have a private chat with those he didn’t - they were likely to be half-bloods, and for that reason alone would need extra guidance.

Soon, the Sorting was over. Dumbledore gave a powerful speech, addressing the need for unity in these troubled times, and then the tables began filling up with unbelievable amounts of food, complete with extra special treats that were only served on occasions such as this. As Severus loaded his plate with roast pork and all the trimmings, he took the chance to allow his gaze to rest on the sweet girl at the top of Gryffindor table, knowing that the general population of Hogwarts was unlikely to pick up on this, engrossed as they were in conversing with their peers, too busy for constant vigilance.

Crowley had selected several pieces of chicken wings and a side of chips. She looked ever so sweet to him as she picked up her food with dainty fingertips and chewed, all the while sitting rod-straight and looking around the Great Hall, presumably to catch any sign of trouble. Severus’ eyes softened a little as he stared at the vigilant witch - really, nobody expected her to be quite so scrupulous, but it amused him that she was trying so hard.

Satisfied, Severus turned his attention to Potter and his lackeys. The very sight of the boy put a
damper on the somewhat tolerable evening. He had knitted his brows together and was whispering something urgently whilst Granger and the Weasley boy gesticulated widely in an obvious attempt to explain something to the thick-headed lad. Severus’ jaw tensed against the sharp needle of intuition prickling at his brain. Whatever they were planning, he would find out. And then he would put a stop to it.

A flash of movement in the corner of his eye alerted him to the fact that Crowley had turned her blonde head towards the Head Table. After a quick glance which confirmed that everybody was either keeping their eyes on their plate or on their interlocutor, she locked her grey eyes with Severus’ and winked. Severus acknowledged her with a slight nod, and she turned away abruptly and picked up a single chip before looking back at him with a coquettish smile.

She kept sending him quick, furtive glances that lasted barely a second as she brought the chip to her mouth. She bit into it in a slow, exaggerated manner, and gently sucked it into her puckered lips, her cheeks hollowing out as she drew in the soft middle with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Severus could not believe what he was seeing. Transfixed, he watched as she finished with the first chip and picked up another, repeating her little performance. Whenever their eyes met, Severus would glower at her in a silent plea and warning, which only served as encouragement for the crazy witch to do it again, and again, and again.

He had gone past doubting that this girl would be the death of him. She had flirted with him on more than one occasion over the summer, and he cursed himself for allowing it. Now, she was crossing a line, and he found himself unable to resist and unwilling to stop her. He held his breath and watched with growing fascination, reminding himself to sit still as the blood in his veins grew hot and his cock hardened under the table. ‘Yessss… suck it all out, little one. Suck it all out.’

‘Are you alright there, Professor Snape? You look a little pale, dear.’

Professor Tchihende’s voice in his ear jolted him sharply back to the present and nearly made him jump. Severus turned his head sharply, feeling like a horny teenager caught red-handed. He muttered, ‘I am quite alright, Professor Tchihende. I was… distracted’ as he looked at the woman’s wrinkled face, stretched into a wide, beaming smile.

The twinkle in her eyes reminded him disturbingly of Dumbledore as she nodded and said, ‘Ah, I get that too, sometimes. It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?’

Severus grunted in reply and buried his eyes in his plate, allowing his lank hair to hide his face like a pair of inky curtains. He grumbled internally, ‘Why do they have to fucking twinkle all the time?’

Furtively, he glanced askance in Crowley’s direction once more. The cheeky minx ended her little game. With a smirk entitled ‘This Isn’t Over’, she turned to her food and ate in a completely innocent manner, ignoring him as she scanned the hall like a hawk once again.

She was playing a dangerous game and he nearly ended up caught, and it’s barely been an hour since her arrival. Severus began stabbing his meat viciously with his fork, silently cursing the little witch. ‘The insufferable, unbearable, uncontrollable, insolent, impertinent… POTTER.’

The Boy Who Lived to be a Pain In The Arse was getting visibly agitated whilst Miss Granger did her best to calm him down. Potter was gesturing towards the Head Table with his head, his face turning a bright shade of magenta as he argued his point with his friends. Severus could not hear the words, but was now seriously concerned - a passionate Potter was never a good sign, and Severus
deemed it necessary to patrol the castle extensively tonight, knowing that the boy would not last five minutes if he ran into certain individuals. This year, the danger was greater than ever before.

On the other side of the Great Hall, the mood seemed light and jovial at the Slytherin table. Undoubtedly the well-oiled propaganda machine was in full swing already, judging by the awe and admiration painted across the newest students as the elder ones informed them of the Pureblood agenda, radiating inspiration and the superficial charm typical for the new, impassioned generation of Death Eaters, ready and eager to follow in their parents’ footsteps. Severus grimaced internally. He knew better than anybody how hard it was to rid oneself of the poisonous effects of brainwashing, so he would have to act fast, and hope that his new Slytherins would be smart enough to decode his advice for what it was - think for yourself.

Soon, the main meal was replaced by dessert, and Severus scowled at the selection of cakes, custards and ice cream that appeared before him. His sweet tooth was one of his best kept secrets, and it was incredibly cruel of the House Elves to present him with such a mouth watering selection of treats. Knowing that it simply wouldn’t do for his austere persona to gorge on a mountain of puddings, he chose a modest piece of bakewell tart and cherished every mouthful.

Crowley, on the other hand, did not seem to have similar concerns. She was currently demolishing a huge piece of hot chocolate fudge cake complete with two generous scoops of ice cream. Once again she caught his eye, and an impish grin appeared briefly on her face as she picked up some ice cream on her spoon. First, the tip of her tongue came out to sample its taste, and then she slowly, deliberately, put the spoon in her mouth. Severus’ breath hitched as he watched her suck on the spoon, her rosey lips puckering as she dragged the silver utensil out of her mouth in a smooth, exaggerated motion. Crowley’s eyes fluttered closed in an expression of sheer pleasure, and Severus couldn’t contain the shaking of his hands as she ran her tongue across the dip of the spoon. He swallowed thickly and dropped his gaze to his own plate, and impaled the bakewell tart on his fork. He shoved a chunk of tart into his mouth and looked up at Crowley again, eyes blazing, with the intention of making it very clear that she should stop right NOW.

