Dead of Night

by spinner33

Summary

Harry is slowly recovering from Lucius Malfoy's vicious attack, but not without stops and starts along the way. He needs to find a way to defeat Voldemort, bring Remus and Tonks home, not lose his mind, control the weird fluctuations in his magic, not get committed to St. Mungo's by Minister Fudge (who has taken on a mission to destroy Harry. Harry is trying very hard not lose his friends while building a relationship with a certain snarky Potions Master. Nothing like a few obstacles before that happily-ever-after starts!

Part One - Chapter One - in which Harry and Hagrid have been disobeying Professor McGonagall

Notes

Warning: This story contains graphic violence, explicit sexual encounters, vampirism, foreign words and phrases, cross-dressing, physical mutilation, nasty-sticky-grisly character deaths, desecration of mortal remains....I think you're getting what I'm saying here. This story is not meant for anyone who doesn't like slash, can't take a morbid joke, or who might be a tad bit squeamish. This is not to say that it's a complete blood-bath. In fact parts of it are sure to bore you to death. But you might not want to be eating spaghetti or pork chops while reading some of this. Don't worry though-- I will give ample warning about upcoming carnage.
"It was a paring knife," Harry stammered.

"I don’t know who you think you’re deceiving, Mr. Potter, but this is not the type of wound one can inflict with the average kitchen implement," Severus Snape said as his eyes darkened with impatience.

"It’s nothing. It’s a tiny poke. Give it a bit of a healing spell, and let’s be done with it," Hagrid said with a grunt of pain.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir?" Harry whispered, eyes on the floor.

"Go outside, get the broadswords, and make sure there’s no blood left on them, unless you want Professor McGonagall to go through the roof when she finds out what you two have been about this evening."

Harry gazed fearfully at Professor Snape. His thin hands were spasmodically clutching and releasing the kitchen apron he had used to staunch the flow of blood from the gaping wound in the giant’s side before using a kitchen towel instead. Severus reached forward and carefully took one of Harry’s hands away, pulling the apron from his grip.

"Go get the broadswords," Snape repeated, dropping his voice to a pleasant sound instead of a harsh bark. Harry was frozen to the spot, staring at the floor. "Harry?"

"I’ll get the swords," Hagrid said, moving to stand up from the chair in which he was slumped. Snape gave him a sharp look and stood up instead.

"Wait where you are, or that will start bleeding again. Harry will take me to the swords. Come on."

"Um, no. You’d better not," Hagrid said, rising slowly to his feet. He put a hand on the table for support to right himself. "They’re next to the rain barrel."

"Why is that a problem?"

"You’re going to wonder why the rain barrel is charmed to stay warm."

"Yes, I might wonder why indeed," Snape agreed.

"It’s because my piranhas are in the rain barrel, and if you knew about them, you’d have to report that you saw them," Hagrid grinned. "But since you haven’t seen them, you can’t be sure they’re even there, right?"

"Right," Severus said with a nod.

"I’ll be right back," Hagrid grunted, climbing up to his feet. Shaking his head in dismay, Snape watched Hagrid wander towards the front door to his hut. Severus leaned against the kitchen table, holding absently onto the apron he had taken from Harry. Potter folded down to his knees. He took the apron from Severus and started wiping up the blood that had spilled onto the wooden floor.
"Harry, let me see if you’re hurt. Did Hagrid nick you? You’ve got blood all over you. Let me have a look at you. HARRY!"

Severus exclaimed Potter’s name as the teen went limp on the floor. Snape dropped beside him, turning him over and lifting his head and shoulders off the bloody wooden planks. Producing a vial from his cloak, he uncorked it with a flick of his thumb, and waved it twice under Harry’s nose. The teen shuddered in response to the vile concoction being waved about. Severus put away the vial and conjured a damp cloth, with which he washed Harry’s clammy face. Finally, Harry’s eyes opened, clouded with confusion.


Hagrid was stumbling back into the hut by this point. He was carrying two broadswords, one stained with blood and the other completely clean. Severus took out his wand and waved it across the mess on the floor. Everything vanished, including those mysterious brown spots that Harry had always mistaken for a pattern on the wood itself. The floor probably hadn’t been so clean in years. Harry rose to his knees and struggled for balance.

"Oh, dear," Hagrid said, dropping woozily into his chair once more. He gave Snape the weapons, keeping the towel pressed tightly over his side. Severus did a quick cleaning spell on the weapons before putting them up on the table between dirty dishes and a bread bowl empty except for crumbs.

"Harry, go in the bathroom and clean up," Snape said, pointing in the direction of what he took to be the bedroom and bathroom. "Hagrid’s going to be fine. You go clean up."

"It’s all right, lad," Hagrid grinned weakly. "Go on now."

Harry climbed unsteadily to his feet and went to the bedroom. Snape waited until he heard the bathroom door close before he pinned Hagrid with an anxious look.

"What the hell happened?" he snapped, taking away the towel and pointing his wand at the gash he had uncovered.

"We were practicing, that’s all."

"Practicing what? Impaling each other?"

"He begged me to show him more about how to use the swords. He’s scared about being able to defend himself."

"He’s barely got enough strength to climb Gryffindor Tower, and you’ve got him swinging these damned things? What’s the matter with you? Did you slip and fall on him? Is that how he cut you?"

"No. I...well...I....I...."

"What?"

"I must have startled him."

"What?"

"I should have known better."
"How did you startle him?"

"I grabbed him ‘bout the waist, picked him up when he wasn’t expecting it, and he–"

"He what?"

"Panicked, I guess. He stabbed me on instinct, realized what he’d done, and he kept blinking at me in shock. It was because of all the blood. I didn’t know if he was fixing to faint or sprout fangs."

"It must have reminded him too much of seeing Lucius Malfoy covered in gore."

"You should have seen his eyes,” Hagrid moaned with a crushed expression. Snape wasn’t sure what was hurting the giant more—the hole in his side or the fact he had terrified Harry. It was probably wise that Snape didn’t comment further.

The Potions Master had been in the forest collecting specimens at dusk, and had come running towards the gamekeeper’s hut when he had heard the sharp terrified scream puncturing the twilight. That same scream was the one that haunted his sleep. He was never far from Harry’s side, helping as much as he could as the boy struggled to recover physically and emotionally from Lucius Malfoy’s attack. Severus had been awakened by that tormented scream on more than one occasion. He knew it meant Harry felt in danger.

Snape had dropped what he was doing and raced to the edge of the forest. He arrived there to find Hagrid leaning something shiny against the side of his hut, next to the rain barrel. Hagrid spurted a trail of blood as he dragged Harry into his hut. Snape had followed, naturally curious as anyone might be.

"Better?" Snape asked.

"Oh, better. Much better," Hagrid said, running his hand over the six-inch, red, healed incision in his side. "Stings, but I’ll be fine. That’s fast work. You have quite a talent for healing, you know. Have you ever considered becoming a doctor?"

"You should avoid lifting heavy objects for a week or two. You’ll also need to come up with a clever explanation to give Madam Pomfrey before next year’s physical."

"There’s a squid in the tub," a small voice said. Hagrid and Snape both jumped. Harry was standing at the bedroom door, holding his shirt up in front of his bare chest. His eyes were glued to the floor.

"Squiggles? He’s back?" Hagrid laughed, standing up and going towards Harry. Potter darted aside, hiding in the darkness of the bedroom as Hagrid went into the bathroom. Hagrid stopped for a step to ponder why Harry was staying out of arm’s reach. His large furry face crinkled with sorrow.

"He came out of the overflow when I filled the tub," Harry stammered.

"I thought he had gone to the lake to stay for sure. It’s January. He shouldn’t be up and about," Hagrid said. Harry slipped back into his shirt and continued to hide in the shadows, careful to keep back from the giant.

"If you have piranhas in your rain barrel and a squid in your tub, where do you wash up?" Snape asked, cleaning the towel and folding it on the counter.

"Kitchen sink," Hagrid called. Snape pointed his wand at the apron.
"That explains a lot," he murmured. He walked to the bathroom to see what Hagrid was fussing about. There was a flash of color in the tub– pinkish tentacles were propelling a small, egg-shaped, gray body. The tiny squid swam lazy circles as Hagrid dropped treats into the water from a jar by the side of the tub.

"Isn’t he something?" Hagrid chuckled, reaching into the water to tickle the baby squid. "Harry, would you like to see?"

Harry stood in the far doorway, shaking his head no, eyes on the floor again.

"Is that at all sanitary, keeping him in your tub?" Severus asked.

"I don’t keep him in the tub. He comes to visit when the tub is filled."

"I see. I’m going to take Mr. Potter back to the castle through the Floo, so he can have a bath that doesn’t include a squid. You haven’t got any fire breathing dragons or other dangerous fauna lurking in the fireplace, have you?"

"No, course not," Hagrid laughed awkwardly.

"Thanks for the healing spell," Hagrid answered.

"You’re welcome."

"And for keeping hush about the swords." Hagrid tested Snape covertly.

"You’re welcome," Snape said through clenched teeth. "The single proviso to my silence is that you will use armor next time."

Black Coffee

Chapter Summary

In which Severus ponders Harry's mental state and Dumbledore ponders where Tonks might be

Severus awoke with Harry in his arms. A shiny glimmer of purple was moving somewhere behind him just beyond visual range but not beyond his senses. He shifted his stiff back and leaned against the other side of the chair, balancing the boy against his chest. Familiar, slender fingers tightened on his moving arm, clutching right above the elbow. Tired green eyes opened, and searched worriedly for Severus.

"It’s all right," Snape murmured in a voice husky from sleep. Harry didn’t look convinced. Severus held tighter, cupping his arms against Harry’s hips like a cradle. Potter burrowed his face down into Snape’s opened jacket, and closed his weary eyes again.

Snape nosed his way through wild bangs and touched one kiss to the boy’s pale skin. He glanced down at the mismatched socks hanging out from under the afghan, and wished he had thought to remove them for Harry before retiring to the chair. Could he reach the dangling gold and scarlet toes from here? Probably not. There was always his wand, but he didn’t want to disturb Harry any further. It had taken him half an hour to be comfortable enough to climb into Severus’s chair with him.

Several minutes of quiet passed. Harry’s breathing slowed and his grip on Snape’s arm loosened. Severus wasn’t sure the boy was asleep though. Potter’s stomach rumbled hungrily. Severus petted his back, rubbing in small circles, willing Harry to try and rest.

It had been a rough first week back to classes, and this was only Wednesday night. Harry was giving it his very best shot, ignoring the whispers and stares, ignoring the rude comments from various Slytherins who were enjoying much humor at his expense. Severus had never been so ashamed of his own students. He was on the verge of removing points from his own house! If matters didn’t improve, they were going to get a dressing-down they’d never forget.

Draco was doing his worst, of course, but that was only to be expected. He had come back from his brief period of mourning with one mission in mind, that of making Harry’s life as miserable as he possibly could. Young Mr. Malfoy had somehow managed to get his hands on a hair-growing potion, and was sporting waist-length locks in imitation of his late father. Draco was also carrying Lucius’s cane with the snake head. At least Severus had had the chance to take Lucius’s wand out of it.

Draco had tried several times on Monday to smack at Harry with the cane as they progressed through the halls to their classes. He finally succeeded in giving Harry a nasty whack in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid had taken Draco and his new toy aside and said a few hushed words to the Slytherin. No one was sure what Hagrid had said, and Malfoy hadn’t confided in Snape about the incident. Draco had meekly handed Hagrid the cane and stayed far away from Harry for the rest of the day. Rumors had later spread around the staff that Hagrid had expressed exactly how far up into Draco’s digestive track the cane was going to be shoved if he didn’t leave Harry be. The very idea of it made Snape smile.
On Tuesday Malfoy was back to the same routine, pressing his luck in Potions Class no less. Severus played over the scene in his mind, smiling yet. Things had not gone exactly as Draco had hoped, that much was certain. While Snape had been demonstrating a particularly-interesting phosphorescent brew to the enraptured students, Draco had crept over to Harry in the darkness and grabbed him from behind. Potter screamed out in fright. The laughter that followed was cut short by the sounds of a scuffle. Snape had had to put down the volatile ingredients and turn the lights back up before he could act. He was cursing himself for letting even one heartbeat pass. When the lights came up, Draco Malfoy was on the ground under Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, who were beating the sense out of him. The entire class gasped as one, not at the physical violence, but at what Harry had been caught doing. Snape had been so busy pulling Weasley and Granger off of Malfoy that he didn’t take notice at first. But when uncovered, Draco called out in alarm. Snape whirled around as Malfoy went down to his knees on the floor, shielding his head with his arms in the face of certain death.

"Mr. Potter," Snape had said calmly.

"Sir?" Harry questioned, mace raised.

"Chapter thirteen, I presume? Pointy Perfection in Three Simple Steps?"

"Chapter seventeen, sir. How Much Wood Would A Woodchuck Chuck."

"Yes, yes, I get the idea. You will surrender to me your copy of Blunt Objects: Practical Uses before the end of the day today. I won’t have your ghoulish interest in various and sundry methods of murder taking any more time away from what you need, which is a proper wizard’s education. Is that understood, Mr. Potter?"

"Of course, sir."

"We could stand about bludgeoning each other until we’re blue in the face, and any monkey can swing an implement. It takes a true wizard to be able to rise above physical violence and employ magic with his brain and his heart, not with his fist."

"Mm hm," Harry hummed, his eyes glittering with hate as Draco shuddered.

"I’m sure Mr. Malfoy is sorry that he accidently startled you."

Harry glared down at Draco, who hadn’t dared raise his head.

"Perhaps Mr. Malfoy could offer a word of apology for his rude behavior?" Snape suggested, giving Malfoy a rough, backwards nudge with his heel.

"Tripped in the dark," Draco spat out the words.

"You see? He is sorry. Mr. Potter, in light of Mr. Malfoy’s apology, you will lower your weapon, and refrain from splattering the contents of his head all over your fellow students and my classroom floor."
"Must I, sir?"

"You must indeed, Mr. Potter. What’s more, you will explain how you managed to produce metal spikes from a wooden wand."

Harry had begrudgingly lowered the mace, reducing it to his wand and a simple silver ring, not unlike the ring that Professor Volkova was never without. Snape felt a twinge of delight in finally having uncovered one of her secrets, until it occurred to him that Harry was learning how to employ her battle strategies. What was more disturbing was that Mr. Potter was showing himself to be a very apt pupil in the art of murder.

Ron and Hermione were each given a detention to be served separately with different instructors. Draco had been sent straight to the Headmaster’s office. The Slytherins had immediately muttered about favoritism because Snape had not punished Harry, but Snape didn’t care. They were lucky he hadn’t deducted any points for Draco’s behavior. The damage was done though. It was pretty evident that Harry had been rattled by Lucius’s attack, and that the Slytherins weren’t going to let up for one moment. As much as he had sworn to look after Draco, Snape would not be able to avoid sending the miscreant boy to the Headmaster’s office over this incident. Truth be told, Severus was hoping that Dumbledore might be able to talk sense to Malfoy.

On Tuesday night, Harry had dutifully surrendered his Blunt Objects book to Snape. It was lying on the coffee table in reach at the moment, in fact. Severus had sealed the book with a locking spell, promising Harry that he could have it back when summer arrived and classes were over for the year. In exchange, he had supplied Harry with a spanking new copy of Civil War: Strategies for Non-Violent Self Defense. Severus would be the first to admit it had not been a fair trade, but it might result in less blood and brains being splattered on the floor in the Potions classroom at least.

Draco had shown up Wednesday morning, this morning, at breakfast. There was a bright gaudy button on his robe. Snape had started to take it away before he read it. "Help Me! I’m FASTing!" it declared in bright green letters. Snape recalled that James Potter had worn one for a month after the whole Werewolf Incident. Severus wasn’t sure the exact properties of the button, except that it had something to do with learning how to control one’s temper. After much whispered discussion at the Slytherin table, Draco explained to friends in earshot that the Headmaster was forcing him to wear the button. It had to do with testing his fortitude and attitude, and if that didn’t work, they’d work their way up to his tolerance for servitude. Draco was glaring sullenly at Harry as the bitter words spilled out of his mouth. Severus wasn’t sure if any mischief had occurred in the morning Transfigurations class that Harry and Draco shared, but Minerva hadn’t seemed out of sorts at lunch, so he imagined things had gone smoothly.

Harry hadn’t shown up for dinner in the Great Hall. Tonight, Ron and Hermione would be serving their detentions. Severus decided that Harry must have been lying low about the castle somewhere, not wanting to make himself any more a target than he already appeared to be. A fast trip back to his dungeons for a glance at his secret, pirated, and rather-improved copy of Harry’s special map of the Hogwarts revealed to Snape that Harry was at Hagrid’s hut. It was a clear if cold night, and there were several species of hardy winter berries that should be about ready to harvest. Severus had made it to the forest in record time, convincing himself that he wasn’t checking up on Harry so much as he was making himself available and near if the boy should need him. He hadn’t suspected that an evening meant for picking potion ingredients off the forest shrubs would turn into healing a life-threatening stab wound in Hagrid’s side, but at least everyone was calm for the moment.

Calmness was exactly what Harry needed, along with a lot of rest and several years of sessions with Doctor McGonagall. But most of all, Harry needed his rest. The circles under his eyes were
shocking, and his pallor and demeanor were even more so. Severus raised a hand and smoothed one finger over the child’s ear, pushing strands of hair away. When Harry whimpered in his half-sleep, Severus put a second kiss on his forehead.

"Shhh. Shhhh," Severus soothed, spreading more kisses in Harry’s dark locks. Not going to coddle the boy? The sarcastic portion of his brain was kicking up its heels in rude, mocking laughter. It troubled Snape to ponder how they could exist side by side, the whimpering tot curled up in his arms, the one who had fainted over having spilled some of Hagrid’s blood, and the mace-wielding young man teetering on the edge of hateful murder. Maybe Timma hadn’t been wrong about not encouraging Harry to bundle up his anger and use it as a weapon. Had Severus encouraged behavior that could only lead to Harry’s ruin?

Sleep claimed Snape in time. Harry must have followed after. Although Severus dreamed of unpleasant things, the memories evaporated like ghosts from his mind when he jumped awake again. An undeterminable amount of time had passed. There was a soft clattering of metal behind the chair where he and Harry were sitting. Snape had his wand in his hand in a flash, but not even that had out-paced Potter, who was on his feet, wand drawn, fully-alert. Severus lowered his wand when the lights came up on Albus Dumbledore, who was carrying a tray of tea cups as the end of his cloak trailed him out of the Floo.

"Did I startle you?" Albus asked, putting the tray on the table. "Clearly, I did. I do apologize," the Headmaster added. "Please have a seat. We need to talk."

Potter put away his wand. Dumbledore handed him his glasses off the side table. Severus folded up the afghan they had been using as a blanket. Albus motioned for Harry to have a seat on the divan. Snape sat down in the chair, noticing immediately how much colder it was in the room without Harry sleeping on his chest. He buttoned his jacket closed.

"How did you know I was here?" Harry whispered, accepting a cup. When Dumbledore tipped up the pot, steaming hot coffee poured out instead of the Headmaster’s usual tea. Potter inhaled deeply, enjoying the smell.

"Instinct. Now, Professor Volkova assures me this is the finest espresso she has on hand, and if you like it, she will get you more. Severus, you should try some. It’s quite good. It will sharpen your senses."

"Thank you, I will. A drop or two, perhaps."

"Gentlemen, we must talk," the Headmaster said seriously. "Are you settled?" he asked Harry. Potter nodded, sipping the hot, bitter java slowly.

"What’s this about?" Snape asked, hoping that wasn’t a stupid question, considering he had been caught with a student sleeping in his arms in his personal quarters at such a late hour of the day. ‘If you feel you’re innocent, you will be innocent,’ he tried to convince himself. Of course, he didn’t feel very innocent when he glanced at Potter and remembered that after his bath, the boy had borrowed a clean shirt and a resized pair of trousers to wear. Harry’s dirty clothes were in the bathroom on the floor, Severus remembered with anguish. ‘Please don’t let the Headmaster need the facilities’, Severus prayed.

"I believe we have a lead on what’s become of Miss Tonks, but I need Mr. Potter to help us be certain," Professor Dumbledore grinned. Harry was using a spell on the cup which made the coffee ice-over. The steam vanished at once.

"Where is she?" Harry gasped, emptying his tiny cup in one gulp.
"Madam Trelawney said she had a vision, a tiny vision, and it involved making beef patty sandwiches and asking people if they would like salt on their chips."

"Tonks is working at McDonalds?" Harry’s brow furrowed.

"Yes, I do believe Madam Trelawney did mention a Scottish fellow!" Dumbledore lit up at once. "I want you to see what you think," Dumbledore added, handing Harry a rumbled tee shirt. Harry unfolded it to find ‘Weird Sisters’ plastered across the front. Potter put down his cup and disappeared into the dark, empty bedroom.

"This isn’t what it looks like," Severus murmured to the Headmaster as Dumbledore sipped at his cup and made a face.

"It’s not? How disappointing."

"Sir?"

"It appeared to me you were giving comfort to someone in need of some. Did I misunderstand?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Carry on."

"I didn’t want you to worry I was taking advantage of Mr. Potter."

"If I suspected for one moment that you had dishonorable intentions against Mr. Potter’s person, I’d lock you in the Room of Doom and leave you there to rot."

"At least I’d have time to read," Snape murmured.

"Anyone who can provide Mr. Potter the reassurance he needs has my full permission. I have no question about your intentions, Severus. If Harry has learned anything from his unfortunate encounter with Lucius Malfoy, it’s a new-found appreciation for self-defense. Anyone trying to take advantage of him from this point forward is likely to find themselves on the receiving end of something pointed and deadly. How is Hagrid, by the way?"

"I...um...fine, sir."

"The wound was not too deep?"

"A simple healing spell, and he was right as rain. How did you know?"

"I happened to be passing a window when I heard Harry scream. You appeared to have matters under control, and therefore I went back to my rounds. I’m greatly concerned about the school’s wards."

"I’m not getting anything," Harry said, his voice deeply scored with disappointment. He entered the room wearing Tonks’ shirt, pulling the white shirt he had borrowed from Snape back on over it.

"Give it time, dear boy. Give it time. Perhaps if you wore it for a few days while you sleep? Give it a week, and see what you can sense," Dumbledore said, putting down his cup. "My oh my, I’m quite alert. How are you two? Hmm? Your eyes are simply bulging from their sockets. I’m afraid espresso at eleven pm might be a bad idea. We’ll keep that in mind next time."

With a wave of the Headmaster’s wand, the cups and coffee disappeared. Harry sat down on the divan, fingering the front hem of the wild shirt. Severus tried not to stare at how the thin material
clung to Harry’s slender body.

"Shall I walk you back to Gryffindor Tower, or will you spend a few more minutes here?"
Dumbledore asked. Harry lifted his eyes and quickly dropped them.

"With your permission, I’d like to stay."

"Certainly. Professor Snape will see you back to the dorm when you are ready. Good night then," he said, patting Harry on top of the head.

"Good night, sir," Harry said, watching Dumbledore vanish into the Floo. "You don’t mind if I stay, do you?" he asked Severus, suddenly aghast at his lack of manners. Snape stood and stretched, extended a hand to him.

"Inside or outside?" he asked.

"Couldn’t we sleep in the chair?" Harry asked nervously.

"No. I’ll have a stiff back and you’ll have a stiff neck and neither one of us will get a wink of rest. You’ll be safe. I swear to you."

Harry took the outstretched hand and followed Severus into the dark bedroom. "I trust you," Harry trembled. "I’m not tired after all that coffee."

"Neither am I."

"We could lie a while."

"Perhaps we could. What shall we lie about?"

Harry gave a small chortle and climbed onto the covers. His uneasiness was evident in his timid movements. He put his head on one pillow. Severus put a book that was lying on the dresser back in the bookcase, and sat on the edge of the bed. Harry stiffened even more.

"No reason to worry," Snape soothed, easing down onto the coverlet. Harry’s gulp of apprehension was audible. "You should be on the outside. Let us trade places."

Harry edged under Severus, closing both eyes tight and breathing erratically.

"It’s all right," Snape murmured, putting his opposite shoulder to the bed and facing Harry, who was clenched like a rod of iron from head to toe. Severus was certain he would relax slowly. Everything would have been all right, if not for the problem of how to get under the covers with the stiff and anxious boy lying on top of them. Not a problem. Severus aimed his wand for the wardrobe in the corner. The doors clicked, and swung open, and one blanket levitated calmly across the room towards the bed. Like a large moth, it unfolded above the bed, and fluttered easily down into place over Harry.

"Savior of the Wizarding World," Harry was mumbling sarcastically to himself as Severus tucked the blanket edges in around him.

"Would you like music, perhaps?" Snape asked. Harry remained mum, and shook his head no. He reached his hand out from under the blanket and searching. Severus took the ice-cold digits into his own. He offered Harry a cautious caress with his thumb.

"You must be so disappointed in me," Harry whispered.
"On the contrary," Severus murmured with a tender smile. No, Snape was enjoying Harry’s vulnerable state, and all the more guilty for enjoying it, because he felt needed truly again. The more Harry clung to him, the more he realized he could have happily spent the rest of his life being needed this way. That had been something of an alarming realization for a wizard who for many years had taken great pride in being an island unto himself.
"This isn’t exactly my idea of a morning well-spent," Anna Volkova said as she pushed clothes on hangers out of her way.

"No?" Harry’s voice held snide amusement and vague warmth. He ducked around the matching jackets and trousers, noting there wasn’t a dress in the bunch, except for one shocking-white dress that had been packaged in dry cleaner plastic and pushed further back into the closet than any of the other clothes.

"Not that I don’t enjoy spending time with you, dear child, but not while locked in my bedroom closet."

"Have you any idea what’s gotten into Malchik?"

"What do you mean?" Volkova asked, pushing boxes of boots aside in order to slither behind and over a trunk that blocked nearly the entire space.

"Why would she push me in here, lock the doors, and then leave your rooms altogether?"

"How do you know she left the rooms?"

"I was watching her through the keyhole. She ran like hell."

"Is she prone to fits of madness?"

"You’re joking, right? My Malchik?"

"She is the only Malchik I know."

"No. She’s loyal to the core. She’s beyond loyal. You look up ‘loyal’ in any dictionary, and it will show a tiny tiny picture of my Malchik."

"That leaves us with only one logical conclusion."

"Which is?"

"She’s either under an Imperius spell or she’s been Polyjuiced."

"That’s two conclusions," Volkova felt obligated to point out. She stopped in her tracks and turned to face Harry, which proved difficult until he popped his head up over the top of the trunk, following her path through the closet.

"Hello," he smiled.
"You do know that Poly-juicing into house-elves can be exceptionally risky, don’t you?" she asked. Harry blinked at her. "Apparently you didn’t know," Volkova mused, lifting her wand and peering up at Harry with a Lumos spell. "If a human tries to Polyjuice into a house-elf, they run the risk of turning themselves into a house-elf permanently, unless there’s a skillful Potions Master about who can brew a vial of antidote for them."

"If you take the Polyjuice and the antidote together, is it safe?" Harry asked. His question caught her off-guard, and she dodged it.

"Potter, do hurry. If I will fit through that space, you will fit through there," Volkova declared with a huff of sound.

"What’s in the trunk?"

"Mummy."

"Your mother’s in the trunk?" Harry squeaked, clinging to the ceiling above the trunk for half a second.

"No," Anna murmured. "My mother is dead. She was cremated in Prague with my father, who is also dead."

"Sorry," Harry commented, feeling rather stupid.

"It’s a mummy. A memento mori from an assignment in Egypt."

"You didn’t want a sneak-o-scope?"

"I promised I would keep the mummy. I didn’t have the heart to part with him. He was very lonely. Are you stuck?" Anna asked.

"Yes, I believe I am. Could you shrink the trunk?"

"No. I cannot shrink the trunk. The mummy could be damaged. You must work yourself free. I could shrink you," she suggested.

"No, no, no, no, no," Harry said, putting up a hand. "I’ll get free. Have you reached the hinges yet to open the doors?"

"The doors were refinished in November, and I don’t want to break them. There were several nail marks and scratches on them. Malchik said they were embarrassing and needed touching up. She worked day and night on them for a week. I’m not going to wreck them. She worked very hard on them."

"All right," Harry said, shifting to his left side and pausing to take a deep breath. He inhaled the smell of cedar and incense. "Why are we headed deeper into the closet? Maybe that’s what I should have asked."

"There’s a secret door at the far end of the closet. You must realize I’ll have to obliviate that knowledge from you once we’re out of here," Anna said.

"You have a secret passage in your bedroom closet?" Harry played casual. Of course he knew about several hidden passageways throughout Hogwarts because of his map. He merely hadn’t followed them all to their every exit point. "How’d you find out about it? I can’t imagine you’ve spent a lot of time lurking around in the back of your own closet," he said out loud.
"One morning first term, I caught Draco Malfoy in here fondling my clothes and touching himself."

Harry cackled softly, bumping his head on the ceiling. "That’s just...weird," he said.

"My bedroom was locked, had been for many hours, so I naturally deduced that he had to have had an alternative route into my closet. I studied the walls of my room and the dimensions of the closet, walked around the outside of the tower on the ground floor to determine the arc of the circle, and discovered there was an extra angle of space that remained unassigned," she continued. "It’s not weird for a boy his age to fancy a teacher. It’s misguided, that’s all."

"You’ve had students do that kind of thing before?"

"You wouldn’t believe what I’ve had students do to get my attention," she confided. Harry rolled carefully onto his stomach and began to move forward again.

"What happened?" Harry hated himself for asking.

"I gave Draco the choice between telling me how he got in or going to the Headmaster about what he’d been doing in my closet, and he wisely chose to show me the hidden passageway," Anna said. Harry deduced this was probably also the way they had come to an arrangement about the necessary ingredients for her Gallahad Elixir, but decided it would be in poor taste to bring that up at this junction. She was doing her best to break her addiction for the potion, and he had to believe she would succeed.

"If this is one end of the passage, where does it originate?" Harry asked, knowing that he would have to check out the Marauders Map to see if there was a hidden path to this spot.

"It joins a very elaborate series of hidden passageways. If you keep doing that, you’re going to get yourself stuck even further. Oh, here, goddamn it."

Harry heard a wooden clank, as if she were holding her wand with her teeth. Her fingers came up and slid under his arms. Volkova planted herself and pulled hard. Harry scraped his knees, turning around as he came free. He landed ungracefully on top of his Dark Arts professor, both sprawling to the ground. To Harry’s utter dismay, in the fraction of a second it took his brain to realize their current positions, he realized he was already half-hard and ever so aware of her being nothing but female. Paralyzed with embarrassment and fear, he froze. Volkova growled at him in a menacing manner.

"Potter, get off," she frowned.

"Sorry," Harry blurted, snapping away from her and standing up. He nearly skewered himself on the handle of the trunk. "Now what?" he asked as she stared at the wall of bricks in front of her with a dim light spell.

"Trouble, I’m afraid."

"Yes."

"Draco has blocked the hidden passageway. That’s what I get for giving him a collection of Poe stories for Christmas."

"What did he give you?" Harry queried, being careful not to look in her face, ever so grateful for the dark conditions.

"A charming manual on the intricate construction of poisoned darts."
“Hmm,” Harry commented, coming forward and putting his hands on the bricks. “We could distort them out of the way.”

“He’ll have guessed we would try that, don’t you think? What if the wall is booby-trapped? Have a seat. I’ve got to think this out.”

“A bombardment spell should do the trick,” Harry said, pulling out his wand. Anna quickly covered his hand with her own.

“You could make the entire closet fall off the side of the tower if your bombardment spell damages the structural support. Worse, you could destroy my mummy.”

“He means a lot to you.”

“Yes, he does. We’re very close.”

“You have a better idea how to get out of here? It’s the outside wall, the passageway, or the doors.”


“Got anything comfortable to sit on?” he asked, slowly lowering himself down. “Stay here. Don’t blow anything up,” she commanded.

“What’s your ceiling made of?” Harry pointed up.

“More than enough rock to crush you to tiny bits. Don’t be stupid,” she chided, slithering around the trunk again.

“I wasn’t being stupid. That’s no way to talk to the person who came here to rescue you.”

“Rescue me?” Anna questioned from the other side of the trunk, her voice reverberating mirthfully.

“Malchik came streaking into the Great Hall during breakfast and dragged me here, telling me you were in great danger, that I had to come right away.”

“Possibly Malchik,” Volkova countered.

“Possibly Malchik. I guess we can assume it’s Draco Malfoy Polyjuiced into Malchik.”

“I hope so. I’d like to see him trapped as a house-elf for a few weeks. What a pity the Headmaster is so against corporal punishment. What I wouldn’t give to have half an hour alone with that boy in one hand and a cat in the other.”

“A cat?”

“Yes, one with nine tails. So possibly Malchik found you at breakfast, and you left your marmalade and eggs and dashed to my rescue. How kind of you. Such a hero.”

“You could show an ounce of gratitude. How was I to know it was a trick?”

“Mr. Potter, I’m not accustomed to being rescued. I must say, I don’t enjoy being rescued, however well-meaning you might be. I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar with the proper etiquette required. Do I have to marrying you now or something? Don’t these situations usually involve fire-breathing dragons or giant water monsters?”
"Not always," Harry mumbled.

"Usually, I’m the one doing the rescuing. In the future, if anyone ever rushes to you and insists that I need to be rescued, you may safely assume they are deceiving you, or that I’d rather find my own way out."

"I was trying to help."

"I don’t need any help."

"You could say ‘thank you’."

"Thank you," she gruffed.

Harry felt a soft pillow slam into his head. He put up both hands and felt the dimensions. It was heavy, round, and soft, and it immediately made him think of a large breast. Another three pillows flew over the trunk at him, and he picked them all up. Each was shaped differently but they were made of the same soft material. Harry wondered if they were decorative bed pillows, and where the heck they had come from. He didn’t think Volkova was given much to decoration, especially the fluffy sort. He straightened his glasses and hugged the pillows. Then he drew out his wand and lit it with a lumos spell. The pillows were pink. Pink? If there was ever a color so not Volkova, it was pink.

Moments later, Volkova reappeared. She situated herself on the ground with her back against the bedroom wall instead of the bricks. Harry gave her a pink pillow cautiously. She snatched it from him and put it behind the small of her back.

"You’re not a morning person," he said.

"I’m more social once I’ve had my coffee."

"Your espresso was very good. Professor Dumbledore let me try it."

"When next I am in Venice, I will bring you more," she promised.

"What shall we talk about?"

"We shall not talk. I’m trying to think of a way out of here."

The silence lasted all of five minutes.

"Sorry," Harry said. "We have to talk about something. We can think and talk, can’t we?" he babbled nervously. "We can’t sit here and stare at each other!"

"Are you claustrophobic?" she asked, raising one brow. Harry noxed his wand and put it away.

"No," he replied. "I’m used to being locked in closets. I spent eleven years in the cupboard under the stairs in my aunt and uncle’s house."

"Nine years, actually. You were a year old when your parents were murdered. You were eleven when you came to Hogwarts. That leaves nine years, give or take a few months. I’ve read your biography."

"I have a biography?"

"You have fifteen, each more fantastical than you could imagine."
"You can’t believe everything you read.’ Gilderoy Lockhart told me that. They may be the only truthful words he ever spoke, aside from ‘arg’ and ‘huh’.

"You aren’t comfortable talking about yourself, are you?” she asked.

"Why bother? You’ve already read my biography,” Harry responded darkly. Volkova reached for another pillow, folding her arms tight around it. "Why don’t we talk about you?” he asked.

"You haven’t read my biography?” she feigned hurt.

"I read the books about the Deusredeti, but they were far from illuminating. They discussed philosophy and paths to inner peace. May I say that if you are representative of the cult, you seem to have forgotten various fundamental laws, particularly the ones about murder being a sin and forgiveness being basic to human society. You don’t have an authorized biography. I checked.”

"No, I don’t have one. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I’ve killed everyone who knows anything personal about me. There’s no one left who will talk. Do you still want to ask stupid questions about myself?"

"Yes."

"Really? Why?"

Volkova could almost hear Potter grinning at her.

"No, I’m afraid that would be counter-productive,” she agreed.

"What if I swear not to write your biography?"

"On the contrary. I want you to promise me that someday, in between saving the world and finding new ways to give Professor McGonagall gray hair, you will write an in-depth, juicy, racy, scandalous biography about me."

"Why should I promise to do that?"

"I’d like to be remembered that way. A scandal would make me happy.”

"You want to be remembered as a complete fiction? You’re the least scandalous person I know."

"Ah, how easy you are to deceive,” she grinned.

"Well, if you’re expecting it to be scandalous, you’d better give me something to write about. Why don’t you start at the beginning?"

"We’re missing first class,” she said quietly after a two-minute pause.

"You’re avoiding my question,” Harry prodded her. "Here. I’ll help. ‘My name is Anna Volkova. I was born in Russia’.”

"I wasn’t born in Russia.”
"Professor Snape said you’re from Archangel on the White Sea. Those books about your family—he read them cover to cover. He was entranced, fascinated even."

"Did you try to read them with your clairvoyance?"

"Yes."

"You didn’t find anything out, did you?"

"No. Nasty, sharp blocking spells."

"That’s the point, dear. They discourage intrusion."

"I could use my clairvoyance on you now."

"I could break your arm in seven places with one well-placed kick," she replied.

"You aren’t good at sharing, are you?" Harry laughed, scooting an inch or two away. "Okay. Let me talk then. I can’t take the silence."

"Have we had any silence?"

"You may not have been born in Russia, but your family, your clan, is from Archangel. You taught there briefly. Is that fair enough to assume?"

"Yes. My parents are from Archangel."

"You send Malchik to Venice on a regular basis, presumably to make reports to the cult you used to work for. I wonder if formerly working for the Deusredeti is anything like being a former vampire hunter."

"Haven’t you anything better to wonder about, with all the fantastic mysteries in the world, Mr. Potter?"

"You don’t want to elaborate on my assumption?"

"No. You appear to have the elaborate assumptions well covered."

"Hermione found a book on learning Russian in the library."

"Hermione found a book in the library on learning Russian."

"Don’t nitpick about my grammar."

"I’m not. Go on."

"She was trying to learn to speak Russian, but with classes resuming, she’ll have to put it aside for the time being."

"Why would she want to learn Russian?"

"She’s a know-it-all. It’s what she does for fun. That’s all right though. We love her anyway. Maybe you could teach her some Russian and save her some time."

"Doubtful, pet."

"Why is that?"
"I know but a few words of Russian myself. Mostly foul language."

"But you’re Russian. You taught in Russia."

"Sitting in a hen house will not make you a chicken. My Russian Dark Arts classes were taught in Latin. Actually, when I first arrived at Hogwarts, I had assumed my Dark Arts classes here would be in Latin as well."

"Why don’t you know Russian?"

"When I was about ten, I asked my grandfather to teach me to speak our native tongue. He refused. He said, ‘No, Vasili Volkov’s granddaughter will be an educated woman. She will be no man’s slave. She will be Mistress of her own Affairs. What does an educated woman need with Russian?’ I was shocked. I was horrified. ‘But I want to learn the language of my people,’ I told him."

"Why did he say that?" Harry asked, amused at how her voice changed in imitation of her grandfather.

"He saw his language as a severe impediment. ‘It is the language of peasants’, he scowled at me from his desk," she said sadly. "‘Your ancestors left Russia so you wouldn’t have to bow down to and obey another man’s whims merely because he is educated and you are not. Learn Latin. Learn Greek. Learn Arabic. Learn French. Forget Russian,’ he scoffed at me."

"What did you say?"

"I’ll tell you what happened," she laughed dimly at the memory. "Hell opened its mouth, a demon possessed my body, and I heard this little voice say, ‘But, Papa, Latin itself began as the language of farmers long before it was the language of senators and soldiers.’ He stared at me for five minutes. You could hear the blood throbbing in his temples."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He turned and walked away. He didn’t speak to me for a week. I was crushed. I worshipped him, you know."

"So you didn’t learn Russian?"

"I learned a word here, a word there, listening to him curse at his prey, listening to him argue with my Nonni. But no, I didn’t learn the language per se."

"But you studied other languages?"

"I travelled with him, and learned fragments of the languages in the countries he frequented, at least until Rubrica decided that I needed more specialized, more civilized training than my grandfather could offer me."

"Who is Rubrica?"

"She is the one who cares for the children."

"In the Deusredeti? How many children are there?"

"No more than 250 at a time. I should say she oversees the care of the children. She does not mind them all by herself. But I will guarantee you that they all mind her," Volkova said ruefully.

"So you never learned Russian?" he said. "That’s pretty sad."
"I understand why Papa was so insistent. If that’s all I knew how to speak, people would judge me by my language, and treat me as an immigrant. Whereas if I spoke Italian, they would see me as a native."

"If you were born in Italy you are a native," Harry pointed out. "How come you have an accent if you weren’t raised by your parents but in groups with other children?"

"I spent a lot of time with my grandparents after my parents were killed. My grandfather told me who he was to me, against the rules. Besides, the language teacher during my formative years was..." Her voice failed her, and she stared at Harry as if he had tricked her in a way she hadn’t anticipated. It took her some time to gulp back her words and bolster her courage. "He was an intelligent, kind young man. He also hailed from Archangel— he’d been born there but joined the Deusredeti in his late teens. We may have been distantly related, actually. All of us who took his lessons wound up speaking with his accent, I’m afraid. Those who teach languages now continue to pass on his accent."

"Why didn’t he teach you Russian?"

"My grandfather threatened Sergei with violence if he even considered it. That’s the sort of threat you take seriously from a vampire-killer, especially if your secret ambition is that he will take you on as his apprentice."

"I guess so. Did he?"

"Did who what?"

"Did your language teacher become a vampire-killer?"

Volkova glared at Harry. He had crossed a line. She didn’t want to discuss this any further. In response, she ignored his question, which was in effect worse than having answered him in the first place. Harry decided for himself that yes, the language teacher had become a vampire-killer, and what’s more, his life had probably ended in a very sticky, ugly, messy horrible way that Volkova was nursing wounds about to this very day.

"Whether I’m a native Italian or not, you’d be surprised how much difference the tiniest of accents makes in how people see you. Besides, many of the aristocratic Russians didn’t speak a word of the language either. They spoke French. They spoke German too. Tell Hermione to learn Latin. She’ll get more mileage from that," Volkova rambled.

"Hermione’s got her heart set on Russian at the moment. I suppose Bulgarian is next. She’s already studied Latin. She knew that your name means ‘wolf’. Did your family ever raise wolves? Or were you raised by wolves?"

"A potter is a maker of clay bowls. Have you ever thrown clay?"

"No. But we probably did in the past. One of my Potter ancestors must have. Remember last semester? The ancestor that Malfoy and I have in common? She married a Potter, and he was a maker of clay bowls."

"Well, as far as I know, my family did not raise wolves. I believe it’s an acquired name, a nickname, one of comparison as opposed to occupation. Peter the Great. John the Terrible. William the Bastard."

"Anna the Wolf-Like."
"More or less. Language is a fluid concept, always in motion, always evolving, often misinterpreted."

"Did they mean it as a compliment?"

"Probably not. We were the terror of the region before we were pushed into hunting vampires for a living."

Harry put one hand forward and touched her nose.

"What are you doing?" Volkova asked, unhappily allowing the intrusion into her personal space.

"You don’t have a snout like a wolf."

"A compliment. Thank you."

She took his hands into hers, and seemed to be studying their dimensions. Harry was so surprised that he didn’t even consider using his clairvoyance on her until she had already released his hands.

"You have nice hands," she said. "Skillful hands. It’s not out the question that you could learn to throw clay."

There was an awkward pause. Harry wasn’t sure what to say.

"I believe I’d prefer to learn how to throw claymores," he joked.

"There’s a lot to be admired in a fine Scottish blade," Volkova purred. "It could also mean that my family once belonged to a lord named Volkov," she added. "My name, that is."

"Did your grandfather agree to take you both on as his apprentices?"

"Yes," Volkova answered distantly, dangerously. A wall went up, and Harry backed off from the topic. Even from three feet away in the darkness, he could sense her getting violently angry deep inside.

"Hermione found out something else. ‘Malchik’ means boy," Harry said, wanting to change the subject.

"Yes, it does."

"She’s a girl, isn’t she?"

"No, pet, she’s a house-elf."

"She’s a female house-elf named ‘boy’?"

Volkova’s wand came on dim. She stared at Harry, slowly raising a brow. She appeared to be waiting. She was slowly smiling, but the smile faded away.

"It’s a joke," she said finally, shutting the light off again.

"I don’t get it," Harry said blandly.

"My grandfather wanted a boy to help him with his work. My grandmother’s house-elf gave birth to a girl. Nonni named her ‘Malchik’— boy. Grandfather said he would only accept a boy to help him with his work, that he had a signed, written contract with Nonni, and that was his final word."
What he got was Malchik, who may not be a boy, but is named ‘boy’ and is therefore acceptable under the terms of their agreement."

"It’s not a funny joke," Harry said.

"Nonsense. I myself have been amused for years by the whole idea of it. I guess it helps if you knew my grandmother though. Most people who knew her get it right away."

"It’s not that funny," Harry repeated.

"My grandmother was prone to finding ways to trick my grandfather. He thought himself a very clever man. Nonni liked outsmarting him. It’s the best way to survive a long marriage, I suppose, especially an arranged marriage."

"Did they often use signed contracts between themselves?"

"Yes. That was agreed on both sides before the marriage was performed. Everything would be in black and white and in print. Neither was very trusting of the other, and having things in print seemed to help them feel more secure. Vampire-hunters are notoriously paranoid."

"You said it was an arranged marriage?"

"Yes."

"What about your parents? Did they have an arranged marriage too? Does the Deusredeti tell you who you can marry?"

"The elders don’t always decide on unions– it depends," Volkova hedged.

"Did these elders tell you you couldn’t marry?" Harry pondered. "Is that why you’re single?"

"My parents had no choice but to marry. My mother was a week away from delivering me. As for me, I have not yet found an appropriate mate. Besides, marriage for someone in my profession can often be more of a hindrance than anything else. One might not choose to risk one’s life if they have someone waiting at home for them."

"Oh," Harry said, brows rising. "But your parents....married...?"

"Against the wishes of the elders."

Another awkward pause lingered. Had the elders not wanted her to marry? Had they felt there was something wrong with her, that she should not have children? He sensed a deep sadness without even touching her to get a reading.

"Everyone tells me I look like my father. Who do you take after the most?" Harry wondered.

"I have my father’s face and build, my grandmother’s hands, my grandfather’s brains, and my mother’s magic, none of which is the best of any of them."

"Did you ever meet your parents?"

"Once."

Stone silence. Harry waited, knowing given a chance, hoping given a chance, she would go on. He did not go unrewarded.
"The children are usually kept separate from the adults, precisely to avoid being overly influenced, showing rank favoritism for one’s own. But I ran into my parents in the courtyard at our school, on my way between classes. I don’t believe it was coincidental. In fact, I’m sure they had been loitering around for some time in the hopes I would walk by them."