His eyes found her again and he nearly choked on his food. He caught a glimpse of the last of the ice-cream disappear into her mouth, and seconds later, a small amount of the white liquid trickled out of the corner of her mouth and down her chin. He forced himself to breathe steadily as she wiped it with her finger, and keeping eye contact, licked it clean, and smacked her lips lightly, her delight visible, her intentions beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Severus’ face was carved out of stone, although his black eyes glittered dangerously as he thought to himself, ‘You’re playing with fire, silly little girl. Carry on, and I’ll see what else I can put in that pretty mouth of yours.’

Crowley turned around sharply, wrinkling her brow as she admonished a pair of boisterous second-years who decided that it would be a good idea to flick profiteroles at one another, and Severus put down his fork and began observing the Hall again, his mind occupied with pleasant images of Crowley, on her knees, with her lips wrapped around his cock. He imagined himself, whispering words of encouragement and stroking her hair as she brought him to completion, the bliss on her face as she enthusiastically swallowed every last drop of his come, the sweet noises she would undoubtedly make…yes. As much as she drove him mad, she was the one thing that kept him sane.

Suddenly, his musings were interrupted once again as a subdued commotion erupted at the Head Table. The Professors whispered to each other with a palpable sense of urgency, and soon, Minerva came over to Severus and leaned in to whisper, ‘We have a problem in the Entrance Hall. Come
quickly!’, her watery eyes widened in alarm.

Severus rose swiftly from his chair and followed the tall witch through the Staff Entrance with Albus, Filius and Pomona, their exit accompanied by the buzzing sound of curious whispers of students.

So much for keeping an eye on the *Chosen One*.

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‘Miss Crowley, Mr Davies, thank you for coming so quickly.’

Professor McGonagall ushered Alice and Roger into her office and asked them to sit down. Shuffling her feet, Alice perched on one of the straight-backed chairs and looked around nervously, surprised to see Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and Snape in there. Davies claimed the chair to her left and sat with his back rod-straight, officious and alert, his features set in a display of almost comical pompousness. Alice decided to stay silent for the moment - the toff seemed to love being the centre of attention, and Alice was more than happy to let him do all the talking.

Professor McGonagall appeared anxious, her elegant features creasing as she explained, wringing her hands, ‘Miss Crowley, Mr Davies, I need to know if you had, by any chance, spotted any suspicious activity in the Entrance Hall. It appears that the Hourglasses have been... tampered with.’

Drawing in a sharp breath, Davies spoke up, ‘That’s atrocious! I haven’t seen anything at all…’ he turned his head towards Alice. ‘Have you seen anything, Alice?’

Alice shook her head in response. She tried not to stare too openly at Snape, who in her view looked rather magnificent, backlit by the fire in the grate. That said, nothing about his countenance suggested that he was paying her any particular attention beyond wanting to know if she had seen anything suspicious, and a tendril of doubt pricked at her heart out of nowhere.

Davies stood up and put a reassuring hand on Professor McGonagall’s upper arm. He seemed to have form for such familiarity. In an impassioned tone, he proclaimed, ‘Don’t worry, Professor, the prefect body will patrol the Entrance Hall day and night if necessary. I will make sure of it myself.’ After a hesitant pause, he added, ‘May I ask in what way the Hourglasses have been tampered with?’

Professor Flitwick piped up, ‘All of the Houses are in negative points! It must have happened during, or shortly after the Sorting!’

Alice blinked rapidly, perplexed by the severe concern etched across the Professors’ faces. Clearing her throat, she offered, ‘Of course the Houses are in negative points, it’s only logical!’ She wrinkled her brow, glad to relieve them of their trouble whilst struggling to grasp why they would make a song and dance about such a non-issue. Didn’t they know anything?!

McGonagall nearly tripped on her own robes as she trotted over to where Alice sat. She demanded, ‘Miss Crowley, what are you talking about?!’, her Scottish accent thickening and laced with urgency, her sharp features drawn into tight, severe lines.

Alice shrugged lightly, as though she was telling the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Well, I deducted points on the train. All Houses start at zero, so it’s only logical that they would drop into negative numbers. I took points from first years, or rather from whatever House they were going to be sorted into, so that explains the additional drop after the Sorting.’
‘YOU?!’ McGonagall’s eyes nearly bulged out at this revelation. She put one long-fingered hand on her heart, breathing in deeply, as though Alice had just admitted to using Unforgivables on newborn kittens. ‘Miss Crowley…’

Professor Flitwick jumped off his chair and pointed an accusing finger at Alice. ‘You deducted over 200 points ON THE TRAIN?!’

Alice shifted her gaze rapidly from one face to another, working her jaw open and closed for a while as she hugged herself defensively, utterly baffled by their outrage. ‘I… I was only doing my job!’ She wanted to get up and hide behind her chair, as though the polished wood could shield her from their unjustified wrath. In a smaller voice, she added, ‘Wasn’t I?’

Professor Sprout stepped up. For today only, she was wearing a clean set of robes and had even scrubbed underneath her nails. Her face bore no accusation, but she seemed saddened and disappointed. ‘You have taken 245 points, Miss Crowley. No wonder the little ones were so upset. You’ve given them the impression that Hogwarts is strict, harsh from the first moment. Was that your intention, dear? Perhaps you made a mistake?’ Sprout gave a shivering smile, her eye twitching lightly as she wrung her hands.

Alice drew in a loud, shuddering breath. This was NOT going to plan. ‘Aren’t I supposed to be catching out those who mess about?’

Professor Sprout replied gently, ‘And reporting them to us. You are not allowed to take points until tomorrow, and the first years are immune until next week. You should have known that. You should have also known that you’re not allowed to take more than five points at a time.’

Glowering at Sprout, Alice muttered, ‘I did take five at a time.’

Professor Sprout inhaled, her demeanour changing from gentle to stern. ‘Then you had overstepped the mark and you should have a word with yourself!’

Alice clenched her fists in indignation. This was the woman who had made her do dirty, unpleasant work in her lessons, bored her half to death with her stupid, dangerous, yucky magical plants and made it very clear that she didn’t want Alice in her lessons. She tried to speak, but her throat constricted dangerously, stealing her voice.