"What were they like?"

"To a little girl, they were gods," she laughed hoarsely. Sadness radiated off of her like heat from a fire.

"What were they like?" Harry asked again.

"My father was grinning like a big blond wolf. He had blond hair, with touches of gray in his moustache and beard. He must have been eight feet tall. He seemed so huge to me. He patted me on the head as I approached them. The other girls in my den fled like skittish rabbits. I stopped, waited, hoping he would say something to me. He kept grinning. My mother was staring at the ground and toying with the end of her red braid. She was a plump, plain-faced woman with timid brown eyes. She was scared to see me, as if she were afraid I wouldn’t approve of her. She spoke German to my father. ‘We have to go now, Vasili’."

"Did you know who they were?"

"I sensed, I believe, yes. It’s hard not to speculate when you see your face and features on another person. I’m careful where I walk when I am home."

"Why?" Harry asked. Was there someone she didn’t want to see her face, lest it should remind them of their own?

"My earliest memories are of Malchik. She was my companion before I learned my own name,” Volkova rambled on ahead, ignoring Harry’s question.

"Do all the children have house elves there?"

"Not all of them."

"Malchik has never locked you in a closet before, has she?"

"She locked me in a trunk and shipped me to Honolulu once."

"Didn’t that hurt?" Harry winced.

"A little," Anna confessed. "If Draco has done anything to hurt Malchik, he’ll live only long enough to regret it."

"Thought of a way out of this yet?"

"No. I can’t think with all the noise."

"Can I keep talking?"

"Nothing short of a gag is going to stop you, apparently." There was a jagged, awkward pause. "Sorry," she said in a small, small voice. Harry felt her reach a hand towards him. She patted him gingerly once on the forearm. "Sorry," she said again.

"Why did Malchik send you to Honolulu?" he mumbled, shrugging. The question was as good a question as any to fill the anxious silence. Talking kept the emotional wolves at bay for Harry. The
sound of someone else’s voice helped—anything that would dampen the mocking laughter of Lucius Malfoy and Lord Voldemort which echoed in his head when he was alone. Falling into someone else’s voice, or into someone else’s pain, was all that seemed to help Harry go on.

The mortification flooded over him again though, the queasy horror he felt at the knowledge that his Dark Arts Professor had seen him entirely naked. More than that—she had covered wounds on his body with her hands to stop the flow of his precious blood. She had helped wash his wounds with special potions as he lay dazed and exhausted. She had helped perform white magic spells that had healed him, crawling around on the hospital wing floor tracing patterns and runes in heavy white chalk lines. Even now, the protective and undeniably motherly aura Harry had felt from Volkova on many occasions wove across the space between them. She wanted to take his hand and reassure him, but hesitated, not wanting to cross unspoken lines for the worry of offending him. ‘Boys of his age are so very easily annoyed,’ she was thinking. ‘Mustn’t mother too much.’

It was strange how Harry didn’t feel queasy or mortified that Severus had seen him naked and vulnerable. Maybe it was different because Volkova was a woman, and even the most fundamental part of his social upbringing made him ashamed of being undressed in front of a strange woman not his mother. Or maybe it was different because Harry was comfortable with Severus seeing him naked. It had everything to do with those surprising, gentle baths that Snape had given him. He would have never considered Snape could be so gentle, and wouldn’t have believed it if it hadn’t happened before his very eyes. Severus had done all of the things to heal him and for his benefit that Volkova had done, but the idea of that didn’t raise the nagging notion in Harry that he should remain penitent and ashamed in his presence because he had acted improperly. Harry could not stop feeling embarrassed around Volkova.

"I needed a vacation but I refused to take one. She was helping me out in her own special way," Volkova said.

"Did you have a nice vacation?" Harry asked.

"No. I got sunburned. The local cuisine did not agree with me. I had morning sickness for weeks on end. I didn’t want a vacation. Everyone there was very friendly and eager to make me happy, which made me more miserable and grumpy."

"It could have been worse."

"Could it?"

"Certainly somehow," Harry assured her, trying to make light. "Seafood allergies. Itchy grass skirts. A terrible phobia for pineapples. You know there are actually people who can go to Hawaii and have a perfectly lovely time. It wouldn’t be thought of as rude if you had a bit of fun along the way in life. What about the floor? What’s below the closet?"

"The Dark Arts storeroom."

"Brilliant!" Harry exclaimed, jumping up and raising his wand.

"No."

"Why not?"
"That door is spell-locked from the outside and is rigged to Petrificus anyone who breaks in."

"What’s a little Petrificus between friends? At least we’ll be out of here," Harry said, aiming at the floor. Volkova took his wand away from him.

"Potter, if you remove the floor, wasn’t going to happen?"

"We’ll get out of here," he said blandly.

"We, and the entire contents of my closet, will land in the Dark Arts storeroom."

"This isn’t about that mummy again, is it?"

"Have you seen the Dark Arts storeroom lately?"

"Not since Remy was the teacher."

"I’ve made a few adjustments to the shelves and contents."

"What kind of adjustments?"

"Nothing I want broken into thousands of pieces. Sit down, if you please. We’ll find a way out of here."

"Let’s continue with your biography then. Where were you born?" He threw himself on the floor and leaned back.

"In a bed," she answered crossly. "In Venice," she added after a pained sigh.

"Your parents were in the Deusredeti too?"

"Yes."

"Voluntarily?"


"What about your grandparents?"

"Yes. Voluntarily. No one is in by force. We all decide at our majority whether to stay or to leave. Most agree to stay. It’s an extended family. It is not a cult. I resent that term. We aren’t all religious weirdos. We’re not all even religious. We’re an extended family, a commune of like-thinkers."

"Vampire-killers, the lot of them?"

"No, not everyone in the Deusredeti is a vampire-killer. We have specialized tasks as directed by our talents. Every Volkovi has been a vampire-hunter, yes. Well, every male Volkovi plus me. My choice of vocation was not greeted with terrific enthusiasm, except by Nonni. I would have been disallowed if it weren’t for the fact I was already practicing the job and making a name for myself. Strangely enough, most people tend to prefer that their exorcists or vampire-killers be male."

"Those were the fields that interested you most? Kinda morbid of you," he said, hoping a gentle tease wasn’t going to get him kicked in the face. To his surprise, Volkova gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"I wasn’t good enough to be a transfigurationist. I had no desire to devote myself to a life of
brewing potions, although I have some minor talent with it– my grandmother’s influence."

"You do have a talent for mayhem and pointy things," Harry said.

"You wouldn’t be the first to say I took a strange path. I had strange experiences which led me to believe either field would prove an interesting career."

"What kind of strange experiences?"

"Ask me again in ten years."

"We both know I might not be around in ten years."

"Neither tale is fit for delicate ears."

"Do I strike you as being the least bit delicate?" Harry clucked. There it was, that protective burst of energy from her. She raised her hand and patted his arm with her fingertips.

"No, not at all," she lied. She dropped the hand fast and cleared her throat. "But the tales are not appropriate ones," she stood her ground. "When you are older, I will tell you. The point is that Rubrica didn’t want me to do either job. She kept trying to make me more feminine."

"How?" Harry wondered. He had mental images of her being forced to wear pink bows in her hair, and those frilly dresses that make little girls look like dolls.

"It’s a long story," Volkova sighed. "There were no laws that said I had to be male to go into those fields, but there remain certain prejudices. They are both male-dominated fields, enough said. I believe it has more to do with the Holy Church being extremely anti-female than anything else. Woman is the garden in which many an evil grows. No, the church doesn’t like women unless we’re mothers and virgins. The Deusredeti doesn’t care much for women either, especially women like me. Rubrica said I should be a healer. A HEALER!? Can you believe that? She said if I were made to be a healer, I might learn a bit of compassion. The elders would have swayed her direction but for the fact that only a week before the choosing ceremony, Sergei and I had managed to root out a nest of four vampires in an abandoned church in Sofia all on our own. I was made a vampire killer, and he was made my aide-de-camp. I don’t think he found much humor in that. Fifteen years my senior, and he was my aide. It chaffed his masculine pride on more than one occasion. It made him reckless to prove himself my better."

Her voice limped away and hid in the darkness, and she breathed unevenly. Harry feared she was fighting tears. He put a hand forward, touching her arm.

"Something terrible happened to him, didn’t it? Do you want to talk about it? It might help."

"No," she snapped, yanking her arm away.

"Okay," Harry said meekly. He was sensing he was not the only person at Hogwarts with pent-up hostility. "Let’s talk about your parents again."

"My father was a vampire killer. My mother was his aide-de-camp."

"Like a nurse to a doctor?"

"More like a moth to the flame. Nonni always knew he’d be the death of her."

"She travelled with your father like you travelled with your grandfather. Is that why you became a
vampire killer? Because you were following in your grandfather’s footsteps?"

"Are you meddling with the floor?"

"Avoiding the question won’t make it go away."

"Give me your wand."

"You already have my wand. AHH! What was that?" Harry asked, climbing to his feet.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Volkova screamed loudly, pounding on the floor.

"The floor is moving," Harry said anxiously.

"Yes, I KNOW IT IS!" Volkova screamed, taking hold of Harry and putting his back against the wall. Potter tried to protest but couldn’t move. She must have used a spell to stick him there. A sickening shudder went through the stones. Harry looked away, and carefully back as the sound of breaking glass and shifting metal filled the air with dust from the crushed stones. The entire floor of the closet had crumbled to dust and dropped out from under them. Volkova was dangling by one hand from the clothes rod. She swung forward to catch herself against the outer wall with a climbing spell, and glared down into the remains of her once-tidy storeroom. Severus Snape was staring back at them.
"Of all the ignorant stunts I’ve seen in my life," Volkova was muttering. Harry sat on the hospital bed, swinging his feet as he leaned back on his arms, trying so very hard not to crack up in laughter.

"I was trying to help you and Mr. Potter," Snape said. He avoided answering the question on Volkova’s face—how had Severus known Harry was in trouble? If she had asked, Snape would have found himself unable to offer a reasonable explanation. He had had an uncomfortable prickle of annoyance along his spine, and a creeping sensation along his scalp. He had gone directly to the Dark Arts classroom, and into the storeroom, and from there, he had heard their voices above him, Volkova exclaiming her indignation about a healer, or about being taken for a healer. Snape couldn’t be sure she wasn’t hollering for a healer, and took the first action that sprung to mind.

"You’d better hope Madam Pomfrey can put my mummy back together, or you’re going to become his substitute," Anna snipped.

"Why, pray tell, did you have a mummy in your closet in your bedroom?" Severus asked. He reached over and covered Harry’s ears with both hands. "Are you a necrophiliac?"

"No, you idiot. The mummy is a memento mori, of sorts, basically, roughly."

Severus pulled his hands away when Harry cackled and ducked down.

"Couldn’t you shrink it? It would be a lot easier to carry around or to store safely in one of the school basements," Snape murmured.

"The mummy must stay close to me," Anna explained.

"Fine. It’s your closet. You can stuff it full of whatever you like."

"Sure I can, after you put the damned floor back in place."

"The house elves are already at work."

"Fine," Volkova growled.

"You’re welcome."

"We were working on how to get out when you came along. We’d’ve stumbled onto something eventually, I’m sure."

"It’s apparent I’m going to have to ask the obvious question. How did you and Mr. Potter come to find yourselves locked in your bedroom closet?"

"Malchik," Harry said. "No, probably not Malchik. Probably Draco Malfoy."
"Oh, look. Potter finally came out of the closet."

Amid gales of wicked laughter, Draco Malfoy came striding into the hospital wing. He was carrying ancient scroll, smirking for all he was worth. Harry wondered if he even smirked while sleeping.

"Mr. Malfoy. I told you to wait in the Dark Arts classroom," Snape said. "Can you not follow even simple instructions?"

"The house elves refused to pick this up--"

Malfoy didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence. Volkova was on her feet one second, and Draco was down on his knees the next.

"Do you find it diverting, Draco, pushing people into closets and locking them inside?" Anna whispered, curling her fingers together tightly around into a fist. Draco gasped for breath and let go of the scroll. At least he wasn’t smirking any more, Harry thought. Anna snatched the scroll off the floor and considered bashing Draco in the head with it. Harry couldn’t help but notice that the ribbon dangling from the scroll had a golden scarab swinging back and forth on the end.

"Sorry...." Draco fought for breath.

"Not sorry enough," she replied venomously.

"I can’t....breathe, please," he gasped.

"Where is Malchik?" Anna demanded, tightening her fist until Harry was sure her fingers would snap.

"I don’t have her...."

"Do you know what I did to the last person who hurt Malchik to get to me?" Volkova menaced.

"I don’t....know where she is."

"He’s turning blue," Snape cautioned.

"Where is she?" Anna hissed.

"If he dies, he won’t be able to tell you where she is," Severus said. "Be civil, Professor Volkova. The Headmaster frowns on this sort of behavior."

"Pansy," Draco gasped. Harry cackled, and Draco glared at him before gasping again.

"Release my student, if you please," Snape said. Volkova begrudgingly allowed Draco to take a breath. He rolled to his backside and scuttled crab-like away from her in sheer terror. She raised the scroll at him and it lengthened it a staff of solid wood. Draco crawled backwards out of her reach.

"What about Pansy??" Volkova growled, aiming the staff at him.

"I left Malchik with Pansy!" Draco exclaimed.

"Mr. Malfoy, on your feet. Let us find Miss Parkinson and ask her the whereabouts of Professor Volkova’s house elf. Come along, before she loses her temper with you," Snape interjected himself between Draco and Volkova.
“Bye. Do come again,” Harry waved from the bed. Draco shot Potter a blood-curdling glare as Snape was dragging him away. Once Draco was gone, Harry turned to Volkova. She shrunk the staff to a scroll again, and jammed it into an inside pocket, cursing to herself. The scarab dangled outside until she plucked it up and tucked it in as well. The scroll must have fallen out of her mummy’s trunk. Harry was burning with curiosity. If he could touch it, hold it, get a sense of it, for only a few minutes......

“I’m going to beat him black and blue someday,” she muttered aloud when she was done muttering under her breath.

“I’m not so sure he wouldn’t enjoy it,” Harry murmured with a careful smile. Volkova raised a brow at him, and he shrank back from her an inch. “Will you be able to put your storeroom back together?” Harry asked, wondering at the shaky breath that Volkova inhaled, exhaled, inhaled again.

“The storeroom, certainly. The shelves, perhaps. The boxes of blown-glass jars filled with priceless and irreplaceable potion ingredients, doubtfully.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Malchik is fine,” Harry said, wanting to be supportive.

“We have a Dark Arts class,” Volkova said, neutrality covering her face.
"Oh, look. Potter finally came out of the closet," Millicent Bulstrode snickered when Harry sprinted into the Dark Arts classroom with Professor Volkova at his heels.

Without a word, Volkova pointed her wand at Bulstrode. Everyone in the near vicinity ducked down at their desks. In the background of the classroom, house elves could be heard hard at work repairing the floor to Volkova’s closet. The door to the storeroom was open. Bits and pieces of dark arts components were strewn about the floor inside and out. It smelled like several greenhouses had exploded in there as well. The intense smell must have come from the potion ingredients Volkova had mentioned.

"How charming, Miss Bulstrode. Do you and Mr. Malfoy always plan your insults in tandem?" Professor Volkova asked Millicent.

"No, ma’am."

"It’s evident you all know about the unfortunate incident with my closet and storeroom this morning." Volkova continued, keeping her wand pointed at Millicent. Volkova situated herself on the front edge of her desk and stared out over the students assembled as Harry took his seat next to Hermione.

"Professor, was Madam Pomfrey able to put your mummy back together?" Hermione asked, raising her hand.

"She’s working on him presently. Now, I feel it’s best we get right to work, because you’ve all got a busy semester ahead of you, especially you, Miss Bulstrode."

"Yes, ma’am." Millicent hadn’t moved a millimeter.

"What happened this morning was a direct result of this juvenile in-house fighting that goes on here at Hogwarts. I want you all to know from this millisecond forward that I will no longer tolerate it in this classroom. What you do outside this classroom, that’s for the Headmaster and your other professors to tolerate or not. Inside this classroom, however, you belong to me. Having said that, as corporal punishment is not allowed on school grounds, and smashing you to bloody pulps is regrettably not an option, I have alternative plans. Miss Bulstrode has volunteered to be part of my first demonstration. Step forward, please."
Millicent gulped, stood up, and meekly came forward. Any of the Gryffindors that thought about
snickering thought a second time when they saw the fury that was taking over Volkova’s usually-
reserved face. The Dark Arts instructor pointed to a spot on the floor right in front of herself, and
Bulstrode stood on that spot and waited.

"Do you have a heart condition?" Volkova asked.

"Ummm."

"Do you have a heart condition?" Anna continued. Millicent continued to wait, her mouth hanging
open. "Please repeat for us what you said when Mr. Potter entered the room."

"What?"

"It’s a simple request. Please repeat what you said."

"'Oh, look. Potter finally came out of the closet'," Millicent said quietly.

"I take this comment to be a remark not only encompassing the incident with my closet and
storeroom this morning, but a verbal slight at Mr. Potter’s sexuality, and also a jab about the recent
incident that passed between Mr. Potter and Mr. Lucius Malfoy. How exciting. Three nasty
remarks in eight short words. Any further thoughts on this you’d like to express, Miss Bulstrode?"

"No, ma’am."

"Do you feel it’s appropriate to make light of possible suffocation, the destruction of personal
property, the inconvenience of missing my first class this morning, to say nothing of missing my
first cup of coffee, to which you owe the present tirade?"

"No, ma’am."

"Do you feel it’s appropriate to make light of another person’s sexual preferences?" Volkova
demanded. Snickers crossed the room, and Millicent thought it safe to smile. Bad move. "It matters
to you that Harry might feel attracted to men?" Volkova asked her.

"No," Millicent denied and snickered.

"This is a Dark Arts classroom, my dear, and whether Mr. Potter is attracted to women or men or
sea squids is of no difference whatsoever to his ability to learn what I am teaching him. All I care
about is that each and every one of you learns what I am teaching you. Do you think Harry cares if
you sleep with a stuffed rabbit and masturbate with carrots you filch from the school kitchen? I
doubt seriously it causes him a moment of worry. Shall we ask him? Shall we ask the other
students their views on your sexual practices?"

Millicent covered her face with both hands. Harry could foresee a lot of anonymous vegetables
being left in her bed in the future, and not just by pervy Gryffindors. Volkova went on as if she
hadn’t revealed probably the darkest secret of Bulstrode’s young life.

"No, we shall not," Volkova decided. "That is sex, and this is Dark Arts. Most people prefer to
keep Dark Arts out of their sex life. I prefer to keep people’s sex lives out of my Dark Arts
classroom. As far as my teaching is concerned, you are all sexless, and should remain so. Do you
understand?"

"Yes, Professor," Millicent mumbled.
"As for the third target of your tasteless innuendo, do you somehow feel it’s appropriate to make light of Mr. Potter being physically assaulted to within an inch of his life? Are you an ignorant savage with no sympathy for a fellow human being?"

This brought a faint smirk to many a Slytherin face, including Millicent’s. Harry wanted to sink down into his chair and vanish from sight.

"Ah, so that’s it," Volkova said, standing to her feet. Harry felt the protectiveness well off of her, and felt her temper rise like a tangible thickening of the room’s environment. "You find Mr. Potter’s experience amusing. Perhaps the circumstances of the attack amuse you, because it was your friend’s father, because you take a vicarious thrill from the idea of a Slytherin getting the best of a Gryffindor."

"No, ma’am."

"How well do you feel you would fare trying to physically protect yourself against someone more than twice your age and two times your body mass, to say nothing of the illegal potions Mr. Malfoy forced Mr. Potter to ingest, which dampened his ability to defend himself?"

"Not well, ma’am," Millicent smirked.

"If I were a Slytherin, I’d be mortified that a sorcerer in his forties, a cub of my den, was afraid to face a boy of sixteen unless the boy was drugged and unable to fight back. Aren’t you embarrassed by such cowardice?"

"Mr. Malfoy wasn’t a coward," Millicent defended as a chorus of angry gasps went through the Slytherins. Volkova knew she had struck a nerve, and she dove in for a second shot at the sore spot.

"Wasn’t he?" Volkova smirked. "What a strange point of view you have, Miss Bulstrode. It’s clear Mr. Malfoy didn’t feel he could take Mr. Potter without first rendering the boy practically unconscious. That does more than suggest cowardice. To my mind, Lucius’s actions reek of fear."

"Mr. Malfoy was never afraid of him." Millicent pointed at Harry and laughed.

"Do you believe somehow that Mr. Potter was deserving of such an attack?"

"Everyone knows he’s a poof now," Millicent muttered.

Harry thought for sure that his heart was going to stop and that he would die. Right there. Ron muttered foul language from his seat, going black with rage. Volkova had heard Ron. Harry waited in fear that she was whirl their direction. The professor was otherwise occupied however. Hermione took out her wand when Crabbe and Goyle started chortling. Volkova was one step ahead of her. With a flick of Anna’s wrist, the two bulky Slytherins began to baa like sheep. She hadn’t even looked away from the captive Bulstrode.

"If I were to rape you, would it make you desire women?" Volkova asked Bulstrode. Crabbe and Goyle continued to baa, in worry, not amusement.

"No," Millicent frowned in disgust. "Besides, you couldn’t."

"I don’t have to have a penis to rape you. I’m creative if not skilled with transfigurations magic. We could find out, couldn’t we?"

Bulstrode took a step backwards as Volkova took one forwards. Anna was leering at her, chuckling
darkly again.

"I assure you, all rape takes is one willing person and one unwilling person. It’s brute force against helplessness. I could rape you here and now, and I doubt there’d be a person in this room who would be able to stop me."

Harry felt his jaw drop. Hermione gasped out loud. It was as if every restrained emotion and dark thought Volkova might have had for the last year was surfacing in a bubbling brew of nasty evil. This was a glimpse at the unrepentant, highly-decorated vampire-killer, staring down at Bulstrode like delicious prey. She was doing this to protect Harry, to defend his honor, in a manner of speaking, and part of Harry was grateful to her. But none of the other students were ready to handle the idea of what a sharp, angry, nasty individual Volkova kept so skillfully buried away most of the time. In fact, Harry was sure Ron would never again have another blissful daydream about Volkova being all soft and pliable on the inside, emotionally speaking.

"It’s not allowed," Millicent whimpered.

"What did you say, you stupid cow? Even in your limited experiences, you must have noticed that many things happen in this world that are not allowed," Volkova mimicked the student’s mincing tone. "It’s not allowed’. What nonsense is this? Do you know what would happen if I struck you dead right here?"

"You’d be punished,” Millicent whimpered when Volkova jabbed her wand against the student’s throat.

"Yes, eventually, maybe, but you’d still be dead, wouldn’t you?” Volkova snapped, narrowing the gap between them. "Once you’re dead, what happens to me is rather irrelevant. There’s no bringing you back. You’re dead. Death is permanent. Forever. I might get sent to Azkaban, if the authorities catch me. But you would still be dead."

"You don’t have a right to talk to me that way,” Bulstrode sounded as if she might cry. "I’ll tell the Headmaster. I’ll tell my parents."

"Yes, let’s summon the Headmaster at once,” Volkova agreed. She made as if to walk to the fireplace as Millicent gibbered where she stood.

"No, really, that’s all right."

"No? He’s a simple floo-call away."

"No. Everyone knows how much Dumbledore favors Potter."

"How about your parents then? Hmm? I’m sure they could explain to me why you’re entertained by the manner in which Mr. Potter was injured. Perhaps I could have a long talk with your mother and father about how your sociopathic amusement with someone else’s pain is a reflection of their less-than-adequate parenting skills. What kind of home life must you have where pain is a form of amusement? Are your parents as sick and twisted as you are? Mentally-malformed? Psychologically incapable of compassion? Perhaps you shouldn’t be raised by such monsters."

"You don’t have any right to say that about my parents!” Millicent screeched.

"Do you have a right to find amusement with what happened to Mr. Potter?"

"I’m not amused!” Bulstrode screamed.
"Your tasteless verbal expression reveals otherwise."

"My father said it serves him right!" Millicent yelled, anger coloring her face. "Potter needed taken down a notch. He needed to be shown he’s not the biggest cock of the walk."

"And that’s how your father measures every man? By the size of his cock?" Volkova asked, smirking.

"It’s an expression," Bulstrode frowned.

"Yes, an expression of your unending stupidity and your father’s common vulgarity. Miss Bulstrode, give me your hand," Volkova hissed.

"What?"

"Which word puzzles you? Give. me. your. hand."

"I don’t think...."

"I didn’t ask you to think! Give me your hand! Your non-dominant one."

The room went deathly quiet. Those words had been added purely for their terror quality. Millicent wiped her left palm on her robe and slid her fishy-cold hand into Volkova’s.

"Mr. Potter, please come forward," Volkova said.

Harry briefly entertained the thought of refusing, but decided Volkova wasn’t going to rip out his internal organs, and frankly anything painful after Lucius was going to be somewhat anti-climatic. He walked up to Volkova, and gave him her hand, refusing to look at Millicent or even acknowledge her presence. Did other wizards feel like she did? Like her father had said? Did they feel he was in need of a reckoning to learn his place? Harry Potter needed to be humbled to learn he wasn’t all-powerful?

Volkova looked intently at Harry, and he knew she wasn’t going to hurt him. She merely needed to see into his mind, he believed. But he didn’t feel her in his mind at all. Anna turned from Harry and focused her gaze on Millicent. Bulstrode dropped to the floor on her knees, screaming in terror and pain. Volkova let go of her hand as if dropping an unclean object. Harry dodged back from Anna and Millicent, stunned by Volkova’s coldness in the face of physical brutality, particularly because she was the one inflicting the brutality with such casualness.

"Get up, Miss Bulstrode, stop your sniveling, and tell the class what you felt," Volkova said. The sobbing Millicent got to her feet. She wiped a hand across her face, and stared dumbly at the other Slytherins. Most of them were having a hard time meeting her face.

"I...." Millicent stammered.

"Tell the class what you felt," Volkova repeated.

"I don’t know," she cried, one hand moving down towards her skirt unconsciously, and the other touching her shirt to make sure her buttons were closed.

"Take your place, Miss Bulstrode. If you trouble me again this semester, I’ll display your head on a pike next to the blackboard and unstring your entrails for sausage casing."

Bulstrode fled for her chair and shrank down in her seat. She put her head on her arms on her desk.
and continued to cry.

"For your information, you wretched, odious snots, what Miss Bulstrode felt is called a Sympatico spell. Would you like another demonstration?"

"Not really," Ron mumbled fearfully.

Volkova centered a glance on Weasley that made his hair part down the middle, and he ducked downward out of reflex. Volkova took Harry’s hand again, much more gently than the first time. The feeling was light at first, and grew slowly. Harry felt giddy, happy, silly even. The room blurred around the edges. There was a tinkle at his nose, a glass at his lips, a sweet bubbly froth going down his throat. He swallowed even though he knew he wasn’t actually drinking, but the sensation was so strong that he couldn’t be sure he shouldn’t, and so he had swallowed, twice, and again. The giddiness increased. He was sitting on the edge of a mattress, and outside the rough, square window to his left, the moon shone down on a desert city and arid landscape. The wind was drifting into the window, and he smelled spices and flowers, perfume and sweat. From behind, a door opened, light washed over the bed, and a figure moved. The bed dipped, and someone kissed him gingerly on the back of the neck. Alarmed, Harry let go of Volkova’s hand. Apparently she had been alarmed too. He wasn’t supposed to have gotten that far into the memory. The sensation of being giddy fell away, as did the mental images. Harry cocked his head at Volkova in puzzlement.

"The Sympatico spell allows you to feel what someone else has felt, physical sensations or emotions. It can work between two people, between three people with one acting as a conduit, between a single person and a room full of people. A very powerful wizard, after many years of practice, would be able to transfer their thoughts to you as well. It’s related to the Legilimency and Occlumency spells. Some have even theorized that a wizard’s ability to do a successful Sympatico is based on his or her clairvoyant abilities, or their personal charisma, or their strength of character. The Sympatico is much more elementary than Legilimency or Occlumency. It operates on a more- animal, less-developed level," Volkova was explaining.

Everyone in the class looked at the crying Miss Bulstrode, who was gaping at Volkova with wide, wet eyes.

"Please take your seat, Mr. Potter," Volkova instructed. Harry wove back to his place beside Hermione, his mind filled with one question– who had been kissing Volkova on the neck? Had all the talk about sex and Dark Arts been for show? Volkova linked them together mentally on some low level herself. He remembered the blond man he had seen in Volkova’s mind over Christmas, and wondered if that man was the mysterious language instructor turned vampire-killer that she had spoken of in cryptic bits and pieces earlier that morning. Had she been remembering him kissing her on the neck?

"What did you feel, Harry?" Hermione asked. "You were smiling."

"What was it?" Ron asked. Harry shrugged that he wasn’t sure.

"What you felt, Miss Bulstrode, was a mere second and a half of the terror and physical pain that Mr. Potter endured for an hour and a half before he managed to accidently kill Lucius Malfoy. Now, tell me how you felt, Miss Bulstrode. Was it at all pleasant or amusing?" Anna pressed.

"No, ma’am."

"Do you have a sudden desire to sleep with women?"
"No!" Millicent howled at her, furious.

"No, certainly not," Volkova growled. "Tell me, Miss Bulstrode, for all the lovely diversion provided by Mr. Malfoy’s exploits, where is he?"

"I don’t know."

"Lucius is dead, you turnip. He’s rotting to dust and bones in that very expensive sepulcher at Malfoy Manor. He is staining ancient oak and mounds of gold with body fluids and decomposing body parts as he vanishes into nothingness."

House elves were peering out of the storeroom at them all, whispering among themselves. Volkova wanted to say more, clenching her teeth together. She bit herself back, fighting a smile that straightened her face.

"Are you all paying attention to me? I’m not going to repeat myself. You may find your in-house competitions diverting, entertaining, necessary, whatever, but the lot of you sniveling, pampered, over-bred, over-privileged wretches are going to straighten up and learn to work together in this classroom, or one by one, you will be killed."

Faces went blank with fear around the room. Although it didn’t seem possible, Volkova became even more livid with annoyance.

"Oh, for God’s sake, I’m not going to kill you! Not that the immense satisfaction I get from that very thought hasn’t kept my heart pumping and blood flowing through my veins for months. No. What I’m telling you is that you will surely perish at the hands of the dark forces of Voldemort if you can’t put aside these petty trivial rivalries. Your only hope for survival is learning to depend on each other, regardless of the colors on your neckties. If not, I’m afraid you will all meet your fates, most of them unpleasant. What’s worse, the world will go on without you. A darker world, perhaps. Who is to decide? Not you. You’ll be dead. You will mean nothing. You will have struggled for nothing. You will have died for nothing. Nothing. Is that what you want your lives to have meant?"

There were mumbles in the silence that followed Volkova’s clipped, furious words. The house elves were all watching now.

"When I ask a question, I want an ANSWER!" Volkova made her voice echo from every corner of the room.

"No, ma’am," the class chorused, drawing back in their seats. It was hard for Harry not to smile when he heard Crabbe and Goyle continue to bleat. The house elves vanished back into the storeroom and began to work more furiously than before. "I will not waste another minute of my time in this classroom if you are not here to learn. There will be no more of this in-house rivalry nonsense distracting you from your work. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma’am."

"You are here to learn. I am here to teach. My time, your time, is too valuable to waste. There isn’t enough time. Do you understand what I’m telling you? There simply isn’t enough time."

"Yes, ma’am."

"Good. Very good. If only you all meant it. No matter. Those who do not understand me now will hopefully come around before the end. To start with, you will all remove your ties, and place them in your pockets. Now. Immediately. I want no more of them. None of these colors, these houses,
these petty petty things. Take them off. Now. Off. Off. Off. From now on, any student wearing a house tie in this classroom is going to spend the day hung above my desk. By your thumbs. If you’re damned lucky."

There was a rustle of movement all around the room as students did as they were ordered, casting glances at each other about whether or not this was against protocol.

Volkova opened one drawer on her desk. Out of it she drew a small glass globe the size of the palm of her hand. It generated a cold blue light as she held it up for them to see.

"Our first assignment of the new term," she whispered softly. "I trust you have read chapter seventeen in your books as I requested when last we met?"

There was a mad scrambling for texts and parchment.
Dearly Departed

Chapter Summary

In which Draco discovers Harry has a new talent up his sleeve

"It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever seen. It’s like someone took Snape and crammed him in Volkova’s skin. It was really scary," Ron whispered at the dinner table.

"She didn’t get her morning coffee," Hermione said, laughing softly as she turned a page in her book.

"Her head spun all the way around," Ron told Luna, who was currently occupying Harry’s space, hiding from the students at her own table.

"It did not," Hermione sighed.

"It did too," Neville interjected. Hermione tossed a roll at him.

"Have Crabbe and Goyle stopped bleating?" Dean asked, casting a glance over to the Slytherin table.

"What caused all this?" Luna wanted to know.

"Draco and Pansy knocked Malchik unconscious. Pansy locked her in a trunk in the Slytherin Common Room. Pansy polyjuiced into Malchik, and lured Harry away from breakfast," Hermione detailed. "Pansy locked Harry and Volkova in Volkova’s bedroom closet, which Draco had walled up to prevent exit. Snape got them out by dropping the bottom off the closet, the contents of which smashed nearly everything in the Dark Arts storeroom."

"Everything except our assignments," Ron said, taking out his glass orb and holding it up to show. "Anybody made any progress with that yet?"

"We got those too. All you have to do is break them," Luna said.

"We haven’t been able to," Hermione said.

"Have you?" Ron asked Luna.

"No," she frowned, her eyes shifting left and right dodgily.

"Volkova had every right to be angry," Hermione added.

"She split us into pairs," Ron moaned. "One Slytherin and one Gryffindor at each table. Anyone who wears a house tie in her classroom will be hung above her desk, or sent back to the dorms with a failing grade for that day. All wands are to be left at the front of the classroom on entrance and will be returned upon exit. There will be no talking except that related to work. There will be no nothing except that related to our assignments."

"And there will definitely be no sex in Dark Arts," Neville said helpfully.
“Ron’s mad he has to sit with Millicent Bulstrode,” Hermione snickered.

“She whimpered any time Volkova came near her,” Ron wailed.

“You’d whimper too if she had threatened to rape you,” Neville said.

“No, I dare say he wouldn’t,” Hermione put in ruefully. Ron glared at her, his nostrils flaring like a snubnose dragon’s.

“Snape had a long talk with Volkova about what she threatened to do to Bulstrode,” Neville commented. Luna nodded quickly.

“I’d like to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation,” Hermione laughed.

“Wouldn’t we all?” Neville replied.

“Snape said he’d be glad to write up a formal complaint on her behalf,” Luna said casually.

“You heard them?” Hermione gasped.

“Yeah. It was a big shock to hear Volkova and Snape agreeing for a change. I nearly fell out of my stall.”

“Snape followed her into the girls’ restroom??” Ron’s eyes went wide.

“Snape is writing up a complaint on Volkova’s behalf? Hermione worried.

“Yeah,” Luna nodded. “In her defense.”

“He’s shedding his skin again,” Hermione laughed, mostly to herself.

“He even promised to have a long talk with the Bulstrodes if they pressed the issue. Who is Harry stuck sitting with in Dark Arts?” Luna asked.

“Malfoy, naturally, right in front of Volkova’s desk,” Ron whispered. “Poor bugger. Harry’s taking it like a Gryffindor though. Draco didn’t get there until half the class was over, but Harry made the most of the time left.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“Headmaster’s Office,” Ron grinned.

“What for?” Luna asked. Ron grinned even wider. Neville laughed through his pumpkin juice. Even Hermione was smirking.

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“You know why you’re here, I presume?” Dumbledore boomed.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, humbled and scared.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

“I’m not sure if I can, sir.”

“Tell me what you know,” Albus said, his voice softening. Harry cautiously gave Professors Snape and McGonagall sideways look, first Snape to his left and McGonagall to his right. Harry
nervously cleared his throat.

"Malfoy was being a git. He wouldn't leave me alone. I wanted him to stop."

"I understand. Go on."

"He kept at me, wouldn't back down."

"Why can’t you ignore him?" McGonagall growled.

"I tried to ignore him, but he wouldn’t stop bothering me."

"Can’t you turn the other cheek?" she suggested.

"So he can smack that one too?" Harry shot back.

"When did Draco set your bookbag on fire?" Albus asked.

"Sometime during our discussion about my questionable parentage, sir."

"Did you know Mr. Malfoy could create fire with wandless magic?" Dumbledore asked Professor Snape.

"No. But it does explain the sudden rash of fires in the waste baskets in the Slytherin dorms," Severus replied.

"Harry, go on. What did you do when Draco set your bag on fire?"

"I grabbed his arm."

"You grabbed his arm?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, chin drooping.

"What did you do next?" Dumbledore waited anxiously.

"Well, I started to... I wanted to punch him. I wanted him to go away and never return."

"And?"

"I was going to knock him out. I raised my fist. I wanted to say ‘buenos noches’. I saw that in a movie once before a fight scene."

"But?"

"I accidently said ‘Buenos Aires’."

"That’s when Draco vanished?" Snape gulped.

"Yes, sir. There was this flash of red light. Malfoy screamed, and he vanished."

The dreadful silence was broken by girlish giggling. Professor McGonagall took off her hat and covered her face with it. The point jiggled strangely up and down.

"Professor McGonagall," Albus murmured. Severus stared at Minerva and raised a brow as he took out his wand. She put her hat back on, still smiling brightly. The expression took two decades off
her usually-somber face.

"I don't suppose you know where in Buenos Aires you sent Draco, do you?" Snape asked Harry.

"I dare say the likes of Mr. Malfoy will be terribly easy to spot in Buenos Aires. Follow the sound of pampered whining," McGonagall said before giving in to another mirthful howl of humor.

"Don't worry, dear boy," Albus said, taking Harry's hand and patting it. "You didn't hurt Draco. You must have apparated him. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"Spontaneous, fully-developed apparition skills," McGonagall was grinning happily. "Oh, Harry! Wonderful! Wonderful! We shall have to see about fine-tuning this, of course, but it's simply wonderful."

"I'm not sure Mr. Malfoy will share your enthusiasm for Harry's new skill," Dumbledore chuckled.

"Would you like help finding Mr. Malfoy?" Minerva asked Severus, calming her chuckles briefly.

"Thank you, no. I'll do this myself."

"Will you be all right?" Harry asked anxiously.

"I'll be fine," Severus smiled grimly at him. "Perhaps a brief visit to Cousin Matilda wouldn't be out of line."

"I'm very sorry," Harry whispered.

"Sorry?" Dumbledore mused. "I'm sure Mr. Malfoy will be fine. You will of course serve your detentions with Professor Volkova. I imagine they will involve sorting out the remaining wreckage from her storage room. Wear your dragon hide gloves," Albus cautioned. "That will be all, Mr. Potter. You are free to go to dinner."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, rising to his feet. He trailed out of the room with his head hung low. He wished they had punished him instead of finding such amusement in this new-found ability. McGonagall was laughing again before the door closed behind Harry.

"Minerva," Albus chided her. "Perhaps I should give you a detention. Do you think Severus is going to enjoy having to go look for Mr. Malfoy?"

"Let him find his own way back," Minerva replied. "Say hello to Matilda while you're there. Haven't seen her in decades!"

That was all Harry heard. He was down the hidden stairs and back into the corridor. Professor Volkova was waiting for him, hands folded behind her back. When she saw him, she stood up straighter, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at him. Harry hung his head lower. Well, at least somebody had the sense to be unhappy with him, Harry resigned himself.

"Detention at eight?" he queried.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, for the next ten nights."

"Even over the weekend?"

"Yes," she growled. "Do you believe your Dark Lord takes weekends off?"
"No. Can I have dinner first?" Harry ventured.

"We will be having dinner in my quarters this evening. Malchik is cooking even as we speak."

"Is she all right?"

"Except for a slight headache, yes."

"What about Pansy?"

"Miss Parkinson will be a house elf for approximately six weeks, during which time she will be isolated in the infirmary. That’s how long it takes for the antidote to work. How lucky she was I had some on hand."

"Lucky indeed. Six weeks?"

"She has only herself and Mr. Malfoy to blame. Mostly Mr. Malfoy. He clearly didn’t tell her all the risks involved, if he knew them himself. Neither will tell me where they managed to secure a vial of Polyjuice Potion, but I have faith one of them will break sooner or later."

"What are we going to do during detention?" Harry asked.

"I have something special in mind," Volkova answered, handing him heavy gloves. Harry paused, gulping softly, and followed her nervously through the castle.
Chapter Summary

In which Professor Volkova gives Harry a puzzle to solve

"What is this?" Harry asked, accepting the strange, wooden box that Volkova put heavily into his hands. It was day six of his detentions, roughly a week after Draco had been sent on his brief vacation to Argentina. Harry had four more detentions to serve. Draco’s trip had not improved his mood or his attitude. But the trip hadn’t been a complete loss. The mysterious Cousin Matilda had put a bit of cheer back in Snape.

Every other professor had taken the precaution of putting Harry and Draco on opposite sides of the room from each other. Volkova had elected to keep them right next to each other and right in front of her. Thus far she had had to put out three fires in Harry’s much-abused book bag, and had de-iced Malfoy’s trousers for him on more than one occasion. She was taking it all in stride though.

If anything, Harry felt that the more time he spent around Volkova, the better her mood became. He tried not to draw any sinister conclusions from this. After all, Hermione had said that they had a certain connection on some level. Having someone to spend time with outside the classroom setting could be alleviating the extreme loneliness that Harry had felt in Volkova over Christmas. Maybe Volkova’s good mood could also be attributed to the fact that every morning there had been a large, steaming cup of coffee waiting for her at the staff table, courtesy of the terrified house elves who had been cleaning her storeroom and heard her light into the students that day.

"I want your help with it," Anna murmured.

Harry tried to open the lid of the wooden container carved with crude skulls and cryptic runes. It had eight sides rather than six, with the longest two sides being the front and back of the box. The top, sides, and bottom were covered with runes carved in several hands with differing measures of legibility, covering each other and making the ones beneath nearly illegible. Harry almost fell from his perch on the top shelf of the storeroom. The lid didn’t appear to have a firm grip on the hinges or the box either one, but it wouldn’t answer to even the strongest pulls. Harry got a better hold on the container by wrapping his arms around it, but no amount of exertion would produce any give. Was it glued shut?

"Is this a joke?" he huffed.

"No. I believe it’s an octonarium," Volkova said.

"A what?" Harry questioned.

"Look at the carvings."

"What’s an octonarium?"

"An ossuary, of sorts. A small container for someone’s bones or ashes. This one is different from the others I’ve seen. What do you know about ancient runes?"

"Not much," Harry gave her a charming smile that slid off his skull when she continued to frown at
him.

"I’ve heard tell they offer a class, but it’s not on your schedule. I’m appalled. Something as useful as Ancient Runes, and you’re not taking it?"

"Hermione takes it."

"Miss Granger was not put on this earth to be your brain. I want you to translate the runes on the top."

"I’ll go straight to the library after we’re finished," Harry promised, meaning it enthusiastically at the time with the full knowledge he’d forget about the library soon before he finished with his detention.

"I won’t tell you which each says, but those runes on the top? They are designed to prevent opening of the box from the inside, and what’s more, the runes on the bottom are designed to prevent opening of the box from the outside."

"Who do you suppose is inside?" Harry gulped, lifting the box up out of the space between his folded legs. "Whose bones and ashes are these? Why did you want to give it to me?"

"To see if it is dangerous."

"How am I supposed to know?"

Volkova’s reserved composure cracked with a wicked grin. "We haven’t exploded into dust, so I’m going to assume whatever evil was placed inside remains there," she said.

"Why did you suppose that?" Harry asked.

"You touched it and it didn’t react." She bowed her head to hide another chuckle. "I considered using it as a demonstration in Dark Arts, along with my mummy, and a few other tidbits that I have collected over the years. I know that you would be bored throughout such a demonstration, but I hoped perhaps if the other children were exposed to death in its many forms, it wouldn’t seem such an alien concept to them. It’s their inexperience, I realize, and I would not intend to wound or scar them. Very much. But to take something intangible like death and be able to present you with something you can hold in your hands, I hoped it might open a few eyes or minds. The box intrigues you, doesn’t it? How wonderful!"

"Where did you find it?" Harry asked.

"Here in the storeroom. It must have been in here all the time and I hadn’t known, even with the renovations and cleaning I had done myself. The house elves left it in the corner over there, once they were finished clearing and cleaning. Isn’t that curious?"

"Whose is it?" Harry wondered.

"I’m not entirely sure," she evaded him.

"Who is inside?"

"I don’t know that either."

"Can you date the runes?"

"Unfortunately, yes."
"Why unfortunately?"

"I should leave you to learn for yourself. Early Christian symbols. If I had to venture a guess, you’re holding what remains of a woman who was burned as a heretic by zealous converts to Christianity. Tenth century? Ninth century?"

"How would you guess that?"

"The deepest layer of runes reminds me of those I’ve seen in the Hall of Knowledge in Venice, confirmed by historians and linguists to date from those centuries. Also there are the one-dimensional, flat representations of the skulls and faces. Very early Christian. The skulls– a symbol of death. The cross on the bottom– a symbol of Christianity, but also, a Celtic symbol for the connection between the everlasting beyond and the earthly plane. The Christians are notorious for snatching bits and pieces from the cultures that they conquered."

"How do you know the woman was burned at the stake?"

"Because she fits in a box that size."

"How do you know it’s a she?"

"Having had first-hand experience with misogyny and sexism in its many diverse forms, I would say that odds are better than two to one that it’s a woman."

"Why?"

"Because if a single woman or a group of women commit an act of violence against a single man, chances are in his favor for being able to escape, if not because of physical prowess then because of the sympathy he might manage to invoke in one of the ensemble. Women are not prone to solving problems with physical confrontation. I mean, it does happen, and there are exceptions to every rule, but it’s not the socially-expected, socially-conditioned form women use to deal with murderous impulses. We are far more likely to poison, to injury from afar, to wound psychologically. We are more often than not encouraged to pity and to forgive no matter the injury done to us, because it’s more ‘lady-like’ to rise above, thus prove our superior strength of character if not our physical prowess."

"Bollocks," Harry frowned.

"Exactly the attitude a man might take," Volkova challenged.

"What about what you did to Bulstrode? That wasn’t lady-like whatsoever."

"I injured her psychologically, not physically."

"You made her feel what happened to me," Harry said.

"It was the fastest way to shut her smug mouth, to take the humor out of the situation for her. Forgive me if that was intrusive. I did not mean it to be so. I couldn’t bear that she would mock you about how you were hurt."

Harry remained contemplatively quiet. He could hear her moving bottles around below, watched the top of her head go by once and again.

"Did something like that happen to you?" he whispered the words, afraid of the answer she might give.
"No," she murmured, not facing him. "But a good friend of mine, another hunter’s aide de camp. She was attacked as you were. She was never the same. I don’t know what’s become of her, to be honest. I haven’t seen her the last two times I’ve been home. That’s been ten years. No one I’m on speaking terms with will answer where she is. Polite enquires go unanswered. My owls return, unopened. I fear.....I fear she may have harmed herself, committed self-murder, but no one will tell me."

"I could find her for you," Harry offered.

"I’ve only myself to blame," Volkova said sadly.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"I wasn’t there for her, wasn’t the friend I should have been, and she turned inward. I was going through a difficult patch and was concerned with only my own problems. I was selfish and I wasn’t the friend I should have been. I’ve long regretted that. It wears on me."

"I could find her for you," Harry offered again.

"Perhaps I will let you someday," Volkova accepted, "when you haven’t so much on your mind as now."

"What? I’m not overly occupied. I merely have to kill Voldemort, find Tonks, find Remus, finish my homework, perhaps rescue a fair maiden from a wonky box," Harry mused.

"How do you know she’s a maiden?" Volkova wondered, her ears perking up not unlike Dobby or Malchik when they were ready to burst with excitement.

"They’re usually the ones that get sacrificed though, aren’t they?"

"Usually," Volkova agreed.

"What you were saying about men and women and how they handle their enemies and their anger? You’re a woman, and you are a trained killer," he said.

"Can we accept I might be an exception to the rule about women in general?"

"I suppose," Harry conceded.

"My point, dear, was that women don’t usually resort to physical violence. However, if a single man or a group of men commit an act of violence against a single woman, chances are not in her favor to escape. You tend to be larger, designed with the upper body strength for wielding weapons. Women tend to be smaller, with the lower body strength required to carry and deliver young. We tend not to be trained to defend ourselves. We are taught to flee, or to depend on the intervention of someone else to save us."

"You don’t like being rescued. You said so yourself. You don’t even like the idea of being rescued. You’d rather be boiled in oil than get rescued, wouldn’t you?"

"Yes. And such sentimentality will get you killed. I am one person, no more, no less. One stone from a mountain of rocks. If I die, another will take my place."

"You say that with such...." Harry scooted to the end of the shelf and caught her in his gaze. "You say that as if you know," he said. The hair on his neck was standing up in surprise and fear. "Are you going to die?"
"Mr. Potter, the beginning of sentience is the realization that this body is temporary."

"You believe men are designed to fight, and women are designed to run? I don’t believe you’ll run from death. My mother didn’t run. She gave her life to defend me."

"I imagine your father would have preferred that she ran, don’t you?"

"Yes, probably," Harry said solemnly. He closed his eyes, putting the box down on the shelf and raising his hand, palm towards her.

"Don’t do it," Volkova said, stepping back from him.

"What aren’t you telling me about this situation?" he asked. "Do you know how you’re going to die?"

"None of us can be entirely sure, can we? But we can make a reasonable assumption that because I have lived by the stake, I may die by the stake. Don’t you find that might be the case? Harry, don’t try to read me, please."

"Will you die defending me?" Harry asked, stretching out his magic like an invisible wave, searching towards her. She was throwing up a blocking spell which echoed out from her.

"You must not ask what I cannot answer."

"Did they send you here to die defending me?" he whispered, opening his eyes and searching her face. She was as far away from him as the room allowed. She avoided his gaze, giving him nervous sideways looks of awe as she walked back and forth fiddling with bottles.

"You must not ask what I cannot answer," she repeated. "I don’t know how I’m going to die, and frankly, I’d rather not know, if you don’t mind. So if you ever see how I’m going to die, don’t tell me."

"I’ve had enough people give up their all on my behalf. I will not stand another," Harry protested. "You do not have my permission to die for me. In fact, rather the opposite. I utterly forbid you to even consider perishing for me."

"The subject is closed, Master," Volkova bowed to him, turning away.

Master? Harry tumbled the word around in his mind as she carried bottles back and forth in heavy, sad silence. Malchik called him that too. But no one had ever explained why.

"And people say I have a problem playing hero at every opportunity," he huffed at Volkova, who very nearly smiled.

"It’s in my blood, I’m afraid."

"How did your parents die? Does it bother you to discuss it?" he asked, trying to get her talking once more.

"My father died trying to kill Le Clair, and my mother killed herself so she would not be taken alive and converted." Volkova would not face him yet.

"I don’t believe all men are prone to use physical violence above all else to solve their problems, and I’ve seen Hermione clock Malfoy, so I know she wouldn’t run from death either," Harry said as Volkova snorted softly. "Besides, wizards and witches could use freezing spells to avoid being
burned at the stake," Harry protested, lifting the box up again. Surely Volkova would not continue to block him out if he talked about the box.

"I don’t mean to upset you," Anna said, "but thousands of innocent men, women, and children were indeed burned for being witches, and they did not survive with freezing spells. There may have been some who managed to survive with spells, but they were the exception, I assure you. I know that no one likes to hear the horrible truth, but fact is fact, and you mustn’t lie to yourself, and you mustn’t let other people lie to you either."

"But it’s one of the first things I learned as a wizard."

"Regardless, it is an untruth, and you must let go of it. Now take a good look at that ossuary."

Volkova finally faced him.

"Yes?"

"That poor unfortunate woman did not survive by using a freezing spell, did she?"

"No."

"Because if she had, she wouldn’t have fit in the box, yes?"

"Yes," Harry agreed softly.

"Do not diminish her death by putting a kind lie over it. She was killed, and what remains of her was trapped inside this box, and has remained there since the time she was killed. Chances are more than likely she was killed by a man or group of men than by a woman or group of women."

"Not necessarily."

"Women ostracize. Men obliterate."

"But why kill her and put her in here?"

"She must have been seen as a threat by those who put her there, a threat they could not end by merely destroying her corporeal body. They put her remains in there, and maybe more than that. Perhaps her spirit, or her soul."

Harry gave the box a small side-to-side shake, and nearly wet his pants. He could hear things, bones and dust and gravel he had to assume, moving around inside. He was sure that flakes of something were landing in his lap.

"Splendid show of human warmth, Harry," Volkova chided him. He held the box upright in his grip once more, hot with humility. "They burn her, and stuff her in there, and now you’re shaking what’s left of her to tiny, crispy bits."

"Sorry."

"You should be."

"You’ve burned people before," he said.

"I’ve burned vampires. It is the one sure way of destroying them."

"You’ve burned people," Harry repeated stubbornly. "There should be no distinction. A living being is a living being."
"Vampires are undead, not living."

"Don't pick nits. They exist. You make them cease to exist."

"If you insist. It seems to be a source of discomfort for you, considering how close you came to being one of them."

"If Severus hadn’t been able to cure me with his Canis Capellum potion, would you have hunted and killed me?" Harry asked. Volkova’s eyes went old with fear and sadness. How long had she been afraid he would ask her this?

"Yes, Master," she answered. "It would have been my unhappy duty. Would you want to continue living like that? A half life in darkness and shadow, banished from the light for all eternity? Never able to see the sunrise? Never able to find true peace in eternal rest. Damned forever."

"Would you want someone to hunt and kill you, if it ever happened to you?"

"Yes, I would," she answered, her voice trembling.

"Would you want me to do it?"

"If I ever found myself on the other side of the light, I would beg you for the mercy of death rather than the torture of half a life."

"Do you believe all vampires feel that way? Couldn’t you ask before you kill them? ‘Would you prefer to die or go on living this way?’"

"I suppose," she said, smiling through tearful eyes.

"If they said yes, there would be no sin in killing them, would there?"

"Harry, you cannot oversimplify the situation like that."

"Have you ever had a vampire ask to be killed?"

"We all have an innate survival instinct. There would be no point to asking if they want to die, because even if they said yes, they would still defend themselves against injury, just as any other human would."

"Have you ever had a vampire ask to be killed?"

"No. Never."

"Did you burn every one that you killed?"

"Yes," she said in a hollow, dead voice.

"Having had experience burning people, you should know what I should find inside here if I manage to open the ossuary."

"The question is if you should you open it. Perhaps whoever stuffed her in there had a good reason."

"Could she have been a dangerous witch put there by other witches, ones who believed in Christianity?"
"She could indeed. I do not know. I think it best you don’t let her out before you know why she was put there. I imagined you might be able to use more devious methods of entry to discover who she is and why she is there. When are you supposed to start your personal lessons with Professor Trelawney?"

"Wednesday afternoon. Tomorrow afternoon."

"During your free time?"

"Yes. Do you want me to use my clairvoyance on this?"

"That was my hope, yes."

"I haven’t been doing so well with that lately. I’ve been wearing Tonks’ shirt for more than a week."

"Have you felt anything from her?"

"I wake up craving burgers and chips. It’s ghastly. I want salt and grease and juicy slabs of meat to sink my teeth into. Sour pickles. Ketchup. Sesame buns. I also keep having these weird flashes of...." Harry went completely pink and stopped talking.

"Of what?" Anna questioned, humor beginning to return to her ashen face.

"It could be totally unrelated," Harry delayed.

"But?"

"I keep seeing these guys in black leather, with lots of tattoos, and those piercings in sensitive places."

Volkova laughed kindly, but not at him, Harry was relieved to note. She handed him up another bottle.

"Maybe Miss Tonks joined a heavy metal music band. Are you trying to get a reading on the octonarium?" she asked when Harry’s hand didn’t appear to accept the bottle.

"Yes," he whispered. "Maybe it belongs to Remy."

"Or any of the other Dark Arts instructors. Or anyone else who was living in my rooms before me. Or anyone looking for a place to hide objects they didn’t want prying people to find."

"It seems to have a determined locking spell on it."

"Those runes have been repeated over one another to give the spell more durability," she said.

"What if we altered the runes?"

"Someone else has already tried, haven’t they?"

"Are there holes in here?" Harry asked, lifting the box again and giving it a small shake. "There’s grit on my clothes."

"Would you please stop shaking that poor soul?" Volkova chided him.

"Would I feel more if I took off these gloves?" he asked.
"Never mind the ossuary for now. Don’t take off your gloves."

"Why not now? You’re laughing. I can hear you," he said, peeking over the shelf again to find her below with a chuckle on her face.

"I’m glad I have piqued your curiosity, but forget the ossuary for now."

"What’s so funny?"

"I was pondering all the baleful events that have occurred in my life since I’ve made your acquaintance, Mr. Potter."

"Well, it wasn’t a bed of roses before you met me either."

"No, but my misfortunes have increased rather exponentially in the past few month. My grandfather was killed by my mortal enemy. I lost and recovered my most precious heirloom. I got this wicked scar on my face from my previously-mentioned mortal enemy. Luckily beauty was never my foremost attribute."

"There are those who would beg to differ," Harry rumbled flirtatiously. Volkova gave him a dirty look, and he wanted to hide from her. No wonder Draco spent more time hiding in the closet with his fantasies about Volkova than trying to actually work his renowned family charm on the Dark Arts professor.

"You clearly need new glasses. You broke my elbow with a bed frame. I snapped my ankle and broke six bones in my foot falling through your roof. I walked around seeing spots for several days when you nearly blinded me with an accidental biting light spell. I got the corner of a desk in my left thigh and nearly broke my knee. I came within inches of getting kidnapped by Death Eaters. I’m sure that would have been loads of fun. I can’t help but wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"If you are going to wind up in a box someday."

Harry protested with a snick of humor and fury.

"Bad luck seems to follow you," she told him frankly. "I’m afraid if you open that box near me, and it’s liable to be a portal to a place filled with venomous snakes or scorpions or something. Ten thousand roving fancies. Whatever. You broadcast bad luck wherever you go."

"Is it possible to broadcast a dark curse?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Have you considered seeing an exorcist?"

Harry stared at her for a second or two before commenting, "I’m seeing an exorcist now, am I not?"

"I do on occasion dabble that direction," she admitted. "Strictly off the record."

"I’m glad to know that you don’t go around sprinkling holy water on everyone you meet," he said pointedly, fingering the burn mark on the palm of his hand.

"I had to know the seriousness of your condition," she said in a business fashion.

"So you could decide whether or not you had to put a stake through me?"
"Yes. I could not take the chance."

"Chance of what? That I might like to go on living even as a vampire?"

"The power you might be able to amass in one human life time will be daunting enough, Mr. Potter. The power you would be able to contain and control in a vampire’s lifetime would make you much too dangerous to allow."

Harry blinked at her, and she clasped and unclasped bottles, moving them around again nervously. What the fuck was she talking about? Too dangerous to allow?

"Have you been sent to kill me if I get out of control?"

"The topic did come up," she admitted.

"Did you know that Le Clair was going to bite me?"

"I knew there was the possibility that you would be bitten, not that it would be by Le Clair."

"How did you know?"

"Because the elders gave me this task, and I am never sent on a task unless there is a vampire around. Why else would they need a vampire killer if not for a vampire?"

"Very judicious of them to send you of all their vampire killers. You could kill either Le Clair or me, depending on the situation."

"The elders are a clever lot."

"Did they ask you to try to exorcize me?"

"No. I dare say they would pale at the very idea of me driving out your demons."

"Why?"

"I was possessed once myself. It makes me vulnerable to repossession."

"You were what?" Harry gasped.

"A tale for another time," she shook her head, waving her hand at him to keep him from asking more.

"Who possessed you?"

"Harry, let it go."

"How did they get inside you?"

"It’s embarrassing. I can’t believe I could have been so dim-witted."

"What did you do?"

"I opened an object that belonged to him, and read the chant that was printed inside. I should have known better. What was I thinking?"

"Him? You were possessed by a man?"
"I was."

"Who?"

She smiled, and Harry suddenly knew.

"Your mummy!" he exclaimed. "That’s why you don’t want to be parted from him!"

"Very good, Mr. Potter."

"Has the thingee you ordered arrived yet?"

"The thingee?" She made a disdainful face.

"Coffin?" Harry corrected himself.

"I did not order a coffin. I ordered a sarcophagus. These are two entirely different creatures, Mr. Potter. No, it has not yet arrived. The particular model I want is on back order. If a similar thingee comes in, Ahmed assured me he would send it along rapidemment."

"That must have been confusing," Harry said, remembering the short amount of time he had spent in the female form of his ancestor in common with Malfoy, Marie de Boniface. He had weird dreams about it now and again.

"You have no idea," she mumbled. "When I mentioned an exorcist, I meant a professional though. A practicing professional with years of experience who isn’t angry with God and the Church."

"Why do I need an exorcist? I already see a witch doctor," Harry mused, thinking briefly of his last visit to see Doctor Mesarik, Snape’s cousin. He had walked into her office to find her listening to the witch wireless broadcast of the children’s hour. She had been dancing around in circles with her son in her arms, performing various small spells that made her ears bigger, her nose bigger, her eyes bigger in turn. Mordred hadn’t been sure if he should laugh or cry, and Harry’s entrance had made up his mind. He laughed and clapped loudly when the Doctor handed him to Harry. She went on doing the enlargement spells in time with the music on the radio. Harry finally understood that the song was meant to teach body parts to small children. He wondered if he had ever heard the song when he was a baby, and had left Doctor Mesarik’s office that day feeling hungry for such motherly attentions.

"Give it some consideration," Volkova said, interrupting Harry’s line of thought.

"So...the exorcist was able to get that guy out of you, wasn’t he?"

"Yes. End of story," she stressed.

"If this box, this octonarium, is Remy’s, it might be very helpful in finding him," Harry thought out loud.

"Do you sense anything about him from it?"

"No, which is odd, because when I hold his things, like his cloak brooch, I see sand and water and the ocean."

"That doesn’t make any sense," Volkova shook her head. "Is it always the same view? The sand, water and ocean."

"It’s the same beach. The palm trees are pretty familiar by this point. Day or night. I can’t bear the
idea of how many fish I’ve eaten. Funny thing is, the sky isn’t filled with our stars. It’s sorta nice

"What color is the ocean?"

"Blue," Harry shrugged.


"Blue," Harry shrugged again. Volkova rolled her eyes at him.

"It doesn’t make any sense," she repeated. "If we could find Miss Tonks, she might be of some help in finding Mr. Lupin."

"Maybe. But have you any idea how many McDonalds there are world-wide?"

"Hundreds of them?"

"More than you can imagine."

"Next time you’re craving these salty fries and greasy burgers, look around you."

"What? Why?"

"See what you can sense about her surroundings. Are there are posters or advertisements? See if you can read them. Is she in the UK at all?"

"I don’t follow."

"Or instead of concentrating on the burgers and fries, you could concentrate on the guys in leather. Do you recognize them?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "But she apparently is very fond of them."

"What makes you say that?" Volkova asked. Harry blinked at her and went livid with embarrassment. Volkova waited, then went on without his input. "Is she physically attracted to them?" she asked.

"I guess that’s what I feel. I’m not sure."

"You sense what she feels as a woman, not as yourself, a man?"

"Yes. After being a woman very briefly with that...cursed locket of Malfoy’s....I’m all confused about what it must be like to be a woman all the time. But that’s probably what’s going on. What’s it like when you’re attracted to someone? How do you feel? Where do you feel it? Is that too personal a question to ask?"

Harry got a sudden mental image of Draco Malfoy, lying on Volkova’s bed in her room, touching himself as she sat on the edge of the bed and watched him. Through Volkova’s eyes, Draco looked altogether flustered and beautiful, all glowing pale skin except for his flushed face and purplish cock. Harry bolted back from the edge of the shelf and away from her as she approached.

"What did you see?" Anna asked, worry in her voice.

"Nothing," Harry shivered, appearing once more. He shook off frightening remembrances of
Lucius Malfoy’s flushed face and his gloating grin above him.

"Are you all right?" Volkova worried.

"Fine, okay?" Harry barked.

"Okay. It occurs to me that it’s likely Mr. Lupin is not in the UK," she continued, walking past his anger and fear as not to embarrass him.

"Why?"

"Does the beach look like anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere you’ve seen?"

"No. The stars are different. But I haven’t seen much beyond Hogwarts, to be honest with you."

"Consult your Astronomy text. I’m sure it has both the Northern and Southern hemisphere night skies," she commented. "Rotate the pages until you find a familiar view. You really must learn to take your brain out for exercise now and again."

"Oh, brother," Harry muttered.

"What?"

"Here," he said, giving her back the wooden box.

"What’s wrong?"

"I’m craving those nasty burgers again, and I can smell smoke and fire," Harry scowled. "It’s because of Tonks’ tee shirt. She must be burning something on the grill at work."

"You’d better stick to one missing person at a time," Volkova agreed. "I’ll put the octonarium down here for you to take with you when you leave."
Odd Jobs

Chapter Summary

In which Harry ponders his plans for the upcoming summer

The note; the damned note, the cursed note, the annoying, pestering, festering, irritating note; had returned again to the Odd Jobs Board.

Conscientious Gryffindor seeks summer position. Has experience cooking and cleaning, doing light yard work, and pet-sitting. Also has basic spelling skills. Is willing to learn if special skills are required for the right position. Contact Hogwarts School, c/o Professor Minerva McGonagall, Student #7.

Severus Snape took a deep breath, reached for the note, and yanked it off with such force that the adhesive spell attached the note to his collar. He calmly removed the note from his collar, wrinkled it up, and crammed it as far into his many-buttoned overcoat pocket as possible.

His frustration wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t seen the same notice printed in the Daily Prophet and in the Quibbler both. He imagined that the Odd Jobs Board was mirrored to appear at the Leaky Cauldron and the Three Broomsticks as well. That’s what McGonagall had done last time she had the board up. Sweet Merlin! Why bother with anonymity? Why didn’t the boy put up a notice that read in bold letters: "Harry Potter Seeks Ghastly Death!"?

Severus stormed his way through the corridors of the school, scaring students by muttering and growling under breath. By the time he reached McGonagall’s office, he had his speech worked down to four words. He knocked, and Minerva called ‘enter’. Severus stepped inside, closed the door, and faced her. He thrust the wrinkled piece of paper onto her desk and growled menacingly.

"Stop this, right now."

Minerva adjusted her glasses, picked up the note, and smoothed it out flat.

"What seems to be the problem, Professor Snape?"

"Are you trying to get Mr. Potter killed? Kidnapped? Tortured? Locked in a basement somewhere we’ll never find him again?" Snape hissed.

"What makes you so sure Student #7 is Mr. Potter?" Minerva asked, ever calm. Severus wanted to bite her nose off.

"He misspelled ‘conscientious’ the same way on his last Potions essay, and I recognized the handwriting, and 7 is his quidditch number."

"Harry has as much right to seek gainful summer employment experience as any of our other students do, particularly considering that his aunt has yet to withdraw her vow that he will never return to Privet as long as she lives there."

"You put another note up, and I’ll take it down too. I mean it. I will."
'Severus, it is not your decision what goes on the Odd Jobs Board. It’s my decision. The only way Harry’s notice will come down from the board and out of the papers is if someone hires him."

"Fine. I’ll hire him."

"For real, gainful experience, not to have him around to look at."

"All right!"

"Or to yell at."

"I’ll hire him. Where’s the paperwork?"

"Hire him to do what?"

"I don’t know. I figure that out before summer."

"Write me a small description of a legitimate position you’re willing to offer Mr. Potter, and he and I will review it together. If he chooses the position as one he is interested in, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, please put this notice back on the Odd Jobs Board."

"I can’t write a description. He’ll recognize my handwriting and refuse to accept charity from me. I know that’s why he didn’t discuss this with me in the first place."

"Perhaps if he felt he wasn’t making a burden of himself."

"He’s not a burden to me, not at all."

"Severus, I don’t have time for this. If you want to see the notice come down, offer him a legitimate job based on his skills listed in the note. Buy a pet. Buy a garden. Buy a Venus Fly Trap, and you’ll have both," Minerva laughed to herself.

"How very droll you are today."

"Severus, quit annoying me. And keep your meat hooks off my notice board."

McGonagall pointed towards the door and went back to grading essays. Snape collected himself and stalked back out of the room. By the time the Potions Master returned to the Odd Jobs Board, classes had let out. Students had filled the hallways and were milling around. As he approached the board, Snape recognized the scarlet red and raven black heads closest to the large rectangle.

"It’s gone again," Harry exclaimed, crossing his arms over his chest. "That’s the third time!"

"Did you put a tracking spell on the paper?" Ron asked. Snape wrinkled up the note and stuffed it back in his jacket.

"No," Harry sighed. "There wasn’t enough time. Professor McGonagall made me rewrite it over and over. ‘List your practical experience’, she said. ‘I don’t believe there’s much demand for wizards who can cook and clean and pet-sit’."

"Perhaps you should have listed your real world experience," Ron suggested.

"Like what?"

"Experience battling trolls, dragons, acromantulas, mermen, dementors, vampires; not to mention the whole vanquishing Voldemort thing."
"That would make the selection process so anonymous."

"Do you want a job or not? If I don’t find a job, I’ll be stuck with Mum and Ginny all summer. We’ve got to find something."

"The whole vanquishing Voldemort thing isn’t a done deal yet, obviously."

"You don’t think other people lie about their qualifications?" Ron laughed.

"Don’t you two have classes to attend this afternoon?" Snape murmured as he ushered the groups of students away and planted himself behind Ron and Harry. Weasley looked angrily over one shoulder at Snape. Potter spun around. Severus chastised himself, noting again that Harry did not like having people standing behind him. One could hardly blame the boy. Severus well remembered healing the bruises caused by Lucius's dagger, knees, and fists.

"Muggle Studies," Ron said. Snape pointed away to his right, and Weasley frowned at him. "Bye, Harry. See you at dinner."

Harry waved bye as Ron shouldered his bag and took off. Snape waited until Ron was gone before drawing the note out of thin air. He made a spectacle of straightening the edges, before putting it in Harry’s hands.

"I knew it was you," Harry grumped.

"Basic spelling skills indeed," Severus replied. "Apparently your abilities as a speller are exceeded only by your skills as a grammarian. There’s hardly a complete sentence in the whole thing."

"What? I meant my wizarding abilities."

"'Illiterate Gryffindor seeks ghastly death at the hands of an unknown assailant. Skills include being a human house-elf.' You misprinted conscientious, Mr. Potter."

"I did not."

"C-o-n-s-c-i-e-n-t-i-o-u-s. Latin, with a sense of being self aware, which is something of a stretch for you certain days, isn't it?"

"Oh." It was a very tiny voice. Harry made a sour face and shoved the notice in his pocket. "I’ll reprint it. Again."

"Don’t let me stand in your way of pain and death."

"I’m looking for a summer position."

"You should have come to me."

"I would like to get a job based on my own abilities, and not based on the favors of my friends. I want to earn a position on the strength my own merits. I’ve got prospects!"

"Mr. Potter, the position you receive may prove to be flat on your back, six feet under fucking sod."

"Fucking sod indeed," Harry responded, tucking himself back against the wall beside the Odd Jobs Board. A dark storm brewed in his eyes and worked its way down to his mouth and chin.

"I’m sure I can find something to do to keep you occupied. The Headmaster would be happy to
amuse you as well," Severus offered.

"I don’t want to be amused. I want to do something meaningful with my time."

"We’ll find you something to do around the school."

"I don’t want to be your charity case," Harry sulked.

"It’s barely mid-January. There’s many months before summer. Surely gainful employment will arise before that time. Why are you in such a foul mood?"

"I’m sorry. Did you reserve the Foul Mood Lounge today for a private sulk?"

"Yes. I have the master key. What’s your problem, Mr. Potter?"

"Did the Headmaster tell you about my owl from the Board of Governors at St. Mungo’s?" Harry asked.

"No. He did not."

"They said, in short, that because of my age and because I’m still in school, I cannot be on the board. Of course they’re going to accept the money— that part hasn’t changed."

"I knew they’d find a way out of that part of the agreement. Did I mention that at least five of the twelve people on the board are Slytherins?"

"Why am I not surprised? As soon as I’ve left school, I’ll be able to take a position on the board, but until that time, I have to appoint an adult who will act in my place."

"Ah, provided first that you survive being in school?"

"You aren’t interested, are you?"

"No, I have no desire to dip my toes in that tank of sharks. But thank you for considering me."

"The Headmaster said you would refuse. If Remy were here, he’d be terrific."

"You need someone with a sense of how to manage money, how to get what you need without being extravagant, and someone with your best interests at heart."

"Oh," Harry said again, but a light had gone off in his head. His eyes brightened, and he was smiling again. "I need to find Hedwig after class."

"Problem solved," Snape shrugged. "All that snapping at me for nothing. Aren’t you terribly sorry?"

"No, problem not solved. They also expect me to take part in a charity auction in mid-February."

"Why is that a problem? You can arrange things with the Headmaster if you need time off school. It won’t be any trouble."

"It’s a charity auction."

"Yes."

"A Valentine charity auction," Harry said, narrowing his eyes.
"What’s your bloody point?" Snape bellowed.

"The Board of Governors seems to think it would raise a great deal of money if they auction off a romantic valentine dinner with me, and they're trying to persuade me to consider doing this, in the name of charity," Harry mumbled. Snape’s gulping, horrified expression said it all. Harry fought a dark smile at his fish impression. "Rather my opinion too," he huffed.

"Have they no shame?" Severus whispered. "No decency?"

"Advertisements will hit the Daily Prophet the first of February. That’s sure to cause a sensation," Harry growled.

"Put it out of your mind. I will talk to the Headmaster and stop this nonsense. Your sessions with Professor Trelawney begin today, do they not?" Severus asked.

"Yes. May I come to your office after detention with Professor Volkova?" Harry pleaded.

"Yes, you may. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about your last Potions essay as it is. It bears more than a striking resemblance to the one that Mr. Weasley gave me."

"Great minds think alike," Harry smiled fetchingly.

"They misspell the same words as well, it would appear. You know how I frown on co-mingled homework assignments, Mr. Potter."

Harry tried another smile, deciding words would get him in worse trouble.

"You needn’t ask permission to come to my office. You know my door is open to you," Severus said, ignoring Potter’s blatant attempts to look innocent and harmless.

"Yes, but I didn’t want you to feel I was taking advantage of you. Asking permission first seemed more appropriate. You’ve said, repeatedly, that we should maintain a proper professor/student relationship."

Snape found himself beginning to smile and tried too late to stifle the impulse. Harry dropped his eyes, raised them, and dropped them once more. The young man was turning pink from his neck to his cheekbones, and clear into his forehead. In short, he was mortified. Harry crept into Snape’s quarters on a regular basis through the secret lab door, curling up in the only place of comfort opened to him. Severus could at anytime change the wards that allowed Harry to slip through the secret lab and into his bedroom, but he never would. He fought to put away the smirking smile that was making Harry blush. He had grown to enjoy these nights too damned well to jeopardize their continuation. It wouldn't do to taunt Harry with his obvious hypocrisy. Although, it was nice to see a Gryffindor with such glaring faults. It did Severus’s heart well.

"I will see you later. You should go now though. Professor Trelawney is expecting you," Severus murmured in the most business-like fashion he could manage. Harry nodded to him, and hurried away.

As Snape turned to watch him go, he caught a blur of blond and green vanish behind the closest hallway intersection. He wasn’t sure if it had been Draco or Volkova, but it was one of the two. There was no point in taking chances. Severus followed discretely behind Harry to make certain he reached the Astronomy Tower unmolested. There was no sign of the other pursuant anywhere along the path.
"It’s not fair."
"I’ll say."
"It’s unnatural."
"I couldn’t agree more."
"Something ought to be done."
"Yeah, but what?"

"What are you two muttering about?" Hermione said as she threw herself down onto the bench for dinner. Her books scattered under the table, landing with a series of thuds.

"You, wearing those," Ron said, pointing at her legs.

"What? You’ve never seen a pair of trousers in your life, have you?" Hermione replied. "Professor Dumbledore made it official this afternoon. Mine arrived by owl and were waiting in the dorms. I didn't see any reason to wait to put them on."

"It’s not natural," Ron replied moodily.

"Ron, shut up and eat your carrots," Hermione said, spooning food onto her plate.

"I’m not sure I’m going to ever eat carrots again. You don’t know whose cunny they’ve been up, do you?" Weasley murmured.

"Ronald!" Hermione exclaimed.

"It’s a fad," Seamus said, sitting back up in his own place and laughing along with Ron. "They’ll get tired of the pants and go back to skirts."

"Will we?" Hermione smirked. "Where’s Harry?"

"He’ll be along. It upsets the natural order of things," Ron said. "Oh no! Not you too!"

Ginny sat down next to Hermione, and grinned at her brother.

"What?"

"Why are you wearing those?!"

"Stop bossing me around, Ron!"
"I'm protecting you!"

"You're right, Hermione," Ginny scowled at her brother. "It is about controlling us. How we move. Which staircases we take in the school. And it's not as if no one has seen me in trousers before. I wear them for Quidditch."

"Yes, but that's Quidditch," Ron replied. "I can't believe you, Hermione. You're being a bad influence on my impressionable little sister. Did you order those for her?"

"No," Ginny remarked back at Ron. "Mother picked them out for me."

"They're...they're....Harry, you'll back me up. They're wearing trousers. Make them take them off," Ron complained when Potter finally arrived the table. Harry set down his bag, put his bottom on the bench, and stared blankly at Ron.

"Whose pants am I taking off?"

"Hermione and Ginny."

Harry tentatively studied his female friends, and they both gave him very challenging looks. Ginny even stuck out her tongue at him.

"I'd rather mud-wrestle a vat of electric eels," Harry said as he faced Ron again.

"I don't know if you've noticed, Ron, but a lot more girls than that are wearing them," Seamus said. "Harry will be very busy taking off a good many pairs of pants."

"You don't approve either, do you?" Ron asked Harry.

"Do you really want to know what I think?" Harry asked, picking up a fork to take a bite of food. He stared at his plate and second-guessed the carrots as well.

"No," Ron decided, frowning. Harry shrugged one shoulder.

"We care what you think," Hermione said, and Ginny nodded.

"It doesn't matter whether you wear pants or skirts. It's really pretty damned irrelevant. But if it makes you happy, you should wear what you like."

"This coming from the guy who won't wear matching socks," Ron teased. "It's just not right," he added.

"Let it go, Ron," Harry murmured.

"He's annoyed he won't be able to look up skirts in the hallways anymore," Ginny muttered from her place. Hermione nodded in agreement, and together they talked among themselves. Harry leaned his weight against the table and stood up again.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked.

"Forgot one of my books in the library. Be right back."

"I'll go with you," Ron said, standing up as well.

"I do know where the library is," Harry said.
"Yes, but knowing you, there’s twelve Death Eaters and a rabid werewolf ready to greet you when you arrive. Come on. I want to get back to eat," Ron laughed.

Harry trudged through the corridors with Ron by his side, hardly saying a word. Finally unable to ignore Harry’s mood, Ron spoke up again.

"Sorry about the werewolf comment."

"Why? Remy’s not rabid."

"What book did you forget?"

"Just a book," Harry hedged, his voice rising.

"How were the lessons with Trelawney?"

"Interesting. Exhausting."

"Are you still wearing Tonks’ shirt?"

"Yeah," Harry said, pulling his uniform shirt aside to show a hint of purple underneath.

"Are you aware you’re carrying a dinner fork?" Ron asked. Harry lifted his hand and stared at the fork.

"Yes. Quite aware. Thank you."

"Did Trelawney teach you to open your inner eye?" Ron asked.

"No. Today was mostly about how to turn your clairvoyance on and off to conserve physical energy. What’s worse, I found out that I’m not her only pupil for these lessons."

"Who else was there?"

"Luna."

"Was she good?"

"Way better than me. It was embarrassing. She’s a natural at it. I’m a snail. She’s a butterfly."

"How do you turn the clairvoyance on and off?"

"In theory, you imagine a container for the magic. When you want to use it, you unlock the container and get the magic out."


"I couldn’t keep the box right in my head."

"How hard could it be? Clear your mind, and picture a box."

"It’s not that easy. First of all, you can’t clear your mind. You tell someone to clear their mind, and they’ll automatically concentrate on something. It’s better if you tell them to see what you want them to concentrate on. It’s supposed to be easier."

"What was wrong with your box?" Ron asked. Harry paused mid-step, going back and forth between two shelves. He spun left, and right, and left again before blurting a soft explicative.
"It’s gone," he declared, tossing the fork down on the library table. Ron looked puzzled. "My box wouldn’t stay the same. A trunk of wood. A cardboard box. A crate of slates. A cage with golden wires. Every time I tried to open it, it changed shape and jumped away from me."

"Why not picture a box you already know instead of an imaginary box?"

"I don’t know if that will work. Who took my book?"

"Maybe Mrs. Pince knows," Ron suggested.

Harry made his way up to the front counter. The witch behind the many piles of books stood up and came over to talk with him.

"I left a book in here a few minutes ago. I don’t suppose you saw anyone with it?" Harry hoped.

"You’d have to be specific about which book," she replied, annoyed at being interrupted. "I don’t recognize them on sight."

"Blue velvet, about this big," Harry said, holding his hands slightly apart.

"What’s the subject matter?"

"It doesn't have a title. It’s not a library book. It’s my own book," Harry said.

"I’m sorry but I can’t help you."

"I’ll go back and look again," Harry said, tugging Ron by the sleeve. They returned to the same space, and Harry situated Ron between the two rows of shelves, facing outward. Harry hid behind Ron, who turned around.

"What are you doing?" Weasley asked, grinning. Harry paced back and forth after he made Ron face front again.

"Keep an eye out, and don’t turn around," Harry muttered. Ron turned his head slightly left, and watched Harry pull out one chair at the table between the two shelves. Harry sat down, put both hands on top of the table. Potter took a deep breath, and another. He shut his eyes in concentration, and Ron saw every muscle in Harry’s body tighten. There was a peculiar inhaling sound that wasn’t coming from either of them. Harry’s dinner fork started to levitate off the table. Ron spun around, mouth open, when a reddish portal opened under Harry’s hands. The blue velvet book dropped onto the table. The portal closed up with a wink of red light. The fork was gone.

"Bloody hell!" Weasley exclaimed.

"SSSSSHHHHHHH!!!” Mrs. Pince chided from the front of the library.
Blue Book

Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Hermione discuss her strange Christmas present

"You missed all the excitement," Hermione said when Harry and Ron returned to the dinner table.

"I doubt it," Ron commented. Harry roughly nudged his shoulder.

"Draco was passing around this book at the Slytherin table, and it vanished into thin air," Ginny whispered. Ron looked accusingly at Harry, who took a drink from his goblet and pretended not to notice Ron's intense expression.

"Not only that, he suddenly had a fork stuck in his hand," Hermione said.

"In his hand!?" Ron asked excitedly.

"In his hand, not through his hand, alas," Hermione sighed.

"Rotten luck." Ron clicked his fingers in a snap.

"Malfoy keeps staring over here," Neville interjected. "Have I got a sign on my back?"

"No," Ron assured Longbottom. "You want to tell me about that book?" he asked Harry. Potter gave a cautious grin.

"No."

"How long have you been able to do that?"

"Do what?" Harry shrugged. "I didn’t do nothing."

"The book Draco had? Was it blue and small?" Ron asked Hermione.

"How’d you know?" Granger wondered. Ron continued to stare at Harry, and Hermione watched them shrewdly. Another thought suddenly careened through her head, competing for her attention. Hermione took a deep breath as her eyes shot open wide.

"It’s the book you gave me for Christmas," Harry said to her, seeing how alarmed she had become. "That’s why I had to go back for it. Didn’t want to leave it lying around for prying eyes."

"Blue....book....Christmas??" Hermione stammered, going redder by the second.

"It’s a very good read," Harry offered timidly.

"Blue?" Hermione said, clearing her throat. "You’re sure?"

"I’m sure," Ron said, wondering what the heck was going on.

"Thought I lost it at home, thought, um, Harry, can I talk to you in private?" Hermione asked,
jumping up from the table and putting a hand on his arm.

"You didn’t mean to give me that book. I know," he laughed, staring up at her. "You meant to give it to Tonks. You don’t want it back, do you? I rather like it."

"No, if you like it....you can....I didn’t mean to give you that particular book. I thought....could we....?" She pointed out into the hallway. Harry heaved a sigh, picked up a chicken leg, and followed her.

"Hermione, it’s no big deal. I already knew you were pervy," he was heard to say as they walked away. Hermione tugged him along faster. Ron leaned close to Neville and started to whisper to him, and missed Draco leaving the Slytherin table.

"Hermione, it’s no big deal," Harry repeated once they were in the area outside of the Great Hall.

"Harry, I hope I haven’t given you a bad impression. I don’t know what to say. Those stories weren’t meant for general consumption. They were supposed to be between Tonks and I, just for....for fun....oh, Merlin. What you must think of me." She covered her face with both hands.

"What’s to say? I like the stories. I have to admit that the one about the girl who wears underwear made of ferret skins was a bit disturbing, suggesting perhaps you might secretly want to put Malfoy where that underwear was, but hey, who am I to say? Can I write one too?"

Hermione uncovered one eye, shooting him a surprised look. She pulled both hands away, and glared, clearly affronted.

"Apparently you skipped over the part where the girl hunts, kills, and skins the ferrets."

"No, I didn’t miss that part. Quite graphic, thank you. It remains you put him in your underwear though," he smiled, staring at her knees. She continued to stare in silence. Harry started to go back into the dining hall.

"How did you do it, Potter?" Draco said, emerging from the doorway. Harry stood where he was, and Hermione went for her wand.

"It’s not nice to take things that don’t belong to you," Harry said to Draco.

"How did you apparate something inside Hogwarts?" Draco persisted, angry and annoyed and embarrassed.

"Me?" Harry pretended innocence.

"It’s not allowed. It’s not possible."

"Clearly it is possible," Harry replied with a deviant smile. "You are living proof, mi amigo."

"It’s not possible" Draco growled.

"Are you looking for another trip to Argentina?" Harry asked.

"Is there a problem, children?"

Professor Dumbledore was descending the stairs, followed by Hedwig. She circled in the air and dropped down to Harry’s shoulder.

"No, sir. No problem," Harry said, standing aside to let the Headmaster pass into dinner.
Dumbledore stopped and smiled at Draco.

"You’re certain there’s nothing wrong, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco stared down at his FASTing button. The letters were glowing orange.

"Everything is fine," Draco answered. The letters went red. "Sir."


Malfoy seethed rapidly for several seconds, and the colors went from red to orange. He seethed faster, and they went yellow. He breathed deeply and slowly, in and out, once, again, and again, and the colors went green. Harry had the sudden urge to do something rude and overt to drive Draco’s temper through the roof, just to see what would happen if the colors went red for too long. Would Draco burst into flames? Would he unleash some terrible spell on himself?? Professor Dumbledore must have suspected what Harry was considering. He patted Draco on the shoulder, and gave Harry a look that said to behave or else.

"That’s it. Relax. Mr. Potter, how’s the chicken?" Dumbledore asked Harry, who was holding onto the drumstick from his dinner plate. Hermione took the opportunity to put her wand away, but not without the Headmaster seeing her do so.

"Highly recommended," Harry answered, taking a bite. Hedwig nosed her way along his cheek, and snatched a bite of meat as well. From her leg was dangling a scroll signed ‘Molly Weasley’.

"We’ll talk about the book later," Hermione promised Harry, taking his arm and escorting him back into the Great Hall. Draco stormed back to his place, grabbed his bag, and hurried away. Dumbledore watched him with great concern and sadness in his eyes.

"Why is Ron’s mum writing to you?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, that?" Harry said, holding the drumstick in his teeth and taking off the note. He popped it open. It had a short message which Hermione read over his shoulder.

‘Dear Harry- I’d love to do it! What a treat! I signed your note and sent it on by owl. Say hello to the children for me. -Love, from Mrs. Weasley’

"What’s that all about?" Hermione asked. Harry pulled the chicken leg out of his mouth and crammed the note into his pocket.

"You’ve found me out. I’m having an affair with Ron’s mum."

"Of course you are. I can keep a secret, you know."

"So can I," Harry grinned. Hedwig snatched the leg and flew away. Harry watched her as she raced out of the room. "Why do all the women in my life feel a need to boss me around and mother me?"

"You have chicken crumbs on your face," Hermione replied, sitting back down on the bench.
"Good morning, class," Professor Volkova said as she closed the door to the storeroom and made her way to her desk. Lying across the long surface was the mummy that Madam Pomfrey had taken so long putting back together. All his limbs appeared to be in their proper locations, and the linen bandages looked firmly taut across what was left of him. Harry had been staring at it for several minutes, wondering if he might be able to discern something about the man by touching his remains. It was the touching of the remains that Harry felt squeamish about. What happened if he remembered something terrible and painful, or worse than that? What had Volkova done while possessed by this man?

"Good morning, Professor Volkova," the students chorused.

"Mr. Potter, where is your desk-mate?" Volkova asked. She stopped in front of Harry, getting in his visual line of sight with the mummy, and derailing his thoughts.

"I don’t know, Professor. Bottom of a dark hole?"

"I hope we don’t find him unwell. I’ve heard there’s a nasty flu going around. Very well. Mr. Longbottom, it’s your turn today. Bring your orb and come to the front of the class."

Neville dug in his bag and brought out the glass orb that everyone else had either in their hands, on their desktop like a large marble, or in their bags as well. Longbottom’s orb went a pale green as he made his way to Volkova’s desk. She produced her everyday wand with a pop of magic. She levitated the mummy out of the way, and leaned him upright gingerly against the blackboard.

"Have you made any progress with your assignment?" Volkova asked Neville, motioning for him to come stand with her.

"No, ma’am."

"Come now. It’s been three weeks. Have none of you made any progress?"

Heads around the room ducked from sight as she searched around. Even Harry looked sheepish and avoided eye contact.

"This is very depressing. My other class of sixth years hasn’t done any better. I have had one student succeed with this assignment. One."

Everyone started at Harry, who darted glances back at them.

"Not me," he blurted.

"All you have to do is figure out how to break the orbs," Volkova said. "You began with the usual attempts, I’m sure?"
She held out her hand and Neville gave her his orb. It went a cold blue in her hands. She tossed it lightly in her left grip. Neville reached for it, and it went green again. Neville dropped the orb and it landed on Hermione’s foot.

"OUCH!" Granger screamed, ducking down. She picked it up off the floor and glared at him. The orb went scarlet in Hermione’s grip. Volkova motioned for Hermione to toss it to her. Granger gave the orb a gentle pitch, and it landed in Volkova’s hand. The scarlet faded to cold blue once more.

"Tried that already," Neville said. "Not the bit about whacking Hermione with it, but all the same."

"Probably that’s safer for Miss Granger. Had your orb broken, I’m sure everyone would have been quick to smack her in the foot too."

"What do the colors mean?" Harry asked, putting his on the desk. It remained clear while on the desktop, but when he picked it up, it went dark purple. He scooted it around between his hands, and whenever his fingers would touch the orb, swirls of purple would appear and disappear in the clear center of the orb.

"I’m afraid that’s part of the assignment, and I can’t tell you," Volkova replied.

"It gauges the strength of our magic?" Hermione asked.

"No," Volkova decided after a small pause, squinting as if worried she was giving something crucial away.

"I tried throwing it. I tried sitting on it. I tried boiling it in my cauldron in Potions," Neville reported, accepting his orb back from the professor.

"You sat on it?" Ron laughed. Neville shrugged and nodded.

"They are not eggs. No matter how long you sit on them, they won’t hatch," Volkova smiled, patting Neville’s shoulder.

"It’s non-breakable glass," Neville said. "It reminds me of Gran’s rememberall."

"I promise you that the orbs are breakable. There is a trick to it, and your assignment is to learn the trick," she said. "Take your seat and we’ll go over the assignment again."

Neville went back to his place as Volkova went to her desk. She opened her desk drawer and withdrew her orb. When she went to let go of her drawer handle, the drawer remained attached to her fingers. She made a very strange face, as if not believing what she was seeing. Then her eyes went half-closed, and she frowned with distaste.

"How very clever," she said dully. "Mr. Potter, some assistance, if you please."

Harry got out of his chair, watching in amazement as she pocketed her orb in her robes. She calmly picked all the articles out of the drawer and placed them in the chair seat.

"What’s wrong?" he asked.

"It seems someone is running loose with a contraband vial of Stilla Statua."

"Ma’am?"

"Would you be so kind as to bring Professor Snape?"
"What’s wrong?” Harry asked. In response, Volkova held up her hand, which was firmly attached to the drawer handle although she wasn’t physically gripping the handle, only touching it with her fingertips.

"Let us hope this has nothing to do with the absence of Mr. Malfoy,” she said, glaring at Draco’s empty seat. She gripped the handle with her fingers. The drawer shivered, and transfigured into a sizeable stick.

"I could—” Harry began.

"On second thought, Mr. Potter, you remain here, and I’ll go find Professor Snape. Perhaps I will be lucky enough to find Mr. Malfoy instead. You all will remain in your seats, pondering your assignments, or you will keep yourselves otherwise constructively occupied,” Volkova ordered, giving the class a surveying glance that spoke of much danger should any unwise souls decide to disobey the edict.

Volkova had been gone ten minutes before the first pair of feet began walking around the room. Harry glanced up from his textbook to find Ron walking around the mummy, his eyes eager and curious.

"I wouldn’t do that if I were you," Harry said when Ron reached for a loose piece of wrapping on the mummy’s left arm. "She’s fond of him."