Flitwick piped in, ‘How utterly irresponsible of you! To punish fifty students…’

Alice muttered, ‘forty-nine’ and crossed her arms and averted her gaze, sulking.

McGonagall scoffed, her voice dripping with disdain, ‘And you took points from your own House, too!’

‘They were misbehaving!’ Alice jumped to her feet, unable to bear any more scolding from these bullies, driven by the need to defend herself against their attack. She thought it disgraceful, the way they ganged up on her, and she wanted to turn around and punch Roger, that sanctimonious twat, if only to wipe that outraged expression off his face. She spat, ‘I don’t care whether they were Gryffindors or Blast-Ended Skrewts!’, her voice rising in a steady crescendo into a full-blown shouting fit. ‘You’re having a go at me for doing my job and I bet you’d do the same if I did nowt! Can’t win with you lot, can I?!”

‘How rude!’ Flitwick waved one finger at her and took a step towards her, breathing loudly through his nose which made him look like a miniscule angry bull with a thick moustache. ‘Miss Crowley, you are the last person I would have expected this kind of behaviour from!’
McGonagall spat out, ‘I am utterly disappointed!’, looking away from Alice as though she could not stand the sight of her.

Alice, by now, was close to tears. She looked towards the door desperately, wishing only to run away from this castle and never return. She had only tried to make the best of a bad situation, but nobody seemed to be listening.

Professor Sprout stepped forward again, as though sensing that Alice was almost at breaking point. She said, ‘Miss Crowley, please listen. Nobody is trying to have a go at you, we’re just trying to explain that what you did was wrong and we want you to acknowledge it, that’s all. We were very worried, but this isn’t something that cannot be fixed. Just apologise and all will be well.’

Sprout’s voice was calm and soothing, but Alice was too far gone, shamed and embarrassed in front of the Head Boy and, more importantly, in front of Snape. All that time, he stood there by the fire and observed quietly without making any effort to jump into her defence. He too must have thought her a failure. She begged, prayed to the heavens above for him to jump to her defense, to fight her corner as she would his.

‘I just…’

A rush of black at the edge of her vision alerted her to Snape, who had finally abandoned his post by the fire and stalked towards her fluidly like a panther, his black, dangerous eyes glistening, as though illuminated by a flickering fire of their own. Alice paled as he approached, the tiny hope that he was going to back her up dying a painful death under his hard, unforgiving gaze. Coming to a halt at arm’s length, he loomed over her and spat, ‘You foolish chit.’

The cold emanating from the wizard made Alice shudder. She opened her mouth to argue, but could not find her voice. This wasn’t the Snape she had argued with over the Summer with no problems or ramifications - this was the terrifying Professor Snape, the Bat of the Dungeons who could freeze the blood in one’s veins with a single look. Her heart sank. She was on her own, and now he had turned against her, too.

He continued, ‘NOBODY is bullying you. NOBODY is having a go at you for doing your job, and believe me, all of us would rather be somewhere else right now. Thanks to your inability to familiarise yourself with your job description, none of us Heads of Houses can do our own job of greeting our first-years. Thanks to your unwillingness to engage at least a couple of brain cells, you have caused significant disruption to the staff and the students on the VERY FIRST DAY OF TERM!’

Alice felt betrayed. The agony of knowing just how little she meant to him was too much to bear. She sobbed, ‘Then why let me take points if I can’t take points? Should I just sit there doin’ nowt an’ let the chillun run wild?!’ She turned to appeal to McGonagall, pleading, ‘Please, please just let me go and give the job to somebody else! I never asked for it in the first place!’

‘Girl, are you being deliberately obtuse?!’ Snape’s patience snapped like a piece of dry wood, and he roared at her, his polished drawl thickening with every second, morphing into the thick, broad Mancunian accent as he berated her. She had stopped arguing now and listened to his tirade, defeated and tired of this situation. Silently, she took his verbal lashings on the chin, letting him slice her heart into thin strips with jagged edges.

Snape paused abruptly to catch his breath inbetween one sentence and another, his eyebrows rising as he noticed the looks of disbelief painted on the faces of his colleagues. Quickly, he straightened and cleared his throat, stiffening his upper lip in visible embarrassment at his poor choice of register. He grunted, ‘As you were’, and moved back to his spot by the fire where he continued glowing at
Alice, who no longer had the energy to even feel amused at this uncharacteristic slip.

Professor Sprout winced and said, ‘There, I believe Miss Crowley had learned her lesson.’ She addressed her colleagues with a hint of hope in her voice, ‘Don’t you think?’

Professor McGonagall sighed. ‘Yes, I believe you’re correct, Pomona. Thank you, Severus, hopefully your… explanation had convinced Miss Crowley that she is in the wrong in this situation.’ She turned to Alice, the anger bleeding away from her face. ‘Miss Crowley, I suggest that you go to your quarters and contemplate your behaviour. I shall inform the Headmaster and you will receive detention. Go now.’

Jaw set tight to halt the flood of tears that were desperate to escape any second now, Alice turned on her heel and made to exit the office when there was a knock on the door. Hermione Granger stood there with a snivelling child in tow. She said, ‘I am sorry to interrupt, Professors. This first-year is distressed and I can’t calm him down. He said he wants to go home.’

The child in question spotted Alice. He pointed at her and screamed in terror, as though confronted by a werewolf, or worse. Chased by McGonagall’s stern glare, Alice shoved her hands into her pockets and skulked off with her head down, vowing to never make any effort again.

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely hope that you're feeling just as frustrated with Apocalyptic Alice as I am. If you don't have an urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake some sense into her, it means that I'm doing something wrong. XD
The Dark Witch

Chapter Notes

Hello hello hello! Ok, please don't bash me round the head with a heavy object, I know it's been over a month since the last update, but life's been a little crazy. Assignments and illnesses all around, kidney stones, bursting appendixes, fevers and vomiting and Goddess knows what else. But here's a new chapter for you, all doom and gloom and misery as always, and I will do my best to publish the next one sooner. I promise. I might even make it less miserable. :)

As always, a thousand thanks to FawkesyLady, without whom my writing would be as atrocious as Alice's table manners. :) Love you, Fawkesy <3

Alice was drained, hallowed out, emptier than the pack of fags she'd already smoked through in the anxiety of the day and its aftermath. As soon as she found her new quarters, she made a beeline for the bedroom without stopping to look at her personal chambers and fell face-first onto the bed. Sleep eluded her. She laid in the darkness and stared at the ceiling, mulling over the abrupt change in Snape’s attitude. Of course she did not expect him to trot up to her and snog her breathless in the middle of the Great Hall. She certainly wished that he would, but she never imagined that he could be so cruel to her, not after what happened in summer.

Well, that's me taught, she reflected bitterly, shifting from her stomach to her back. I was his friend for as long as I was useful, and now he's tossed me out like an empty wrapper. Well, fuck him. Plenty of fish in the sea.

The assertion did nothing to ease the wrenching pain in her heart. Sure, she could find another bloke, but the idea of another failure on that front was unbearable. Snape had many faults, but what she believed they had made her feel on top of the world. She should have seen it coming, really. That man was a double agent, a master of deception, and she could not believe just how stupid she had been to think that whatever they had was anything more than another illusion. And she fell for it, hook line and sinker. It was soul-crushing.

Drawing in a shaky sigh, she thought back to her very first boyfriend, the first notch on the belt of disappointments. Bartosz was a lad from Durmstrang she had met in her fifth year, the year of the Triwizard Tournament. It didn’t take him long to have her wrapped around his little finger - the first boy ever to give her any attention, to see her as the girl she was rather than a non-entity, or in the case of Fred and George, a sister. Within weeks he had her in his bed, and all she received in return was a nickname and the forbidden knowledge that had landed her where she was today. Alice snorted bitterly, thanking her lucky stars that at least he didn’t knock her up.

Bartosz had lured her in with promises as sweet as they were empty, fed her a steady stream of false hope, then forgot all about her after returning home, leaving her to pine for him for months after his departure. At first, Alice desperately believed that the owl would eventually come with a letter - for many months, she told herself that it would be tomorrow, or the day after, or perhaps next week. When it became apparent that the owl would never come, Alice spent countless nights crying into her pillow, knowing that Bartosz never intended to come back at all.
He had taught her the basics, the framework of the Dark Arts which she had built up on. There was no doubt that she had fallen down the rabbit hole, extending her repertoire at a rapid pace. So entranced she was with these new, unexplored magics, that her regular school work began to suffer, shoved to the back burner in favour of experiments that pushed her abilities to their limits, gave her a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction as her repertoire grew with each passing day. This didn’t last, either. One stupid error, one detail overlooked was enough to leave her condemned to servitude, trapped under the rubble left behind after her kingdom collapsed. The fact that no living soul had been harmed in her quest for knowledge meant nothing to the wizard who now owned her, and it mattered not one jot that it was the handsome lad from Durmstrang who introduced her to the Dark Arts in the first place.

Then there was Fred. It took him long enough to open his eyes and see what Alice was a girl, and last year they became casual lovers. They loved each other dearly, but it wasn’t that kind of love. Their occasional sexual encounters served as a way of letting off steam, and both parties were well aware that it would all end as soon as one of them found a permanent partner. Fred would always see her as one of the lads, and would never treat her the way she would like to be treated as somebody’s witch. Alice didn't labour under any illusions, and there was no point dwelling on it. The arrangement they had was more than satisfactory for the time being.

And then there was Snape.

Reason told her that she had build her dream cottage on a quagmire, and it had already sunk out of view. His actions and words were absolutely clear, and whatever uneasy alliance they had forged over the summer under the duress of need was broken. Alice couldn’t blame him, really - he was, after all, her teacher and a wizard twenty years her senior. She had nothing to give him that an older witch couldn’t.

She sat up and punched the pillow before collapsing back into the wonderfully comfortable bed. She closed her leaden eyes, overcome with exhaustion despite the myriad thoughts whirling in her brain. As she finally drifted off into sleep, a new resolve blossomed in her heart and she now knew what she had to do. Forget and move on, and distance herself from Professor Snape.

A few hours later, Alice was woken up by the sound of the Floo network. Rubbing her eyes, she sat up in her bed, momentarily disoriented by the bright green flames in the grate opposite her bed. As she clambered out of bed awkwardly, she briefly wondered who had decided to contact her this early in the morning and why, and then decided to hex the intruder into oblivion for doing just that. Before she could utter the ‘bugger off’ that hovered around the tip of her tongue, the Headmaster’s wheezy voice interrupted that thought.

‘Good morning, Miss Crowley. I hope you’ve slept well?’

Alice yawned loudly, ignoring the good-natured question. She hadn't the energy or inclination to exchange pleasantries with the wizard she considered most dangerous to her personal health and well being. On the other hand, her sense of self-preservation was rearing high above the sullen resentment that she harbouried for Dumbledore, and she found her way to heightened alertness. Barefoot, she walked towards the fireplace and sat down cross-legged on the hearth rug, looking into the flames through sleep-addled eyes. ‘Morning’, she grunted in a low, hoarse voice before lapsing into a fit of smoker’s cough. Her throat was sore and tickly, and she could taste the filthy tar in the back of her throat as she coughed violently.

Alice made a sound that resembled that of a cat hacking up a fur ball, and then finally her cough subsided enough to allow discourse. Maintaining his facade of concern, the man spoke, ‘I’m sorry to have woken you up, but I wanted to ensure that I could speak to you before you leave your quarters.
I hope that you find them comfortable?’

Alice grunted, ‘Not looked yet.’

Dumbledore answered with a hint of amusement in his voice, ‘I am surprised, I expected you to have deep-cleaned all the rooms three times by now. As you will undoubtedly see, the decor is in Gryffindor colours, but feel free to make the place your own and transfigure the colours if you wish. Please abstain from knocking the walls down, it would be awfully inconvenient.’

Alice narrowed her eyes and scowled nastily, chin in hand. ‘Have you called to talk to me about interior design, or is there something I can do for you?’