"Ron, you really shouldn’t do that," Hermione called out.

"Who do you suppose he is?” Ron asked, letting go of the linen. "Harry, when you say she’s fond of him, what do you mean?"

"I mean she’s likely to hurt you if you even touch him," Harry replied.

"She’s waiting for a sarcophagus to arrive. I saw her send the order off by owl several weeks ago," Hermione said. "It went to the Egyptorium in downtown Cairo."

"The one she wanted is on back-order,” Harry replied.

"You’re supposed to be in your seat," Neville said.

"Yeah, Weasley. Do you want to see another eruption of Mount Volkova?” Dean Thomas cautioned.

"I’m not breaking the rules. She said we could remain in our seats, or ponder our assignments, or keep ourselves constructively occupied,” Ron defended. He nosed around the contents of the desk drawer— used quills, pieces of parchment, several sticks of chewing gum, and a small cloth-bound book.

"That is not what she said. And how is what you’re doing constructive?” Hermione asked.

"Ron! Put that back!” Harry said. Ron picked up the small, red book and went back to his seat, grinning at Harry the whole time.

"It’s got pictures inside,” Ron said. "Who are all these people?"

Students crowded around Ron’s desk for a glance. Hermione got out of her seat as well, but Ron anticipated what she was up to before she arrived. He climbed on top of his desk and held the book out of reach from her. Bulstrode shrank out of the way, ducking and dodging as Hermione jumped
They’re Volkova and her friends, I think,” Ron said, flashing a picture to the students below him. “She’s always been skin and bones. I wonder who that bloke is? He keeps trying to take her hand and pull her hair. He’s always standing beside her in the pictures."

"Ron Weasley, give me that book, and get down off that desk," Hermione said impatiently.

"No," Ron scowled at her.

"Fine. When Professor Volkova comes back and turns you into a newt, don’t come crying to me," Hermione said, going calmly back to her desk and sitting down with a thump.

"No way!" Ron declared loudly, dropping off his desk to the floor. "Harry, you have to see this!!"

"What?" Harry rasped.

"Who is that?" Hermione wondered, getting up once more.

"Here. Touch the book and tell us who these people are," Ron said, thrusting it at Harry. Potter dodged back, frowning at him. "Come on!" Ron pleaded. Harry relented and gave a glance at the picture that Ron flashed at him.

"Volkova in Hawaii," Potter said blankly. The picture showed a radically-different Volkova than they were accustomed to seeing. She was seated on the ground cross-legged on a woven mat, and she dressed in a brightly-colored, over-sized muumuu. She was looking at the camera as if she were considering the meticulous and bloody extermination of whatever person or thing was taking her picture. Someone was putting tropical flowers in her hair, which was loose and flowing and shining like sunlight. There were many strings of garlands already around her neck. Granger got a closer look at the picture and her face scrunched up.

"She’s scary there too, and really sorta beautiful like that. She’s like... human, even," Ron said. Hermione growled at him. "It’s nice to see she went through a chubby phase too," Ron commented shakily. "Why isn’t anyone moving?"

"That picture is from a Muggle camera," Hermione told him.

"Volkova vacationed once in Hawaii. The food made her very sick," Harry revealed, not touching the album. Hermione got a better look at the picture, and a curious smile wove around her face.

"I don’t doubt it," Granger said cryptically, giving the book back to Ron. The door knob turned, and students fled back to their desks. Professor Snape entered, looking puzzled and concerned.

"Where is Professor Volkova?" he asked, his eyes landing on the mummy and seemingly unable to move away from it. In the interim, Ron had managed to drop the book on the floor near the desk.

"She went to find you, sir," Harry said.

"Why?" Snape questioned.

"She’s got a desk drawer stuck to her hand," Ron explained.

"Still a Statua," Harry added.

"How curious. I was about to ask if she had been the one to borrow the rest of my supply. Why is he hanging around the classroom this way?" Snape asked, motioning to the lurking mummy.
"Professor Volkova ordered a sarcophagus but it hasn’t arrived yet,” Hermione said. "I suspect she wants to keep him where she can make sure nothing happens to him."

"Why aren’t any of you wearing your ties?” Snape asked.

"Because if we do, we’ll be up there,” Harry said as he pointed to a runic circle drawn on the ceiling. "Seamus spent two days there. Sir, can I ask a question?”

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Apparently you can.”

Harry narrowly restrained from rolling his eyes.

"May I ask a question?” he murmured.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, you may,” Snape smirked.

"What’s the difference between Stilla Statua and Lentus Rapidus? Why teach us two adhesive potions in one term?”

"Ask me again in Potions tomorrow. If you concentrate very hard, I’m sure you’ll figure it out without me having to explain. I will have a fresh batch of each on hand, and I will be able to demonstrate. Someone borrowed my remaining vials for this ever-so-droll stunt, it would seem,” Severus murmured. "You said Professor Volkova went to find me?”

"Some time ago, sir.”

"Where is Mr. Malfoy?” Snape asked.

"Bottom of a dark hole?” Harry smiled.

"She left you lot alone?” Snape asked, pulling out the chair. "Quite trusting of her, all things considered. I’m sure she won’t mind if I wait until she returns.”

Quills, parchment, and sticks of gum went on the floor. Snape pulled everything on the floor up with a levitation spell, including the small red book. He nudged open another drawer on the desk with a quick spell, and put the articles inside. It was then that the orbs on everyone’s desks caught his attention.

"May I?” Severus asked, approaching Harry’s desk.

"Yes, you can,” Harry piped up. Severus gave him a short, angry glare for being cheeky. Harry lifted up the orb to hand it to the Potions Master. Snape’s face became less severe almost at once. Potter was sure that Snape was noting with dry approval the color of the orb while it was in Harry’s hands. Harry, in turn, watched in curiosity as the orb faded from dark purple to a wintery blue in Snape’s grip.

"Have you seen these before?” Hermione asked.

"Not for many years. They’re rare and expensive. It must have cost Volkova a fortune to commission this many. She told you to figure out how to break them, didn’t she?” Snape said, completely intrigued.

"How do you break them?” Crabbe called out.

"Has anyone succeeded?” Snape asked.
"One person. She wouldn't tell us who," Hermione sulked. "Must be the other class though, because everyone in here still has theirs."

"I'm not surprised this class hasn't solved the trick yet," Snape mocked.

The door opened once more. Draco entered, jaunty one second, and disoriented the next. He stepped back, glanced at the hallway, and into the classroom again.

"Yes, you're in the correct room, Mr. Malfoy. Come. Sit down."

"Where's Professor Volkova?"

"Stuck to part of her desk, roaming the castle, searching for me. I suspect she'll return shortly. Do tell us where you've been that clocks do not exist, and you find you have arrived late for your lessons."

"Relaxing in the loo," Draco grinned as he tossed his wand into the wooden box at the front door. "Thank you for that sparkling bit of trivia," Snape said, his tone dry as sand.

When Harry gave a crooked smile, Snape wondered what was going through the boy's head. 'Bottom over a dark hole. I was close,' Harry laughed to himself.

"Potter, your wand is humping someone else's wand again," Draco said, glancing down into the box. Malfoy never stopped mocking Harry's new wand, because it was one more way he could rub in the continuing results of Lucius's attack. Potter wished Rover could bite Malfoy's hand, just once, when the smirky git was getting his own wand in or out of the box. Harry gave Draco a bored look, and managed to hold his tongue. Severus wanted to applaud.

"Professor Snape, you were going to tell us how to break the orbs," Millicent spoke up.

"No, Miss Bulstrode. I'm not going to tell you how to break them. What I will tell you is this. The orbs are a lesson in cooperation and perspective," Snape said.

"You mean we have to look inside them?" Neville said. Nearly everyone in the room put their faces to their orbs, and missed Snape rolling his eyes in exasperation. Harry watched him, giving a wicked grin.

"I don't see anything," Goyle mumbled. Harry let his fingers brush Snape's hands as Severus handed back his orb. For a second, the orb went entirely colorless. Draco searched around in his bookbag, gouging Harry several times with his elbow. Harry responded by giving Draco another foul glance and scooting his chair further to the side. Malfoy finally produced his orb—it shimmered pitch black like oil on the inside. Harry stared at Draco's orb, and then at Draco. Malfoy narrowed his eyes. Harry watched Severus watching Draco's pitch black orb. Severus's face was so sad for a moment.

"What are you looking at, Potter?" Draco howled.

"Each is a different color," Harry said. "They change color for every person," Harry replied. He handed his orb to Draco, and it went black. Draco tentatively handed his orb to Harry, and it went dark purple. Harry turned to find Ron, who was sitting with his orb in one hand. Ron's orb was a bright, golden-yellow.

"What do the colors mean?" Draco asked.
"It must have something to do with measuring the strength of our personal magic," Hermione said.

"No, it doesn’t," Millicent told her flatly. "Volkova said no. It doesn’t gauge our magic."

"No, it does not measure the strength of your magic," Snape agreed.

"Maybe it reflects our moods," Neville suggested.

"Why are we all different colors? I mean, there has to be a logical reason," Hermione said impatiently. "It’s reflecting something about each of us, or they wouldn’t change to fit each specific person."

"When you stand in a mirror, you see yourself," Ron said. "The mirror doesn’t change, only what is reflected in the mirror changes."

"Yeah? So?" Neville called out.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Hermione fussed.

"Actually, what you see when you stand in the mirror is the exact opposite of your reflection," Snape corrected.

"The orbs must reflect our souls," Hermione said, her voice going soft. Everyone stared at Draco’s pitch black orb and drew back from him. "Am I correct? Do the orbs reflect our souls, sir?"

Hermione asked Professor Snape. Severus lifted Harry’s orb out of Draco’s grasp, and motioned for Harry to give Draco back his own orb.

"My lips are sealed, Miss Granger. You will have to deduce what the colors mean on your own, I’m afraid. In the meantime– ah. There you are."

Professor Volkova came back into the classroom. She clutched the stick, and it reshaped itself into a drawer once more. Her eyes landed on Malfoy and narrowed as if she were ready to spit venom. He cowered back from her, brushing Harry’s arm. Curious, Harry kept the contact long enough to open a clairvoyant conduit between them.

Potter felt a wave of adoration flowing off of Malfoy towards Volkova, mixed with anger at her. She had called his father a coward, but didn’t she have lovely eyes? Draco’s fear of rejection came next, along with the horrible realization that even in the middle of class with the Dark Arts professor glaring at him, Malfoy was getting aroused under his robes. The randy schoolboy had spent the previous half an hour in the loo masturbating while thinking about the fold of her robes and the sway of her hair and the many wonders that composed her, and here he was aroused again by the close proximity to her. Considering what Harry had sensed from Volkova in her storeroom, it was no wonder Draco was a confused mess when it came to her. Lucky Draco hadn’t been here to see those pictures in the small red book, because Volkova really had been very glowingly pretty in it, and Draco would surely have moved Heaven and Earth to nick the photo album from her desk.

"I heard you had a minor accident," Snape said, giving Volkova a wicked smile.

"Not to worry," Volkova answered. "I asked Madam Pomfrey for a suggestion when I couldn’t locate you."

Volkova slid the drawer back into place. Using her wand, she calmly split the material of her jacket from wrist to elbow, and rolled up her shirt sleeve. Still using her wand, she drew a temporarily-visible red line around her fingers She aimed her wand at her hand, pausing as if to steel herself.
"If you’d like help?" Snape offered.

"Exodermis excidero," she murmured. Her hand came free with a sloshing noise that made everyone in the room except Professor Snape cringe. Thin slips of pale skin remained attached to the handle, like glove fingers chopped off from the exact point where she had drawn the red line. The students groaned in disgust.

"I could have used a simple spell," Severus said.

"No, no, really, I’m fine. The layer of skin will grow back soon enough," Volkova muttered, yanking the dead skin off the drawer handle and tossing in the waste basket, except for the three flat fingertips which remained on the drawer handle.

"Hey, Potter, want to play a game?" Draco smiled wickedly sideways at him. "There’s more than one way to skin a lion."

"Do you want to go to Alaska naked??" Harry replied, undaunted.

"Gentlemen," Snape growled. Harry and Draco turned away from each other, desperately pretending that the other wasn’t there at his elbow.

"Was there something you needed, Professor Snape?" Volkova asked. She sealed up her jacket sleeve with a swish of her wand, and produced her orb from her pocket. Snape watched eagerly to see what color appeared. His smirk faded off his skull.

"You’re a blue? Color me surprised," Severus whispered. Volkova narrowed her eyes and thrust her orb into his grip. When it went blue, she smirked, snatching the orb back from him.

"Why are you loitering in my classroom when yours is in complete chaos mere floors away?" she taunted him.

"I came to warn you that some miscreant student has stolen my personal supply of both Lentus Rapidus and Stilla Statua," Severus replied, not taking the bait about his students being involved in chaos. He had scared those third years so much they were probably holding their breath for five minutes after he left the room, he was certain of that much.

"I hope you’ll understand if I’m not shocked by that announcement."

"Under the circumstance, no, I suppose not."

"Your concern is duly noted. I shall let you know at once if I discover who may have your supplies."

"Of course, you’ll tell me before you skin them alive, Professor?"

"That depends," Volkova answered.

"On what?" Snape asked.

"Witnesses," Volkova hissed.
In which Harry gets a package from Madam Grimwood, and Seamus gets a little help from his mum

"Harry, you’ve got a package," Neville said, chasing Potter and Weasley up the stairs to get to the Gryffindor dorms. Harry was resting on a landing as Ron dumped out the contents of his bookbag and looked through it.

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said when Longbottom dropped the oblong, flat object in his open hands.

"Wait," Ron said before Harry could rip off the brown paper.

"What?"

"Tell us what’s inside first," Weasley grinned.

"Ron, quit it."

"Professor Trelawney did say you should practice on everyday objects. Mail is an everyday object."

"It won’t hurt to try, Harry," Neville said, sitting on the landing as well. "Luna has been doing that too."

"It’s a book," Potter murmured.

"Yeah, right. Even we can see that," Ron laughed. "What’s it about?"

"Ten ounces or so."

"Subject, Harry," Ron teased.

"Does your clairvoyance work on people too?" Neville asked. "I mean, if you held my hand, could you tell where I’ve been? Luna said hers is limited to objects, that’s all."

"Don’t need an inner eye to know where you’ve been, Longbottom— he’s been up Luna’s skirt," Weasley leaned in to whisper in Harry’s ear, loud enough that Neville could hear.

"No, she’s wearing pants too," Neville replied. "It’s been a couple days since we’ve been in the broom closet, which is better than I can say for you and Hermione."

"Hey, Longbottom, mind your own business."

"Did you two have another fight?" Neville asked.

"I told Hermione that until one of us is wearing a skirt, we’re not going to the broom closet," Ron said. Neville broke into a grin.
"Are you punishing her or yourself?" Longbottom asked.

"Mind your own business," Ron repeated.

"If all I had to do was wear a skirt to get a girl to go in the broom closet with me, I’d be at Madam Malkin’s through the next available floo," Neville whispered.

"In every couple, someone has to be the one to wear the pants," Ron huffed, "and it’s not going to be Hermione. That’s all I’m going to say about it. What?" he demanded when Harry cocked his head to the side as if puzzled.

‘What happens in couples where no one wears skirts?’ Harry pondered inside.

"What?" Ron demanded loudly when Harry continued to frown.

"Nothing, Ron. Don’t be so sensitive."

"She’s becoming too independent," Ron decided. "I just hope she doesn’t get knocked in the head."

"Mine does work on people, but it comes and it goes," Harry told Neville, trying to ignore Ron.

"What was Draco up to before he got to Dark Arts?" Ron asked.

"He was in the restroom down the hall from the class, touching himself while thinking about Volkova," Harry said. Ron wailed, recoiling and covering his ears.

"Harry! Are you trying to shorten my young life?" he howled. "I don’t ever want to know when Draco is having a wank!"

"What’s the book about?" Neville asked. Harry tore off the paper and squinted at the two texts he found inside.

"Cartography for Agoraphobics?" Harry puzzled. He opened the cover of the first book but found nothing. "It must be from Madam Grimwood. That woman’s a right menace, isn’t she? First the Blunt Objects book, now this. She’s going to get me expelled."

Ron deflated with terrible sadness. He sat down beside Harry, and stared at his friend.

"You aren’t planning on traveling anywhere, are you, Harry?"

"No," Harry reassured him. Ron plucked up the book and put it in his own bag, far out of Harry’s reach.

"What’s the second book?" Neville wanted to know.


Harry opened the cover. There was no note in this one either. Harry flipped through the pages. There were pictures and diagrams showing proud, smiling wizards of all assortments holding laughing, happy infants, performing various tasks such as warming bottles, feeding babies, changing nappies, rocking, burping, and such. He closed the book and gulped loudly around the sudden sting of emotion in his throat.

Was Madam Grimwood taunting him? She hadn’t seemed like the sort of woman who would do that. But the nature of the injuries Harry received during Lucius’s attack had been made common
knowledge, thanks to the Daily Prophet’s suspected mole in the Ministry of Magic. Mole was going to become an endangered species if Harry ever found out who it was. Everyone in the wizarding world knew that Lucius Malfoy had taken a knife to Harry’s genitals, and even if they had not been given exact diagrams of his wounds, there would continue to be speculations about his anatomy until a picture of his penis appeared on the front page. He could imagine the headlines! Harry was well aware that gossip around the school, surely around the wizarding world, was that he would not be able to father children, perhaps not even be able to perform sexually. He had felt the stares of his classmates, mostly the male ones, and knew what they were thinking every time they looked at him. When he was in the restroom, he could hear whispers wondering about if he were still able to perform, if he were a fully-functional man. Now that Grimwood woman starts sending him books like this?? She was taunting him!

"Harry, is there something you’d like to tell us?" Neville asked. "Someone you’re serious about?"

"Longbottom, don’t go there," Ron warned. Harry pushed the childcare book into his bag, and took a deep breath.

"You can always adopt," Neville said. A wave of caring tenderness welled around Longbottom, and Harry wanted to cry. There was something so kind about Neville, something so warm about his soul. Harry was touched and annoyed at once.

"Not a word," Harry ground out forcefully.

"Not a word," Weasley assured him. "Right, Neville?"

"Nope. Didn’t see a thing," Longbottom replied, giving Harry an embarrassed glance that was melting with sympathy.

"Better get going. We’ve got an essay to write for Herbology. How is it your plants always do twice as well as the rest of us, Longbottom?" Ron asked.

"I talk to them," Neville shrugged. "Do you think the clairvoyance would work on plants, Harry? You could tell me if they want more sunlight, or more water."

"I hadn’t tried that yet," Harry admitted. "Do you believe objects can feel?"

"Plants aren’t objects. They’re alive," Neville replied.

"Ready, Harry?" Ron asked. Harry nodded, standing up very slowly. "Is it your legs? Does your back hurt?"

"No. I’m a little tired is all."

"I don’t doubt it. If you spent more time sleeping at night and less time wandering the castle like one of the ghosts, you might not be this run-down," Weasley suggested, giving Harry an arm up. "Where do you go when you wander?"

"Around."

"In circles, all night?"

Dean and Seamus galloped up the steps like a herd of hippogriffs, grinning from ear to ear. They were carrying several boxes from the mail.

"Shake a leg, lads," Seamus ordered as they went past.
"What’s up with him?" Neville wondered.

"You’ll see," Seamus promised.

Once in the dorms, Seamus closed and locked the door, and Dean put one box on each of their beds.

"What’s this all about, Finnegan?" Ron asked, sitting down and staring at the present.

"It’s about protesting what’s not right," Seamus said, yanking his box open. "I got one for all of you, and I expect you’re going to wear it too."

"You’re out of your mind," Harry frowned. He was holding his on his lap, and it was pretty clear he knew what was inside.

"Harry, I’m counting on you most of all."

"Why?"

"Because people will listen to you. They care what you have to say."

"Finnegan, what in the...." Ron opened his box and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. "You’re a bloody lunatic!"

"They’re even in Gryffindor colors," Finnegan grinned happily. "Mum out-did herself."

Harry’s first thought was that maybe he could put a few of those rumors about his anatomy to rest once and for all. His second thought was that now Ron and Hermione could go back to the broom closet because at least one of them would be wearing a skirt. He lay back on his bed and began to chuckle.

"How do you put them on?" Potter asked.

"You’re not. You’re not! Oh, Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "I’m not going around with my privates dangling in the breeze!"

"Don’t worry, Weasley. Mum put in boxers for each of us too," Seamus said.

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"What is the meaning of this?" Professor McGonagall asked the next morning in Transfigurations when she was greeted by the sight of five sets of very pale knees of the slightly-hairy variety. She had Harry, Ron, Seamus, Neville, and Dean lined up in front of her desk, as the rest of the class tittered and shivered in their seats in an all-too-unsuccessful attempt to keep quiet and not gloat too much over their classmates’ discomfort.

"They’re called kilts," Seamus said proudly.

"Don’t you begin to condescend to me, Mr. Finnegan," McGonagall snarled back, her temper practically bleaching Seamus white. "I know what you’re wearing. I want to know why. Someone had better start talking, or I’m going to start taking off points for every second we’re forced to endure this spectacle."

"You did approve a change in dress code for the students," Ron pointed out.

"For the female students, Mr. Weasley, to be more accommodating to their comfort. Even the
wizarding world must move forward in social aspects of equality and opportunity."

"These are standard uniform kilts," Dean said.

"They’re even the correct colors," Neville pointed out.

"Those particular uniforms haven’t been worn at Hogwarts for eight hundred years," McGonagall replied, pacing back and forth. "Tell me why I shouldn’t send you lot marching straight to the Headmaster for this colorful reinterpretation of school policy."

"Actually, Professor McGonagall, the new uniform code says that ‘students may wear either trousers or skirts’," Harry said, handing her a small piece of paper. "The rule doesn’t specify female or male."

McGonagall took the piece of paper from Harry, and seethed visibly before, during, and after she read it.

"You wouldn’t punish us for following school rules, would you, ma’am?" Ron tested the waters with a half smile. Minerva crinkled the paper between her fingers before turning to put the paperball on the desktop.

"You boys might feel as if you’re having the last laugh on this matter, but I want to caution you that I don’t find an iota of humor in the situation," she said, facing them one by one as she walked the line from one end to the other. "Think of the message you’re sending to your female colleagues. Do you want them to feel as if you value them less because they are female? Is their struggle to be treated the same as you are treated so absurd to you? You aren’t making a mockery of the rules. You’re making a mockery of their aspirations for equality. You’re alienating half the population of the world with this vulgar display of woefully knobby knees."

"That’s not what we mean at all. But there is the natural order of things," Ron insisted.

"Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall lingered over Ron’s name as if her teeth were chattering with anger and impatience. "Never again use the natural order of things to justify committing a deed you know is wrong. There are those in the wizarding world who have used their perceived ‘natural order to things’ to justify many a dark and evil act. It makes my blood run cold, thinking of what has been done to preserve things. Open your history text now and again, won’t you? We study history so we will not repeat it."

"Yes, ma’am," Ron blushed.

"Gentlemen, I’ve half a mind to make you wear those the rest of the term as punishment, but I suspect the hassle of having to keep your knees together and those kilts in place will be more than enough annoyance in a week or two."

She stopped in front of Neville and motioned for him to lift his arms. Longbottom followed her request, and she hitched his kilt up a good four inches so that it rested slightly above his waist. She then rearranged his sporran and his flying plaid. Neville looked as if he might die of horror. His mouth hung open for several seconds. Clearly Minerva McGonagall knew her way around a properly-dressed Scotsman. Hermione choked back a gasp at her desk, as if she might explode from pressurized humor at any second.

"If you’re going to wear those clothes, at least have the decency to put them on correctly," McGonagall muttered as the other boys glanced at Neville and started fixing their outfits as well. "Take your seats, and quit embarrassing me, if possible."
Your Slip Is Showing

Chapter Summary

In which Harry finally locates Tonks (and scares the heebie-jeebies out of his classmates)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hey, Gryffin-boys! Nice legs!"

The whooping cheer had been of the female variety, and might have been taken as an insult if it hadn’t come from Ginny Weasley. She and Luna were standing outside of the Potions classroom, whispering to themselves, waiting for the others to arrive before departing for their own classes. They waved wildly.

"How much trouble did they get in with McGonagall?" Lovegood asked Granger, who followed closely behind the boys, making them very nervous. Hermione pealed with laughter, taking the girls by the arms and walking them down the hall a few feet to talk. Seconds later, all three were squealing with laughter as Hermione recounted the tale for them.

Ron moodily stalked into the Potions classroom and went to his place. Neville, Dean, and Seamus followed, but not with as much spunk and nerve as Weasley had displayed. Professor Snape had his back to the class and was writing on the board. As other students piled into their places, Harry waited at the door for Hermione. Draco pushed past Harry, smirking at him.

"Hey, bitch, your slip is showing," Malfoy whispered. Harry clenched his jaws together and made a point of ignoring Malfoy. He turned away from the blond menace and continued to wait for Hermione. Disappointed, Draco went to talk to Professor Snape at the board.

"I’m sorry my Adhesive Properties scroll is late, sir," Draco said, handing his assignment to Severus. Snape accepted the essay with an arched brow and an outstretched hand. "I hope you’ll find it meets the requirements laid down."

"I suspect it will, Mr. Malfoy. The high quality of your potions work never varies. However, my acceptance of the essay comes with the customary points deducted for lateness."

"Yes, sir. Field studies had to be performed. You understand."

"Take your place, Mr. Malfoy. In the future...."

Severus stopped talking, and stared at the doorway, his eyes going wide. Draco followed his line of sight and flared with competitive anger.

"Take your seat, Mr. Malfoy," Severus murmured. Draco sat down next to Crabbe, and made faces as Snape went to the doorway, dragged Harry outside, and shut the door. A second later the door opened, Hermione was pushed inside, and the door was closed again. Hermione was mortified about such rough handling. She straightened her clothes and robe with a huff of indignation.
"Brute," she muttered, stomping to her desk.

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus whispered, motioning up and down Harry’s form. "I can’t believe Professor McGonagall let you keep that on. I’d’ve sent you to the Headmaster at once. Most unseemly, Mr. Potter."

"Sir, I—" Harry sputtered. "I was helping out a friend."

"I hope to Merlin you’re not regimental under there."

Harry grabbed the edge of his kilt and lifted it high enough that Snape could have seen scarlet, if he had been facing Harry, that is. He bounced back from Potter, slapping the kilt edge downward. Waves of possessive jealousy and embarrassment rolled off of him.

"You march yourself to Gryffindor Tower, put on your trousers, and get back here. I will hold class until you return," Severus insisted as he pointed angrily down the hall. Snape stormed back into the classroom with a rattle and slam. The door opened seconds later. The other four kilt-adorned Gryffindors were pushed outside. All were as red with shame as Harry was.

"Sir, we have permission from Professor McGonagall to keep them on," Ron said. Snape glared hard at him.

"Mr. Weasley, is it asking too much to expect you to evolve?" Snape growled. "You can do it slowly. But do it, for all our sakes, before the entirety of Gryffindor Tower is living in a cave, eating raw meat, and wearing furs."

"Professor McGonagall said we could keep them on," Ron repeated. "What’s more, we’re going to," he added, lifting his chin and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Tread carefully, Mr. Weasley," Snape warned.

"We’ll change," Harry said, stepping between Ron and Severus. "We’ll change."

"No, we won’t," Ron insisted. "It’s allowed in school rules. McGonagall said we could keep them on. As Head of Gryffindor House, she outranks Snape when it comes to us."

"Ron..." Harry gasped.

"No, Harry. I’m not going to take it!" Ron shouted. "I’m not going to change!"

"Harry?" Severus whispered fearfully, dropping his voice. Ron was shocked to find his near-mutiny had been altogether forgotten. Harry reached forward as his knees went out from under him. He mutely put a hand over his scar and rolled his eyes back in his head before he started to convulse. Severus struggled to hold Harry, to keep his thrashing limbs somewhat still.

"Harry?" Ron wailed.

"Get Madam Pomfrey!" Snape ordered. Ron took Harry’s hand, kneeling down to his side. "Weasley! Go get Madam Pomfrey!"

The hallway rippled with intense light that folded around itself and began to implode into a devilish, red vortex.

"Harry! Stop it!" Ron yelled. Abnormally-loud demonic laughter could be heard from the vortex. Weasley grabbed Harry’s shoulders and began to shake him. However violent, it had snapped
Harry out of his convulsions. Snape took Harry out of Ron’s reach, struggling to pull out his wand with the other hand. Harry tumbled back to the ground and sat in a heap as Snape pointed his wand at the vortex.

"All of you, get back," Snape hissed at the students. Writhing forms thrashed about inside the portal. Red, green, and blue lights throbbed and roiled around like the smoke that poured out into the hallway. The most horrendous sounds of screaming and shouting sent the other Gryffindors behind Snape. They all drew their wands as well. Harry grasped Severus for support and pulled himself slowly upright.

"Tonks," Harry mumbled, pointing at the portal.

"In there?" Ron wailed. Harry stumbled towards the vortex. Ron and Severus both made a grab for him, but Harry tugged away, stretching out both hands towards the portal.

"Harry! Harry! Stop!" Ron screamed. Words were becoming more clear amid the pounding, rhythmic drums and wailing guitars, and alternating whispers.

"'I am the voice inside your head (and I control you). I am the lover in your bed (and I control you)'." *author's note*

One form began to stand out among the thrashing crowd visible in the vortex. Pink hair and tight black leather were her prominent features. Harry reached towards her. Tonks was shouting at the top of her lungs, and simultaneously both deafened and distracted by the mind-scarring noises. She didn’t feel the hands on her back until it was too late.

The door to the classroom crashed off its hinges and shattered inside the room itself as Dean and Seamus got further away from the other-worldly noises. Neville stood perfectly still, gaping in horror. Students were crowded into the doorway, their faces pulled in every direction with shock and surprise. Harry hauled backwards on Tonks, and now that she was aware of him, she clawed at him in an attempt to get free from him. The portal itself was beginning to fail, to fold, to condense. Tonks goggled at Harry, not recognizing him, and she threw wild looks at the others as well. Was she losing her mind? Was she hallucinating? It wasn’t a surprise she thought these were both possible, considering how strung-out she appeared to be. Harry held tight to Tonks as the vortex closed around itself and vanished, leaving her stranded in her own world again. Her screams of pain and horror echoed in the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The lyrics are from ‘Mr. Self Destruct’ by Nine Inch Nails. Wow, has it really been over a decade since I wrote these fics? I feel so ooooold suddenly :(
"You’re sure that’s our Miss Tonks?" Professor McGonagall asked, staring in great concern at the unconscious young woman restrained in a bed in a private room of the school’s hospital wing. Sleep did nothing to compose her frantic, fearful expression.

"Yes, I’m sure," Madame Pomfrey replied.

"How did Mr. Potter get her back?"

"Pulled her out of hell itself, so I heard from witnesses," Pomfrey tisked. "She scratched him up like a wildcat. I sent him back to the dorms with a cold compress and a vial of antibacterial lotion. Would you look at those nails? I’m of a mind to trim them while she’s asleep."

"Have you informed the Headmaster?"

"Right before I contacted you."

"Did she say anything before she passed out?"

"Nothing coherent. Kept muttering about Philadelphia, and having to be at work at 9."

"What’s keeping the Headmaster?" Minerva asked impatiently.

"He’s talking to Mr. Potter."

"Have you had a chance to examine her? What’s the matter with her?" McGonagall wanted to know.

"Appalling nutritional habits, an addiction to several Muggle recreational drugs, and infected piercings in places I shudder to recount. She appears to have no idea that she’s even a witch. Her memory had been impaired by a powerful spell, but I was able to set her to rights once more. But she’s going to need a week or two before she’s totally herself again."

"You sound rather confident," Minerva tested out a smile.

"Oh, she’s not the first wizard child I’ve pulled back from the Muggles, teetering on the brink of destruction. As I recall, Severus Snape looked something like that when the late Mr. Malfoy managed to bring him back to us. No," she paused, tilting her head. "I take that back. Severus was in much worse condition."

"At least he didn’t pierce anything," Minerva murmured.

"Not that he’ll admit," Poppy whispered.

"Finally. What kept you?" McGonagall gasped as Dumbledore strolled casually through the door,
grinning ear to ear.

"Our Miss Tonks?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir," Madam Pomfrey confirmed.

"Fabulous," Dumbledore grinned. "Where was she?"

"In Philadelphia, at what Miss Granger tells me was a music concert. Can I assume you want to search there for Remus?" McGonagall asked.

"No. No, I don’t believe we’ll find Remus in Philadelphia. Surely news of an amnesiac werewolf wizard wandering the streets of any major American city would have made the news reports in some fashion."

"You do have a point," Minerva conceded. "How is Harry?"

"Worn out. It took a lot of energy to do what he did. He’s exhausted. I put him to bed, and Severus is with him."

"Albus!" Minerva exclaimed.

"My word!" Poppy shrieked. The Headmaster shook his head at them.

"Severus is sitting at Harry’s side to make sure he doesn’t leave the bed," the Headmaster corrected himself, giving them both a chiding look for misunderstanding him in the first place. But the seed of doubt was planted. Was there something going on here that he wasn't seeing?

"How did Harry do it? How is he getting around the wards at Hogwarts? How is he apparating people and objects to and from?" Poppy wanted to know. "It’s not supposed to be possible."

"Possibly he’s overpowering the wards. I've found weak spots in the last few weeks. Something is absorbing the magic of the entire area in small doses. Something, or someone."

"What?" McGonagall gasped. "Is that possible?"

Dumbledore shrugged to indicate he had no idea. McGonagall wasn’t going to let the question go unanswered. Albus held his palms up, and speculated his way to a theory.

"The surge in Harry’s magic occurred at the precise moment that he was in emotional distress, exactly what happened when he killed Lucius Malfoy. This time, the surge allowed him the extra energy needed to locate Miss Tonks and pull her through a portal back to where she belongs. That’s what I suspect is going on."

"If Mr. Potter can apparate objects and people in, out, and around the wards of Hogwarts, and he’s still linked to You Know Who, doesn’t that mean He Who Must Not Be Named can also get around the wards?" McGonagall asked.

"No, I’d say not."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because, dear Minerva, if Voldemort had the ability to get in here, he wouldn’t hesitate to use it to his advantage. He would have already attacked, or taken Mr. Potter from the school grounds by force."
"Perhaps he doesn’t know he can get through."

"I’ve always wondered why you and Severus insist on dwelling on the negative. Let’s try to dwell on the positive, shall we?" Albus suggested tartly.

"Instead of burying our heads in the sand and hoping no one sees our bare bums, we’d better make certain those wards are all intact," McGonagall replied icily.

"My thoughts precisely. Shall we make our rounds before dinner?" Dumbledore invited her. "Madam Pomfrey will let us know when Miss Tonks is ready for visitors, won’t you, dear?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Pomfrey smiled.
In which Severus helps Harry relax and get a bit of rest

"What’s wrong? Have I grown another head?" Harry asked, noting how Severus kept secretly watching him with Slytherin stealth.

"No," Snape answered. Harry closed his eyes as he laughed silently. When he opened them again, Severus’s expression was one of concern. "You’re more tired than you’re letting on, aren’t you? You’ve got dark rings down to your cheekbones. They’re especially prominent in this sunlight."

"I’m having trouble sleeping. Could I close the curtains?"

"You’re not to get out of bed. I’m here to see to that."

"You close the bloody curtains then."

"Have you or have you not been taking the prescription that Doctor Mesarik ordered for you?"

"I have not," Harry admitted, folding his shoulders inward as he drooped downward.

"Why not?"

"It makes me groggy clear into the afternoon if I take it. I sleep too heavy."

"Have you been following the directions?"

"Directions?" Harry pondered.

"You’re so blissfully unencumbered by deep thought, aren’t you?"

"Don't be rude," Harry smiled.

"If you had spoken with Madam Pomfrey or myself about the problem, we would have corrected the dose for you in the beginning. Why do you insist on toughing your way through adversity? What do you do on the nights you’re not with me?"

"I walk around the castle," Harry whispered.

"I doubt it. Mr. Filch would have reported you by now."

"He’s seen me several times, actually."

"You’ve charmed him into forgetting he saw you?"

"I’ve been trading sexual favors for his silence."

Harry’s squeaks of laughter surprised Severus. The boy was trying too hard to pretend he was all right, Snape knew. The laugh was too boisterous to be genuine, and dropped off painfully fast.
I wear my dad’s cloak some nights,” Harry said as he sat up and scooted over to the edge, inadvertantly hiking up the hem of his kilt. Snape got a lap-side view of Harry’s bright scarlet boxer shorts.

“Sweet Merlin,” Severus gasped, putting his hands forward and tugging the material back over Harry’s knees. Harry took Severus by the arm and pleaded with him.

“I have to see Tonks. You have to sneak me into the hospital ward.”

“Shall I secret you in under my cloak? In my pocket? The Headmaster’s orders were that you should remain in bed until you have regained your strength. Harry, why are you pushing yourself? You don’t have to pretend you’re all right when you don’t feel well. No one would think less of you if you needed a day or two to collect yourself.”

“Tonks is the key to finding Remy. I’m sure of it. Please. You have to sneak me into the hospital wing.”

“Hold still,” Severus whispered, taking out his wand. “Does your head hurt? Is your scar irritated? Why were you holding it?” he asked, getting closer to Potter’s hairline with the tip of his wand.

“Voldemort is on the move,” Harry murmured, rubbing his forehead absently. “No. That’s not precisely what I meant. He’s not getting closer to me. He’s having me watched; I’m sure of that much. By someone here at the school.”

“Who do you suspect? Mr. Malfoy?” Snape asked. He swiped at the window curtains with his wand, and they fell closed. He also urged the bed curtains closed except for the side of the bed where Harry was seated.

“Draco would be my first choice, naturally,” Harry admitted.

“I shall question him and find out.”

“Do you think that wise?”

“I can handle Mr. Malfoy,” Snape laughed, putting away his wand.

“Sure you can. But what if it’s not Mr. Malfoy? If you could let me in the Slytherin Common Room, I might get a lead.”

“You’re assuming it’s a Slytherin student.”

“I don’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities.”

“It could be anyone, student or faculty. As I recall, the last student under Voldemort’s control at Hogwarts was a Gryffindor.”

“That was years ago. It’s not Ginny this time. For that matter, it could even be me,” Harry said, his eyes and voice growing thoughtful beyond his years. All the playfulness disappeared. “We don’t know what happened when Lucius was in my house. Maybe he traded the real Harry for a doppleganger. Maybe I’m not the real Harry. Would I know if I weren’t really me? Could they obliviate my mind to the point that I would believe I was really me?”

“You do bring up an intriguing point,” Severus agreed. “But I can set your mind to rest as far as that is concerned.”
"How?"

"I already had someone confirm your identity."

"How?" Harry asked. Severus looked around before answering. Was he afraid of being overheard?

"Do you know what DNA testing is?"

"Yes, I know what DNA testing is. But how do YOU know?" Harry gasped.

"A squib friend of mine works in a Muggle—"

"That bloke at Scotland Yard, Mr. St. John," Harry nodded. "He’s a friend? Remy and I thought he might be your cousin or something."

"I’d forgotten that you met him. We’re not related. We’re old friends. I’ve known him since....since I was your age, I believe. I took a few strands of your hair and sent them off to him. He confirmed straight away that we had the real you."

"When?"

"You probably don’t remember. It was while you were sleeping those first couple of days," Severus said.

"Don’t remember much," Harry admitted in a hushed tone.

"That’s all right," Severus soothed.

"It’s sorta fuzzy," Harry babbled, uncomfortable.

"That’s all right," Severus repeated. "You don’t have to. No need for that."

It was best Harry didn’t remember, and best not to remind Harry in any way of those first few days of his recovery. He hadn’t been himself, and shouldn’t be judged by whatever he had said and done. Anguish scratched and slashed Snape’s heart as he recalled the animal horror in Harry’s eyes when faced with a harmless cup of cinnamon tea. Helpless fright had followed fast upon the horror. Potter dissolved into more pieces than the fine china that quaked in his grip before crashing to the stone floor. Uncontrollable tears and hiccups, and the most terrible howls of pain had filled the air. It wasn’t a reaction any person on the planet could have or would have ever faked.

Worst of all to bring to mind was how long Dumbledore and Snape had stood there staring at the frightened, sobbing child, utterly perplexed, thoroughly unable to help because they didn’t know what in the Nine Hells was wrong. Was the tea too hot? Had there been a sharp point on the cup? Had there been too much sugar? ‘If you don’t want the stupid tea, all you have to do is say so.’ Had Snape actually snapped those words at Harry before he realized the cause and the severity of the situation?

Inwardly, Severus winced too against the remembrance of Harry a day later, whimpering in his sleep, stuck down in a nightmare that he couldn’t banish. Not even a dreamless sleep potion could have helped, and given the boy’s delicate condition, Snape didn’t want to use his sleep spell on him. Severus had sat by the bed, caressing Harry’s forehead, whispering comforting words in the boy’s ear until Harry’s misery had exhausted the last of his energy. Severus had kissed away every tear that fell that night, petting and nuzzling Harry though he was totally unaware. Potter was fighting even in his dreams, and the whimpers had melted away so slowly that Severus could hear them even yet. They were like the blood stains that remained on the hospital sheets no matter how
Knowing better than anyone else his own selfish nature, Severus knew it wasn’t impossible that he had been so considerate then because Potter had been totally unaware. There could never be any recriminations for gentle treatment if Harry could remember none of it. Snape’s greatest fear wasn’t that he would be caught showing kindness. It was that his kindness would be rejected, or even worse, mocked in some way. Even now, Snape was embarrassed by the doting tenderness he was showing the boy. But Harry never mocked Snape’s kindness. If anything, the boy craved more and more of it, and it broke Severus’s heart knowing how little human kindness Harry must have ever been shown growing up if he would accept it even from someone like Snape. Harry lapped affection up like a starving pup, and the horrible experience with Lucius only made Harry more eager for approval and reaffirmation that someone cared about him.

If Harry fresh from his trial by fire was hard to endure for those who loved him best, Harry limping back to normalcy was a truly painful creature to behold. Had it been a mere month since Lucius’s attack? Not even that long. Severus marveled at the progress Harry had made, but there was no denying that much of Potter’s recovery was a façade he was putting on for the people around him who felt guilty that he had come to harm in such a bestial fashion. If they thought Harry was recovering, it would assuage their own self-loathing for what they hadn’t been able to prevent from happening. Potter was in pain, but under the surface where no one wanted to look, no one but Severus. Weasley certainly wasn’t looking any deeper than he had to, not getting any closer than he had to either. Snape knew part of that was guilt, and part of was wishful thinking that if Harry seemed fine then Harry was fine and it would be rude to suggest otherwise.

Harry was slowly getting better at controlling his physical fearful reactions, disappointing many Slytherins who had taken to dropping books, making loud bangs, or whatever to startle him. But Severus noticed the subtle shivers when anyone brushed too close to Harry for his comfort, or how Potter didn’t like being cold at all, and how at certain moments, when no one noticed, Harry would stare off into blank space and become a vessel empty of all emotions save humiliation and misery.

"Didn’t Mr. St. John have to have a previous sample to test it against?” Harry wondered. Severus remained uncharacteristically quiet and pensive. "You already gave him a previous sample?” Potter knew.

"Yes."

"When did you do that? During the whole vampire problem?"

"No, much earlier."

"When, exactly?"

"Two years ago. I asked him if he would make a collection of specimens for me, in order to confirm the identities of several people, not just you."

"So you can Polyjuice into anyone you want?” Harry teased.

"No. I merely wanted to be certain we could confirm positively who people were any time we needed."

"No more Barty Crouch’s?”

"Precisely what I hoped to avoid repeating, yes. Mr. St. John has, what did he call it?, a database in
one of his computers."

"You even know about computers?" Harry goggled at him.

"I’ve watched him use his, yes. A useful tool."

"Professor, you’re full of surprises. I had you pegged for one of those traditionalist wizards."

At this comment, Severus coughed up a half-offended, half-amused smile.

"I’d like to think I’m a very progressive wizard, thank you very much."

"Of course you are," Harry soothed. "The fact that you have access to such a database of specimens does of course beg the question if we all are who we say we are," Harry added, fishing.

"At the moment," Severus acknowledged.

"Good to know. But wouldn’t someone who is Polyjuiced to look like someone else take on their DNA during the time they are pretending to be that person?"

"No," Severus said after following through the question. Harry gave him an extremely skeptical stare. "We tested that extrapolation before starting the database. It’s a very fundamental question that needed to be answered before we could proceed with our work."

"Okay," Harry accepted the answer, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

"A Polyjuice potion brewed correctly will change the surface of the flesh, stretch the bones where necessary— it’s quite painful."

"Yes, I know," Harry said. He cringed and put a hand over his mouth.

"An admission you will have to expand on some other time," Snape informed him with eyes narrowed. The words ‘you conniving, manipulative, skillful liar’ also came to mind, but he didn’t spit them off his tongue. "However, back to your question, no, the potion does not change your fundamental DNA structure."

"That's fascinating, really, but do you think Tonks is awake yet?" Harry made a move as if to stand up.

"The Headmaster said you should rest, and that you should do no more magic the rest of the day."

"I don’t need to use magic to sneak into the hospital wing."

"Harry."

"Please."

"I will not disobey the Headmaster’s orders, and neither will you."

"What if I need to go to the hospital wing?"

"Are you hurt?"

"I could be."

"Mr. Potter, this is no time for games."
"I’ve got a twinge in my neck. My stomach is all queasy. I could have a virus. What if I’m contagious?"

Harry rubbed one side of his neck with his hand and gave Severus the most pleading look the Potions Master had ever been challenged with. To Potter’s surprise, the ploy wasn’t working this time.

"For once in your life, would you do as you’re told?"

"I need to talk to Tonks. She’s the key to finding out what happened to Remy. Are you going to help me get to the hospital wing or not?"

"No, I am not. Do I have to tie you to that bed to keep you in it?" Snape growled, looming close. Harry gave him a hurt and frightened look for half a second. Severus cursed himself again, pulling back.

"Why don’t you want me to talk to Tonks?" Harry asked.

"Stop this at once," Severus growled again, his pity forgotten.

"Perhaps it’s not Tonks that’s the matter. Maybe the truth is that you don’t want me to find Remy at all."

"I very much want you to find Mr. Lupin."

"Are you lying to me?" Harry asked, taking one of Snape’s hands.

"Lie back in bed, or I’m going to paddle you," Severus warned.

"Having Remy back isn’t going to change me and you," Harry said, his voice deepening in a very hypnotic manner that made Snape’s heart quiver. "It’s not a competition."

"Mr. Potter, this is most inappropriate," Snape murmured, taking his hand away from Harry. "This is not the time and place to argue about what you believe is motivating me about keeping you in this room. The point of fact is that Headmaster Dumbledore wants you to rest, and I want you to rest. It’s more than evident how tired you are. Don’t argue with me. You need to sleep."

They measured each other with eyes and intuition for the space of two minutes. It occurred to Severus that Potter might be trying to charisma him. But he couldn't remember any time Harry had used that spell since.....he couldn't remember the last time. Whatever Harry was trying, it wasn't working. Finally, Potter ducked his head, acquiescing like a scolded pup.

"Would you get me a glass of water?" he requested in a defeated tone.

"Will you remain in bed until I bring it?" Severus asked, giving into a smile.

"Yes."

"Promise? You’re not going to sneak off while my back is turned?"

"No."

"I will have my eye on you the entire time."

"All right."
Snape motioned over his eyes, and though he knew it must be an illusion, Harry was still amazed and appalled with Severus stood from the bed and left one dark eye hovering in the air while he left the room.

"I’m watching you," his voice called. The eye moved around.

"That’s disgusting," Harry mouthed.

"I want to see you lie down. Get under the covers," Snape called.

Harry pulled back the scarlet bedcovers and climbed between the sheets.

"Take off your shoes, Potter," Severus called, his voice echoing from the small restroom nearby. He carried a tiny glass filled to the brim, and returned to the room. Harry was edging down under the covers further, his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Could you put that away?" Harry motioned to the eye. Snape waved a hand over the eye, and it vanished. "Who taught you such a gross spell?"

"My mother," Severus grinned in remembrance. "She’d leave one hovering over me at night when I was small."

"That’s weird," Harry told him. Snape chuckled, sad and low.

"It’s a mirror spell," he explained.

"Yes, and it’s gross," Harry replied. "It feels weird sleeping in the afternoon."

"Did you change into pajamas?"

"I don’t want to be pajamas. I’d much rather be a dragon. Or maybe a crup," Harry pondered. "Do you think I’d be more intimidating as a hart?" He raised his fingers at the sides of his head as imitation antlers.

"I’m sure there’s a great psychological revelation behind each of those choices," Snape said, waving his wand and solving the pajama dilemma.

Harry lifted the covers and peered underneath. "Thank you. They’re very comfortable. Right out of the bottom drawer. How clever. What did you do with my kilt?"

"It’s in the bottom drawer. Here you are. One glass of water."

"How many drops should I put in?" Harry asked. He opened the top drawer of the table beside his bed, and lifted out the prescription vial from Doctor Mesarik.

"Let me see," Snape said, handing Harry the glass to hold. Potter stared through the glass around the room, as Severus read the small text on the side of the vial. "Have you been shaking the bottle before you put the drops in your glass?"

"Have I what? Why would I do a thing like that?"

"AAB. Agita ante.....Shake before drinking. Mr. Potter, you should spend your summer learning Latin, before your stupidity kills you."

"Somehow I don’t think stupidity will be what gets me in the end," Harry said as Snape rattled the bottle violently between his fingers. "Why does it need to be shaken?"
"Because the components clump together, and if you don’t shake them apart, you’re doubling, even tripling the dosage."

"Oh."

Snape undid the stopper, and allowed three drops of blue to disappear into the glass that Harry was holding. He pocketed the vial from his cousin, and gave Harry the glass. Potter raised the glass, and saw a dark eyeball floating in it.

"Oh, ha ha ha," Harry said. "Take it out."

Snape waved his hand over the glass, and the eye vanished. As Harry drank the sleeping agent, Severus got up and closed the door.

"Will you stay?" Harry pleaded. "The others won’t be back for a couple hours."

"I will stay until they return. If you are very obedient, and you promise to go to sleep, I will even give you a treat."

"Yes?" Harry whispered. Severus made a show of sitting down in the chair beside the bed. He unfolded his hands, and a small square appeared. It was dingy and black, much-handled, dog-earred. Harry rolled onto his side and watched Snape’s hands, his curiosity completely captured. The square gave a puff of black smoke, and folded out of itself twice.

"You must close your eyes and go to sleep fast," Severus urged.

"What is that?" Harry mumbled. Severus held up the square. It was a small, flat book with a plain black cover. There were strings hanging from the edges. It was no more than four inches squared, and had a funny, moldy scent to it.

"It was in a box of things Timma sent me. She's helping Grandfather clean out one of the attics at Ravensrood. No touching," Snape chided when Harry reached out. "It’s a very ancient, precious tome."

"What’s inside?"

"Pages and words," Severus replied. He knew he had intrigued Harry, and waited a dramatic pause. "I will read you every word in this book, but you must keep your word, and fall to sleep fast."

"Why?"

"It’s a short book," Severus murmured, leaning close and dropping his voice even further. "Shall we begin?"

"Yes, please."

"This book is titled ‘Unpleasant Things’."

Harry’s unfeigned chuckle warmed Snape’s entire being. He cleared his throat, and turned pages as he read them.


Harry buried his face in the pillow, holding back more chuckles.

Severus paused, took a deep breath, and turned another page. Mold-green sprinkles went into the air, and he blew them away like so much fairie dust.

"Are there illustrations?" Harry wanted to know.

"No," Severus told him softly. "You’re meant to use your mind’s eye. Shall I take off your glasses for you?"

Harry nodded. Snape set the book on the small table and used both hands to remove Harry’s glasses. In the meantime, Potter got a good if blurry glance at the pages. The book had been entirely wet at least once—the ink was smeared in several places. The lettering in the early pages was drawn in a child’s handwriting, but as the book progressed, the writing improved. It was written in several different colors of ink as well.

"Go on," Harry invited.

"‘A hug that’s too far away. A sneeze that’s much too close. Kisses that hurt. Hands that bite’.

"Who wrote this?" Harry murmured.

"You mustn’t interrupt. ‘What’s left of biscuits in the bottom of the empty tin. What’s left of slugs that have been salted. What’s left of snow that’s not quite melted. What’s left of marshmallows that are toasted too crispy. What’s left of the mouse not finished by Kitty’.

I’ll bet this was written by a Slytherin," Harry whispered.

"You’d be right, of course," Severus smirked.

"You said I was right. Quick! Find a calendar. Red letter day," Potter joked sleepily. Severus leaned on one elbow, and pulled the blankets around Harry.

"Are you asleep yet?" he whispered.

"No," Harry protested in spite of growing evidence to the contrary. "What animal would you be?"

Severus straightened Harry’s blankets, gazing pensively at the patterns woven into them before meeting Harry’s eyes. Had Harry figured out that Severus had put a soothing blanket on his bed, hoping it might help him sleep through the nights and not embarrass himself in front of his dorm-mates? Of course, the spell on the blanket wasn’t a strong as it once had been many years ago when it had been wrapped around his own bed. Harry had nightmares and wandered the castle regardless of whatever charmed blankets Severus had tried to surround him with.

"You mean like an animagus? Would a snake be too obvious?"

"A garden snake?"

"A black mamba."

"What’s that?"

"I’ve never seen a specimen in person, but I’ve heard they’re large and deadly and extremely frightening when aroused. My father was nearly eaten by one years ago. I confess I’ve had a sneaking admiration for them ever since," Severus purred.
"Keep going," Harry laughed. He was groggy with sleep, pointing to the book.

"‘Hurried goodbyes. Long hellos. Unraveling socks and pointy toes. The place in the garden where nothing grows’."

Severus turned another page. His voice followed Harry down into sleep.

"‘Being at home at night alone. The spooky room no one enters. Granny is moving the furniture again. The voices in the basement. The ghosts in the attic. The cemetery outside the window. Shadows that are too big for their corners. Monsters who can pick locks’."

There was a long pause. Severus waited.

"Harry?"

When he received no response, Severus smiled, and closed the book, hiding it away in his cloak. Bending low, he nuzzled Harry’s forehead.

"We didn’t even get to the end. Some other time, perhaps," he murmured, his breath moving Potter’s hair. Harry felt a kiss on his cheek and tensed, but didn’t awaken. "Shhh. My tired boy, aren’t you? Hmm? Shhh. That’s it. Try to rest."

Snape’s voice faded, but his human warmth remained tangibly close. Fingertips cautiously caressed the edge of Harry’s ear, the side of his cheek, and moved away finally. Harry unconsciously turned his head and moved his chin, searching. Snape’s hand returned.

"I’m here," Severus soothed.

From his seat in the chair, Snape pooled himself around Harry’s torso like a cloak. Harry turned his head to the side and hid his face within the shadows of Snape’s shoulder, chin, and cheek. Various sharp angles nestled together. Snape felt the warm wet brush of lips to his cheek. He collected the boy’s closest hand, and caressed a thumb slowly and delicately along the back. A pang of sympathy went through him as his thumb crossed the words ‘I must not tell lies’.
Wrong Side of the Bed

Chapter Summary

In which Harry goes atomic on Draco

Harry stumbled out of bed and instinctively headed towards the bathroom. It was sometime in the middle of the night. He returned to bed, and went directly back to sleep. When he awoke again, he stumbled back to the bathroom, feeling the same urgency as the last time, even though time was apparently standing still, because night was as black as before outside the castle. Harry crawled into his covers, and dropped down into sleep. He opened his eyes again to the sound of whispering outside of his bed curtains, which someone had drawn together. It was well into the day, probably after noon, his internal clock told him.

"Should we wake him?" Neville whispered.

"Dumbledore said not to wake Harry, but to tell him when he was awake. There’s a difference," Ron muttered.

"Is he awake?" Dean asked.

"I dunno."

"I heard him get up last night," Seamus said. "And the night before too."

"One of us has to look in there and see if he’s awake or not," Neville said. "If he’s not awake, we should tell Madam Pomfrey. If he is awake, we need to get Dumbledore."

"Well, Weasley, go on then," Dean said.

"Shhhhh," Ron hissed. Cold white fingers slipped between the edges of Harry’s curtains. They came apart in a delicate operation. When Ron’s head was entirely inside, Harry sat up in bed.

"Why are you lunatics hanging around outside my curtains like that?" Harry asked loudly. Ron leapt back in surprise, falling on the floor. Harry pushed his legs over the side of the bed, and wobbled as he stood to his feet, hauling back the scarlet bed hangings.

"You’re awake," Ron grinned, standing up as fast as he could.

"I’ll tell the Headmaster," Neville said, shooting out of the room like fireworks. Dean and Seamus disappeared, hot on Longbottom’s tail.

"How do you feel?" Ron asked timidly.

"Fine," Harry said. "I’ll be right back. I really have to pee."

When Harry returned to the room and sat on his bed, Ron was pacing back and forth.

"Did you sleep well?" Ron asked, coming to a stop.

"Yeah. Snape adjusted the sleeping drops for me. Transfigurations this morning. Did you finish
"Um...Harry? You’d better sit down."
"What? I am sitting down."
"Harry, it’s Saturday."
"What?" Potter gulped.
"You slept for three days straight."
"I what? Why did you let me sleep so long?"
"Snape threatened us all with unspeakable violence if we woke you."
"Three days?"
"Don’t worry. Merlin slept for nine months after Arthur was conceived. What’s three days to a great sorcerer?" Ron kidded nervously. His worried eyes travelled over and around Harry. "You are all right, aren’t you?"
"Three days?" Harry repeated.

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"Sleeping Beauty has risen from her glass coffin!"

Shielded by Ron and Hermione, Harry made his way along the corridor. Although he was trying to ignore Draco Malfoy, who was coming their direction, it wasn’t going to be easy.

"What did it take to raise him from the dead? A kiss from his true love?" Malfoy mocked with a simpering laugh. "Which one of you two is that?" he taunted.

"Harry, are you coming to Hogsmeade with us? Everyone else has already left," Hermione said to Harry as they passed Malfoy and kept on going. Harry sensed Draco stopping in the hall, laughing with Crabbe and Goyle before changing his path in order to follow behind the three Gryffindors.

"No. I need to talk to Tonks first," Harry replied to Hermione’s question, putting his hand on his wand under his robe. "She’s in the hospital wing still, isn’t she?"

"She doesn’t know anything, Harry. I asked her already," Hermione revealed. "She doesn’t know where Remus is."

Crushed, Harry blinked back frustration and tears. He took a breath and steeled himself, trying to keep in mind that the situation wasn’t beyond hope. Even if Tonks didn’t know where Remus was, that didn’t mean he wasn’t out there somewhere. Harry was going to find him if it was the last thing he ever did!

"We’ll wait for you if you need a few minutes," Hermione offered.

"I really don’t want to go to Hogsmeade," Harry said, hoping that would end the conversation then and there.

"Harry, you have to come with us," Hermione whispered. "We have arranged a surprise for you there."
"It’s supposed to be a surprise!" Ron whispered between his teeth.

"You mustn’t be allowed to find a dark corner and sulk. You need to be around your friends. We want to help you," Hermione said, scooping up Harry’s arm and rubbing her fingers through his hand.

"Rank favoritism. That’s what it is," Draco complained behind Harry. "No one else gets to spend three days lounging in bed. The rest of us have to go to class and do our work and make ourselves useful."

"Put a sock in it, Malfoy," Weasley muttered.

"Yeah, button it up, purebred," Hermione added, delicately undoing her binding grip on Harry’s arm.

"You get special treatment here, Potter. There’s no way you can deny it. If it weren’t for the fact that you’re the Headmaster’s lapdog, you would have been expelled years ago. Don’t you dare deny it," Malfoy challenged.

Harry stopped and faced Malfoy, sagging with annoyance and struggling with his temper. He promised himself he would not do anything that would upset or annoy Professor McGonagall. He had promised her last semester that he wouldn’t let Draco egg him into reacting with anger. He had even promised the Headmaster the same thing during their talk this morning. He would not let Draco provoke him into violence. He would not react with anger to whatever Draco would do.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"I want you stuffed and mounted in the Slytherin Common Room."

"Take your best shot, purebred," Harry snarled, opening his arms wide in invitation.

"Not here, not in front of witnesses. But I am going to kill you someday, Potter."

"That’s great, Malfoy. It’s very healthy to have long term goals."

"Think it’s a joke?"

"No," Harry sighed.

"Because comedy has never been your strong suit," Ron interjected. Malfoy shot him an ugly look and centered his attention on Harry once more.

"There’s nothing special about you, Potter. I don’t know what your friends are telling you, but there’s absolutely nothing special about you. All that’s getting you by in this school is rank favoritism."

"That’s pretty bold, coming from someone like you, Malfoy. You are the very definition of rank favoritism, emphasis on the rank part," Harry laughed.

"You can’t deny you get special treatment here, Potter."

"Aren’t there constructive things you could be doing, Draco? Stealing candy from first years? Kicking baby crups?"

"How dare you go around telling people you absorbed my father’s magic," Draco growled, getting practically nose to nose with Harry. "I’ve heard what everyone’s whispering— that you took my
father’s magic and that’s why yours is increasing. That that’s how you brought Tonks back through one of your portals. You half-blood bastard! You didn’t take my father’s magic. He died with it! It’s a damned lie, and I want you to take it back. I’m going to make you take it back!

"Do you like your face in its current arrangement, Malfoy?" Potter chilled off as if he’d been covered in ice. Draco stopped his raging and pulled away.

"I’m going to kill you someday, Potter, but before I slip the knife in between your ribs, I’m going to make you to watch me kill everyone that you’ve ever loved."

"Great. You and Voldemort can have a competition," Harry murmured, somehow managing to look fearsome while at the same time struggling to keep a straight face. She had her wand in her hand, her fingers twitching it back and forth impatiently.

"I’m going to torture them one by one. I’m going to listen to them beg and plead. I will enjoy their every delectable snivel," Draco went on.

"You’ve been spending too much time reading Very Bad Fiction, haven’t you, Draco?" Hermione smiled.

"Tell me yourself, purebred," she mocked.

"Tell your mudblood to shut up," Draco warned, extending his arm and slowly pulling back his sleeve to reveal a bandage on his fishy-white skin. He tugged away the gauze, and revealed a healing tattoo underneath.

"Tell your mudblood to shut up," Draco warned, extending his arm and slowly pulling back his sleeve to reveal a bandage on his fishy-white skin. He tugged away the gauze, and revealed a healing tattoo underneath.

"I’m supposed to be impressed by your ouchie?" Harry asked.

"What is it?" Hermione asked. Draco turned his arm the other direction. Ron, Harry, and Hermione all tipped to the left and then the right.

"Harry, is that the Dark Mark?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe," Harry replied.

"That’s really crooked," Ron put in.

"You didn’t pay someone to do that to you, did you, Malfoy?" Hermione added.

"What an amateur," Ron laughed. "You drew it yourself, didn’t you?"

"No," Draco growled in denial.

"Did you move while it was being applied?" Harry asked. Draco was flaming with color. Ron was leaning against the wall in hysterical laughter.

"IT’S NOT FUNNY!" Malfoy wailed.

"Right. You’re right. Draco, it’s not funny. It’s not one bit funny," Harry said, shushing Ron. Draco flinched away from him and lowered his sleeve once more.

"You’ve never taken me seriously, Potter. It’s going to be what kills you someday."
"I’m taking you seriously, but the next time you’re going to get a threatening tattoo, sit very very still," Harry smiled.

"I’m going to kill you and everyone you have ever loved," Draco growled.

"You and Moldywarts can have a competition," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Not to turn the knife, Malfoy, but I feel obligated to point out that he’s several people ahead of you at this time."

"I’m going to start with that traitorous bastard you’re fucking," Malfoy howled.

"Exactly who do you mean?" Harry attempted to conjure an innocent smile.

"You’re in and out of Snape’s office and his quarters practically every night," Draco said. Ron choked visibly, and Draco seized on Weasley’s reaction with teeth and nails. "See, Potter? I’m a better spy than you think I am. I know it’s you even when I can’t see you there. I can hear your breathing."

"What a clever spy, to have revealed yourself and your nefarious plans to me in this very public demonstration, in front of several witnesses," Harry replied in a very arch tone, praying to anyone who would listen that Ron would keep his comments to himself until they were alone to discuss this. Weasley was biting back words aplenty, giving Harry questioning looks that bordered between betrayal and revulsion.

"I want you to know where I stand," Draco said, lifting his head in a defiant manner that made Harry want to laugh.

"On the edge of a very unpleasant cliff," Harry told him. "Okay, Malfoy. I shall consider myself warned. You’re going to kill me, and you’re going to torture my loved ones. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me, or can I get on with my day? Do we have to do the whole ‘slap me with glove and vow to meet me on the field of honor’ thing, or will exchanging unpleasant words be enough to suffice for the moment?"

"You put up a good front, Potter, but you weren’t so fucking high and mighty when my father had you on your knees with his cock down your throat," Draco spat at Harry with a sneer. Crabbe and Goyle gasped with delight, and started bellowing laughter.

"That’s it!" Hermione screamed, wand blazing. Malfoy’s fellow Slytherins fell on the floor, immobilized.

Draco was thrilled with himself for a long second, until he took in the malevolence of the stare Harry had centered on him. His own flammable hatred was nothing compared to the icy cold wafting off of Potter. Frozen winds were gathering in the hallway, which was odd owing to the fact there weren’t any windows open.

"Harry?" Ron croaked as he cringed back. "Are you doing that?"

Hermione lowered her wand, shivering. "Harry?"

Malfoy knew that his fate was written in the venomous green eyes that held him tight in their focus. All promises Harry had made against committing violence were long forgotten. Draco pulled back from Harry to run, but it was too late. People on the far side of Hogwarts in the Hufflepuff Tower felt the explosion that followed. It rocked the very foundations of the castle.
"Mr. Potter, this is very serious. I don’t believe you fully appreciate what Mr. Malfoy’s continued absence means to your already-delicate position."

"You’re wrong, Minister Fudge. Malfoy’s absence is something I can very much appreciate," Harry’s voice grated through the darkness.

"You have twenty-four hours to tell us where you sent Draco Malfoy, Mr. Potter, or you will be charged with his murder, and sentenced to spend the rest of your miserable life in Azkaban."

"Minister, are you threatening me?" Harry asked, sitting up straighter in the hard-backed chair. His hands were laced together in front of him by angry red coils of magic. It was the only way Fudge would agree to be near him. Even then, two Aurors had been ordered to stand at the door, to watch the proceedings without a word, to protect the minister if necessary.

"For the last time, what did you do with Draco Malfoy?!" Fudge screamed.

"Why are you so anxious to find Draco?? I sent him to visit Lucius," Harry replied. "Perhaps you’d like to visit Lucius too? You and he were such good friends."

"SNAPE!!" Fudge screamed, getting as far away from Harry as he could, as if there were an invisible border around the boy beyond which everyone else would be safe. Fudge’s fear did not go unnoticed by the guards.

"Draco got his Dark Mark on his arm. Where are you hiding yours?" Harry asked, narrowing his eyes at the man as he squirmed against the door. The Aurors watched Fudge, and in turn watched Potter. Harry avoided their gazes, unsure of what he read there.

"SNAPE!!" Fudge wailed, flustered and frustrated and furious. Harry bore a look through the minister, and let him squirm under it.

"You’re a bigger coward than Lucius was," Potter declared haughtily. "What danger could you possibly be in from me? A liar and a fraud. That’s what you say to everyone when you talk about me. Don’t you believe it yourself though, do you? Why else am I bound like this? Or perhaps you like the idea of seeing me tied up?"

Fudge stopped squirming, and stopping breathing. Fear flooded his features like ice water. The door opened, and Fudge flew from the dark room. Looking puzzled, Professor Snape entered. Doctor Artemis McGonagall followed behind.

"Is everything all right?" Snape asked of the Aurors.

"Yes, sir," they answered in unison.

"Did he reveal anything to the Minister?" Snape asked.
They answered again in unison, leaving the room while carefully not turning their backs to Harry. Potter noted this with an inner squeak of pleasure, knowing he had won a dark victory. Snape closed the door in the faces of the other ministers, who were waiting in the hallway.

"Mr. Potter," Severus intoned, coming over to the chair where Harry was seated. He waved his wand, and the bands of magic disappeared. "You have a visitor. Be polite to the Doctor."

"Harry," Artemis smiled in a stern but motherly fashion that so reminded Harry of Minerva McGonagall. Harry cringed at the idea of how angry Professor McGonagall must be at him right at this moment.

"You’ll be relieved to know that the Headmaster has located Mr. Malfoy," Snape continued, taking off his cloak and wrapping it around Harry’s frame.

"Will I?" Harry retorted, huddling under the cloak. Of course Dumbledore had guessed where Harry sent Draco. Of course he had. Darn it.

"They are, even as we speak, on their way back from Malfoy Manor. The clumsy trip through the layers of marble into the mausoleum left Draco somewhat bruised and battered, but he appears to have survived the excursion relatively unscathed. Congratulations. You managed to crash sixty percent of the wards around Hogwarts with your little power surge."

Harry’s carnivorous smile said what he didn’t dare put into words. Snape restrained an involuntary shiver, and Harry stopped grinning. His victory melted like ice down his spine. Of all the people he might want to scare, Severus wasn’t one of them. Severus conjured a chair for Doctor McGonagall, and one for himself as well.

"Perhaps you’d like to tell us what precipitated this particular outburst," Severus suggested with a thin veneer of calm layered over his anxiety.

"Not really," Harry replied, feeling defeated as he stared down at his hands.

"Wouldn’t you like to have a chance to talk to us about what happened?" Artemis asked. "We’ve already spoken with your friends."

"They told us nothing, of course," Snape murmured. "Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle were more than willing to talk. They assured me that you attacked Mr. Malfoy for no reason. They were calmly walking down the hallway, and you exploded at Draco with no provocation. You’ll forgive me if I find that difficult to swallow."

"I don’t want to talk about it," Harry replied, continuing to stare at his hands. He wanted to open his clairvoyance and read into Snape’s cloak, to find out what Severus was up to, whether he could count on him as an ally in this. Unfortunately, the first thing the Headmaster had done when he found Harry seething with fury in the cold, windy corridor was put a Wet Blanket on Potter’s magic. Harry couldn’t so much as give a magical sneeze until the spell was lifted.

"Would you feel more comfortable talking to me alone?" Artemis asked, reaching out to take Harry’s hand. He dodged the touch, snarling at her. She backed away as he got out of his chair. Going to the wall, Harry was trailing the spare inches of Snape’s cloak along the ground as he wrapped up tightly in the cover.

"I don’t want to talk," Harry repeated. He remained hidden in the dark as he followed the edges of the round room to the sound of shoes crunching on small dust and rock fragments underfoot.

"Mr. Malfoy did something that upset you, and you lost control of your magic, and you sent him
away from you. We do understand the basics of what happened, you see?" Artemis cajoled him, turning in her chair.

"Filch took my socks, and my belt, and my tie," Harry complained, keeping his distance from the doctor.

"Suicide prevention," she explained.

"Draco doesn’t make me suicidal. He makes me homicidal," Harry spat in fury. Severus got out of his chair and advanced on Harry. Potter drew back tight to the wall, and Snape stopped short of him. Harry looked confused and wary, and made a small sound that Artemis couldn’t have heard. Severus put out one hand, inviting Harry forward. Uneasily, Harry moved further away. Snape did his best not to react to this, hoping to make Harry more at ease.

"Tell Doctor McGonagall what she wants to know," Snape requested.

"I didn’t lose control of my magic. Draco wound up right where I wanted him to go." Harry came up with a haughty laugh, but he was moving another step away from Severus, who was standing too close for comfort. "He’s taken the Dark Mark, did you know? It’s on his forearm. Not the real one. It’s a bad, fake tattoo replica. All the same, I know now where his loyalties lie."

"I’m afraid I must disagree with you. He burned his arm in the dorms in an accidental fire of his own creation. I bandaged the wound myself," Snape said.

"I saw the tattoo with my own eyes."

"Charms magic. Lucius was adept with it. Draco is as well."

"He either fooled you all into seeing the mark, or he fooled me into bandaging a fake burn. Either way it’s all irrelevant," Snape said with a shrug. "What else happened?"

"He said he’d killed everyone I love, starting with you. He thinks we’re involved." Harry burned with anger.

"Involved in what?" Snape asked, bluffing.

"He thinks we’re being intimate. Knows I’ve been going to your quarters at night. Thinks that’s why. He threatened your life," Harry whispered. Doctor McGonagall started with surprise. Severus’s eyes grew rounder, not with alarm but with amusement.

"Mr. Potter, I’ll have to have one foot in the Beyond and several limbs lopped off before Draco Malfoy is more than I can handle," Severus purred. "I assure you that the people you love are safe from the evil machinations of that over-inflated schoolboy."

"How can you be sure?"

"I won’t lie to you. There is always risk. Mr. Malfoy might someday grow both a brain and a backbone and surprise us all with his wizarding abilities. But you can’t go through life afraid to live and move around for fear of being attacked."

"Psychologically speaking, one cannot maintain a level of hyper-awareness and vigilance for an extended period of time without causing permanent damage to themselves. Case in point, Mad-Eye Moody," Doctor McGonagall said. "My dear child, come sit down and talk to me. You mustn’t
worry yourself so over these little exchanges with your classmates."

"What else did Draco say to you?" Severus asked. Harry pulled further away into the darkness.

"You were right," he admitted finally.

"I often am. About what, in particular?"

"Draco knows details about what Lucius did," Harry stammered.

"From reading the Daily Prophet?" Snape asked.

"No. Things not in the articles," Harry trembled. "Could he have been watching too? Like Voldemort was?"

"I don’t know." Severus felt Harry’s pain, could hear the strain in his voice.

"You mustn’t let him concern you so," Artemis said.

"He taunted you in specifics about what happened?" Snape asked, fury burning in his stomach. Harry gave one diagonal nod, a move forged somewhere in his stomach between the hot proud denial and terrible cold fear. He made another small sound. It could have been the prelude of a sob, or a barely-smothered blurt of hysteria. Unfortunately, Artemis heard this sound.

"I know whatever Draco said made you very angry, Harry, but you can’t react to his provocations by sending him abroad every time he annoys you," Doctor McGonagall cautioned. Even Severus wanted to slap her. He could easily imagine how furious Harry was with her and her stupid and insipid, and worst of all, unhelpful nonsense.

"No. You’re right," Harry agreed.

"There are other ways to deal with your anger, more mature and constructive ways to defuse the power that Mr. Malfoy has over you."

"Yes. Next time, I’ll start yanking out his organs," Harry growled, poison boiling up into his expression.

"That would be neither mature nor constructive," she chided him.

"But it would make him stop bothering me, wouldn’t it?"

"It would make him fear you. Is that what you want?"

"If it means he’ll leave me alone, yes."

"You cannot change what happened to you, Harry. It cannot be undone. You have to accept it, and move on," Artemis advised. "You have to turn the other cheek when Draco Malfoy attempts to provoke angry reactions from you."

"What?!" Harry screamed. "You want me to just lie down and take it when Malfoy attacks me in the middle of the hallway? You want me to lie there and take it?! I won’t do it! I won’t! I won’t!"

"Harry, don’t be upset," she soothed.

"He’s the one with the problem! Why hasn’t he been locked away!? He’s the one who won’t leave me alone!"
"Why is Draco mad at you, Harry?"

"Because he hates me. Because I killed his father. He said he’s going to torture and kill everyone I’ve ever loved."


"He won’t rest until I’m destroyed!" Harry hollered. "I’m going to have to kill him if I want any peace of mind!"

"Harry, don’t talk that way." Artemis sprang to her feet and approached.

"You better have a talk with Draco and tell him what kind of danger he’s in," Harry told Severus pointedly. "I’m not going to take any more from him or his friends. He’d better keep his mouth shut and avoid me, or I’m going to start taking away body parts. If he’s lucky, I’ll start with the spare ones he’s not using, like his brain and his appendix."

The door to the room swung open without warning, nearly creaming Harry against the wall. Dumbledore strode in, cloak swirling around him. Fury swelled around him, radiating from his every pore. He smelled of decay and darkness, and only seemed to make the room that much more claustrophobic and tight. Harry took in the Headmaster’s ferocity and withdrew from him.

"Mr. Potter and I need to talk. Alone," Dumbledore murmured. One look from the Headmaster sent Artemis and Snape towards the exit.

"I could perhaps help?" Snape suggested.

"Out!" Dumbledore ordered. "Mr. Potter! Sit! This instant!"

Harry went back to his chair and sat down, curling up under Snape’s cloak. On his way towards the door, Severus ran a hand over Harry’s shoulder, and was comforted himself by that fact Harry didn’t pull away.

"Don’t be afraid," Severus whispered.

The heavy door slammed with a resounding thud, leaving Dumbledore and Potter alone. Snape and the Sisters McGonagall were stuck out in the middle of the hallway. The minister and his fellows were congregated at the far end, putting as much distance as possible in order to be safe but be able to overhear. They huddled together, whispering and gesticulating among themselves as they peered back towards Harry’s temporary prison.

"—clearly dangerous—" one said.

"— has to be stopped—" another agreed.

"—nipped in the bud—" another insisted.

"I’ll take care of Potter," Fudge assured them. "Don’t worry. I’ll take care of him. He won’t be a problem for much longer."

If the silence in the room had Snape and the McGonagalls uneasy, the sound of chairs scooting made them all three press to the door to hear. When Harry began to talk in a soft voice, both Minerva and Severus relaxed slightly. Although they couldn’t make out his words, the very fact that he was talking seemed a good sign, wasn’t it?
"It has to stop, Harry," Dumbledore was saying.

"You don’t have to do this," Harry pleaded.

"It has to stop."

"I’ll be good. I promise I won’t do it again."

"I’m sorry. I’m afraid there’s no other choice. It’s going to help. You’ll see. All your anger will drift away."

"Please!" Harry begged. Snape went for the handle, but McGonagall stopped him. An aura of Dumbledore’s magic lit the room with lavender light. It seemed to be fighting with another aura. Purple light seeped into the hallway from under the door. Everything went deathly quiet inside. Then Harry could be heard sobbing. A chair scooted across the stones. The door came open. Dumbledore stalked out, all askew and rumpled. His glasses were crooked. He took them off and cleaned them on a small patch of fabric in his hands.

"Professor McGonagall, you will escort Mr. Potter to the top floor of the Black Queen’s Tower. He will remain there until I say otherwise," the Headmaster ordered once he had put his glasses back on his nose.

"What about–?" McGonagall protested.

"His meals and classwork will be delivered to him, but he is not to leave the Tower. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Headmaster," McGonagall said. Snape turned to go into the room and comfort Harry, but Dumbledore spoke again.

"Professor Snape, you will find Draco Malfoy in the Slytherin dorms, getting cleaned up. Please bring him to my office. We are all going to have a cup of tea, and together you and I going to explain the legal term ‘accomplice during the act’ to Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps Minister Fudge will be good enough to join us. I believe we will all find the conversation very enlightening."

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus intoned. He stared into the room forlornly. Harry was curled up, quivering on the floor in front of his chair, hiding within the folds of Snape’s dark cloak. All the misery in Harry’s body was pouring out through his sorrowful sobs. Each one ripped through Snape like hot knives. Fudge could clearly hear the sounds from where he stood. The bastard had the temerity to smile, and to let Dumbledore see him smiling.

"I see you got through to the boy, Albus," the minister commented.

"Come, Severus. There isn’t much time," Dumbledore said, pivoting on his heels and starting away without another word to Fudge. He hadn’t gone more than a handful of steps before he gazed back at the room, his face filled with guilt and worry. Harry’s crying hadn’t stopped yet. If anything, it was getting louder. Minerva gave Severus a glance that told him to be cautious before she and her sister went into the room and closed the door.

"At least he’ll still listen to you," Fudge commented as Dumbledore swept by him. Snape paused on one foot long enough to glare at the Minister of Magic, who was once again smiling from ear to ear. Severus memorized Fudge’s jubilant face so he would have something to claw at in his private thoughts for years to come.
When Snake Swallows Snake

Chapter Summary

In which Severus and Draco have a little heart-to-heart talk

Chapter Notes

Warning: use of vulgar and offensive language, rude insinuations, and allusions to sexual situations.

"I’m pressing charges."

Severus turned at the words, and frowned at Draco in a dark manner. He wanted to grab the boy and yank the long hair off the back of his head. He wanted to drag Draco to the floor and crush him one limb at a time. He wanted to make Draco hurt the way Harry was hurting right at this moment, from the very core of his being. But there was no need to rush things, was there? There was all the time in the world to make Draco pay for hurting Harry. Snape finished closing the dormitory door in the prying faces of Draco’s mates.

"Potter has made a fool of me for the last time. I’m pressing charges. Nothing you can say will change my mind."

Snape pointed his wand at a chair that stood beside Malfoy’s bed, piled up with the finest cloaks, silken ties, and other sundry clothes. The clothes folded themselves neatly and landed on the bed. Snape sat down and studied Malfoy as the boy moved back and forth like a caged animal. If Severus closed his eyes, he imagined he could hear Harry’s unspeakable sobs coming from upstairs. What had Dumbledore said to Harry to get him to talk? How had Albus been able to persuade the boy to open up to him?

"There’s no point in trying to talk me out of it. It’s time someone put a stop to Potter, and the way the faculty lets him dance around the rules."

"You have stood at the right hand of Lord Voldemort," Severus spoke finally. It wasn’t a question. Draco quieted down, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the Head of his House. "You have stood at the right hand of Lord Voldemort, or you very much want Mr. Potter to think so. Show me your arm, Mr. Malfoy."

"I’m not playing these games with you. I’m going straight to—"

Draco was suddenly on his knees, keening in pain. Snape stood from his chair and came forward, putting his boot on the back of Draco’s head. Severus lowered the boy’s face to the floor and held it there. How easy it would be, a twist of his boot, a crack of the neck. He had dispatched his enemies in such fashion with no remorse before. Why should it matter now? Why should he delay this time?
"You will show me your arm," Severus repeated.

"You have no right to do this to me!" Draco whimpered, putting one hand up against Snape’s leg. Severus bent down and took hold of the hand, yanking the arm, yanking the boy, into a seated position once more. He ripped the sleeve downward, and revealed the bandaged spot on Draco’s forearm. Grabbing the gauze, he pulled it away, revealing the bare naked skin beneath. Snape clutched the wrist in his fist, grimacing in disgust.


"I was good enough to fool Potter and his friends," Draco smirked.

"Do you honestly believe it was so clever of you, convincing Potter you’ve gone and joined the ranks of Lord Voldemort’s minions? They’re gullible children. Of course they believed the worst of you. Because you have chosen to convince Potter you’ve become a Death Eater, he’s decided he has to kill you. Is that what you were aiming for?"

"Fooling Potter was easy. But I was also good enough to convince you to bandage my arm because you thought I had burned it. Charms magic isn’t pointless."

"I won’t make the mistake of showing you mercy or pity ever again, Draco."

"Don’t you speak to me as a familiar. We are not friends. You’ve betrayed your own House, you bastard. I’m going to petition the Board of Governors to have you removed as Head of Slytherin! I am Mr. Malfoy to you. Mr. Malfoy!"

"I have betrayed my House?" Snape laughed without mirth, letting go of Draco’s arm and pushing him back to the floor. "You have no idea what it even means to be a Slytherin, do you, Mr. Malfoy? You’re nothing but a child. Fine. We’re not friends. We never have been. To be absolutely honest with you, I have tolerated you for the sake of my utterly misplaced affection for your father, but I don’t see any reason to continue protecting you from the consequences of your own stupidity. You may now begin making your own way through this school, and through life, based on your own talents and your own faults. Your father will no doubt be watching you from afar. Do try to make him proud of you."

"Don’t you speak of my father! You’ve turned your back on all of us. You’re helping Dumbledore, and you’re fucking Potter."

"‘All of us’?" Snape murmured. "How curious you should say it that way. All of you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"What’s curious?"

"What makes you ‘all of us’? You are one man. One man."

"The Dark Lord’s followers are growing in number every day. Every wizard with any sense will join him soon. They’ll see that Potter is nothing but a fraud and a coward. The only path to true power is to follow the greatest sorcerer, the most feared sorcerer."

"But you are not one of those followers yet, are you? He didn’t accept you, did he? In spite of all your mother’s efforts, Voldemort wasn’t quite ready to accept you as one of his chosen."

"I don’t know what you mean."

"He said you have to prove yourself to him before you will be allowed the honor of taking your
father’s place at his side,” Snape smiled darkly. Draco avoided his eyes.

"I don’t have to talk to you."

"No. Quite right. As well you shouldn’t. But you simply can’t help yourself, can you? I’m so very
easy to talk to, and you have so much to get off your chest. I do want to help you, whelp. I very
much want to keep you from harm."

"I can walk out those doors and out of this school, and you’ll never lay eyes on me again. I stay
only because it keeps me close enough to Potter to hurt him as much as I please. But I could leave
any day, at any time."

"You could. No one would stop you. Are you under the illusion I’d follow you and beg you to
come back? Mr. Malfoy, you’re only here now because your father begged me to watch over you,
and because for lack of better judgment, I’ve tried to keep my word."

"I don’t believe you. I don’t need you to make my way in the world."

"No? Don’t be too sure. At least I’m not trying to sell you away to the Dark Lord like your mother
is. Do you realize, have you been told, that if you die, your mother becomes the sole inheritor of
the Malfoy fortune?"

"My mother loves me. She doesn’t care about the money. She cares about killing Potter and killing
you, and that’s all I care about too."

"Do you know what you mean to your mother? You made her gain forty pounds, and produced
stretch marks on the flattest stomach and firmest thighs in Slytherin. She didn’t pick you up and
hold you until you were six months old, and she only did it then because Lucius threatened to cut
her weekly allowance if she didn’t start showing a bit of maternal affection for you."

"You don’t know what you’re talking about."

"I was there, boy, when they pulled you out of her. I watched Lucius mooning over you, and I
watched Narcissa turn her eyes away in distaste when he laid you naked and writhing on her bare
stomach. You’ve grown up knowing she can’t stand you, and you’ve clung desperately to your
father, knowing he loved you, in his own selfish, stupid way. It’s all over you, your desperate need
for affection and approval. Your mother barely tolerates you, loves you best from afar. Your father
loved you, but hadn’t the first clue how to show true affection to a child, having never been shown
any affection from his own father or mother. Your father hired a wet nurse to suckle you, kept an
army of house elves to amuse you, because your mother couldn’t stand you and wanted you as far
away from herself as she could send you."

"I don’t believe you,” Draco trembled.

"Yes, you do. And you have my sympathy, I assure you, because I know how you feel, when you
love someone with all your heart but you don’t dare say the words because the person would only
despise you for your affection. I must say that your wounded feelings over your mother’s
displeasure with you go a long way in explaining your affections for Professor Volkova. She’s
twice your age, and about as warm and affectionate as your mother has ever been."

"You know nothing about how affectionate she is!” Draco howled, wounded.

"Volkova is old enough to be your mother,” Snape teased.

"This from you? The man who never got over his own mother’s murder?”
"I readily admit, my mother’s death was the most defining moment of my life. There are no two ways about it. It has made me the warped and twisted man I am today. Would you like me to tell you about your mother’s parents?? I’m sure you don’t know the half of that story either."

"You leave my mother out of this!"

"Fine. We won’t talk about your mother. We won’t talk about the Dark Lord, shall we? Do you know what he wanted me to do to prove myself to him? He wanted me to kill my grandfather and sign over my inheritance money to him."

"Your grandfather is still alive. You failed the Dark Lord. He should have killed you when he had a chance."

"I failed him? No. He failed me. He made a fool of me, and that’s not something I suffer gladly. My grandfather is a very powerful wizard, and I tried to kill him, oh yes, tried several times—potions, daggers, boulders, dark spells, evil thoughts, voodoo dolls. Nothing worked. When my grandfather asked me why I was trying to kill him, I told him the truth. Do you know what he did?"

"No."

"He took me to my mother’s grave and told me that the next time I tried to kill him, I was going to wind up down in there with her, and Lord Voldemort would be buried right next to me. Do you want a short explanation of what Voldemort wants with you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"How would you know what he values in me?"

"Your blood. He wants you to be able to breed more pure-blooded, simple-minded, easily-led, easily-controlled servants like you, your father, your mother. That’s all he wanted from me."

"He doesn’t want my blood," Draco scoffed. "He knows I’m a valuable asset. I’m the son of a great wizard. My father will be forever famous for what he was able to accomplish. My father fucked Potter so hard he still has bruises," Draco mocked. "Potter will always stare at the scars on his body and think of my father. He will never be able to have children—my father saw to that. There will never be any more Potters. That’s what my father accomplished. No more Potters, ever. My father has finished them, finally."

"Doctor Mesarik was able to heal Mr. Potter’s injuries. If he wishes to father children, he certainly may do so."

"You’re bluffing."

"I helped in the healing, with spells and potions. I should know the condition of the patient. Mr. Potter is certainly capable of having children."

"No, he’s not. I saw how my father cut him. You should have heard him screaming."

"We’ll have to wait for Harry to find a witch he wants to have children with," Severus said, struggling to quell his fury. The savage, intense desire to snatch the smirk off Draco’s face was almost impossible to resist. If it proved to be in Harry’s best interest, Snape would set about this very day to find a witch suitable for Harry to marry, regardless of his own desperate feelings for the boy. Of course he hoped it wouldn’t be necessary for Harry to father a child to prove to the wizarding world what a man he was. But if he had to do it, Severus would lead Harry to the alter by the hand or by the throat, and promptly go hang himself."

"He never will marry. My father made sure. Potter’s going to be a childless queer, just like you."
There were spells. There were runes. I saw what was done! My father has finally ended the Potter line!" Draco mocked. That detestable smirk was looking more tempting by the minute, Severus decided, fingering his wand.

"Remember that your father is dead, Mr. Malfoy, and remember who killed him."

"Think I’ll ever forget?" Draco snarled. Severus loomed ever closer.

"I advise you to be on your guard with Mr. Potter. With this latest disagreement, you have pushed him beyond his endurance, and the next time you anger him, he promises to render you if not dead then forever maimed."

"He doesn’t scare me," Draco laughed. "I’ve seen him on his knees. I have watched him beg. ‘Don’t. Don’t. Oh, please’."

"Potter knows very well that you have seen him at his most vulnerable," Severus whispered with a dangerous glint in his smile. "Don’t you understand, Mr. Malfoy. It’s all the more reason he has to want to see you dead. You don’t think a proud man like Harry Potter will let you live once you’ve seen him on his knees, do you?"

Draco winced at that remark. No, he hadn’t considered that, had he? Snape moved ever closer.

"No, no, no, Mr. Malfoy. Potter will claw you to shreds given half an opportunity. You need to be wary of him, because you have seen him vulnerable, and because he does have your father’s magic. Yes, what the other students are saying is true. I have smelled it in his sweat, seen it in his eyes, watched it pulse beneath his skin. I’m telling you this for your own good. You absolutely must be cautious of Potter. I’d avoid him if I were you. Stay clear of him, if you value your life."

"I’m not scared of Potter. He does not have my father’s magic. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Besides, I’m a Malfoy. I’ve got the best of the wizarding world’s finest blood in these veins."

"Your blood means nothing spilled out on the ground, does it? Your blood will mean nothing in your veins either until you prove yourself to be a great wizard, and you will never have a chance to be a great wizard yourself until you no longer wish to be viewed in the shadow of your father’s deeds."

"What’s the supposed to be? A warning?"

"It’s advice. That’s all. You could be a great wizard in your own right, you know? You are not without certain talents."

"Like what?" Draco questioned, disbelief in his face. His vulnerability, his need for genuine affection and praise, was nearly as strong as Harry’s was, Snape decided.

"You are without a doubt the most skilled potions maker in your year. I’m intensely proud of how you’ve excelled in the subject. Potions can take you far, Mr. Malfoy. I’ve always told you that. You could be an alchemist, a healer, a doctor even."

"My father said real Malfoys don’t work. We don’t have to work. There’s more than enough money to live for generations in ease, now that St. Mungo’s isn’t going to get the bulk of it," Draco scoffed, dismissing the compliment.

"Why are you so altogether proud of what your father did to Mr. Potter?"
"Lucius Malfoy will be forever famous for raping Potter, for wounding him to the core of his soul, for taking away part of his magic," Draco laughed. "Just you wait. Someday I’m going to be famous for finally killing Harry Potter once and for all."

"I don’t doubt you’d like to be remembered that way. How long do you think you’d live after you achieved that goal? Hmmm, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Long enough to savor all the glory it will bring me," Draco replied, his eyes glazed with dreamy visions of gore.

"That’s it, isn’t it? Voldemort swayed you with promises of power, promises of rewards for your efforts, promises of the fulfillment of your every whim, your every desire, your every dark wish. But first, you must do a small thing for him. Not right away. When you can do it easily and quickly and without drawing blame onto him. He’s in no hurry, as long as you accomplish what he wants you to do. And to whet your appetite for the power you will wield over others, he gave you a small demonstration of what you will have if you make your obeisance to him. You stood at the Dark Lord’s side and watched your father savage Harry Potter."

The grin that wreathed Draco’s face made Snape want to crucio him until he was nothing but a gibbering fool. Draco taunted as much as he could from down on his knees. How like Lucius he was, how very like Lucius, Severus mourned inside.

"Potter begged and pleaded, cried until he was hoarse."

"I imagine you would too if you were drugged to the gills and someone was threatening to cut off your penis," Severus murmured without emotion. "Go on. Say it. I’m waiting. Continue. It’s on the tip of your tongue, and you’re dying to tell me. I want to hear the words."

"I enjoyed every second of it."