She could hear the Headmaster taking in a deep, weary sigh before he replied. ‘Yes, yes. Well, I just wanted to let you know that the Hourglasses have been reset successfully, and that your detention with Professor McGonagall had been cancelled. I was made aware of the situation, and I wanted to acknowledge that your lack of judgement was due to extreme stress.’ After a brief pause, a hint of humour crept back into his voice. ‘You might wish to keep a low profile for a little while.’

Nodding, Alice rubbed her eyes again, then barked, ‘Fine.’ Ready to end this conversation, she shifted her weight to stand, but Dumbledore was not yet finished.

‘Please note that your Wednesday detentions will still go ahead. You will report to Professor Sprout at 6 o’clock precisely.’

Alice rolled her eyes. Unlucky. She was now desperate to piss and eager to have a fag before breakfast. As though he could sense her thoughts, Dumbledore added, ‘And please remember that smoking is prohibited. I also expect a report on the status of the Essence every Monday after my Honeydukes delivery.’

‘FINE! Now leave me unless you’re going to pay for a show!’ Alice growled. She stood up, knees creaking, and walked to her bedside cabinet, where she picked up her wand and pointed it at the fireplace. A single flick later, the connection ended. Noticing that she was already pissed off and the day hadn’t even started properly yet, Alice left the bedroom in search of the bathroom.

If the usual standards of Hogwarts bathrooms were rather luxurious, the Head Girl’s private bathroom could only be described as positively opulent. Alice had found the bathroom directly opposite her bedroom, and gasped in awe as soon as she entered. Admittedly the bathroom was much smaller than the shared bathrooms scattered around the castle, but the fixtures more than made up for it. The walls were bare stone, and the floor was black marble, polished to a high shine. There was a white porcelain toilet tucked away in one corner next to a sink with an ornate mirror over it, and a large boat-shaped bath, breathtakingly beautiful, was placed in the centre of the room under an enormous chandelier.

Sliding her finger around the tub’s rim as she walked around it, she was surprised to find that it was made of glass, tinted a brilliant blue, like sea water in an exotic island. The sides were decorated with what looked like a thin fishing net, shiny and filigree, and Alice strongly suspected that it may have been made of real gold, not that cheap tinted chrome that peals. The bath had six taps, all with knobs stylised to look like sea shells, made of shiny glass. Alice had never seen anything like it in her life, but could already imagine wasting a lot of time in the bath from now on.

Further inspection revealed a shower cubicle tucked away behind a stump of a wall in the far corner, with stone walls and a gleaming bronze tray and a variety of shower heads. Deciding to save the bath for a lazy evening, she shed her pyjamas and jumped in the shower. She washed quickly, using the
plain bar of soap provided by the school. The water was soothing, warm and soft against her skin, and soon she felt vaguely human again.

As she stepped out of the shower, an enormous fluffy white towel floated towards her and wrapped itself around her body. It was enchanted to keep itself warm and felt rather like a thick blanket. With a small sound of approval, Alice walked over to the sink and stared into the beautiful mirror, wandlessly summoning her makeup bag. She rummaged inside the flowery bag for a while, digging out her collection of cosmetics, and laid them all out neatly on the little shelf above the sink. As she rubbed a thick layer of foundation into her skin, she muttered, ‘Mirror mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?’

The mirror replied, ‘You are!’, causing Alice to nearly jump out of her skin. She had heard of these fancy enchanted mirrors before but had never encountered one until now.

‘Oh.’ She said dumbly, fluttering her eyelashes at her own reflection. ‘Well, cheers. Nice to see that we’re in agreement.’

The mirror chuckled. ‘You’re welcome. But if I were you, I’d do something about these dark circles under your eyes. They aren’t very flattering, dear. Have you not had your beauty sleep?’

Alice grunted, ‘No rest for the wicked’ as she applied concealer under her eyes and on top of the few spots that appeared around her jaw and chin and then covered the lot with powder. She found her eyeliner pencil and, keeping the cap pinched between her teeth, drew a thin black line on her upper lid and smudged it out with the tip of her finger. Finally, she applied two coats of mascara and a swipe of pearly pink lipstick. She smacked her lips, smiling coquettishly into the mirror’s polished surface. She asked aloud, ‘How about now?’

‘Much better.’ The mirror paused for a beat, then added as an afterthought, ‘Perhaps you could do with a little blusher on your cheeks. You do look rather pale.’

‘No time for that, I’m dying for a fag.’

Alice took hold of her wand and began working on her hair, charming it dry and poker-straight. When she was done, she ran her fingers through her now-silky locks and smirked in satisfaction. ‘Well, that’s me sorted.’

The mirror made a small sound of thoughtful approval. ‘Yes. You’re certainly presentable. Perhaps you should consider adding some highlights to your hair, and maybe a few layers to frame your face.’

‘I know, I know.’ Alice waved her hand in annoyed dismissal. ‘I’ve been meaning to do it for ages. Maybe after payday.’

With that, Alice banished the towel to the rack and left the bathroom.

Back in her bedroom, Alice put on her school uniform quickly and stuffed her bra with rolled-up socks to give an illusion of a swell under her shirt, reflecting that she rather liked the mirror and would probably steal it at the end of the school year. Whilst washing, she had taken the time to think, her mind clearer now that she was calm again.

She had decided on a new plan, having taken a hard look at her behaviour last night. She had been too rash, too overcome with stress and emotion, and admittedly the vodka didn’t help. Taking careful stock of the possible repercussions, Alice came to the conclusion that she hadn’t done herself any favours by refusing to take the blame. Presenting herself as the meek and quiet student meant that she
had slipped under the radar numerous times in the past. It was very useful, and to shatter the illusion now was not in her best interest. She would have to remedy the problem quickly, preferably before lunch.

Alice left her rooms and carefully made her way to the seldom-used exit located near the dungeons. It was Fred and George who had discovered it a while ago, hidden among the myriad winding passages that made up the bowels of Hogwarts. It was still very early in the morning, too early for breakfast, and most of the castle’s inhabitants would likely still be in bed, and Alice did not encounter a single living soul as she stepped into the fresh, chilly air of the outdoors. Quickly, she walked along the castle’s outside wall and rounded a corner, making a beeline to the windowless blind spot in the castle’s walls which served as her her own private smoking refuge.