"Did you indeed? I’m not surprised. Your father must have enjoyed himself as well. I’m more than familiar with his sadistic streak, having been on the receiving end of it on more occasions than I care to recall. Tell me, what about the attack did you enjoy the most?"

"The sounds Potter made when my father was fucking him."

"You were turned on? You were aroused at the idea of what sounds he might make if you were fucking him?"

"Oh, yes. He screamed and fought, whimpered like a baby. I kept wishing I had been the one the Dark Lord had asked to rape Potter. My father took him time and time again."

"Did you come?"

"Yes."

"Such honesty is so refreshing. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, Mr. Malfoy, because if I have anything to say about it, that’s the closest you’re ever going to get to fucking Harry," Snape snarled. Draco wasn’t quick enough with a response, unsure of the suddenly-hissing, hate-filled tone. Snape continued to speak, but the tone had reverted to a smooth rumble, confusing Draco further. "Did you watch the spells your father performed on Mr. Potter?" Snape asked.

"Yes. They were Dark Arts of the most advanced level."

"Yes, I understand," Snape feigned boredom. "I’m sure they were lovely. There were ancient runes
drawn in black on the floor of the room you and Voldemort and the others were in. Did Voldemort explain them to you?"

"My mother did."

"She was always top of the class in Ancient Runes. I believe I have stood in the very room you three were in. It's where she and I performed the dark spells that made her with-child by your father, did you know that? Do you know you owe your very life to me? She and I charmed and drugged your father into creating you so she could secure a successful marriage to him."

"I don't believe you."

"He was having sex with your mother, all the while believing it was me," Severus told him with a satisfied smile.

"I don't believe you," Draco repeated.

"You don't have to. It doesn't matter if you believe me or not. I could be making it up. The only proof I have is that you are standing here, the product of a conniving witch in search of a vast fortune and a wizard so queer he couldn't walk past a firm male ass without grabbing it."

"That's a damn lie!"

"You were there when your father first met Mr. Potter at Flourish and Blotts. Lucius told me all about what he said and what he did. Fact of it is, he wouldn't shut up about it. How the boy breathed, how the boy spoke, how the timbre of his voice was beginning to deepen, how his shoulders were beginning to spread, how his waist was going small, how his legs were starting to lengthen. Perhaps I should have heeded that as the warning sign it truly was. But, Draco, tell me honestly, did that greeting seem at all normal or strictly hetero to you?"

"Shut up!"

"Your father was very good at concealing his lustful persuasions. He had his friends, to be sure, who helped him conceal them. He had to be careful— Lord Voldemort frowns on any sex that won't result in more pure bloods to control. The Dark Lord has arranged numerous marriages, all to create more supporters for his vile philosophy."

"My father wasn't a queer!"

"If you had heard him going on about how much he wanted to put a collar on Harry's neck and drag him to the first bed he could find, you might think otherwise."

"My father wasn't a queer!" Draco repeated.

"I could be making it up. You could always ask your mother about the night you were conceived and she became engaged, though that might be difficult to broach over marmalade and toast and breakfast eggs."

"My father never had sex with men! He certainly never had sex with you! Who would?"

"I did have sex with your father, the gospel truth."

"You lying fucking bastard!"

"Mr. Malfoy, did your father rape Mr. Potter?"
"Yes."

"Mr. Potter is male, is he not?"

"That’s different!"

"How is it different? You said yourself that your father enjoyed every minute of what he was doing to Mr. Potter."

"I did not! He did not!"

"You said you even enjoyed it too. Are you quite sure of your own persuasion, Mr. Malfoy? I’ve heard these things can run in families. It doesn’t matter," he dismissed as Draco sputtered in anger. "It’s neither here nor there. What I want you to keep foremost in mind is that your mother excels in the usage of Ancient Runes, and it’s the very reason you should be cautious of her. She is out to do you in and grab the Malfoy fortune for herself."

"I trust my mother completely."

"More the fool you are then. She’s probably got her legs open for the Dark Lord at this very moment. Think of what a coup that would be for her– to conceive a child with him! You’d better hope she doesn’t. If she manages to get herself pregnant, you will become obsolete to her."

"I’m not listening to any more of your lies."

"With your money and her ambition, she’ll be the most powerful woman in all the wizarding world. That’s what she’s aiming for- nothing less than the best. That’s why she had to have Lucius. All the best of dark and bright, she often said about him. She didn’t want him because she loved him. She wanted him because he was powerful and rich and easy to use. Tell me about these runes."

"She said these runes would open a channel from the Dark Lord to Potter, so the Dark Lord could take away his magic. My father was the conduit, that’s all. The Dark Lord needed Potter’s defenses to be down, needed his virginity to be taken. My father was only doing what he was told to do, and my mother is not fucking Voldemort!"

Severus had to draw back a satisfied chuckle. It had been so easy to plant the seed of doubt in Draco’s feverish mind that he ought to hate himself for what he had done. Ought to, but didn’t. He made a mental note to check conduit spells in the library when the time allowed.

"If your mother wrote the spells and your father performed them, then they would have worked. Yes, they should have worked, if Mr. Potter hadn’t revived enough to finally defend himself. I want to know how Potter reversed the spell. Don’t you want to know how a defenseless wizard found enough strength to do what he did? It’s remarkable, isn’t it?"

"He’s not going to get away with killing my father. I’m going to kill Potter someday, but first, I’m going to kill you."

"I hope you can. It’s the only way Voldemort will let you into his club, isn’t it?"

Draco faltered, pulling back from Snape, who was practically nose to nose with him, crouched down, a shadowy, sinister, snide caricature of himself from this angle.

"How did you know?"
"You don’t have to say a word," Snape whispered. "I can read it all over you. You have to kill me, and after that, Voldemort will let you in the Death Eaters, and your mother will love you, and your father will be proud of you, and all your fondest wishes will come true."

"Get away from me," Draco whispered, tears springing up in his eyes.

"It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Malfoy. We all want to be loved. We all want to feel as if someone cares about us. We all want to feel as if we belong, and we’ll do anything we have to do to make the people we worship notice us, to make them want us. We’ll walk on fire if it makes them love us."

"I want you to die."

"I understand. Of course you do. You’re angry at me because you think I’ve betrayed your father, and maybe I have betrayed him. I no longer believe all the hateful things he stood for in his life. I worshipped your father for so many years, looked past his faults, willingly subjected myself to his ridicule and his violence, followed in his every step in hopes of somehow gaining a minuscule expression of affection from him. But how could I continue to respect a man who would savage a child in such a terrible fashion? How can you continue to respect him after what he did? What you think about Mr. Potter should be irrelevant when you look at the crime your father committed. You know what he did was wrong, Draco. Look into your heart. If your defense of your father is that he was only obeying Lord Voldemort, that’s no excuse. Even if you feel it absolves your father of blame, how could you ever want to follow Voldemort, a wizard who would ask someone to do such a thing?"

"Fuck you," Draco growled. "Potter got what he deserved. I wish my father had had time enough to finish the task."

"Your father was nothing if not determined and single-minded about his missions for the Dark Lord. If he had had time, I’m sure there’s nothing so unsavory that Lucius wouldn’t have done it, all for The Cause. Yes, you two were in the same boat, emotionally speaking. He followed the Dark Lord, searching for the approval and affection he never got from his father, and he would have licked the ground the Dark Lord tread upon if it would have gained him some measure of acceptance. The only place that Lucius ever drew the line was when it came to you. He protected you from Voldemort as long as he possibly could. Your father loved you beyond Heaven and Earth, beyond life itself."

"You damned right he did!" Draco howled, eyes filling. He didn’t voice the concern, but it was tangible in the air. What the hell was Draco going to do without his father to look after him?

"You don’t have to worry," Severus soothed. "There are times when I too speak in anger and wish the words back. I’m sorry I spoke harshly to you. I will keep my promise to your father. I will always look after you, Draco, no matter how much you might not understand my reasons, because I do love you, in spite of what a monster you can sometimes be."

"I don’t need you to look after me," Draco defended angrily, swiping away the tears on his face.

"Yes, you do. You need me. Merlin, boy, you need someone you can depend on, someone who isn’t going to stab you in the back at the first opportunity."

"I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone!"

"Then, shall we go talk to the Headmaster and to the ministers? They’re waiting. They’re dying to hear all you know about what you saw your father do to Mr. Potter."
"Fine. I’ll tell them all about it."

"Tell them about your mother, and what she did. Tell them about Voldemort, and what he promised you."

"Don’t you worry, I will. I’m not afraid of them."

"Do you know what it means to be the accomplice to a crime, Mr. Malfoy? Did your mother explain that to you?"

"What?"

"An accomplice is someone who participates in a crime that is being committed."

"I didn’t do anything. All I did was watch."

"I’m afraid, Mr. Malfoy, that is precisely what makes you an accomplice. If you had closed your eyes, if you had looked away, if you had tried to stop them somehow, you wouldn’t be in this predicament now."

"What predicament?"

"The ministers have come to hear your version of this attack on Mr. Potter."

"No, they haven’t. They’ve come to take Potter away and lock him in Azkaban because he’s a danger to the wizarding world."

"That may be true, but you will have the cell right next to him."

"No, I won’t."

"Your mother will be in the cell next to yours. What I want to know is where your Auntie Bellatrix was while Lucius was busy mangling Mr. Potter. She would have wanted to be nearby, in case your father should need her. No doubt she would also have wanted to gloat over the scene as much as you have. Tell me, Mr. Malfoy. Where was your dear Aunt Bellatrix?"

Draco froze at that question, fear in his eyes.

"I don’t know where she was. Even if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you," Draco snarled and spat.

"You don’t have to tell me. I’ll find out soon enough on my own. If you want to face the ministers and the Headmaster without my help, I’m more than willing to let you do it. Go on. Go take it like a man."

"I didn’t lay one hand on Potter. They can’t punish me for what happened to him! I didn’t touch him! What about Fudge?!!"

"What about Fudge?" Snape murmured. Draco didn’t expand on the topic, eyes wide with fear. Pity, Severus sighed, wishing he had let the words slide. What else might Draco have revealed?

"I didn’t touch Potter. They can’t do a thing to me."

"You didn’t raise one finger to try and stop the others from hurting him either."

"Why should I? He deserved every minute of it."
"Being so firm in your convictions, it will be your pleasure to go to Azkaban and serve your term, won’t it? You can finish school in ten or so years. No one will ever condemn you for having the courage to sacrifice yourself for your beloved Dark Lord."

Draco opened and closed his mouth in a great imitation of a land-stranded fish.

"Do I detect wavering in your convictions, Mr. Malfoy?" Severus asked, raising a brow.

"You can’t let them do this to me," Draco protested.

"Why not?"

"I’m a Slytherin. It’s your job to look after me."

"No. It’s my job to teach you to brew potions, to give you detentions when you disobey, to give you house points when you excel. It is not my job to protect you from the rule of law when you have transgressed both good conduct and good manners."

"It is so your job to protect me. You’re a Slytherin. We look after our own. We protect each other through thick and thin!"

"You may, perchance, be confusing me with the Gryffindors. They are the ones with the compulsion to rescue everyone in harm’s way. As a Slytherin, my first consideration is always my own safety. Stepping between you and this particular train would leave us both flattened on the tracks. It’s your train. You enjoyed the ride, did you not? It’s your train, Mr. Malfoy. You stop it yourself."

"You don’t mean that!"

"You said you didn’t need my help. Do you need my help? Yes or no??" Snape said, crossing his arms over his chest and putting one hand in his cloak pocket, seeking the side of his wand. To grasp the end would be too obvious. All he needed was to touch the side.

"You can’t let them put me in Azkaban! I’ve done nothing wrong!"

Snape was mouthing words undertone. Draco, in his anxiety, had no idea. It was probably better that way. The bright light that enveloped Malfoy echoed out of his sight in less than a second, hardly long enough for him to mistake it for anything more than the glint of sunlight running through the water and through the dorm windows that looked out into the giant lake. Snape stood up away from him, smiling to himself in a satisfied manner.

"I’ve done nothing wrong!" Draco repeated, nearly sobbing. "I’ve done nothing wrong!"

"No. You’re right. You’ve done nothing wrong," Snape replied. "You’ve been terribly traumatized by this whole situation. I understand."

"Yes, yes, I have."

"Your mother made you stay. She made you watch what they did to Harry."

"Yes, she did."

"Get off the floor. The Headmaster and the ministers are waiting for us."

"I don’t know anything! My mother made me stand there. I wanted to leave!"
"I know you did. That’s exactly what you’re going to tell them."

"You’re going to help me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I love you. Because I promised your father I would look after you. To abandon you because I’m angry with your father is unfair to you. Also, I hope to make you feel guilty about what a wretch you are to me, and to make you reconsider this rash course you’ve chosen. There’s time left to reconsider the path you’re starting down. I could never save your father, but perhaps I can save you."

"I still think you’re a traitor," Draco frowned, hurt and annoyed.

"Very well. You may think what you like," Snape said, turning his back on Malfoy and heading for the door. "I’m not here to be the Thought Police."

"I’m still going to kill you someday, if I can," Draco warned, his voice wavering.

"Perhaps you will, and perhaps I will be grateful for it," Severus murmured. "Do hurry up, Mr. Malfoy. They aren’t going to wait all day, and the longer you delay, the more suspicious they will be of you."

Draco was on his feet, following Snape out the door.
"It’s completely barbaric," Hermione wailed, leaving her textbooks and parchments piled on the table in Hagrid’s hut. She wandered around, picking up dishes and straightening items on the countertop. She needed to have something to do, to keep her mind from spinning out of control. "I wouldn’t go that far," Hagrid said.

"Draco didn’t know a thing about what happened? Didn’t remember a thing? He blocked it all out of his mind due to the trauma of the experience?? I don’t know how Draco lied his way around Veritaserum, but I’m sure Snape had something to do with it. How could Snape do this to Harry? How could he help Draco get out of this?"

"Hermione, Harry said he’s okay," Ron reminded her.

"But they can’t....they just can’t...it’s not allowed, is it?" she asked, turning to Hagrid, hoping for help.

"Dumbledore has Harry’s best interests at heart," the giant reassured her.

"Dumbledore took the only course of action there was to keep Harry at Hogwarts. The Board of Governors was pushing for him to be expelled," Ron said. "The Minister of Magic is pushing to have him brought up on charges for transporting Draco against his will."

"After what Draco said to Harry, he’s the one that ought to be expelled," Hermione said, her eyes welling with emotion.

"Yeah, well, Draco’s been mute as a door mouse since his resurrection," Ron grinned.

"Oh, don’t you worry. I’m sure the shock of the experience will wear off before long, and he’ll be back to his usually-pleasant self," Hermione growled.

"I’d’ve loved to have been the one to have taken the lock off that crypt door," Hagrid grinned boyishly. "It were me, I’d’ve left him in there a good week or so. Let him get right familiar with the smell of death."

"I can’t believe the Headmaster locked Harry in the Black Queen’s Tower. It’s the scariest place in the whole entire school, and he’s in there all by himself," Hermione cried. Hagrid handed her his handkerchief from his pocket, taking the cups out of her hands before she dropped them.

"Hermione, there’s no point in being upset about this. Harry will make do. He always has," Hagrid soothed. "He’s got what it takes to make it through this."

"Some of the parents have been petitioning Dumbledore to expel Harry. They’re sending owls night and day," Ron said. "Professor McGonagall has been burning them."
"The owls?" Hagrid gasped, horrified.

"The letters," Ron corrected.

"Before or after she reads them?" Hagrid wondered, relaxing.

"After. She’s made a list of who they’re from. I’d like a look at that list. We should send howlers to every last one of them," Ron grumbled. "We should send stink-bombs."

"We have to do something about this," Hermione decided softly.

"Oh, no, you don’t," Hagrid warned.

"But we can’t let them lock our friend away. He’s done nothing wrong," Hermione wailed.
"They’re punishing Harry, and he’s done nothing wrong!"

"Harry did transport a wizard against his wishes," Ron pointed out. "Dad said that’s against the law."

"Malfoy had it coming. That and a lot more."

"I couldn’t agree more," Ron calmed Hermione. "Mum and Dad both said that Harry would be safer by himself. No more Malfoy to bother him. It will help him concentrate on his schoolwork. Hermione, Harry said he was okay with this. You have to let it go."

"Let it go?!? They’re holding him in a locked tower! What is this? A school or a prison? The only difference is the lack of dementors, and we both know that could change!"

"Harry said he’s okay," Ron repeated.

"You!" Hermione hollered at Ron, her fury rising. "You don’t want Harry to get out of the tower because you don’t want him running to see Professor Snape! That’s the only reason you want Harry to stay in his tower!"

"Hermione!" Hagrid chided, but Granger was already out the door of the hut, storming back to the castle, leaving a furrow of anger in her wake.

"She’ll calm down," Ron said. Hagrid nodded.

"I sure hope so, or she’s going to be locked in a tower herself," the giant mused.

"You don’t think she’ll go and do something rash, do you?" Ron asked as Hagrid closed the front door.

"Knowing the three of you, odds are better than two to one," Rubeus grinned.

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Someone was tapping at Harry’s window. He sat up in bed, searching for his glasses. His eyes were aching, and his head was thick with sleep. As he stumbled across the floor, he slipped on the area rug and landed hard on his knees. Things could have been worse though. He had missed the corner of the heavy table in the middle of the rug by less than an inch. Standing back up, he walked to the first window he saw. To his surprise, it was empty. Puzzled, Harry stepped back from the panes and scratched his hair. The tapping continued, so he hadn’t been dreaming. Harry walked around the circular room to the next set of windows, about five feet away. The space took an eternity to cross because his limbs weren’t working properly, and his mind was foggy.
Ginny and Hermione had their faces pressed against the glass, and were grinning at him. Harry took several tries and finally opened the handle. January winds blasted into the room. The girls were both riding Ginny’s Quidditch broom. Hermione leapt through the open area and collided with Harry, knocking him off balance. She hugged him tightly, recovering his balance for him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, hugging him again and again.

"Hermione? Ginny? How did you get here? You two are going to get in such trouble!" Harry warned, hugging Hermione back. Together they reached out the window and pulled Ginny’s broom inside. She climbed off and hugged Harry as well.

"We’ll cover for you. Get on the broom and take a spin," Ginny offered.

"No. I’m a bit fuddled right now. I’d just crash," Harry said, leaning her broom against the wall next to the window.

"This is awful," Hermione moaned. "I’m so sorry."

"It’s all right. I’ll manage," Harry said. "It’s not the first time I’ve been locked up for misbehaving. This is much nicer than my cupboard."

"Can we bring you anything?" Ginny wanted to know.

"A harmonica?" he suggested. Ginny looked puzzled, and Hermione laughed and cried at once.

"Harry!"

"Have you talked to Ron?" Ginny asked delicately as she unloaded her pockets of apples and cookies she had brought for him.

"He owled me," Harry said, his voice shaking.

"He hasn’t stopped muttering about Snape. I thought it was Malfoy who said those awful things to you. Hermione told me what he said. I’m very sorry."

"I’m fine," Harry reassured them, his voice cracking.

"Why is Ron mad at Snape?" Ginny wanted to know.

"It’s nothing," Hermione sighed. "Harry, we’ll bring you anything you need," Hermione promised. Harry took a biscuit from Ginny and gulped it down.

"No. You mustn’t sneak up here. You’ll get yourselves in trouble. Don’t do that on my account."

"What about classes?" Ginny asked.

"The professors will be bringing lessons to me. If I have questions, I can send a note with a house elf or by owl."

"They gave you plants at least," Hermione said, walking over to the next set of windows, where a long, curved table was littered from one end to the other with plants of various assortments.

"Professor Sprout said I should take advantage of the terrific light."

"Aren’t they feeding you?" Ginny asked as Harry hastily ate another cookie.
"Yes, but the potion Pomfrey gave me to calm my nerves and help me sleep makes me hungry," Harry explained.

"They're drugging you to keep you quiet?" Hermione exclaimed, horrified.

"No," Harry defended.

"What are they making you take?" she asked.

"It's a soothing potion, that's all," Harry said.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Harry said. Granger remained unconvinced.

"Do you know the official name of the potion?"

"Peaceable?" Harry ventured.

"They're giving you PEACEABLE!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What?"

"It's the most addictive sedative potion ever," she sobbed. "Are you taking that AND the sleeping potion from Doctor Mesarik as well?"

Harry said, "I don't think so," and Hermione swelled like a furious hen.

"Where do they keep your medications?"

"Pomfrey brings them with her....."

"Where's the bathroom?" Hermione asked.

"Around the bend there," Harry pointed. She hurried off in that direction. Ginny dragged her feet, following Harry back to the heavy table, which was laid out with his stacks and stacks of schoolwork. He lit a candle, and Hedwig stirred in her cage on top of the large wardrobe that covered the wall by the bed.

"How long are you expected to live like Rapunzel?" Ginny asked.

"I dunno," Harry replied. "Professor Dumbledore said as long as it's necessary."

Ginny gave him a cautious glance, and then looked towards where Hermione had vanished.

"Wonder what’s keeping her," Ginny said.

"Is she trying to rifle through the medicine cabinet? I already looked in there. Nothing in there but bandages and Pepper-Up."

"She’s worried you’re being mistreated."

"I’m all right," Harry shrugged.

"I’m sorry Ron isn’t here," Ginny whispered.

"It’s all right," Harry sighed. "He’d probably be screaming at me if he were."
"Nothing unusual happened overnight?"

"This is only my second night here. I can’t find my wand. I think they took Rover away from me. I slept very heavily last night. The spell Dumbledore hit me with made me tired too."

"What did he do to you?"

"I don’t know what the spell was. He said, ‘Tristo Lacrimoso’, and I was so..." Potter searched for the correct word, feeling tears well up in his eyes. Ginny’s face furrowed with concern.

"...miserable," Harry continued ineffectively. Ginny pretended to understand, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

"Tristo what?" she asked.

"I can’t find that listed in any of our books," Harry rambled. "I don’t even know how to spell it."

"You didn’t hear anything in the night?" Ginny asked, dropping her hand away, worried she was scaring Harry.

"What makes you ask that, in particular?"

"Fred and George said this used to be the Potions tower a long time ago, and where the Potions Master lived. Charlie agreed with them. Bill remembers coming to classes here as a first year."

"Severus lived here?"

"Roberto Fossuro. One of the Potions Masters before Snape."

"What happened?"

"He did something that angered The Black Queen. He was very famous for his bone-knitting potions, as I recall. This room should be connected to the one down below by a staircase in a door in the floor. He had a two-level living area. Said he liked the windows for his potion plants. But his bone potions were top of the line. The old classroom should be two levels down from this room."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked nervously. The heavy carpet under his feet made examining the floor difficult, but certain boards did creak in a strange way when he tread across them. There was no denying that. Maybe if he got his bearings about him, he could search around and find a staircase out of here.

"I heard that the Black Queen climbed in bed with him one night and burned him alive. The official report claims he fell asleep smoking munia and burned himself up. Who do you believe?"

Harry whirled to study the wardrobe. Even when he had first stumbled into this room, with a McGonagall supporting each arm, he had thought the wall behind the wardrobe was darker than the others in view. Was the large piece of furniture covering burn marks? The bed was the newest piece by far. It was clear they were all mismatched. Were those scorch marks behind the wardrobe?

"These were on the bathroom floor," Hermione chided Harry when she returned. She placed folded clothes on one of the two chairs at the table.

"Being here won’t be a problem for you, Harry," Ginny said. "I heard McGonagall talking to Flitwick about what Dumbledore said. The Black Queen isn't going to bother you at all. She seems to like you. McGonagall suspects you won’t be in the tower any longer than you want to be,"
"You’re not telling him about The Black Queen, are you?" Hermione worried.

"What have you heard?" Harry asked her.


"Is she in Hogwarts: A History?" Harry wanted to know.

"Yes, actually, she is," Hermione said, even more nervous. Ginny turned from Hermione to Harry and began to speak when it was clear Granger wasn't going to go on without a push.

"The grounds of the castle once belonged to her. There are no living eye-witnesses who have seen her spirit. Everyone knows her by reputation though. Some think they've seen her out of the corner of their eyes in dark hallways on certain nights."

"I don't think you should tell him that," Hermione muttered sideways. Ginny went on regardless.

"All that’s left of those who actually saw her is a burned-out space where they should have been. Spontaneous combustion. Poof! Gone! Some people who come into this tower feel inexplicably hot at strange times. Some people have reported feeling hands on their blankets while they’re asleep. Some have described the rattle of bones, like dice in a cup. Others have found runes and bones drawn around their floors too. Some people have found burnt marks, and smelled smoke and fire."

"It's rubbish, Harry. Nothing to worry about," Hermione smiled bright and nervous again. Loud knocking erupted behind Harry. All three of the students jumped with fear. Someone was at the heavy, wooden door. Harry pushed Ginny and Hermione towards the bathroom, putting out the candle with a puff of breath.

"He doesn’t seem to be in distress," Ginny whispered once they were inside the bathroom with the door closed.

"No," Hermione agreed.

"Does this mean we’re not breaking him out?" Ginny asked.

"Well, no, I guess we’d better not," Hermione answered.

The bathroom door opened with a gust of wind. Harry’s room was brightly lit. A tall figure in black scowled down at the girls. Harry was nowhere to be seen.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione gulped. Ginny put her hand to her forehead, closing her eyes.

"Damn. The broom," Ginny whispered.

"Damn indeed, Miss Weasley. Follow me, if you please," Severus growled.
Ghosts

Chapter Summary

In which Harry finds out he's not alone in his tower

"Harry, dear?"
A hand caressed Harry’s. He shook himself aware, having been lost once more in the hypnotic drift of flakes outside the windows beyond the plants.

"I know. It’s tedious at best. But it’s actually fascinating in a way as well," Mrs. Weasley said. She collected papers from around herself on the divan and stacked them into a series of folders crammed into her knitted bag. "It’s all I can do sometimes to keep up in these meetings. It’s like I’ve been hit with a Profundus Confundus. But when I take the pages home and give them another glance, why, it’s as clear as day. The point of this is that I’m making sure the board of governors takes very good care of your generous donation. Which reminds me. I’ve been depositing the travel stipend back into your Gringotts vault."

"What stipend?" Harry asked.

"The travel stipend."

"What?" Harry asked, feeling stupid and dull.

Potter had had a tiring day, and it wasn’t over yet. This morning he had been awakened by Professor McGonagall’s horrified exclamations. The entire floor of his room was covered with black chalk runes, and skulls and crossbones were everywhere among the letters. What’s more, Harry’s hands were smeared with black dust, seeming to point to the conclusion that he had done the deed himself. Dumbledore had been alarmed at first too, until he puttered around the room thinking. He pointed out the fact that no black dust covered Harry's clothes or knees or bare feet, and marking up the floor would have been difficult without stooping and bending and kneeling at some point. Harry could have washed his clothes and knees and feet, but then his hands wouldn't be covered with the chalk. Dumbledore decided he should probably consult with others first, to find their opinions.

Professor Volkova had arrived with grave calm for one being summoned before breakfast and her morning coffee. She glanced at the runic puzzles on Harry's floor for less than five seconds before patting Potter on the head, and dismissing it all as an elaborate joke. When pressed for her reasoning, she merely shrugged and answered that Potter probably didn't know the meaning of half these runes, and neither did the person who put them on the ground in the first place. She ruffled Harry's locks, yawned broadly, and went off in search of coffee.

Severus arrived with a tray of food for Harry, and nearly collapsed in horror when he saw the floor. Harry was worried he was about to be moved to an even-more desolate tower, if there was one to be had. Dumbledore spent several minutes reassuring Snape, Pomfrey was summoned to administer a calming draught to the distraught Potions Master, and McGonagall directed Harry to eat his breakfast. Potter had sat balled up in bed, eating in mute silence until the house elves finished scrubbing his floor spotless. Come to that, the house elves had been very nervous too.
when they first entered the room. Harry was trying not to stare at the runes and wonder which one
of them had scared the heebie-jeebies out of Severus, or why.

"Each board member receives a nominal stipend for travel to and from the meetings, and for
accommodations if necessary," Mrs. Weasley was saying.

"Is that standard?"

"Arthur said the Ministry has a very similar allowance, and a much more generous one as well, but
seeing as how the board of governors at St. Mungo’s is made up of men and women who can more
than afford a cab fare, and at the very least know how to apparate, I made sure the stipends were
very much reduced from the original suggested amount."

"You should keep it."

"That’s sweet of you, dear, but I’m not doing this to make money. I need something to keep me
busy until Bill and Fleur have their baby."

"But you do have to travel."

"Yes, but—"

"You should keep it," Harry repeated.

"Well, if it makes you happy, dear. I’ll start a Christmas fund for next year. That brings me to the
request from Mr. Dunn."

"Which one is he?"

"The one who sits around humming all the time."

"Oh, him."

"He wanted to know if there would be money set aside for a quidditch team from Hogsmeade, with
recruits from the new school."

"I hadn’t thought about....wouldn’t it be better to concentrate on the academics first?" Harry
questioned.

"Normally, I’d agree with you, but Dunn showed me the figures and details on what the estimated
economic advantage and return on having a sports team associated with the university would be,
and you’d be amazed the kind of money it generates."

"Really?" Harry said. Mrs. Weasley fished around for another folder, and handed Harry the page in
question. He couldn’t make any sense of the figures, but made a concerted effort to understand
them though.

"If these projections are correct, you’d be able to recoup the investment in the team in just under
five years, sooner if the team does well," she explained.

"Wouldn’t people think that was a frivolous way to spend money?"

"Harry, do you know why I’ve permitted my children to take up such a violent, barbaric, blood-
thirsty sport as a form of amusement?"

"No."
"It’s an outlet for them. We all have darker passions and urges. It’s where you put those energies that makes the difference."

"Okay," Harry said, not wanting to lump Mrs. Weasley, passions, and urges too closely together in the same thought.

"If they’re allowed to bludger, whack, fly, shout, spit, scream, and curse on the quidditch pitch, they won’t be doing it in my house at the dinner table."

"If you feel it’s worth the effort and the investment," he said. "I don’t have to name the team too, do I?"

"Arthur and I were having a little fun at the dinner table last night. A few suggestions," she said, giving him a sheet of parchment. Harry immediately began to laugh.

"Potter’s Penguins? I like that one," he said, picturing black and white uniforms and bright yellow shoes.

"Harry’s Hornets was my favorite. But it’s awfully similar to the Wasps," Molly replied, digging out a pink folder. Harry’s face lost all amusement. "Can we discuss the Valentine Auction?" she asked.

"I suppose," Harry said woefully.

"You are comfortable with this, aren’t you?"

"Yes," he lied.

"Professor Snape gave me an earful, I’ll tell you. He’s simply appalled, told me I’m prostituting you for general consumption. I was very hurt by what he said. I assure you that it’s all on the up and up, Harry. I wouldn’t see you come to harm, not for the world."

"I know, Mrs. Weasley."

"The first advert went out in Thursday’s Daily Prophet."

"Um hm."

"The response has been, well, to say the least," Molly fished for words.

"Horrible?" Harry winced.

"On the contrary. We don’t know what to do with all the inquiries. We’ve had offers from as far away as Albuquerque."

"Where’s that?" Harry asked.

"It’s in the States."

"That far away?"

"There have even been marriage proposals along with a few of the bids, and one very pervy old wizard from Jersey who made several crude comments about cabin boys, rowboats, and seamen."

Harry made a shocked face, imagining Mrs. Weasley’s fury upon reading that particular post.
"I of course told him very flatly that only serious bidders need respond, and if he so much as thought about sending another rude note filled with sexual innuendos, I’d be on his doorstep with the Minister of Morality," she huffed.

"There’s a Minister of Morality?"

"Arthur says they hardly see him in the office, he’s so busy these days," she replied. "Used to be it was a more ceremonial position than anything else, but lately, Mr. Hawkins has had his hands full. Confidentially, I believe he’s trying to make up for how the last minister was unceremoniously tossed out of office. Asked to resign. Whatever. It was years before you were born, dear."

"Why did he have to resign?"

"He was caught in a delicate situation."

"Um, what kind of delicate situation?"

"One that involves.....ask me again in ten years and I’ll tell you all about it," she smiled politely, chuckling at him. "I want to set your mind at ease, Harry. This is to be a dinner, at a restaurant, in public, for charity. That’s all. No one’s asking you to put yourself in danger. It’s pot roast and potatoes and polite, civilized conversation. There will be Aurors stationed everywhere. What’s more, you will be chaperoned."

"By whom?"

"Arthur and I will be there. Fred and George have even offered to find a romantic restaurant for you. I said I’d ask if you had food preferences."

"Greek?" Harry whispered, going awkwardly silent. Why had he said that? It had come out at random, the first word off his tongue.

"I wanted to reassure you you would be safe. If it would make you feel better, I could open the bidding to the top three offers, to make it less of a date and more of a charity dinner. I could disqualify anyone who gave you an uneasy feeling."

Mental images of squabbling, marriage-minded young witches and their rich, snooty parents came to mind, fighting over where each was going to sit. Harry shivered unconsciously.

"No one the least bit dangerous will be allowed near you," Mrs. Weasley promised. Harry nodded vaguely. "I’ll even twist Ron’s arm and make him come with you, if that would make you feel more at ease."

Harry very nearly began to cry. He didn’t seem to have much control over his emotions. He looked away, clearing his throat. Oh, how nice. The snow outside was falling heavier, threatening to smother away the entire world. Remus was still lost. Harry wasn’t any closer to having a personal talk with Tonks, because he wasn’t allowed any visitors that the Headmaster felt might upset him. Hermione had said that Tonks didn’t know where Remus was, at any rate. Ron wasn’t speaking to him except to berate him about betraying Gryffindor by falling in lust with Snape. Harry had never felt so alone. Now he was really depressed. Molly made a soft noise, and came to stand beside him.

"He’s mad at you, but he won’t tell me why," she said. "Do you want to talk about it? I’m all ears."

"No."

"You’re not fighting over Hermione again, are you?"
"No," Harry laughed.

"That’s good."

"We had words, a couple owls."

"I gathered that. He’s got burnt fingertips from opening one of your letters. I’m not trying to pry, love. I only want to help. You know, there was a time when I could fix anything that was wrong when my children were unhappy. I miss having that kind of power."

Harry remained quiet, and Mrs. Weasley finally took the hint.

"Shall I tell you about the bids? It might amuse you," she offered.

"Okay," Harry mumbled, sniffing. Mrs. Weasley sat down on the divan and opened the pink folder.

"In third place, there’s Percival Peabody."

"Who is he?" Harry blinked, clearing his throat.

"I asked Arthur to check up on him because his name sounded so very familiar. He’s from a good family– has a daughter named Mirabelle. Single father. His wife died unexpectedly, terrible skiing accident. He does his best with a young girl to raise all by himself. I suspect Mirabelle is the reason he’s bidding. I hope she’s the reason he’s bidding," Molly added under her breath. "Hogwarts Alumnus. Ravenclaw. Mirabelle is sure to be among the first years next year herself."

"Do they seem dangerous?" Harry began to relax. A romantic dinner with a ten year old girl wasn’t likely to involve unwanted groping and pawing. At worst, she’d talk non-stop and giggle at everything Harry said.

"No. Nice people, in fact. Percival is in the shipping business, and it’s a good thing, because he’s been known to spend money like water when it comes to making Mirabelle happy. In second place, nipping at his heels are the Goodhopes."

"Sounds safe enough."

"No, no, no. Very dangerous indeed. Godwin Goodhope, good man, his wife Gertrude, wonderful lady, but they have six teenage daughters, all of them looking for husbands. Taking you to dinner with that lot, fetching boy like you, would be like holding a fresh-baked biscuit above a room filled with screaming hungry toddlers. I’m hoping the price goes higher than they can afford."

"Six?" Harry gulped.

"Finally, there’s Orpheus Snape."

"Who?"

"Professor Snape’s grandfather. I can’t help but believe Severus is behind his grandfather’s bidding in the first place, but he denied it emphatically, of course."

"His what? Snape’s grandfather is still alive?"

"They’ve never been close. Professor Snape has always struck me as someone who keeps others at arms’ length regardless of how they might feel for him. Orpheus has been matching every bid by Peabody, toying with him, I’m guessing. The bids are posted in the front lobby at St. Mungo’s, updated on an hourly basis. Orpheus has his house elf standing right there all day, upping his bid"
whenever Peabody or anyone else gets close. It’s nearly cheating, very nearly."

"Why would Professor Snape’s grandfather want a romantic dinner with me?" Harry asked, queasy. Molly was laughing to herself. "Have you ever met him?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Weasley said. "A memorable experience, I must say."

"Memorable good, or memorable you’re scarred for life?" Harry asked.

"Don't worry, Harry. You’re safe from him. Orpheus is an oft-married, philandering, skirt-chaser, literally."

"Whu?" Harry mumbled. "He was chasing you?"

"He was, until Arthur laid him out with a right hook, and put him in St. Mungo’s for a week."

Harry gulped and goggled as Molly continued.

"Ninety nine years old at the time, and there he was, chasing me around the table at the Gryffindor Alumni Dinner. I could have died from the embarrassment!"

"Snape’s grandfather was in Gryffindor?!" Harry blanched, thoroughly confused.

"Oh no, Harry dear. He was the guest speaker that evening, some drivel about how Hogwarts Houses should come together in love and harmony. He runs a group of charitable organizations, keeps them going with the interest off the interest of all the money he’s worth. The Open Arms Charities, I believe. Open Arms? Open Hearts? Open....something."

"Severus said he didn’t have much money."

"Probably he meant that he doesn’t have any currently. If Orpheus ever passes away, his children and grandchildren will be comfortable, if not rich. They can't touch the money either, only the interest."

"Severus doesn’t act like he comes from money."

"Money won’t buy you love."

"There are places in Knockturn Alley, or so I’ve heard," Harry mused. Molly chuckled, patting him on the head.

"Orpheus was a wonderful singer, an exceptional voice. Bear in mind this all happened more than twenty years ago. I was very much a looker then."

She gave a wonderful laugh that surprised Harry, and he was nearly overwhelmed with curiosity, enough that he wanted to take her hand and read what memories had sparked that wonderful sound.

"Yes, strange old Orpheus. Usually he’s the very essence of pure blood distance, but you put a bit of cheer in him, and he turns into someone else entirely. He’s probably given up singing by this point. He’s not seen in public much any more. Not for the last four or five years, I believe. I doubt he’s given up chasing redheads around banquet tables though," she continued.

"Perhaps he has them brought to him to save time?" Harry questioned.

"He was a terrific singer, really," Molly added.
The door to Harry’s tower rooms opened, and Madam Pomfrey entered.

"Time for evening medications," she said cheerfully. Harry was anything but delighted at the prospect. He watched Mrs. Weasley packing up her things, wishing she would stay longer. Oblivious to his discomfort, Molly kissed him on the cheek before departing.

"Good night, dear. Pleasant dreams."

***

Harry was discovering that one of the side effects of too much Peaceable was, ironically enough, bright-eyed wakefulness. He was propped up on the divan in his darkened room, having abandoned the bed hours ago. Dreams of being chained up in Voldemort's dungeons and being raped by long lines of Death Eaters had driven him to seek a more-comfortable, less troublesome sleeping arrangements. He was feeling nearly as miserable as when Dumbledore had cursed him, for surely, any spell that had caused him to cry uncontrollably for hours was nothing if not a curse, and an ugly one at that.

It wasn’t that Harry disliked being alone in the tower. He had resented it at first, of course, but understood that Professor Dumbledore had had no other choice. There were certain things he could appreciate about being here. His days were no longer spent avoiding Draco Malfoy and his friends. But the nights were the worst for him. Even when he could sleep, which wasn’t often lately, he had nightmares more disturbing than ever before. He was forbidden to leave the tower, and had given his word that he would remain there as long as Dumbledore demanded. But there was nothing he wanted more than to walk out the door and make his way down to the dungeons, to see if Severus was awake, to see if he would like company. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine himself in the large chair in Snape’s outer chamber, pooled limply with his head on Severus’s shoulder, or wrapped up warmly in his arms. He had secretly kept Snape’s loaned cloak hidden under his bed for a day or so, but McGonagall had found it and taken it away from him. He remained angry at her for it too.

The fireplace had long ago burned down to embers. The tower room wasn’t unbearably chilly, so Harry hadn’t rekindled the fire. The house elves had come for laundry and gone. Dobby had given Harry a plate of biscuits and cold beef sandwiches to tide him over till morning, along with a pitcher of ice cold milk. The plate and the pitcher stood empty on the big table.

Harry glanced around, cataloguing the room’s dimensions, thinking of Severus’s tiny, smelly book, and monsters who could pick locks, and shadows too big for their corners. Uncomfortable, uneasy trails of feeling went through him. He knew someone was in the room with him, but he couldn’t tell where. He only knew that he was not alone, and he had yet to find his wand. Rover was gone! If the Peaceable hadn’t been making his magic so wobbly, he might have been able to use his clairvoyance to locate his wand or discover who was in his room with him.

How many nights had he passed like this, feeling someone else in the room with him, and being too afraid to tell anyone for fear they wouldn’t believe him? Pomfrey was giving him more and stronger Peaceable with each passing day, and Harry knew it. But she wasn’t the one in the room with him. He could have told Snape, but even Severus might have been doubtful, and Harry had no proof. Harry couldn’t tell Professor McGonagall. He hardly had the nerve to look her in the face after having spent so many hours sobbing in her arms while under Dumbledore’s curse. She must have known what spell the Headmaster had used on him. Why hadn’t she undone it, or at the very least left him alone in his misery? No. All she could keep saying was how ‘the crying would do him good, would get the poison of hatred and pain out of his system. Everyone needs a good cry now and again’. Rubbish, he snarled to himself at the memory. And she had taken Snape’s cloak
away from him too.

Finally he heard it loud and clear– the step of a foot on the squeaky boards in front of the empty bed. There was a sweep of material backwards, as if the figure was pulling the covers off the mattress. Harry held perfectly, completely immobile on the divan. A swish swish swish of material swept towards him on light feet. Willing himself to be motionless, Harry watched the floor.

A figure drifted into view with the shift and rustle of fabric and the soft patter of slippered feet. It appeared to be a woman, draped in black from head to toe, her face covered with blackness beneath her veil. She paused in front of the unmoving boy, and reached out as if to touch him. Harry kept still, raised eyes focused on the featureless face. He couldn’t see any eyes in the face– nothing at all but blackness covered in blackness surrounded by blackness. Even with his mind and magic swamped and befuddled with Peaceable, Harry could sense the outer boundary of strong magic around the figure. He imagined he could see an aura around the arm that was coming for him.

Suddenly, the figure jerked back its hand. Had it brushed the boundary of Harry’s magic? Had it been startled by what it felt? The ghost rushed away from Harry, with the same confusing slap of slippered feet on the wooden floor. It vanished directly into the cold fireplace. Flames shot up violently, and the air filled with the stench of burnt wood and carbonized flesh. Trembling, Harry drew his legs up onto the divan and hid his face in his knees.
In which McGonagall and Snape visit Harry in his tower

"I’ve seen her, I think."

Chapter Notes

Warning for smooshie sweetness

"Who?" he asked. Apparently he had heard. Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He had waited another week, building up his courage to tell someone while enduring night after night of horrid dreams about dungeons and being raped over and over again. Snape was the obvious one to tell, as McGonagall had done nothing but find fault with Harry from the minute she had stepped in his rooms this afternoon after regular classes had finished. Harry’s wand had turned up, hidden under the mattress on his bed. Had he put it there? He couldn’t remember putting Rover there.

"Her," Harry said, moving one hand around as if motioning to the room and to the tower. He folded his mouth together tightly as Professor McGonagall emerged from the washroom. She was carrying a watering can, and tending to the plants on the table. Snape lifted the beaker to his cauldron again, turning the page in the Potions text with his other hand. He shot Minerva an annoyed glance before turning back to his work.

"Did she say anything?" Severus asked calmly, facing Harry and putting his back to Professor McGonagall.

"No," Harry replied. He lifted his beaker and followed Snape’s directions for the assignment, but his mind was not on the cauldron in front of him. Their potions were not even the same color. Harry’s brew burped and boiled in a most offensive way. Harry’s Transfigurations assignment had not gone any better. He was supposed to create a deck of cards out of a box of matches. The best he had managed was a flaming stack of misshapen squares with numbers generated randomly over their strange, flame-covered surfaces. If there were decks of cards in Hell, they would have probably resembled Harry’s final product for his lesson.

"Did who say what?" McGonagall asked.

"One of the ghosts," Harry answered, his words slurred.

"Is Moaning Myrtle pestering you?" she worried.

"We should concentrate on our lessons," Snape said before Harry could fill in the blanks. It was
obvious to both Harry and Minerva that Severus resented McGonagall for lingering after the Transfigurations lesson had finished, being here with Harry precisely when she knew Snape would be conducting his Potions lesson for the isolated boy. There was a growing tension between Minerva and Severus, and it appeared that McGonagall was taking the same route as Ron in questioning the strange bond between the former enemies. Harry couldn’t help but believe that was because Ron had told Minerva everything he believed was going on between Harry and Severus, and McGonagall was none too thrilled about it.

The only thing that had made the evening bearable was the fact that Snape was proudly displaying a button of Gryffindor creation on his austere black jacket. Hermione had made them all by hand, so Luna Lovegood had said when she owled Harry one surreptitiously. Miss Granger had spelled the buttons in her special way. Most of the buttons, when worn by average Gryffindors and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs and various faculty members, simply read ‘Free Harry’. The buttons of good friends of Potter’s also read ‘Free Harry’, but that sentiment alternated with ‘Imprison Draco’ or ‘Expel Draco’ or ‘Impale Draco’. Apparently the spell sensed what the wearer might want to do to Mr. Malfoy. Ron’s button usually read ‘Pound Draco’ or ‘Smash Draco’, Luna had reported, along with ‘Kill Snape’. Needless to say, Weasley had been cautioned to take off the button when attending his Potions classes.

Severus’s button was taking an entirely different approach to the situation. In the last ten minutes alone, ‘Imprison Draco’ had alternated with ‘Kiss Harry’, ‘Snuggle Harry’, and ‘Hold Harry’. Maybe Severus couldn’t read it from the bad angle at which it was pinned. Had he pinned it on himself, or had someone else pinned it on him? Hermione, perhaps? Would he continue wearing it if he knew what it was saying?? Was it saying these things in front of the students and faculty? Harry stifled a small smile. That might explain why McGonagall was mad, if she had seen what Severus’s button was saying. Harry had noticed that McGonagall was not wearing one, and he knew she usually held herself above such trivialities, but wouldn’t it have been nice of her to at least have hidden one on her collar, or on the brim of her deerstalker? ‘Pet Harry’ came up on Snape’s button, followed by ‘Nuzzle Harry’, and Potter smiled a bit wider. He could do with a little petting right now.

"This is a pain killing potion, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

"Yes. You recognized the ingredients, did you?” Snape asked.

"No. It smells like some of the ones that Madam Pomfrey uses,” Harry said.

"It is very similar indeed."

"Is it like Peaceable?” Harry wanted to know.

"The potions are related,” Snape admitted, "though Peaceable is meant to ease the pain of the mind rather than the pain of the body."

"This potion is weaker by comparison."


"But the Peaceable I’m taking is much stronger than this,” Harry said.

"They’re practically identical except for one or two ingredients which we cannot use in classrooms, owing to their delicate nature. Your doses of Peaceable should not be stronger by a noticeable amount."
Harry gave Severus a significant look, holding his eyes for many seconds. ‘Protect Harry’, his button proclaimed. Potter dropped his gaze, feeling a lump of emotion clog his throat. ‘Protect Harry’, the button said again.

"Will I be able to stop taking that Peaceable soon?" Harry asked.

"It’s making you feel better, and helping you sleep," Minerva protested. Snape rolled his eyes, and his button flashed ‘Choke Minerva’. Harry clenched his mouth together to keep from smiling. McGonagall must have realized that she was missing part of the conversation. She came and planted herself at the head of the table, where she could see both Harry and Severus’s faces at once. Harry reached over and plucked off Snape’s button.

"I really like these," he said. ‘Dissect Malfoy’ appeared as he slipped the button back to Snape. He put it in his hand instead of on his jacket. Severus didn’t understand why until he glanced down. Whatever the button was saying, Snape stuffed it in a pants pocket, avoiding Minerva’s dark expression.

"Harry, why would you want to stop taking a potion that is helping you?" McGonagall pressed the young man.

"Hermione told me that it’s highly addictive. She owled me a book. I’m already showing signs of being overdosed," Harry replied. "And I’m not sleeping very well."

"I don’t want to insult your comprehension abilities, Mr. Potter, but I’m sure you misunderstood whatever it was that Miss Granger sent you. Madam Pomfrey knows far more about safe medical dosages than you can read in one single book."

Harry struggled to hide his annoyance, and tried to study his potions manual. Severus adjusted the flames under Harry’s cauldron as Minerva sorted through Harry’s remaining homework stacked up at the head of the table.

"You haven’t finished your Charms work yet?" she asked. "Or your Dark Arts?"

"I’m having trouble concentrating," Harry said.

"I realize it must be troubling, to be kept apart from your fellow students."

Harry picked up his potions manual and gazed hatefully at the pages. Severus was surprised the book didn’t burst into flames.

"Are you nearly done? Harry might have time to finish this work before Professor Volkova arrives," McGonagall pressed Snape.

"We might make considerably better progress with fewer interruptions."

Snape and McGonagall goggled at Harry with their mouths open. His voice had had every mark of Lucius Malfoy’s snide tone and manners, enough that chills went up and down Snape’s spine.

"Irritability. It’s another side effect of too much Peaceable," Harry added blandly, not looking up
from his work. "Have I mentioned the tendency towards hallucinations, and the distant ringing in
my ears? What about the difficulty concentrating my magic?"

"Mr. Potter, that’s enough!" Minerva bellowed. Harry closed his manual with a formidable thump,
and threw it on the table. The very corner slid into the flame pot under one of the cauldrons, and
Snape snatched it out fast.

"Test the potency of the Peaceable Pomfrey is giving me, or I’m not taking another swallow!"
Harry shouted.

"The Board of Governors for the school has decreed that either you will take your medication as
Doctor Mesarik prescribes, or you will be shipped to St. Mungo’s, where they can keep you from
harming yourself or any of your fellow students. Oh, Harry, do you think I want to see you locked
away?" McGonagall blurted.

"Where does Madam Pomfrey get the potion? Do you brew it for her?" Harry asked Severus, not
answering Professor McGonagall’s question. He wasn’t sure if she wanted him to be locked away,
but he was sure he didn’t want to be trapped anywhere near Artemis McGonagall day in and day
out. She would do her best to make him cry non-stop, no doubt.

"No. It contains a particular controlled substance that St. Mungo’s does not allow to be purchased,
distributed, or cultivated," Severus said.

"Pomfrey must be getting it delivered from St. Mungo’s."

"Yes."

"Could Toadvine be brewing it?" Harry asked.

"It’s possible," Severus admitted. "As the senior Healer on staff, he is the Potions Master for St.
Mungo’s. He heads the department that trains young medi-wizards and witches. I believe that’s
how Toadvine and Pomfrey became acquainted many years ago. They were both up for the same
job."

"This is preposterous. You’re feeding his paranoia," Minerva accused Severus.

"Unfortunately, that’s another side effect, paranoia," Harry told her.

"Would you like a royal taster?" she asked tartly.

"If you’re so certain about the veracity of the Peaceable, you can have my dose tonight. If you
show no ill effects, and the potion passes Professor Snape’s approval, I’ll be happy to allow you to
impair my senses, make me question my own sanity, and jeopardize my ability to do battle with
Lord Voldemort. I’m sure he’ll be more than willing to make certain allowances for my
handicapped state of being."

"Harry!" Severus exclaimed, racing around the table and pulling the boy back from McGonagall as
she went an ashen color. He stood between them as Minerva cleared her throat and wrestled with
the dark words on her tongue. Harry took a deep, shaky breath, covered his mouth with one hand.
Even he had been surprised at the venomous intensity of his words. He raced out of the room,
slammed and locked himself in the bathroom, and kicked the door several times. A chilly quiet
took over the table where Minerva and Severus stood.

"I’d prefer to talk to him alone, if you’d like to leave," McGonagall said in a voice as crisp and
fragile as burnt parchment. She was angry, but more than that, she was hurt. Harry didn’t trust her
any longer, and there was no denying how deeply that wounded her.

"Give him a few minutes to pull himself together," Snape answered. "Dangerous mood swings are another side effect of being overdosed with Peaceable."

"You’re making excuses for him and feeding into his fears."

"What if he’s right?"

"Severus, don’t let your personal feelings cloud your judgment."

"What if he’s right?" Snape repeated, much more softly. "If you give me time, I can talk to him. I will check for other signs, things not included in whatever book Miss Granger managed to secret to him."

"What kind of signs?" she asked, dripping with skepticism. "Don’t blow smoke up my skirt, Severus."

"Give me ten minutes with him," Snape pleaded. He must have said something correctly. Minerva agreed with a huff of annoyance.

"You can have your ten minutes, but I warn you, I’ll be right outside that door."

Snape blew out the flames under both cauldrons, and headed for the bathroom.

"Let me in, Harry," he said, knocking on the portal.

"Go away," Potter choked.

"Let me in," Severus soothed. The lock gave a small metallic click, and Harry allowed Snape inside. The door shut fast and locked again. Minerva crept close and put an ear to the wood to hear.

"I can’t do this," Harry said, sniffing loudly as he sat down on the floor with his back to the door. Severus sat as well, though the position was none too comfortable on his frame. Harry’s personal effects were strewn about the counter and floor as if he had swept them all down in anger. The towel hanging from the rack had a big hole burned through the center.


"They’re practically tying my hands behind my back and somehow expecting me to finish my Charms work, battle Voldemort to the death, and carry on happily as if I haven’t a care in the world. I feel as though I’m losing my mind."

"Don’t be dramatic. I’ll test the Peaceable tonight. I’ll know if anything has gone afoul."

"I can’t do this. Don’t they realize what’s happening to me?"

"They realize," Severus promised. "I’ve always told the Headmaster that he’s expecting too much of you. He continues to assure me you are made of very stern stuff. Perhaps he pushes you only to further your limits beyond your fears."

"That’s the stupidest thing I’ve EVER heard," Harry cried, burying his face in his knees.

"Harry, you are in this tower as punishment for transporting a wizard against his will. You very nearly got expelled for what you did. That will not change no matter how much I talk to Dumbledore and McGonagall about your situation. You may not send Draco around the globe at a
"whim, and nor may you snatch out his internal organs."

"I know that," Harry said. "I didn’t mean it. It’s not like I’d actually do that. I was blowing off steam, that’s all."

Severus could feel the shivers running through Harry’s frame, and he couldn’t remain aloof any longer. He reached an arm around him to be comforting. Harry wasted no time climbing into his embrace.

"You’re under a lot of pressure. I know," Snape whispered, kissing the wet cheek under his chin.

"I need to be able to control my magic to defeat Voldemort. Drugging me half out of my mind, making me see ghosts in my room, causing me to have hallucinations is not going to help any of us, is it?" Harry insisted.

"No, certainly not."

"I don’t care if they feel safer when I’m drugged up. It’s going to stop. I’m not taking any more of that Peaceable. I mean it. I’m not taking any more of it!"

"You won’t have to. I promise," Severus whispered against his cheek.

"I’ll stay in the tower, but I’m not taking any more Peaceable."

"All right. I promise I will do my best to reason with the Headmaster, but you are going to have to be on your best behavior."

"I will."

"Leave everything to me."

"Make them stop drugging me. I can’t do this alone, especially if I haven’t got my wits about me."

"You are not doing this alone," Severus promised, kissing Harry’s cheek once more. This was what Snape had missed– the sound of Harry’s voice, the taste of him. It was a drug more addictive than all the munia he had ever consumed. He nosed against the young man’s skin, wanting to lick his wounds and caress away his fears, wanting to reassure him.

"I’ve missed you so much," Harry whispered, immediately regretting the words. Even if he couldn’t have seen the shadows of McGonagall’s toes right at the bottom of the door, he could indeed hear her breathing on the other side of the wood. Severus kissed Harry again, lower on his jaw, lingering but a moment too long in order to feel the beat of his heart. Harry tilted his head back, and gave a moist, shaky sigh. Snape’s breath against his neck tickled down into his loose collar and down his shirt. He went hot with shame and pleasure at once, pushing the horrible dreams out of his mind and concentrating on the protective love welling off of Severus. Nothing mattered except how safe Harry felt, right where he was, right at this moment.

"You are not in this alone," Severus repeated, brushing the tip of his nose against Harry’s. Snape stood to his feet, straightened his clothes, and reached a hand down to Potter. Harry climbed carefully to his feet, letting Severus dry his face for him. He gazed up at Snape, as if waiting. Curiously, he was beginning to smile.

"What does your button say?" Harry asked. Severus reached into his pocket and pulled it out. His eyes went wild with panic. Before Harry could read it, he stuffed it away.
"Nothing that bears repeating in mixed company," Severus answered, clearing his throat. Harry managed a small laugh, drying his eyes again.
A Mere Trifle

Chapter Summary

In which Harry plays prestidigitation tricks with his medications, and Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape put their heads together

"I suppose I could do that," Harry agreed, giving Snape a very skeptical glance as the Potions Master backed away from his bed. Potter was piled under mounds of blankets and a furry throw that Hagrid had sent to him. Across the room in front of the fireplace, Professor Volkova was reading what little of Harry’s Dark Arts essay he had completed, and she was taking her time about it too, as if waiting for more to materialize out of nothing.

"It should be easy for you, the great Harry Potter," Snape murmured. "A mere trifle."

"No more delays, Mr. Potter. Time for your evening medications," Madam Pomfrey said, looming next to his bed with her goblet of frothy brew. Snape turned and walked to the heavy table, where he collected the Potions supplies that were lying about. He capped vials and put them in the case he had laid open. He glanced over one shoulder at Harry, who caught his eye.

The empty vial that Snape was holding up started to fill with clear liquid. Poppy had her eyes glued to Potter, observing his every move. Volkova couldn’t help but notice the vial as it sparkled in the light from the setting sun. Her eyes went wide, and she blinked wildly. Harry glanced at her, and she immediately ducked her face down, pretending to be reading the parchment in her hands.

"I want to see you swallow all of that, Mr. Potter," Poppy warned in an ominous tone. The filling of Snape’s vial stopped. Harry made a swallowing motion, and afterwards, liquid again started to appear in the vial. Harry was beginning to turn blue with effort though. "All of it," Pomfrey said. The vial was nearly full. Harry made a loud choking sound, coughed copiously, and gasped for breath. Snape clapped a stopper on the brim-full vial and hid it in his palm as Harry sputtered and wheezed.

"Oh fuck," Harry cursed between coughing fits.

"Such language!" Pomfrey chided him.

"Vile, nasty shit," Harry continued to curse.

"Down the wrong pipe?" Pomfrey asked. "Are you bleeding?" she asked, noting reddish dots appearing on the hand Harry was coughing into.

"Must have bitten my cheek," he mumbled, holding his jaw.

"What a soldier," Severus taunted in a friendly tone, coming over to the bed and patting Harry briskly on the back. Harry swatted him away, and Snape stepped out of reach, unduly amused.

"Until tomorrow night, Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said, bustling away, the wings of her hat flapping in her wake. Volkova came over to the bed, rolling the scroll into a tight, tidy bundle. She and Snape exchanged a look, and she made a one-shouldered shrug. Whatever they were up to, she wasn’t going to interfere, at least for the time being. Perhaps she had deduced on her own from reading
Harry’s essay that something was wrong with Potter, and Snape was testing the Peaceable to see if it was the problem. Professor McGonagall came back into Harry’s room, and exchanged pleasantries with Poppy at the door to the tower prison.

"Lovely evening," Minerva smiled.

"Such a beautiful sunset," Poppy agreed.

"Ta."

"Ta."

"Put it back," Harry muttered to Snape in a low whisper. Severus fingered the vial in his grip, holding it up for a dangerous second or two. There was a perfectly-shaped molar floating inside, and wispy tendrils of blood as well.

"Only a wisdom tooth. You'll never miss it," Snape answered. He touched his wand to Harry’s cheek, putting the vial away again. The madly-throbbing pain in Harry’s face and jaw drifted down out of reach and went away.

"Sadistic bastard," Harry snipped, rubbing his jaw at the mere thought of how much it had hurt moments ago. Snape tickled Harry’s ear canal with the tip of his wand, and studied his neck longingly. Volkova cleared her throat. Severus felt McGonagall’s reproachful eyes long before she reached Harry’s bedside.

"I believe you have work to do," McGonagall dismissed Snape curtly.

"Of course," Severus replied before hurrying away.

"You should be asleep, Mr. Potter," McGonagall told him.

"I won’t be but a moment," Volkova promised when Minerva turned jealous eyes in her direction.

"His essay was hardly worth the effort of climbing the tower," McGonagall said, chastising Harry. "He will produce better in the future, won’t you, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma’am," Harry replied.

"You’ve got more important things on your mind?" Volkova asked, touching Harry’s cheek. He felt another healing spell work into his jaw, and nodded his thanks.

"Nothing in the world is more important than your education," McGonagall huffed.

"Killing Voldemort, staying alive, finding Remus– I can think of more important things," Harry retorted.

"This scroll was a starting effort on a subject I want you to explore more thoroughly, Mr. Potter," Volkova said, giving it to Harry with a gentle thump on the wrist while McGonagall glared back at him. "You may not believe you will ever need to know the exact degree of cold at which Lethifolds will go into hibernation, but I assure you, there may come a time when a Frigidarium spell may very well save your life. Reread the chapter, and give this essay another effort."

"Yes, Professor Volkova."

"Having iced-over Mr. Malfoy’s trousers on several occasions, I know you understand the concept of the Frigidarium spell. But this chapter will help you understand the subtle nuances of each
degree of cold that you can achieve. Role play the situation, if that makes it easier."

"What?"

"Imagine yourself in a dark jungle, and suddenly you’re fallen upon by a veritable crowd of Lethifolds. How would you deal with the situation?"

"Apparate away."

"An apparition spell would take the Lethifolds along if they’re attached to you."

"How many are we talking about?"

"At least three. In two days, I expect another scroll," Anna said.

"Couldn’t I pretend I’m the Lethifold instead?" Harry asked.

"If it makes the essay easier, you may be the Lethifold. Tell me how your human victim would counter each attack," Volkova agreed, giving a stiff bow. "Pleasant dreams."

After Volkova left the room, Harry scrunched down into the piles of covers, and watched the sunset as McGonagall blew out the lamps and candles and left without a word. Apparently she was too angry to care about the state of his dreams. Harry hoped if he got any sleep, he didn’t spend it dreaming about killer bolts of cloth. That would have been an improvement over Voldemort’s dungeon, though. Harry was convinced the Dark Lord must have been using the connection between their minds in order to torment Harry with terrible dreams. If only Harry could manage to have lurid, sexy dreams about Severus and torture Voldemort in kind. In the orange-laced near-darkness, he rubbed his tongue over the back of his jaw where minutes ago, there had been a tooth, and tried to think very dirty thoughts about his Potions Master.

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"You’re sure of this?" Dumbledore asked, losing a tea biscuit into his cup. He gazed wistfully into the dark brew, but decided not to plunge his fingers inside.

"I’ve been testing the sample for the last two hours," Snape said. "It’s five times the normal strength. It’s a wonder Potter can speak, let alone perform magic. I shudder to think that I let him near potion ingredients in that condition!"

"Could the results have been skewed by Mr. Potter having first put the potion into his mouth before you tested it?" Albus asked. "As much of that as he’s drunk in the last three weeks, he’s bound to have an excess built up in his system."

"No. There were traces of blood and saliva in the sample, but not enough to skew the results."

"How did Harry put the potion in the vial for you?" Dumbledore questioned. "How did Pomfrey not see what was going on under her nose?"

"You may as well tell him about the tooth," Minerva sighed between sips of tea.

"He doesn’t want to know about the tooth."

"Harry apparated the Peaceable from his own mouth into the vial, and accidently put in a back tooth as well," Minerva informed Albus.

"My word!" Dumbledore exclaimed. "Maybe Harry would like the tooth back, Severus?"
"I healed him. He’s fine. It was a wisdom tooth. What are we going to do about Pomfrey? Do you believe she’s been compromised?" Snape asked.

"I don’t want to believe that at all," Dumbledore replied.

"I have a suggestion," McGonagall said, helping herself to another tidbit from the tray on Dumbledore’s desk. "I will stay in Madam Pomfrey’s office and keep her occupied until we have arranged for an Auror from the Ministry of Magic to come and question her. It can’t be one of us—it must be someone totally neutral. One of you must go to Harry’s tower and stay with him until we have safely secured whoever at St. Mungo’s was overdosing Harry’s Peaceable. The other of you needs to contact the Ministry of Magic at once, in spite of the late hour."

"Capital plan, Minerva," Dumbledore pronounced. He emptied his cup, chewing up the soggy biscuit in the bottom. He chewed and chewed, and stared at Severus, waiting.

"I’ll go to Harry’s tower, if I may," Snape said, doing his best to hold down the quiver of excitement in his voice.

"I’ll contact Fudge," Albus said after a loud swallow. Severus and Minerva both groaned in unison. "Not Fudge?" Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he smiled at them.

"Is there anyone else we might contact before Cornelius?" Minerva asked. "It’s fair to say he’s rather less than neutral in his feelings about Mr. Potter."

"I could contact Arthur Weasley first."

"Perfect," McGonagall agreed.

"Not exactly neutral either," Severus corrected.

"I’ll go to the Ministry and find someone neutral," Dumbledore promised. "Surely there must be someone."
In which Harry meets his ghost face-to-face

Harry was sitting up on his divan, feet on the cushions, head on his knees, wide-eyed, awake, and aware. He could hear every noise in the castle, he imagined, every creak and shudder. Any time a cat meowed or a mouse scuttled, he could sense the direction the pursuit would take. Every time the Floo activated somewhere along the Hogwarts network, he could see tiny belches of green flame come through the empty fireplace. He had purposefully not lit a fire because he wanted the room as dark as possible. Only scant beams of moonlight swept over the floor. An ivory crescent was visible through the opened curtains.

The house elves had come for laundry and gone away again. Dobby had brought Harry a plate of chicken sandwiches and a giant mug of steaming hot cocoa. While Harry had devoured his midnight snack, the window by the plants had swung open three times, introducing acid-cold blasts of wind into the room. Harry abandoned the last sandwich, transfigured a large stick from a stray match, and shoved the stick between the handles of the errant window to keep it closed.

Underneath Hagrid’s furry throw, Harry was comfortably warm again. The young man put one foot off the divan and tenderly toed against the glass orb from Volkova, which he discovered was a class-A foot massager. The orb crinkled across his Mauraders’ Map, which was laid out on the floor as well, with his tower topmost and visible among the folds and slips of parchment. He rolled the orb under the ball of his foot, back and forth across his own name, watching the letters enlarge and contract, misted around by purple clouds. To his surprise, his footprint on the map consisted of toe tips that touched down and moved off in time with his own foot moving back and forth. How curious.

He stopped crinkling the map when behind him, the stones concealing the hidden passageway opened and closed. All those nights in a row when he had been too dazed to understand, this must have been how his intruder found access to the room. A chilly wind came and went, and steps crossed his wooden floor. Harry forced himself not to turn and follow the progress of the figure. Instead, he focused his eyes on the map, and smiled deviously as another name floated into the space that marked his private domain. The feet pattered closer, off the wood and onto the large carpet, then back onto the wood again. There was a distinctive swish of material and the careful intake of breath. His ghost approached his divan, where Potter waited, seemingly defenseless, apparently paralyzed with fear. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Corpus Leviosa!" Harry shouted, throwing off Hagrid’s furry cover, and rising off the divan with his wand out. A scream of surprise echoed in the room, followed by the satisfying sound of a body impacting with the bare wooden beams on the high ceiling. A dark mask fell to the floor and
landed over Harry’s map and his feet. It was made of wood and cloth. He kicked it angrily out of his path.

When his divan and Hagrid’s pelt burst into flames, obviously because of a spell thrown by the intruder, Harry leapt clumsily to the right. He tripped on the glass orb, and landed on his backside on the ground, sending the orb and his map under the divan. His tailbone throbbed in pain. Harry immediately stuck his hand underneath the divan and rescued his map, throwing it aside. The orb rolled out from under going in the other direction, unchanged after the exposure to the flames.

While Harry was distracted putting out the singed edges of his hair and pajama sleeve, his prisoner dropped from the ceiling, hit the ground hard, and took off for the passageway. As he went past the flaming divan, Harry caught sight of the long blond hair under the veil that was whipping about. Infuriated, Harry threw himself at the escaping intruder, snatching two handfuls of crunchy, swishy black material. He slammed Draco Malfoy mercilessly to the ground on the carpet. Harry used his left knee to pin one of Draco’s arms as Malfoy screamed and squealed in terror.

"I ought to inflamare you on the spot," Potter snarled, pulling Draco’s head back and getting nose to nose with him over one shoulder. Terrified, Malfoy began to scream for help.

"AAAAAAA!! MURDER!! He’s trying to kill me!"

"Oh, you’ll wish!" Harry hissed back.

It was like riding a bucking horse, or a hippogriff in flight. Harry couldn’t keep his balance for long. He plunged his wand downward, transfiguring a dagger from his thin silver ring and a wooden handle from his wand. Draco’s screams rose higher each time the knife came towards him.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!"

"Harry!!" Snape was knocking on the door and rushing through it in nearly the same motion. Harry threw something metallic, something blond, and something fluffy and black aside, struggling to hold onto his ‘ghost’. Draco whirled frantically around the floor, flipped onto his back, and booted Harry in the chest with one slippered foot. Malfoy managed to get up, and was headed for the passageway even before the stones had parted.

Draco found Severus was blocking his path, wand drawn. Malfoy heaved with panic and anger, his black dress and ripped veil ruffling wildly around him as he turned one way, then the other, and faced Severus a second time, pondering his options. Snape was trying not to laugh at the image of Draco holding the skirt of his dress up high in both hands to be able to run in it. In true Malfoy fashion, it was made from unspeakably expensive material. Perhaps it was a mourning dress from his mother’s closet?

"Stop where you are, Mr. Malfoy," Snape ordered him. Malfoy leapt away from Snape’s grasping hands, and raced back for the fireplace. Potter intersected his course with a ferocious lunge, rolling Malfoy down like a steam-roller. They went under the heavy table, chairs flying aside like spinning tops. Dark material flew into the air like puffs of smoke as Harry ripped off shreds of veil. Draco seized Harry’s forearm and dug in with every last one of his teeth. Potter hollered in pain, getting a handful of blond hair in a tight grip, trying to pull Draco off.

"Let go!"

"Grrrrr!"

"Let go!"
"Gentlemen, compose yourselves, if you please," Snape murmured, walking past the askew table and flaming divan. He threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace and called out loudly. "Headmaster! We’ve captured an intruder in Harry’s Tower."

"How interesting. I’ll be right there," Albus’s voice answered. "What are you cooking? Not his intruder, I hope."

"No," Snape replied, pointing his wand at the flaming furniture and extinguishing the fire. Harry and Draco were still squabbling and struggling around on the floor. Threatening growls and whimpers abounded. It sounded like two male cats squaring off in a dark alley. The table danced around as they kicked each other and rolled about. Harry had Draco firmly gripped by his ruined hair. Malfoy could bite Potter all he wanted, but he wasn’t going to get away.
Sometimes I Have Evil Thoughts

Chapter Summary

In which Harry gets to savor his small victory, and his professors get to worry over another enemy who has been revealed

"She was under an Imperious Spell," McGonagall explained to Severus and Harry as Snape tipped a beaker of purple oil onto a folded cloth before dabbing the triangle of fluffy whiteness on the bloody, crescent-shaped mouth-marks on Potter’s exposed forearm. "Poppy has been under someone’s control since Christmas, maybe even before that, it would seem."

"I’d say since November," Severus commented.

"Malfoy?" Harry asked, wincing as the purple concoction on the cloth seeped into his wounds.

"No. This was much too powerful a spell for Draco Malfoy to have held for so long," Minerva replied. She petted Potter’s locks, which were in full flight after his violent tussling with his intruder. The scratches and bruises on his face and neck were standing up lividly. Between the layers of his opened pajama shirt, she could see the splayed-toe bruise which left one with the impression Harry had been kicked in the chest by a man-sized frog.

"Do you have what I asked for from her office?" Snape asked McGonagall.

"Of course," Minerva told him, producing a hat with wings. Severus motioned for her to put it beside him. As the cap inside reflected in the light, Harry saw what Snape was searching for—several strands of gray-brown hair. Pomfrey must have been in St. John’s database too, Harry decided with a smile. Harry wanted to reach for the hat, but anticipating his move, Snape pulled the hat out of Harry’s reach.

"It had to have been Toadvine," Severus said, holding firmly to Harry’s hand when Potter tried to jerk his arm away.

"It burns," Harry protested.

"Do you remember how poisonous I told you human saliva is? You could have a massive infection if I don’t get it all out," Severus chided, straightening the arm on the heavy table and keeping it level as he dabbed more gingerly with the cloth.

"Albus thought of Toadvine as well. He and Shaklebolt went to alert the Minister," Minerva said. Harry made a disparaging noise. "They’re going to apprehend Toadvine and question him," she added, irritated by Harry’s interruption.

"Fudge will warn Toadvine, and he’ll escape," Potter complained. "We need to know who is controlling him. If he’s gone, we’ll never know."

"Hold still, if you please," Severus ordered, dabbing another corner of the cloth to the bleeding wounds. "Dip your fingers into the Bruise-Be-Gone, and massage your chest. If anything gives way too far, stop at once. You may have a cracked rib."
"The rules of law must be obeyed," McGonagall informed Harry. "We cannot burst into Doctor Toadvine’s house and seize him without first alerting the proper people. We cannot apprehend someone without following the proper procedures. That would make us no better than the black-hearted villains we’re fighting against."

"That toad is going to be gone before they get there," Harry predicted angrily, putting the slippery gray-green goop on his fingertips and touching his chest with it. McGonagall took a small dollop from the jar with the tip of one finger, and touched Harry’s neck. He shuddered in pain, and she dabbed more carefully.

"If he is, we will find him," Minerva promised.

"I’ll be surprised if Fudge doesn’t follow him in flight," Harry added, glancing at the long blond braid on the table before giving a wicked, triumphant smile.

"I don’t suppose I can talk you into giving up your trophy," McGonagall said.

"No," Harry frowned. "I’m going to frame it. I’m going to have it mounted and framed and hung in my tower, right above the fireplace."

"Such gloating is most unseemly, Mr. Potter," she chided him, letting him tend to his own bruises.

"I don’t care. He was trying to burn down my tower. He tried to make me think I was out of my mind," Harry snipped. "Ouch!" he exclaimed, giving Snape a murderous glance.

"Be still. I’m drawing out the poison."}

"Where is Mr. Malfoy currently?" McGonagall asked.

"In the Headmaster’s office. Hagrid is watching him," Snape answered her.

"Oooh," Harry purred softly as an evil thought prowled through his head. He stroked the braid as he said, "You know, I could Polyjuice into Draco any time I wanted, couldn’t I? I’ve got years and years and potion after potion’s worth of Draco available here."

"Mr. Potter," Severus ground out the words.

"Only a thought," Harry sheepishly rounded down his shoulders. He paused for a tired yawn, which made McGonagall smile while he wasn’t looking.

"Did you get any sleep whatsoever?" she prodded Harry while Severus wrapped a clean bandage around the young man’s forearm. Harry was laughing to himself.

"What?" Snape asked.

"Nothing," Harry lied.

"What?" McGonagall asked.

"I was...nothing....ow. Ow!"

"Answer Professor McGonagall’s question," Severus pressured him, wrapping the bandage tight.

"No, I didn’t get much sleep. Ow!!"

"Now tell us what you were laughing about."
"If you must know, the idea of polyjuicing into Draco, and running naked around Fudge’s office, after alerting the Daily Prophet about our illicit affair. I doubt that would take a whole hour. Where can I buy bondage gear?"

"As if I know?" Snape replied with a husky rumble.

"Mr. Potter, most juvenile," Minerva rolled her eyes, standing up from the table and pushing in her chair. "What did Draco do to the divan? It smells like you’ve been roasting bison in here."

"He flambéed it," Harry told her, pointing across the room.

"That goes a long way towards explaining your hair. We shall have to find you a suitable replacement for your comfortable spot in front of the fireplace," she said with a much-put-upon sigh. "You are in desperate need of a haircut," she informed him. Severus glanced upwards, an amused smirk warming his face.

"I will have a talk with Draco about his pyromania," Snape promised. "Harry, this nonsense between you and Mr. Malfoy has got to end, before one of you gets seriously hurt. Do you understand what I’m saying?"

"But, sir, I’m not the one strutting around playing fire demon, now am I? I’m not the one sneaking into other people’s bedrooms at night, trying to make them think they’re losing their minds either," Harry defended.

"You make a valid point. Mr. Malfoy had to have known part of what was going on between Toadvine and Pomfrey. He must have known the Peaceable she was giving you was too strong. He knew you would not be in any suitable mental condition when he entered your tower, knew you would doubt what you were seeing," McGonagall put in.

"He must have been hoping you’d tell anyone who was listening about seeing the Black Queen’s ghost, further discrediting yourself," Snape murmured, the bitterness in his voice making the corners of the words sharp.

"What will happen to Draco?" Harry asked.

"That’s not for me to decide," Minerva told him.

"You’re his Head of House," Harry baited Severus with a challenging frown. "What will his punishment should be? Are you going to lock him in a tower until he promises to behave? Drug him with Peaceable until he can’t spell his own name?"

"No, I doubt that very much," Severus responded.

"Why not?" Harry pouted.

"Harry, if we locked every misbehaving student in this school in their very own tower, we’d find ourselves rather short of garret rooms. I’ve always felt the punishment should reflect the crime," Snape added, rubbing Bruise-Be-Gone on the scratches on Harry’s face and neck. Potter frowned at him, unamused.

"You’re going to get him off again."

"I assure you that I will not be getting Mr. Malfoy off, as you so colorfully put it."

"You’re going to let him get away with it."
"I am not."

"Just like you did when he said those filthy things to me in the hall," Harry sniffed, feigning exaggerated hurt to cover his genuine feeling of betrayal that Snape had helped Draco instead of him.

"Oh, snivel-snivel. I am sorry, but in that situation, I had no choice," Severus replied, seeing right through Harry yet again.

"Didn’t you? Hmm. I wonder."

"Take a deep breath," Snape ordered, putting his palm against Harry’s chest. The frog-footed bruise was disappearing.

"Broken ribs?" Minerva worried.

"No. Everything seems to be in order," Snape replied. "Sit up straight and breathe deeply."

"Is he wheezing? I thought I heard a wheeze."

"I’m fine," Harry said. "Why did you have no choice but to help Draco against me?" he asked Severus.

"Draco Malfoy, locked in Azkaban Prison, would become an angry, powerful, uncontrollable danger to you. He would pass his time, spending every day with a single thought in his mind– how many ways he can kill you when he gets a chance."

"I hate to piss in your potion, but it would seem that topic takes up much of his day already. What’s your point?"

"I know what he was doing, where he was doing it, what was written on the floor, what they had hoped to accomplish, who was missing from the room, and exactly where Mr. Malfoy’s transparent loyalties and affections lie. I learned his fears, his hopes, his weaknesses. All of that learned, and it was as easy as making him so incoherent with rage that he rambled like a drunk soldier. He couldn’t wait to tell me everything he knew. After that, it was a flick of the wrist and a tiny, untraceable Obliviatissimo."

"You obliviated him?"

"No. Listen to the word. Obliviatissimo."

"I'm in no mood for word games. What does it mean, exactly?"

"Think of a pink elephant."

"I’d rather not. What if one appears?"

"Think of your shoes."

"My shoes?"

"Are you thinking of your shoes?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about them?"
"I’m barefooted," Harry smirked.

"Oblviatiissimo," Severus whispered at him, blowing the word into his mind and face at once. Harry blinked several times, and then stared at his feet.

"Where are my shoes?" he asked.

"Exactly my point," Snape chuckled darkly. Harry’s head bounced up, and a light went off in his eyes.

"It erases the thought foremost in someone’s mind."

"So much more than a pretty face," Severus smiled, patting Harry on top of the head. Potter glared dangerously at him. "It doesn’t erase the thought so much as alter it, ever so slightly. It also makes one more impressionable to suggestions."

"We will bid you goodnight, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Lock all the doors and windows, and don’t move the wardrobe out from in front of the hidden passageway. Tomorrow I will make sure it is properly sealed."

"I should like to check the rest of his bruises and bites, to make sure he is in no danger of infection," Snape suggested.

"We will check on him before breakfast," McGonagall insisted.

"I’ve got a kink in my leg," Harry said, giving Severus a persuasive, hopeful smile. "My knee hurts."

"Left or right?"

"I fell on my tailbone too," Harry said, rubbing the small of his back. "Could you take a look? I think I bruised it."

"Professor Snape, we are leaving," Minerva said, taking Snape by one arm when it was clear Severus was considering Harry’s last request with more than half his brain. "Goodnight, Mr. Potter."

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"Good morning, Severus. I’m afraid I have bad news," Dumbledore announced.

"Must there always be bad news with breakfast?" Severus protested as he scooted in his chair and pushed away his empty plate.

"What’s wrong?" McGonagall asked as she sat down at the Head Table and scanned her eyes across the students who were filling up their places.

"Doctor Toadvine has not appeared for work this morning at St. Mungo’s," Albus reported calmly while buttering a scone.

"He can be tracked?" McGonagall wondered.

"Minister Fudge doesn’t feel there are enough physical resources to waste our time on Mr. Potter’s quote unquote flights of fancy," Dumbledore replied archly. Minerva diced her eggs, muttering to herself. "Doctor Mesarik said she will do her best to keep us informed. The moment she has a scent on the wind about where Toadvine has gone, she will owl us. In the meantime, I see no harm in
allowing Madam Pomfrey to resume her duties."

Snape interjected an undertone explicative. "You don’t?" he snarled afterwards.

"As long as she is not allowed anywhere near Mr. Potter, I see no reason why she cannot tend to any of our other students."

"Nor do I," Minerva agreed.

"Harry does seem to prefer you to be his healer as it is," Dumbledore added.

"Yes, he most certainly does," McGonagall agreed.

"Here comes Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, eyes lighting up as a form in bedraggled black material swished across the suddenly-quiet dining hall. "I must say, a creative form of punishment, Severus."

"Thank you. I felt it was appropriate."

"The cut of that dress is all wrong for him," Minerva smiled. "I’m glad to see you did something with his hair though."

"It’ll grow back soon enough," Severus whispered. Snape mentally savored the gleam of fear that had been in Draco’s eyes in the Headmaster’s Office late last night. Snape had dismissed Hagrid and produced a long, thin blade. Severus had twiddled the point against his index finger as he approached Malfoy. He had shaved Draco’s locks to within an inch of his scalp. Overnight, Draco’s internal magic had replaced a few millimeters of his prized, blond coif, but Malfoy looked as if he’d been given a very random haircut by an exceptionally-angry barber.

Draco stalked over to his place at the Slytherin table, making a rude gesture at the Gryffindors who were rolling in their seats with laughter. Dumbledore tapped the side of his goblet, and the students quieted down.

"I’ve had an owl from Mrs. Weasley," Dumbledore said, glancing down at Severus. "I thought I’d better pass it along to you."

"Why is that?" Snape wondered, accepting the piece of parchment with one hand while lifting his goblet with the other.

"I suggest you not drink while reading it," Dumbledore cautioned him. Snape put down his morning grog. "Though I suspect after reading it, all you may want to do is drink."

"Sweet Merlin," Snape gasped, gaping in horror at the words inside the page. "What in the world is that man up to now?"

"What is amiss?" Minerva asked. Severus pushed the message into his cloak, and downed his entire goblet in one swallow.

"It’s not a miss, and that’s the problem," Albus cackled.

"If you’ll excuse me," Severus rose from the table, carrying a link of sausage wrapped in a slice of toast with him. "I’m going to check on Harry before classes start."

Minerva and Albus gave each other significant smirks, and Dumbledore answered, "Very well. If you must."
In which Harry finds out who won the dreaded Valentine auction

"You don’t mind the change in venue, I hope? I trust you will be on your very best behavior tonight?"

"Yes, sir," Harry beamed, sitting with some care down in the chair that Snape pulled out for him. "It’s a nice change from the tower with only house elves for dinner companions. But why are you here tonight?"

Harry had been dying all day to show Severus the huge bruise covering the apex of his backside, if only to prove he hadn’t been making it up when he said he’d fallen on it. It was nice to have a souvenir from his personal battle with Draco, other than Draco’s braid of hair. The trouble was how to bring up his bruised butt in a way that didn’t seem overtly obnoxious, or worse, flirtatious. ‘Hello. Would you like to see my arse?’ was clearly not the correct approach.

"The Headmaster and I discussed the evening, and decided it wouldn’t be inappropriate if I accompanied you," Severus said, interrupting Harry’s thoughts.

"Are you here to Petrificus anyone who gets fresh with me?" Harry asked.

"Indeed I am," Severus replied.

"I feel safer already," Harry beamed. He had wanted it to come out sarcastic, but to his horror, he sounded so very gushy he was certain Severus would roll his eyes or faint dead from annoyance. Instead, Snape gave a ghost of a smile. The smile lingered, and increased, as they gazed at each other across the table.

They were seated next to the front windows of the Helios Rising Restaurant, outside of which Harry could see several tall, burly figures standing in a perimeter around the building. Yeah, no one was ever going to notice those guys. They might as well be wearing matching tee-shirts that read 'Secret Auror Agents'. Beyond the burly brutes meant to guard him, Harry could see cold rain falling beneath the street lights. It was a decidedly-unromantic, dark and chilly Valentine’s Day night outside.

"There they are! Harry!"

Potter glanced around in the direction of the shouting. Arthur and Molly Weasley waved wildly before crossing the sea of people in the busy, two-level dining area. Had they come in through the back door, or had they been seated in a different location until Harry and Severus arrived? Harry waved at the Weasleys, and flash bulbs went off from outside the window. He jerked back around in surprise, and Snape yanked the curtains closed before Potter could see who had taken the shot of him.

"Harry, dear!" Molly pecked Harry on both cheeks and the top of his head, sitting down in the chair that Arthur pulled out for her. Mr. Weasley and Professor Snape sat down across from Harry and
Molly, keeping a comfortable distance from each other. People around the restaurant were staring, but Harry ignored them, turning to look instead at the empty chair at the head of the table to his left. He swallowed nervously, picked up his glass of water, and sipped.

"Did I hear horse hooves?" Arthur said, climbing to his feet and going to the window. He peered out through the part in the heavy, blue drapes without opening them. Severus covered his eyes for a second with one hand but straightened back up and went on pretending nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Arthur!" Molly hissed, sounding as she were chastising one of her sons. "I hope you don’t mind all the mystery about who won the charity auction, Harry," she continued in a normal voice.

"No. I don’t mind. No one would show me the Daily Prophet today, but I’m sure if it were meant to be an unpleasant surprise, someone would have already medicated me for the occasion."

Snape gave Harry a stiff poke in the shin with a set of pointy toes. Potter smiled deviously at him. Doctor Mesarik had changed Harry’s medications back to the simple sleeping brew she had prescribed, and he would not have to take any more Peaceable. Harry was still trying to figure out what the secret ingredient had been though.

"Professor McGonagall told me you had a round of unscheduled excitement in your tower last night," Mr. Weasley said, coming back to the table.

"Ron sent me an owl," Harry smiled to Mrs. Weasley, going over the rhyme in his head. ‘Roses are scarlet; Pancakes are flat; Heard you scalped Malfoy; Wish I’d seen that.’

Flash bulbs sizzled and winked as the door opened once more. Whispers flew through the levels of the room as members of the press forced their way inside, taking advantage when other patrons came through the front door behind and to the right of Severus’s back. They peppered questions into the air.

"Mr. Snape, would you like to offer a comment on how it feels to have won this particular charity auction?"

"Do you feel at all in danger, being so near to the Boy Who Lived? There are rumors that He Who Must Not Be Named has already been informed about this entire evening."

"Why on earth would a family like the Snapes bid on a valentine dinner with Harry Potter?"

The questions, all valid, were shot out at once, in a flurry of words that made little or no difference to the wizard who swept his way through the flashes of light and attacks of sound.

"This dinner must have cost you more money than most families take home in a year’s time. Any words on that, Mr. Snape?"

The last question made the tall sorcerer stop in his tracks. His cloak of emerald green whirled as he turned his frame back towards the young man who had called out the barb. He drew himself up to his full height, and motioned for a small house elf to make her way through the forest of legs and inside the establishment.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I am too far removed from the cares of ordinary people to understand the value of money?" Mr. Snape asked. Harry stared back and forth between Severus and the new arrival, and gulped loudly.

"No, sir. Not at all. Your charity work is very well known and appreciated."
"This dinner with Mr. Potter, the proceeds of which are going to a very worthy cause, that being the construction of a university on the outskirts of Hogsmeade Village, cost me more money than some families make in ten years’ time. What would be your point?"

"I’m sure I’m not the only one who is wondering why someone from such an illustrious, pure blood family would waste his time and money on such a curious cause. If the Snapes wanted to fund a university, they wouldn’t have to get in bed with Harry Potter to afford one."

Mr. Snape pulled his house elf by the hand to stand at his side. Harry noted that like Volkova, Mr. Snape dressed his house elf as a miniature woman, not in a pillowcase, but in a stylish dress and cloak. It raised Harry’s opinion of him considerably. Orpheus had on a look that Harry remembered too well from the several occasions when he and Ron had misbehaved in Potions class. So Severus had learned the Snape Technique from this man?! The elder Snape adjusted his thin-rimmed spectacles on his long, broad nose and positively glared at the reporter.

"You’re from the Daily Prophet, aren’t you?" he asked. The angle at which he held his face, the strange pull of his mouth when he spoke, suggested in Harry’s mind someone who had struggled to recover movement and speech after a brain stroke.

"Yes, sir. Yes, I am."

"It has become the rag-cloth of newspapers. You and your compatriots go around wiping up messes so everyone can have a look at them. Gossip-mongering has replaced the fine art of reporting on a story with objectivity and clarity. True journalists, sir, are a dying breed."

"I’m sorry you feel that way, sir," the reporter fumed.

"Would you like a random quote for your article?"

"Yes, I would."

"Very well. If you must know, I purchased this dinner with Mr. Potter in order to further what I see is the most important pursuit we might ever have— that of giving and receiving knowledge. When we stop learning, we stop growing, and when we stop growing, we stop living."

"Is that true, sir, or did you have other motives?"

"All right. I do have other motives."

"I thought as much."

"I had hoped that I might suck the blood from Mr. Potter’s veins, leave him dead under the table, and continue to prolong my own life by means of the most dark and sinister magic known to wizard kind. Is that a random enough quote for you?"

The ensemble took a collective step back from Orpheus as he smiled high up the right side of his face. The left side of his face remained passive by contrast. Severus whispered to himself, closing his eyes.

"A quiet, simple evening. That’s all I wanted it to be," he muttered. "Why can’t it ever be quiet and simple?"

"Sir? Mr. Snape? Are you admitting you’re one of the undead? Is that why you haven’t been seen in public in more than five years? Sir, are you coming out of the coffin??"
"Imbeciles," the senior Snape muttered, striding away. He climbed the two steps up into the floor of the restaurant, and people parted ways to allow he and his house elf passage. The maitre d’ hurried to his side, giving him an arm to lean on. The elderly wizard gave him a withering glare, and he took the arm away.

"If you’ll follow me, Mr. Snape."

"I want them gone before dinner is served, and have someone keep an eye on that carriage, will you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Where is my party?"

"This way, sir. Here we are."

Severus stood up, moving to pull out the chair at the head of the table. As both the Snapes stood side by side, Harry couldn’t help but stare some more. This was Severus in eighty years, he knew, compiling the beak of the nose, the angle of the shoulders, the gaunt face, the silvery hair. Orpheus was handsome now, at 120, all sharp angles with a ramrod-straight spine. What must he have been like in his youth if he was this formidable in old age?


"I remember you," Orpheus smiled teasingly at Molly, his dark eyes twinkling with warm, human mischief. His dark and angry façade of moments ago was quickly forgotten.

"I remember you too, and I’ll thank you not to make a repeat of our last evening together," Molly said in a curt fashion so unlike herself.

"Mrs. Weasley, I vow to be on my best behavior." Orpheus bowed to her. "Mr. Weasley," he nodded politely to her husband.

"Mr. Snape," Arthur ground out the words.


"Society remains prejudiced against vampires. You ought to know that by now," Severus told him.

"How is Illumina? Have you heard from her?"

"She’s fine," Severus declared between clenched teeth.

"I read Malkus's book. What a load of rubbish. I hope you weren't too offended."

"That’s it. Cut right to the heart, you old vulture. Take it out while it’s still beating," Severus growled under breath.

"This is my date, is he?" the elderly wizard chuckled, extending a hand at Potter. Harry almost took it, had stood from his seat in order to do so, but Orpheus retracted the limb. "Mr. Potter, I’ve heard you’re training as a seer. Is that true?"

"Now and then, sir."
"I believe it’s better we hold that handshake for another time then," he tisked, bowing instead. Harry bowed as well, trying not to be disappointed. He’d been looking forward to a peek inside this man.

"No need to be rude, Grandfather," Severus said. "He’s a novice, not an adept."

"Not yet," the grayed wizard grinned, leaning closer to view Harry more with his right eye than with the left. "Rumor has it, you are already most formidable. A dangerous liar and killer. An attention-hungry, out-of-control menace to society as we know it, if Cornelius Fudge is to be believed. Hair like an unmade bed," he mused. "Can't you get a comb through that stuff, Mr. Potter?"

"Grandfather," Severus chided as Harry worriedly ran a hand through his unkempt locks.