She hadn’t had a fag since the previous day, and the nicotine rush hit her quickly, making her light-headed. She savoured the roll-up, which eased the rumbling of her hungry stomach, and longed for a mug of steaming, strong black coffee. Hogwarts did not provide such delicacies to students; the only beverages permitted to them were either pumpkin juice, which Alice hated with a passion, plain water, or tea that was intentionally tepid for health and safety reasons, none of which were of any use to the caffeine-dependent witch. Grimacing, Alice made a mental note to try her luck and request a mug of coffee from the House Elves. She would quite gladly swap most of the ‘perks’ that came with being Head Girl in exchange for the privilege of her preferred beverage.

In the corner of her vision, she spotted a bright lone figure approaching from the opposite direction at a leisurely pace. Startled, she stubbed out her cigarette and stiffened reflexively for a moment before her instincts kicked into gear, compelling her legs to move as though of their own volition. Heart pounding, she sprinted back to the secret entrance as though chased by a throng of Death Eaters, cursing vehemently under her breath as she ran. Damn and blast. She didn’t get a good glimpse of the newcomer’s face, but had strong belief that it must have been another student. Which meant that her smoking spot was no longer her own. Which meant that she would have to chase the intruder away next time, by hook or by crook.

Panting, she navigated the labyrinthine corridors of the dungeons and made her way to the Great Hall for breakfast. Her throat was hurting and she had a stitch in her side after the brief sprint. She really ought to take up some exercise, but the very idea made her nauseous. It was one thing to watch football on the telly, and another thing entirely to run around like a bloody goon or jump up and down like a monkey on a rope. No, sports were sweaty, smelly and unhygienic, and she would rather shove a garden gnome up her arse than partake in any such madness.

Alice’s first period was Defense, followed by a free period, then Runes after lunch, followed by double Arithmancy, as she found out during breakfast when she finally cared to take a look at her timetable. She huffed a small sigh of relief, glad that she wouldn’t have to suffer Herbology or Potions today. It took an awful lot of effort to avoid looking in the direction of the Head Table anyway, and Alice wasn’t sure if she could restrain herself from hexing Professor Snape on sight if she did.

Ever the self-proclaimed hater of the Great Outdoors, Alice was appalled to find that the Defense class was to be held on the grounds rather than in a classroom. She nipped back to her room to find her jumper, and then doddered to the meeting spot a short walk away from Professor Hagrid’s hut. She had always been wary of the half-giant and preferred to keep her distance despite his lovely reputation, offended by his enormous bushy beard and the unpleasant smell of the stables.

Soon, she arrived in the meeting spot with only minutes to spare, where a group of students had gathered already in a rough semi-circle around Professor Tchihende. The air was quite chilly, and
several students could be seen shivering slightly, having foregone their jumpers. The edge of the Forbidden Forest was visible in the near distance, and Alice dry-swallowed reflexively. She had always felt intimidated by the ominous-looking woods. She noticed three huts in various stages of construction, one large and two smaller ones, and wondered who was going to live there.

Standing off to the side, close enough to see and hear clearly but visibly distanced from the rest of the class, she caught snippets of hushed whispers among the students who, like her, were obviously curious about Professor Tchihende. The ancient-looking witch was not quite a midget, roughly five foot, and wore an odd mix of a light green flannel shirt which appeared around three sizes too large, coupled with a thick quilted bodywarmer in a garish shade of fuchsia, and a pair of shabby-looking brown cords tucked into knee-high dark green wellingtons. She had waist-long silver hair that looked desperate for a good trim, and Alice was taken aback by the sheer informality, as there was not a teaching robe in sight.

Alice took a keen interest to the four young people behind Professor Tchihende, two girls and two boys. They seemed to be in their late teens or perhaps very early twenties. Dressed in Muggle clothing that seemed as ill-fitting and odd as the professor’s, they stood in a loose row, smiling at the class. Alice’s eye was drawn to one particular boy, tall and lean, with tawny skin, gleaming dark eyes and long brown plaited hair that reached the middle of his back. He had a strong brow, high cheekbones and full, boat-shaped lips that revealed a set of pearly teeth as he sent the students another bright grin. Not bad, she thought. Not bad at all.

Professor Tchihende cleared her throat and clapped her hands. She said, ‘Welcome to seventh-year Defense Against the Dark Arts, everyone. My name is Professor Tina Tchihende, and these,’ she pointed to the people behind her back with her thumb, ‘- are my apprentices. Their names are Eskaminzin, Tarak, Onawa and Liluye, and they will be assisting us over the course of the year.’

Her voice was pleasant if a little croaky, and Alice had trouble working out her accent, sing-song with a noticeable twang. It was decidedly foreign, but pleasant to her ears. Alice smiled lightly. Ah, so the pretty boy’s name is Tarak. Nice. But why do they all have such odd names?

The Professor continued, her voice taking on a tougher edge, ‘Look scrubs, I know you’ve been subjected to a series of inconsistent instruction throughout your years here at Hogwarts, which I was led to believe was one of the best schools in the world. I’m here to correct all of the old mistakes, iron out your bad habits, and open your eyes to what’s waiting out there for you when you graduate. You cannot afford to not know this subject inside and out in these very dangerous times.’

She gave the class a long, searching look. ‘This year, you will spend less time writing essays and learning about creatures you are unlikely to come across in the United Kingdom. You are going to concentrate on bringing your practical skills up to scratch, and you will spend a lot of time outdoors, practising spells, duelling, and eventually simulating battles. I will give you as much real-life, hands-on experience as possible. Ultimately, what you get out of it is entirely up to you and will depend on the effort you put in. I will expect you to follow my instructions to the letter, and bullshit will not be tolerated. Am I making myself clear?’

Alice nodded along with the rest of the class. Suddenly, the small and dotty-looking witch seemed almost intimidating, but Alice was quietly impressed. Professor Tchihende was a massive improvement on Umbridge, but then again, the bar was set ridiculously low in the first place. The young witch felt something akin to shy hope. Alice wasn’t particularly powerful, even Dumbledore had said so, but compared to many of her peers she was a living war machine, even taking into account the fact that many of her classmates were members of Dumbledore’s Army. It was a sad state of affairs that Hogwarts students were so unequipped for dealing with the horrors that were undoubtedly just around the corner.
Before she had a chance to dwell on the thought, Professor Tchihende bellowed, ‘Alright! Today I want to do a little test. Get yourselves into pairs!’

Alice grimaced lightly and did not move from her spot, knowing that she would end up the odd one out, as she always did. Standing with her arms crossed, she scowled, watching the other students pair up quickly, and waited for the professor to spot her and add her as the third wheel to an existing pair, as usual. She was surprised when the ancient witch trotted over to her shortly before she was left standing awkwardly alone and took her arm, and led her gently to where the apprentices stood. ‘We have an odd number today,’ she said. ‘How about you practise with Tarak?’

Alice nodded as they came to a halt in front of Tarak and Professor Tchihende patted her arm lightly, sending her a small, understanding smile before she turned around to address the class. Alice drew in a deep breath. The professor had saved her the embarrassment of being the odd one out before it became apparent. Nobody had ever done this for her before, and an uncomfortable knot of gratitude formed in her chest. It felt strange, leaving her off-balance.

Shifting her weight from side to side, Alice mustered up the courage to look up at Tarak. As though sensing her uncertainty, he flashed her a wide, reassuring smile, which Alice returned awkwardly. He said, ‘Hello. What’s your name?’

His face was open and friendly, and he also spoke with the slight twang that Alice found equally funny and fascinating. Having decided that he seemed nice enough, Alice cleared her throat before replying, ‘Um, hi. I’m Alice.’ She averted her gaze, suddenly fascinated with the tips of her shoes.

Tarak bowed slightly. ‘Nice to meet you, Alice. I -’

He was cut off abruptly as Professor Tchihende’s voice, magically amplified, reverberated around the area, and they both turned around to listen. ‘Right then! I will be observing you all as your square off in practise duels with your partners. While real battle does not follow rules, I expect you all to restrain yourselves to clean spells only today. Begin!’

Like a flash of light, Alice whipped out her wand and pointed it at Tarak’s chest, taking up the duelling stance, one foot forward. The corner of Tarak’s mouth quirked up slightly as he mirrored her stance, wand at the ready. He sent a disarming spell her way, which she blocked easily and non-verbally, without even thinking about it.

‘Nice one,’ he said, a small glint appearing in his eyes. He sent another spell, this time a stinging hex, and Alice deflected it with only a slight twitch of her wand. Tarak raised one thick eyebrow, surprised or mildly impressed, and Alice felt the blood grow hot in her veins as the rush of battle filled her from within, sharpening her senses. She sent a strong Knee-Reversal Hex and tsked when Tarak deflected effortlessly. This would be fun.

They sparred for what seemed like hours, although it could have been minutes, the back-and-forth of attacking and blocking spells rising to a furious cascade of flashing colours. Alice fell into a trance, her awareness narrowed down to attack-deflect-duck-survive, the fire in her eyes matching Tarak’s, who seemed equally focused on their duel. A thin layer of perspiration appeared on Alice’s face as she successfully blocked another jinx. Unexpectedly, she felt a hand pat her shoulder, and she turned around sharply, shrieking at the top of her voice just as a Sardine Hex shot out from the tip of her wand before she could stop it.

She watched, horrified, as the sparks dissipated almost immediately, a couple of inches away from Professor Tchihende’s chest. The professor had blocked the hex wordlessly and wandlessly, an impressive skill, and Alice gasped, knees shaking. ‘I’m sorry, Professor, I was…’
‘Distracted, yes, I know.’ Professor Tchihende’s mouth stretched into a warm, indulgent smile and she chuckled good-naturedly at her student. ‘We have a young warrior here, haven’t we, Tarak?’

‘You can say that again, Teacher!’ Panting, Tarak walked over to where the two witches stood, wiping his sweat-soaked brow. ‘She gave me a good workout!’

Alice turned an unflattering shade of red to the tips of her ears, and she cast her eyes downwards. ‘Likewise.’ She muttered, digging into the soft ground with the tips of her shoes.

Professor Tchihende grabbed the piece of parchment that was hovering on a clipboard behind her back. Fishing a small pencil out of her pocket, she gave Tarak a questioning look.

Tarak muttered, ‘Offensive, definitely’, and Tchihende made a small mark next to Alice’s name on the parchment. Satisfied, she nodded and walked back to the centre of the clearing, ignoring Alice’s bemused stare.

Tina Tchihende shouted, ‘Gather round!’ and watched her students flood back to where she stood, arranging themselves in a loose cluster. The children looked tired and muddy, and she clucked her tongue in irritation at their lack of stamina. They really should have been able to go for a lot longer than a mere twenty minutes at this point in their education.

‘I’ve seen enough to tell that you all have potential. What many of you lack in confidence and skill can amended with hard work and practice. Sure, you’d pass your exams, but I’m concerned about making sure you have the best chance of surviving if you are caught in the crossfire. Towards this, I’ve divided you into two sections based on what you have shown to be your strengths. Specifically, Offensive and Defensive styles of fighting. Neither is superior to the other, so don’t go on getting ideas about yourselves.’

The ancient witch had to close her eyes briefly as there was a disturbance in the residual magic that filled the air and it was tugging at her attention. She could sense it earlier, a small undercurrent of Darkness beneath the clean, school-approved spells. She had been briefed, and knew all about the disturbing politics of House Slytherin in particular, and now the evidence was there. No Dark spells had been used in this lesson, but the Dark magick’s stain was noticeable even when the most innocent spells were used. It filled her nostrils and prickled the tip of her tongue. More than one of these ruddy-cheeked adolescents were touched by it, and she grimly mentally marked each, intending to watch them closely. One student in particular pulled her inner senses, a Gryffindor. It wasn’t surprising to the ancient wise woman. Despite what everyone said, there was always one, even among the so-called white hats. This one didn’t merely have a hint of dark magick, she was disturbingly saturated with its metallic, alien tang.

Tina gave a brief lecture concerning the variety of offensive and defensive spells they were going to cover and concluded the lesson, her brilliant mind whizzing with plans to cram all of the necessary knowledge into these children’s heads in the space of one academic year. Dumbledore was right, this place needed her.

It was appalling that the other Professors hadn’t a notion of the plague that walked among them. British Wizarding culture had removed itself from the base magick, preferring to use wands as crutches. skipping over the baser connection with their magic in favour of precision; thereby blinding themselves to the world around them.

She squinted as she considered the witch as she walked away. Something was off, not quite right. Then it came to her. Alice Crowley, for all of the eye-watering, bitter and suffocating quality of the magic steaming off of her, lacked the unholy aura of a corrupted Dark Witch. Tina looked forward to
unraveling this knot, and needed to do it soon, come hell or high water.

Tarak appeared at Tina’s side, humming thoughtfully. The look in his face confirmed that he shared Tina’s sentiment. Exchanging a long, knowing glance with Tarak, she muttered, ‘Keep an eye on this one. She does not dabble with the forbidden arts, she is an active practitioner. Don’t let her near Harry Potter if you can help it.’

Voice heavy with concern Tarak asked, ‘Teacher, what can be done?’

Feeling old, Tina replied, ‘You can bring a witch to the sacred hearth, but you can't make her swallow the healing flames. But for her sake, we will try.’

That evening, Alice washed away the stresses of the day in a lovely bath. She recognised that she was stalling as she massaged scented lotion into her skin, her mind shying away from what awaited her in the extremely small lab. It probably had been a storage room in former use, but now was outfitted with an ingredient cabinet which had yet to fully explore and a tiny basin. There was an equipment trolley that had to be wheeled out into her bedroom to allow her space to move and reach the wooden workbench, which a charitable person would have described as full of character. Alice knew it was cheap, but as it was sturdy, she had nothing to reproach the Headmaster with.

Alice's favourite part of all was the single wall that was occupied by bookshelves, stocked with her own impressive collection of books and scrolls dedicated to the forbidden Dark Arts, obtained by questionable means from disreputable sources. Part of Dumbledore's deal was that he would allow her this freedom to explore, but would not support her should she get caught. After all, this was necessary to her success with the Essence, and was undertaken for the Greater Good.

Alice doddered to the workbench, her floppy footsteps echoing around the room, towards the solitary cauldron in which the Essence swirled lazily from one side to the other. It had become noticeably darker, now a deep shade of mahogany, and also thicker. The oily substance swirled about the cauldron slowly, as though too heavy to move with ease, and as soon as Alice stepped closer, familiar voices began to speak, the whispers rising up like curling mists above the potion’s surface.

The pages-long Arithmetic calculation suggested that the next growth spurt wasn’t due for a little while longer, and she took the return of the whispers as a sure sign that the time was approaching. Wrinkling her nose, she tried to clear her mind as she picked up a jar of black powder and dropped a single pinch into the cauldron. The Essence accepted the Ashes and released three large bubbles that popped loudly as soon as they reached the surface, and Alice chuckled lightly, the sound reminding her of a good old belch after a hearty meal.

Reviewing her notes, Alice reflected on her first day back, the Essence’s whispers providing a soothing if unintelligible background noise to her thoughts. The day hadn’t been as bad as she feared. When she went to apologise profusely to both Sprout and McGonagall, she ended up receiving a tight hug from the former and a biscuit from the latter, along with a pitying look and an acknowledgement of the stress she must have been under.

But you were in the right. You should not have to apologise for being right...

Alice muttered, ‘Shouldn’t have to, but had to nonetheless.’ She brushed the thought aside. What was done was done, and she managed to maintain the status quo. If she kept her head low for a while, she would continue to protect her image as the blue-eyed girl. Yes. She had done the right thing.

What’s more, the classes, so far, seemed rather enjoyable. The seventh-year curriculum seemed
challenging, and it looked like this year she would have to dedicate a lot more time to her studies, but Defense, Runes and Arithmancy had gone reasonably well, although the new set of Arithmatic formulas had been harder to grasp than she expected, but it was only the first lecture of the term. Most importantly, she managed to avoid Professor Snape.

You love him.

Alice snorted under her breath. ‘I want him more than anything. But he doesn’t love me.’

You could make him love you.

Skim-reading over her many notes, she spoke to the empty room absentmindedly. ‘I can’t force him to love me. I could pour a gallon of Amortentia down his throat and it still wouldn’t be love. A parody, or even a facsimile, but not the real thing.’

Don’t be silly. Let me help you. It would be easy to make him yours. Why not bind him to you forevermore?

Alice shook her head in confusion at the strange ideas that bred inside her mind. ‘Bind him to me?’ She whispered, gazing at the worktop. Unexpectedly, her inner vision was filled with lewd images of her and Snape, mating furiously on an enormous bed. She fell into the vision of Snape labouring over her, his features creasing in a rictus of unrestrained masculine pleasure as he fucked her savagely, powerful and untamed in his passion. She could hear his grunting and her own mewling as she writhed beneath him, the pressure between her legs growing stronger, her need more urgent. She could smell it, the unmistakable scent of sex, of sweat and semen and heat, heady to the point of overwhelming.

Drunk on desire, she fell onto the desk and held onto its edge for dear life as her knees went weak, sending the parchment flying. Her head spun. The vision took control and made itself real in her mind. The fire in her lower belly died down for a split second before it exploded in a raging bonfire once more, and Alice began to scream, a jolt of blinding ecstasy shaking her to the core as she let go.

The sound of glass shattering into a million pieces pulled her out of her trance. Panting and whimpering, Alice went down on her hands and knees and crawled out of the room, her passion spent, her arousal giving way to fear. ‘What the… what the hell was that… oh fuck…’

As soon as she reached her bedroom, she kicked the door closed and fell onto her side on the carpeted floor, trying to catch her breath, her instincts screaming at her to flee through the haze inside her head.

‘Oh fuck…’ she croaked brokenly, coming to understand her mistake. The Essence was as fascinating as it was dangerous, more addictive than opium. She had let her guard down, and the whispers took advantage. She should have known better than that. This was the Dark Arts in their purest form she was fucking with, and one does not fuck with the Dark Arts without risking getting fucked in return. She could almost hear the Essence, laughing blackly just at the edge of her awareness.
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