"What? Do you think I believe one word that falls out of that man's poisonous mouth? If Fudge shouts 'Fire', wait to run until you see the flames. Mr. Potter, I must say, you do have a familiar face."

"So do you, sir," Harry smiled. Orpheus looked terrified for half a second, and took a small step back from Potter.

"Most impressive," he whispered. "Severus, your dueling friend—such a pretty girl. What was her name? My mind isn't what it used to be. Is he Lily Evans’ boy? He’s got her eyes, I believe," Orpheus questioned Severus, who nodded.

"Yes, he does," Severus agreed sadly.

"That beautiful berries and cream skin too. The curve of her neck, perhaps?"

Harry was astounded. Orpheus Snape was to date the only person who had ever looked at him and not seen merely a cast-off shadow of his father. Of course, as a reputed, accomplished womanizer, maybe Harry shouldn’t have been surprised that the elderly Snape remembered Lily’s attributes far better than James’s. Orpheus slowly put himself down into his chair, and his house elf stood to his left. She filled his glass for him, and picked up Severus’s glass as well. Professor Snape took it back from her at once.

"I didn't realize you met my parents, sir," Harry said, resuming his seat, hoping Orpheus’s appreciation for his mother did not mean this man had chased her around banquet tables too.

"You are concerned that I mentioned your mother in glowing terms. Don’t worry. I admired her from afar, and was never as forward with her as I was with dear Mrs. Weasley," he said, giving a quick smile when he saw Harry’s eyes widen. Had he read Harry’s mind??

"There’s no need to explain," Harry stammered.

"I do confess, I always hoped she would become my Severus’s wife. How disappointed I was she married someone else. Some wild youth from Gryffindor, as I recall. The one that used to call you 'Snivellus', wasn't it?"

"That would be James Potter," Severus muttered, gazing grimly at his plate.

"Oh, do drop the self-pity," Orpheus grumbled. "You spend your formative years being paraded around like a prize pet parrot, being called 'Orifice' by every other bone-headed boy who finally got to 'O' in the dictionary. Then we can compare notes on misery."
"You are not cheering me up," Severus almost smiled.

"Life sucks worse than a near-sighted leech. Get over it. Harry, my boy, you came quite close to being a Snape, so I can’t help but be curious to know more about you, hence the reason for my bidding for this dinner."

"Thank you for being interested in helping fund the university," Orpheus replied. "You're very pale. Not enough sunshine in your life. You need to get away to a sunnier climate for a few days," he noted. "I hear they've locked you in a tower at school for misbehaving. Is that true?"

"Yes and no."

"You weren't misbehaving?"

"I was misbehaving. But I think the whole tower thing was their second choice," Harry said.

"Why is that?" Orpheus smiled as Severus glared hard at Harry.

"Call it intuition," Harry shrugged, dodging another poke in the shin from Severus.

"Mr. Potter, don't be afraid to speak your mind. There are two things you should know about me. They will make the evening pass quickly and pleasantly," Orpheus said.

"What is that, sir?" Harry asked.

"First, I’m not a vampire, and I have no intention whatsoever of harming you. I said that to make those vultures go away. They will trample each other in an effort to get back to their respective lairs and print out their lurid tales. My outlandish words will be all over their pages tomorrow. Those who know me will get a great laugh. Those who don’t know me....perhaps they will learn the fine art of sarcasm one day, if they’re lucky."

"Yes, sir," Harry smiled.

"The second thing you need to know is that I will never lie to you."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Is that what you've given up for Lent this year?" Severus asked, earning himself a penetrating glance.

"When we deceive others, we deceive ourselves," Orpheus replied. "It has of late become my mission in life to tell everyone I meet the absolute truth. I know I haven't much time left here, and I want to make sure I go out on a good note."

"What a novel idea."

"Severus, you may be snide if you like, but I suggest you try pure honesty one of these days. You’ll have an easier time looking yourself in the eyes in the mirror in the morning. Mr. Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore told me you’re in need of a new divan for your tower room. Is that true?"
"Yes, sir."

"A scuffle with one of your classmates or some such child’s play."

"Draco has become something of a pyromaniac as of late," Harry said.

"Draco Malfoy?" Orpheus questioned.

"Yes," Severus answered.

"One of your charges, isn’t he?" Orpheus asked Severus.

"Yes," Severus bit off the word when Orpheus chuckled at him.

"Difficult to control, aren’t they? You want to protect them every day of the week, from each other, from themselves. You know you’ll exhaust yourself if you even try to look after them, and yet you try, because you love them, and usually everything ends with disastrous results."

"I suppose so," Severus agreed.

"It’s not easy being a parent, is it? Or a teacher either one?"

"I suppose not," Severus agreed.

"Mr. Potter, I’d like to present you with a divan from my collection. May I be so bold without offending you?" the elderly Snape said to Harry.

"You collect furniture?" Harry asked.

"Blame it on the third wife."

"All right," Harry smiled hesitantly. "I don’t suppose it would be wrong to accept, would it?"

"There’s a love. Such an agreeable boy," Orpheus smiled. "You were never so agreeable at his age, Severus."

"Wasn’t I?" the younger Snape murmured. The words were drops of hot acid.

"You remember my third wife, don’t you?" Orpheus asked.

"Agnes. I liked her. She had such wonderful wit."


"Your wives have been, in order, Moira, Joan, Agnes, Shannon, Gertrude, Anne-Marie, and Millicent," Severus counted off on his fingers. "I do not recall a Phillippa."

"Moira was after Shannon, wasn’t she?"

"They were sisters, so I can see where you might confuse them."

"Millicent wasn’t the last one, was she?"

"She was indeed. I have her sister’s granddaughter in my sixth years at Hogwarts."

"You’re related to the Bulstrodes?" Harry gasped.
"We’re old blood, Mr. Potter. I don’t think there’s a family we haven’t married into at one time or another through the centuries," Orpheus said.

"Even the Malfoys?" Harry worried.

"Very distantly, yes," Severus answered.

"Very very distantly, I promise," Orpheus said soothingly. "Very distantly."

"I retract that. I do remember a Phillippa. Wasn’t that the girl who trained horses for the Dalrymples?" Severus put in with a sideways glance of irritation.

"Was it?" Orpheus questioned.

"Tall, firm, very athletic. Just the way you like them."

"I don’t recall. My memory is starting to go."

"I believe you recall her right well. She had very long dark hair," Snape smirked.

"Did she? It seems I’m not the only one who noticed Phillippa. But I have forgotten her face," Orpheus challenged.

"How could you forget?"

"It’s been several years and many wives ago."

"But as I recall, Grandmother Agnes had another name for Phillippa."

"What was that?"

"Lady Godiva."

"Exactly what are you implying?" Orpheus chided him.

"Why did your third wife collect divans, then?" Harry asked, interrupting the sparks flying between the two Snapes. He’d have to look Snape up again in the genealogy section of the library again. He didn’t remember seeing the Bulstrodes in there, or the Malfoys either. He might check out the Dalrymples too.

"Agnes was long an admirer of firm wood and nice legs. She collected furniture for amusement, and I took over after she passed on," Orpheus told Harry as the waiter passed out menus to them all. "Greek? Why didn’t anyone tell me we were having Greek? I wouldn’t have worn a green cloak if I’d’ve known we were having Greek."

"Didn’t you read the door?" Severus asked snidely.

"Yes, but...I’m wearing green. Most inappropriate."

"What would you have worn?" the Potions Master wondered.

"A blue cloak, of course. How wonderful your mother looked in blue," Orpheus smiled sweetly at him. He didn’t wince or dodge from Severus’s sharp and pointed reply glance. Harry could hear Severus positively seething from the other side of the small table.

"I could get your favorite blue cloak, sir," the house elf offered.
"It’s no matter," he said. "But thank you."

The house elf beamed at him, giving the sorcerer a curtsey.

"Mr. Potter, how old are you this year?" Orpheus asked.

"Sixteen, sir. Seventeen in July."

"Nearly there. Nearly there," he cackled with delight, petting Harry’s arm once, twice before yanking the hand away. Harry managed to seize upon the merest hint of an image. He struggled to pull the fragment out of the fog that had surrounded it, having had less than a fraction of a second to organize and upright the scene.

He was walking in an immense garden. He was Orpheus walking in an immense, labyrinthine garden. He was Orpheus walking in a labyrinth garden, following the sound of moans and whispers. Up ahead, the path diverted into a hidden niche, a carpet of green grass shaded nearly to night by tall hedges on all sides. Contrasting with the green grass was a tangled gray and black cloak, one bare leg with dark hairs, a foot with toes clenched tightly, a pair of long, unlaced boots, and black trousers tossed every which way.

"Grandfather," Severus warned, looking down his nose and scanning his menu. Harry frowned, struggling to hold tight to the image.

Orpheus was peering around the hedges at the lovers, admiring miles and miles of bare skin as one dark haired man kissed his way down another dark haired man’s bare chest, extracting anxious cries. Long legs covered with dark hair opened like a shy angel spreading its wings. Familiar green eyes peered out of the darkness and shadows, clouded with desire and worry. The knees snapped together again in an instant. Orpheus was smiling as he moved away from the hidden niche as fast as humanly possible.

"I’m so looking forward to having you around," Orpheus smiled. Harry’s face scrunched up in puzzlement. He knew those eyes. Where did he know those eyes? The fraction of an image dissolved beyond Harry’s reach, as if Orpheus had stirred the pot of his thoughts and a tantalizing scent that had first captured Harry’s attention had melted away in with all the others. The Weasleys were beginning to exchange looks that silently commented on the rising tide of insanity that was coming from the Snape end of the table.

"Grandfather," Severus warned again, closing the menu with a loud thump. "Quit pestering the child."

"Pestering?" Orpheus blinked, the very air of innocence around him.

"I recommend the lamb kebabs," Molly interjected.


"To Mr. Potter," Orpheus declared, lifting his glass. Everyone at the table lifted theirs as well, except Harry, who continued to fight with a puzzled grin. "Oh dear," Orpheus’s face fell as soon as he took a sip.

"What? Everything all right?" Severus asked, horrified with concern. Harry felt a surge of love and protectiveness from Severus towards Orpheus. So, no matter how much the Snapes might spar and snip and cut away at each other, the family bond was there. Harry was proud and jealous of Severus in one breath. How he longed for that kind of bond!
"I forgot Rowena," Orpheus whispered, pale with embarrassment.

"No, sir, she’s all right," the house elf said.

"Are you certain?"

"She went out, and won't be back till late."

"Did she? What for?"

"She and her grand-daughter Penny are volunteering at St. Mungo's until five, and then she's off to Florish and Blotts. The next installment from Fangs MacMillan is out today, and she's hoping to get a signed copy."

"Yes, that’s right. Yes. I remember. Yes," Orpheus relaxed as he spoke.

"Who is Rowena?" Severus asked. Orpheus grinned at him, up the right side of his face again.

"Does anyone feel like a turn around a dance floor? I know a wonderful place that’s a stone’s throw from here. What if we step over there after dinner, work off the kebabs with a salsa or a waltz or a rumba?" Orpheus suggested.

"Who is Rowena?" Severus pressed.

"Nothing more romantic than a turn around the dance floor," Orpheus delayed, smiling back and forth between Harry and Severus.

"Grandfather...."

"Timma recommended that I dance as often as possible."

"Why on earth are you consulting Timma about dancing?" Severus asked.

"Do you dance, Mr. Potter?" Orpheus dodged the question.

"Yes, badly," Harry replied.

"There’s no valid reason a young man shouldn’t be taught to dance properly. It’s the very essence of good breeding. Dancing is good for the heart and for the soul."

"Sir?"

"You let me dance with a woman for five minutes, and I’ll tell you things about her she doesn’t know herself."

"Mm hmm," Harry agreed unsurely, worrying over Severus’s black gaze.

"Did you know that Severus’s mother could belly-dance?" Orpheus whispered to Harry.

"No, sir, I did not know that." Harry gave Severus a very cautious glance and decided from the horrified fury he saw there that he shouldn’t dare smile.

"I knew it! You, old man, are far too cheerful. Hounds of Hecate! You’ve gotten married again, haven’t you?!" Severus accused.

"Whisper, have I gotten married again?" Orpheus asked the house elf.
"Not recently, sir."

"See? I have learned my lesson, Severus. This time around, I’ve settled for shacking up and shagging about like the kids do today."

"Angels and ministers of grace," Severus muttered, opening his menu once more.

"You’ll like Rowena, I promise," Orpheus laughed. "She’ll charm you clear down to your socks."

"Where did you meet her? At the dance hall?"

"At the bookstore, in the self-help section."

"That’s different." Severus begrudged him a half-way apology.

"We both reached for the same book, and it was like destiny was smiling on us," Orpheus whispered, touching his hand to his heart.

"That’s so sweet! What book?" Molly asked. Orpheus waited a beat, plying his audience with anticipation.

"1001 Paths to Satisfying Self-Pleasure."

Harry quivered with pent-up laughter, ducking his head down, unable to ignore the appalled gasp from Severus. The Potions Master looked if he had a live toad lodged in his throat.

"Oh my!" Molly exclaimed. "Did we mention that our son Bill is getting married soon?" Mrs. Weasley said, in a clear attempt to steer the conversation in a more polite direction.

"Congratulations! Who will perform the blessing spell? You have to have a blessing spell," Orpheus insisted.

"We’re going to be grandparents by August," Arthur beamed.

"Could be someone’s already performed the blessing spell," Orpheus whispered to Severus, who did his best not to respond as he tried to remember how to breath.

"What’s the blessing spell?" Harry asked.

"Fertility, prosperity, happiness, health, and wealth," Severus replied. "Traditionally, the oldest living relative of the bride blesses a new union by performing the spell, wishing each in equal measures."

"Poor Uncle Ashby," Molly sighed.


"He said the blessing at our wedding," Molly explained to Harry’s puzzled look. "He got as far as good health, and dropped dead in the middle of his sherry."

"Poor Ashby," Arthur repeated. "At least we got four out of five," he smiled, taking up Molly’s hand and kissing it.

"Oh, Arthur," she sighed, beaming at him.

"What will we be having?" the waiter asked, finally returning for their orders.
"Ouzo all around?" Orpheus asked.

"Not for our youthful dinner company, I should think," Severus answered, staring at Harry, threatening him not to challenge the decree. Orpheus stared as well for a moment, then turned back to his offspring.

"Why the hell not? He’s sixteen, not six. If he starts dancing and singing too loudly, and disturbing the other guests, we’ll see him safely home."

"He’s much too young for alcohol that strong," Severus retorted.

"Oh tosh," Orpheus refuted. "You were drinking bathtub gin of your own creation at his age."

"I’ll have the lamb kebabs," Molly said to the nervous waiter.

"Make that two," Arthur added.

"Would Mr. Potter care for a drink?" the waiter asked. Two sets of Snape-lish eyes narrowed at Harry, four dark tunnels filled with nightmares and bats.

"Yes, he would," Orpheus said.

"No, he wouldn’t," Severus growled.

"Are you going to make him drink milk and pumpkin juice until he’s twenty five?" Orpheus snipped at Severus. "Why don’t you get a wet nurse to breast feed him?"

"He’s trying to work a considerable amount of Peaceable out of his system, and strong alcohol is not recommended. There might be negative interactions between the liquor and the potion ingredients still in his blood stream."

"Which one of you clever geniuses decided to give him Peaceable in the first place?" Orpheus taunted. "If I were his guardian, I’d be yanking him out of that school so fast, it would make your knickers spin."

"Mr. Potter?" the waiter questioned. "What would you like to drink?"

"I’ll have hot tea, please," Harry told the waiter. "Anything but cinnamon."
Harry woke to find breakfast on the big table, along with his Transfigurations work for the day. There was cat hair all over the side of his pillow. He had a vague recollection of hearing purring, and feeling warmth against his cheek. He shook his head to clear the thoughts, and went to the windows to look outside.

The other students were going to classes down below. Black robes moved around in clusters through the courtyard, like small bats on the wing. The pathways had been cleared of the light snowfall. There hadn’t been more than a dusting, but everything was outlined in white. It was cold, even for middle March. Had Harry missed that much of the day? If he opened the window, would he be able to smell the snow on the wind? He shivered as he drew away from the window. He didn’t want to smell snow. It made him think of the cold, made him feel uneasy, made him remember the touch of Lucius’s blade against his thighs and other places.

Potter spent an hour and a half reading Transfigurations before the fireplace captured his attention and drew his mind inside. The flames rotated lazily in a languid rhythm, casting an unspoken spell. He snuggled down into the cushiony divan, wondering if it was spelled to snuggle back. Orpheus Snape had good taste in furniture. Harry smiled to himself, lying down on his stomach and gazing into the fireplace.

The reds and golds in the fire moved around each other like lovers or fighters, like autumn leaves caught in a punishing wind. Unseen spirits moved here and there around the room, and spoke to him in undecipherable whispers. If he could concentrate harder, perhaps he could begin to understand the secrets they wanted to share. Potter stared into the flames and let them mesmerize him into a state of near-sleep. His eyes drooped, his head tilted forward, and his hand slid off the divan onto the cold floor.

"Master?"

The voice trying to rouse him was not the only voice in his head presently. Harry clung fiercely to the dream that moved through his mind.

A young boy stopped before him, giving a slight bow. As he stood straight again, the colors raining on him from the beams of sunlight gave a golden glow to his blond hair. He had a few freckles across his nose, and they turned golden in the light as well. He was clothed in wizard dress robes of the darkest black, and was wearing a Ravenclaw pin on his collar.

"Mr. Potter," the little boy said, extending a small hand to Harry. "Very good to see you again, sir."

There was a familiar faint accent to his words. The hand that had been extended was marked with an array of colors, pigments, splotches, paints? Harry took it eagerly into his own. Volkova’s eyes.
The boy had her green eyes. Harry shifted around uneasily and nearly woke up. He held on in spite of the dreadful nervousness washing through him.

"Master?" the small voice said. A hand touched Harry’s arm.

Harry looked away from the young man towards the white altar which was laid out in the garden of an immense estate. The expanse of stone was draped in white ribbons, lilies, and golden yellow roses. Severus stood next to the altar, deep in thought, a nervous frown masking his face. Beside him stood Draco Malfoy, older by a year or so. He smoothed the front of his gray-green dress robes over and over again. Harry recoiled when he saw that Draco was missing half his right hand. Draco looked as if he had swallowed live toads for breakfast and they were threatening to make a reappearance. Severus was murmuring calming things. Draco was nodding. What were they doing standing around in front of an altar? Why did Draco look so nervous?

"Master?"

Were those bones rattling in a cup? Harry lurched awake, untouched visions making his brain ache. The very air around him was pregnant with disappearing knowledge. Malchik took her hand off his arm, backing away from his divan. Harry’s Transfigurations book dropped to the floor with a bang. Malchik drew back further, pale with awe. Could she feel the magic billowing around Harry like rich, smoky perfume?

"Is Master all right?" Malchik asked, giving a quick bow. She approached again as Harry shivered, certain of the feeling there were other people or spirits standing near him in the room. He gazed at the house elf in confusion, reaching out his hand at her. Malchik was standing there dressed in all black wearing Harry’s gift tie. She took his hand and kissed it ardently, dropping down on one knee before shooting back to a standing position. Harry, confused as never before, breathed deeply a couple of times as she pressed her cheek to his hand before releasing it. The magic he had felt in the air was dissolving, vanishing away from him. Malchik was the only one standing before him now. She had made the rattling noise that woke him. She was carrying a biscuit tin with the lid opened.

"Is Master hungry?" she asked, giving him a peek inside the round tin she offered.

"Yes, please," Harry replied, his hunger stabbing through him. He put a hand inside, and encountered several cookies. He also found a rumbled piece of parchment.

"Have you finished your essay for the Mistress?" Malchik asked.

"Not yet," Harry answered, putting a whole cookie in his mouth.

"I’ll wait," Malchik offered. Harry took another cookie from the tin, noting there were blue, red, yellow, and green squares interspersed with cream-colored squares in a harlequin pattern on the metal container, and that the pattern matched the squares of frosting on the treats inside. There were four more biscuits waiting, and the wrinkled piece of parchment as well.

Harry stood from his divan and walked to the table, searching through the piles for the Dark Arts essay instructions. Malchik followed him nervously. Every time he turned around, she lifted the tin so he could reach it. It didn’t take long for him to finish the cookies off. When he turned around the next time, to his surprise, Malchik held up the tin again. He put his fingers inside and lifted out the piece of parchment. She began nodding quickly, and dropped the tin on the ground. It rattled and rolled away, landing under the divan.
"Oh, Master," she burst into tears.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. Malchik stuffed both hands against her face.

"Forbidden to say," she sobbed. Harry smiled at her, trying to be reassuring.

"I'm not going to get locked in another closet, am I?" he joked.

"No," she sobbed. Harry closed his hand around the parchment. A voice filled his head, chanting Latin to the sound of halting sobs.

"Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniant regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos a malo. Amen. (an#1)

The voice continued, in English this time.

"I know I have no right to ask of you. I know I've been vain, and I've been proud, and that I've let my heart get ahead of my duty too often."

Harry recognized Volkova's voice when she switched to English. Her tears shook him. The pain of her sorrow coursed through him as she pushed pages of parchment off a desk and about the floor like a swirl of leaves.

"I know I have no right to ask," she repeated, getting down from her chair and onto her knees on the floor. "Please don't do this to me. You took his father from me. Please don't take my Seryozha. (an #2) Oh, you bastard! Damn you. Damn you. Don't you take my son from me! Not my son. Not my son."

Harry took a deep breath and swallowed hard. He held the parchment in his fist so firmly that he was sure his fingers would never come apart again. More visions flooded through him. He could see Professor Volkova sitting on the floor of her rooms, staring at the parchment that had fallen. A letter lay exposed among the pages. He could make out a line or two if he squinted.

Dear Anna–
It is with great anguish of heart that I write to you....
All that is possible is being done....
You must remain on duty and not forget your post.
So much depends on this mission,
more than you could know, more than you have been told.
You must have faith that we will find him. Your duty must come before all else....
I will write again when we have located Sergei.
He cannot have gone far—he does not know the city, and he has no means by which to travel.
Please do not worry. I promise you we will find your son.
I promise you I will not rest until I know he is safe.

"She would never ask for help, Master, least of all from you, because she was warned this task was her last chance. She would never ask for help, but you have to find him for her," Malchik said, crying against Harry's leg. There was so much anguish in his heart that he couldn't bear to make out any more of the letter.

"Her son?" Harry asked, his whole view of Professor Volkova falling over on one side while he struggled to work through the days and hours and minutes he had spent with her. He had always
sensed that she was motherly towards him, but that could have been simply part of her job. Somehow though, he was positive he had always known she was a mother. Had he seen her son in his dream— the young man with her green eyes and the Ravenclaw pin?

"He’s very young, and so impetuous, so like her at that age," Malchik cried.

"How can I help?" Harry asked.

"Can you find him?" Malchik pleaded. She let go of his leg, drying off his trousers with a swipe of one sleeve and her face with the other sleeve.

"I’ll try," he promised. "I’ve tried to find Remus Lupin and Tonks."

"Miss Tonks is back, safe and sound," Malchik beamed. Harry nodded.

Unfortunately, when he had finally gotten a chance to speak to Tonks alone, all he had been able to discover was that she had no idea where Remus was. Hermione had been correct after all. How Tonks had gotten to Philadelphia remained as much a mystery to her as everyone else. She was off again on another mission for the Order, and had written to Hermione once or twice, but as far as Harry knew, there was no sign of Remus, not that anyone had told him.

"But Remy’s still missing," Harry reminded Malchik. "My success rate isn’t what you’d call impressive."

"Sergei is a small boy. Very small. He won’t be far from home, not without help. It’s a dangerous world, Master, especially when you’re the son of vampire-killers."

"How old is he?" Harry asked.

"He turns eleven on March 15."

"Can you bring me something that belongs to him? Something I can get a reading from?" Harry wondered. He squished the parchment in his hand, and another vision went through him.

"Blessed Mother, please protect my baby. He’s all I have in the world, all that is dear to me. Not my son."

Volkova’s pain went through Harry again, keen as a knife or a whip. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. This was what his mother had felt in her dying seconds— this all-consuming panic and pain.

"It’s not allowed— unauthorized contact between parents and children. I don’t know if she has anything small from him," Malchik hedged.


"It’s not allowed. The children don’t know who their parents are until they reach their eighteenth birthday."

"That’s absurd. Professor Volkova knew who her grandparents were. She told me so."

"She learned through whispers, through gossip among her classmates, how her parents had died, and who her grandparents were."

"She knew her grandparents. She worked with them. She told me."
"Master Vasili broke the rules and told Anna who she was, told her even though Rubrica said not to do it, but Vasili wanted her to be on her guard, and honestly, he never liked Rubrica as it was. I was told they were almost contracted to be married, but Vasili refused to have her, and she never forgave him that insult. He told Anna who she was in order to spite Rubrica. The damage was done. The elders were furious, but the damage was done. What they’ll never admit is that Anna knowing who she was saved her life."

"Sergei doesn’t know she is his mother?"

"No. Anna has been very careful not to break the rules. He does not know who she is. He doesn’t know what danger he’s in." Malchik shook her head in misery. "His mother and his father both were vampire-killers. If those monsters find him before Rubrica does, they’ll convert him. If Le Clair finds him, if Le Clair harms him, Anna will harm herself in grief. I know she will."

Harry puzzled. "But he’s a child. Henri wouldn’t harm a child."

"He won’t care. To be able to claim a Volkovi as one of his own creations? Le Clair has waited years for another chance. He was cheated once before. He won’t stand for it again."

"How was he cheated before? By another Volkov?"

"The Mistress does have one thing that belongs to her son," Malchik said, her ears drooping with fear. "But you have to come to the Mistress’s office."

"Why not bring it here?"

"It’s too big for me to lift."

"Why not use magic?"

"It’s attached to the wall by magic not even I can break," Malchik said. "I may be able to get a piece of it for you though."

"I’m not supposed to leave the tower," Harry said. "Severus said he’d know if I leave the Tower."

"What if you had to leave the tower?" Malchik asked.

"What?" Harry gulped. "No, no, no. Don’t do a thing to my room. I like it this way."

"All right," Malchik agreed reluctantly, lowering her hands and dissolving the orbs of light that had started to grow in the middle of her palms.

"I’ll take the Floo to Volkova’s office and back. We won’t be gone that long, right?"

"No. Let me go ahead of you. I’ll make sure no one is about," Malchik said, heading for the fireplace. She ran into the flames and disappeared. Harry watched in alarm as the fire puffed out with a discontented belch. How could Malchik have used the Floo when a fire was burning in it? Could house elves do that? Did she have a protection against fire? He didn’t have a chance to ask her. She popped back out of the now-empty fireplace, and reached for his hand.

Chapter End Notes
#1 - The Lord's Prayer in Latin
#2 - Little Sergei
Pooling Resources

Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Severus delve further into Volkova’s inner-most secrets, and Harry accidentally breaks through into one of Severus's darkest moments

"Mr. Potter."

Harry stepped back out of the Floo to find Severus Snape was sitting on the comfy divan right in front of the fireplace. Malchik peered out from behind Harry, and her small hands clutched the backs of his legs until he thought he’d scream out. She pressed herself against Harry, hiding from Severus.

"Professor Snape, I’m glad you’re here. I need your help," Harry said, taking Snape’s arm and pulling him towards the big table. Severus followed, taken aback momentarily. A flash of movement made him spin around.

"Come back here," he snarled as Malchik darted back into the Floo and vanished. Harry continued to haul Snape towards the table, even as he bellowed his displeasure. "What is the meaning of this? Why did you leave this tower?"

"It’s important. I want you to do me a favor."

"I cannot hope to get you out of your confinement here if you continue to ignore the conditions of your punishment."

"This isn’t about me," Harry replied. "I’m trying to help Volkova."

Snape raised a brow and jerked his arm away from the boy’s grip.

"What’s wrong with her? Why should I help her?"

"If ever you lost someone who meant the world to you, someone you cherished above all others, you would help her. You would spare her the pain she is feeling," Harry whispered, taking a deep, agonized breath. His eyes filled with pity and hurt. He un wrinkled his clutched hand, and let two things drop to the table. One was a nearly mutilated piece of blank parchment, and the other was a small square of canvas cut from a painting. The blues and golds from the material had flaked away onto Harry’s skin.

"What am I to do?" Severus asked. Harry pushed all his notes and schoolwork into one pile, and sat unsteadily in one chair. He motioned for Snape to sit in the other chair.

"Do you know what a Sympatico spell is?" Harry asked.

"Of course. Every person trained in Legilimency and Occlumency first begins by learning how to use a Sympatico."

"Why didn’t you teach it to me?" Harry wanted to know.
"I was very much under the impression that any boy wizard who could cast a Patronus Charm the way you could, with no more training than you had had," he paused for a shake of the head and an awed sigh. "Any wizard who could produce that powerful a Patronus wasn’t going to need to learn how to do a Sympatico in order to learn Legilimency or Occlumency. I was concerned you’d be offended."

Harry blinked at Severus. "Was that a compliment?" he asked.

"No," Severus lied.

"Can a Sympatico be used between two people, focusing on an object, using the magic of both people in order to read the object?"

"To what end? You can’t feel what an object is feeling. Mr. Potter, objects do not feel."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. He received a scalding glare for his question, to which he replied a hesitant smile.

"Unless there’s something you’d like to tell me?" Snape began.

"No," Harry lied. "Couldn’t you feel impressions left on the object by other people?" he added.

"In theory," Snape said, looking worried. His face held the same awe and mistrust as when Harry had first spoken Parseltongue in public. "If one of the two people is a clairvoyant, it would more than likely work."

"Are you at all clairvoyant?" Harry asked.

"I doubt it," Snape hedged. Potter picked up the one lingering note of hesitance in those three small syllables.

"Not entirely sure, are you? When you were my age, did you go through a stage like I’m going through?"


"Hermione said other wizards go through phases like this when they are my age," Harry mused.

"Yes, but yours has been much more pronounced than most."

"Did someone in your family have a phase like this?" Harry pressed.

"My mother," Severus admitted. "Grandfather said she was far more clairvoyant than she ever let my father know, and with good reason."

"Between us, we could focus our magics together, couldn’t we?"

"Could we what?"

"May I have permission to borrow your magic?"

"What?" Severus felt his mouth go dry. The audacity of the boy! Did he have any idea what he was asking?

"A little of you, a little of me, a little of Mr. Malfoy, a little of your mum? I believe Lucius must have had an undeveloped talent like mine. Yes, I’m nearly sure of it. He worked for the ministry,
locating dark magic objects, worked for Voldemort, locating even darker magic objects."

"Yes."

"Unofficially, of course."

"Of course."

"But he had flashes, now and then," Harry whispered.

"Yes, now and then," Snape confirmed.

"Draco has them?"

"Not that he's said."

"You’ve never had flashes like that??"

"It’s called intuition," Severus said, frowning.

"May I borrow your intuition?" Harry raised a brow at Snape in an irritating and on-mark imitation of the Potions Master’s biting manner.

"You don’t know what you’re asking."

"Yes, I do. Please," Harry begged. "There’s not much time. I need your help. I’m not strong enough on my own."

"Not strong enough? Rubbish."

"Are you going to help me or not?"

"What can I do?" Severus whispered.

"I’m flying blind myself, following a hunch."

Severus gave Harry one of his hands, and the young man held tight. He picked up the scrap of canvas and the piece of parchment, closing his other hand around them. Nothing happened for several seconds, long enough that Snape was becoming skeptical that perhaps Potter was playing him for a fool, trying to distract him from being angry about him leaving his tower.

"It’s all Trelawney’s fault. My box keeps changing and jumping around on me," Harry said, shaking his head. He gave a low moan, and the power that arched between he and Snape made Severus cry out in pain.

"DAMN IT, HARRY!" Snape shouted. Harry dropped his hand at once.

"I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Are you all right?" he winced.

"Try increasing the link gradually. Don’t go full bore at once."

"Are you all right?"

"Your strength surprised me, that’s all. Try again."

"Sorry. Sorry," Harry winced, taking Severus’s hand in as delicate a manner as he could. The essence of their magics joined once more, and what coalesced around them this time was visible.
Harry had his eyes closed, but Snape kept his open for as long as he could.

Who was Harry searching for? Where was the canvas from? Did he have a clue about Remus? How was this connected to Volkova? The questions were swimming around Snape nearly as tangibly as the indigo cloud shimmering in the air. Severus lurched backwards when a small blond boy toddle past his knees. What in the hell?

Volkova reached out to touch the boy’s hair, smiling fondly. Love and pain bubbled up inside her chest, shutting off any other emotion she had ever felt. The boy went past her and grabbed the knees of a round, gray-haired matron at the far end of the room. Volkova’s heart withered away in fear and jealousy.

Severus recognized Rubrica at once, right down to the ice-cold black eyes that Illumina had once described to him. Having seen her from up close and from afar, he had to say that from afar was his preferred choice.

"I had wondered who she was," Harry mumbled as if in deep thought. "That woman scared the daylights out of Volkova. Anna has nightmares about her to this very day. That’s not why we’re here though. There isn’t much time."

"Why are we here? Where are we?" Severus asked.

"I need to know if she has seen him more recently," Harry said cryptically.

"Who?"

"The boy. Her son."

"I had wondered," Snape replied. The blue-purple mist was tingling over the surface of Snape’s skin. He wondered if Harry was feeling the same thing he was.

"Yes," Harry whispered, laughing softly. "It tickles."

A small group of boys appeared, tumbling and running through the halls of a great building, a church, a castle? It was hard to tell from this corridor alone. It was gothic and impressive and ancient. When they reached a set of great, wooden, double doors, they came to a halt. All of them straightened their clothes and dark blue robes before the blond boy reached up and opened the handles, having to push with all his might.

At first glance, it could have been an art gallery or a museum. Saintly faces with praying hands, eyes searching for Heaven decorated the walls. They went by in jolts and bolts, as if the boys were stopping only before certain pictures to view them. Suddenly, the boys collided like startled geese in a busy roadway. Someone else was in the gallery.

They peered cautiously around the corner into a nook. It was set apart from the main gallery by Moorish ornamental metal screens which cast star-shaped patterns on the floor when the sun shone behind them. A nearby plaque explained that the screens had been ‘secured from the Holy Land of Jerusalem during the Crusades’. Professor Volkova was pulling a book from an upper shelf. She was clinging to the ceiling with one hand, and had a boot tip balanced on the middle shelf of the case. At first she was ready to ignore the four rounded faces that were goggling at her, until she got a better look.

She jumped to the ground and rolled once head over heels before gracefully pulling herself up to her full height. The boys were at least ten feet back from her by that point, ready to bolt out of the nook. Volkova motioned them to come to her, pocketing the book inside her jacket.
“What are your names?” she asked sternly. They introduced themselves left to right; Paolo, Eugene, Sergei, and Ulfie. She smiled, much amused with each. “How you’ve grown since I last saw you. What are you doing in the Hall of Knowledge? Have you come for the books?”

“No, ma’am,” Sergei told her, stepping boldly forward out of the group. “I come to look at the pictures.”

“Why are they here?” Volkova asked, indicating the other boys.

“Because they’re in my den. We have to stay together,” he explained.

“Which is your den?” Volkova asked.

“Blue,” Sergei smiled, pointing to his robe.

Paolo and Eugene were snickering behind Sergei’s back. Volkova cast them a look that silenced them. Ulfie laced one hand into the hem of Sergei’s cloak– he wanted to pull Sergei back from Volkova.

“You’re the woman vampire-killer, aren’t you?” Paolo asked.


“I’ve heard them talk about you, the other elders,” Paolo said nervously.

“Believe every word you’ve heard,” Volkova told him. “Why do you like these pictures?” Volkova asked of Sergei. “What do you know about them? Come, tell me.”

She and Sergei paced along as the little boy explained the canvas or medium types and pigments of each of the paintings that interested him. Who was in the pictures seemed irrelevant to the artistry it had taken to produce them. Although Volkova appeared intent on his every word, it wasn’t the topic that so bewitched her. Precious minutes went by in seconds for her. She wanted to take his hands. She wanted to kiss his cheeks. She wanted to pull him close to her heart and run away and never look back.

The other boys, she remembered, were following behind, annoyed that Sergei was getting attention while they weren’t. Volkova watched them out of the corner of one eye. Ulfie looked very sad and serious, and he stared at her as if chastising her. She knew she was breaking the rules, didn’t he? Smart boy, she decided. Eugene and Paolo were babbling to each other, snickering behind their hands when Anna complimented Sergei on his knowledge of the paintings. She wished she could erase their faces, making them as blank as their minds. Paolo belonged to DiPietro and Delacroix, she was sure. Eugene, she wasn’t so sure. But Paolo had Sophia’s nose, and Delacroix’s absence of a chin. Thank all the holies she hadn’t been saddled with Delacroix as her aide de camp.

“You’re going to be a painter then?” Anna asked Sergei.

“Rubrica said maybe, if that’s where my talents lie.”

“I wish I could be here when the elders decide your path.”
"Where will you be?"

"I am going to Archangel."

"Is that very far away?"

"Not so far. If I send you materials from Archangel, will you paint for me? I'll send you everything you need," Anna promised. Sergei went gushy at the request, filling with joy.

"Yes, ma'am," he piped. "What shall I paint for you?"

"Paint me a picture of yourself."

"We have to go," Ulfie said finally, rushing over to Sergei and tugging on his robe sleeve. "It's almost four."

"Why would you want a picture of me?" Sergei asked, grasping one of Volkova's hands suddenly. The contact nearly made her crumble. The words remained unspoken from her lips, lodged in her throat—‘because you are mine, all that is truly mine’."

"No, Sergei. We have to go," Ulfie insisted.

"What's your name?" Sergei asked again. Volkova put a finger to her lips, motioning for him to be silent. He stared at her with curious eyes, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I will send a package for you, Seryozha," she replied. "You'd better go. It's nearly four. Rubrica will be expecting you back at your den, cleaned and straightened before you eat. Look at your face and hands," she whispered.

Ulfie's eyes turned into wide dinner plates as the bells in the tower above them began to toll. Sergei rushed away, waving to her as he pushed Ulfie out the doors. Paolo and Eugene followed, nervous of the prospect of Volkova at their backs. Volkova heard the heavy double doors close, and she sat down on the floor, burying her face in her hands as she heaved for breath.

"It was her husband," Severus murmured, finally putting the pieces together. "That was the one vampire she hunted without permission."

"She's never been married," Harry reminded him.

"She killed the boy's father, husband or not," Severus decided.

"Her language instructor. Her aide de camp, she called him," Harry said. "He was also named Sergei."

The body wound around, struggling even as the flames rose higher. Volkova was on her knees before the inferno, her hair flying wildly with the wind produced by the heat. She was close enough to the flames that her skin was getting singed. Her own cries and screams battled with those of the victim of the fire. On the ground beside her was a clean stake and a hammer.

She hadn't staked him first. She hadn't had the heart to do it. She had let her love get in the way.
She threw the weapons both into the flames, screaming in fury. The stake was burning and the hammer was melting. She was feeling no regret for the fact it had been a cherished weapon that she once swore she’d never part with. Volkova reached up and yanked off the rosary around her neck, throwing the beads into the fire. She took off her jacket and threw it in as well. Vials exploded violently. She pulled off the belt around her waist, the one that held stakes and had an open slot for the hammer that was now nothing more than a melted puddle of silver shining in the flames. She was ready to throw the belt in, ready to throw herself in as well, but for the small hand that came out from behind her and grabbed her hand.

"Malchik," Harry knew instantly.

Severus caught his breath and bit his mouth against waves of nausea and pain as Harry tried to focus their magics even tighter, wanting the dream to continue even as it faded. The intensity of the connection between them was making Snape extremely uneasy. He was slowly losing his grip on consciousness. He continued to hold Harry’s hand even while he struggled to keep his own demons at bay. Through his bond to Harry, he could feel the terrible fear in Volkova’s heart over the safety of her son. All the barriers that Severus had put between himself and the memories of his mother’s death were starting to crumble at the worst possible time. Harry was everywhere in his mind, even in his soul. There was no way to run from Potter, no way to push him out. If Severus reached out, the very essence of the young man was all around him, so honest and open and warm, eager to help, eager to understand, eager to love and be loved in return. By then it was too late to prevent the memories from rising. They came through in full, and there was no way to stop them.
Death and Rebirth

Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Severus come closer together (warning: graphic violence, murder, nudity, explicit heavy petting, and coerced hickies)

Septima was kicking and scratching, biting and cursing, and all for nothing. Severus stood in the portal to the bathroom, stock still, arms at his sides, his mouth open in a silent scream. On the flooded floor lay a small square, his black book, pages losing their ink to the water. At first he had been horrified to see his mother totally naked, and had dropped his book from his hand. When he realized what his father was doing to his mother, that this wasn’t a simple fight, nor was it angry sex, that this was out-right hateful murder, he had been too terrified to turn and leave, and too terrified to jump at his father and make him leave his mother alone. Maybe it was because in his heart of hearts, the boy knew that his father was going to turn on him with the same murderous hatred once he had finished off his wife.

"Mesarik!! STOP!"

Spells flew from Septima’s fingertips even as her husband shoved her back under the surface of the water. Bubbles poured onto the floor, and blood oozed from the scratches she was making in his arms and his face. Mesarik put both hands under the water, both hands around her throat. He began to shake and push and hit her head against the hard stone behind her and under her. There was no way she would be able to get him away from her this time. But with a remarkable great gasp, she surfaced once more, her face hot red, her neck livid with red and blue and black marks circling her throat.

"Mesarik! What are you doing? Mesarik! Severus? Severus! Run!"

His father spun around, releasing his mother. The fury that stood before the small boy made him stiffen in place even tighter. The man seethed, baring his teeth at the child. His eyes were bulging out, his face twisted with hatred and anger and frustration and fear as he snarled at the boy. With one step forward and one twist of his arm, he knocked Severus off his feet into the wall. The boy’s distraction, however unintentional and pointless, had given his mother seconds to catch her standing. She got one foot outside the tub.

Mesarik spun back to Septima, grabbed her with both hands around the throat, and literally pushed her down into the bubbling, frothing water. Blood was rising with the bubbles this time. Severus could see it swirling around. His father was hissing and gritting his teeth in exertion. Even as a boy, Severus knew it must take a lot of energy and physical power to manually crush the bones in someone’s neck, let alone to keep a tall, powerful witch submerged under the rising water as well. The explosion of magic behind Severus didn’t even register in his mind. Someone picking him up and pulling him back certainly did though. He began to scream and thrash and fight, kicking and biting just as Septima had done.

"It’s all right. You’re safe. It’s all right," the man said. "Shhhh." It was Orpheus, his Grandfather Orpheus. "Mesarik! Let her go! Mesarik! Mesarik!!"

***
When Severus regained consciousness, he was lying on the divan in front of the fireplace. Harry was sitting on the floor with his back to the divan and his face in his hands, mumbling 'oh god' to himself. Snape sat up with an undignified wobble, and Harry rose up to his knees, spinning and facing him.

"That bastard killed your mum," Harry declared in anger.

To his chagrin, Severus realized he had been crying while unconscious. Harry reached up with a damp cloth and washed Snape’s face before dropping the cloth absently on the floor. Naked sympathy poured from Potter, which would have normally caused Severus to react with immediate anger and dark hatred. After they had been bonded together so deeply in Harry's spell, it was different. Everything felt different. Harry’s sympathy made Severus feel calm, as if he knew it was all right to bear Harry’s concern. Had Severus really been out long enough that Potter had been able to drag him over here and go get a cloth from the bathroom? Potter put his head against Snape’s chest and wound his arms around the older man’s waist.

"I’m so sorry," Harry whispered, hiding his face in Snape’s shoulder. "I didn’t mean to intrude. I needed a stronger magic than my own. I didn’t have enough strength to do it by myself. It was never my plan to get inside your mind, inside your thoughts."

Severus murmured pointless words with all the gentleness than he felt. His every secret was out. Potter knew everything. There was no telling what else the boy had seen while their minds had been connected. But in truth, wasn’t it a relief? He could feel that he didn’t have to worry. There would never have to be an unspoken secret between them again.

"That bastard killed her right in front of you," Harry gasped with emotion. Hadn’t Potter realized who that bastard was, Snape wondered. He must have. He had been inside Severus’s very heart and soul. The instinct that had led the boy to know Septima was Snape’s mother surely also had told him Mesarik was Snape’s father as well. How would Severus ever be able to explain this to the boy? Would he even have to explain it, or would Harry understand?

"There isn’t time for this," Severus tried to speak. He held Harry to his chest, petting the young man’s back, soothing his trembling. "We have to think about Volkova."

"Yes. Volkova. Yes," Harry agreed. "I’m sorry I intruded."

"Put it out of your mind."

"You can obliviate me," Harry offered.

"No. Put it out of your mind. I don’t want to talk about it. How do you want me to help you with Volkova?"

"We have to find her son before the vampires find him. I’m sorry about your mother. I’m so sorry."

"You are not allowed to leave this tower," Snape reminded him.

"This is no time for that kind of rigidity. Someone’s life is on the line!" Harry flamed with anger, pulling back from Snape’s chest. "What do I tell Volkova? ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t save your son. I was grounded and couldn’t leave my room?’ I promised Malchik I would help find Volkova’s son, and I’m going to keep that promise, no matter what."

"All right," Snape soothed, rubbing Harry’s sides, pulling the young man back into his arms. "I understand. Damned Gryffindor spirit. You must always play the hero. Someday I’m going to strangle you with your own tie."
"Don’t try to stop me from helping."

"I won’t try to stop you," Severus whispered, nose to nose with Harry.

"Damned right you won’t," Harry mouthed fiercely, his eyes locked on Snape’s mouth. Severus raised one set of fingers. He had meant to dry Harry’s face, and was astounded to find himself instead pulling the young man close, touching his mouth against those sweet red lips. His own horror could not have been equaled, and he fully expected to be knocked unconscious, or wake up in a different time zone.

After initially tensing up, Potter did an unexpected thing. Strands of clairvoyant magic encircled Snape inside and out, going through him like creeping vines, nearly as tangible as the indigo mist had been minutes ago. Sensing no danger, Harry relaxed slightly, and let his clairvoyance drop away. Even more surprising, he allowed Snape’s kiss to continue. Severus pulled back a second later, and gauged what was lurking in Harry’s eyes. He saw timid worry and embarrassed surprise, not fear.

"I’m sorry. I won’t hurt you," Severus whispered, drawing one finger over Harry’s mouth. "Don’t worry. Are you all right?"

Harry nodded, but didn’t say a word.

"I’m sorry," Snape repeated. "Do you want me to stop?"

Harry shook his head no. Snape was suddenly kissing Harry again, more slowly and cautiously. Pulling back, Snape watched the young man’s hungry eyes cloud over with lust and amusement in equal measures. Severus coaxed him into another kiss, a more ardent, slippery, exhilarating, sucking tangle. Harry offered a low, scratchy laugh as a reply when they separated.

"It’s to be torture then? You’re going to kill me one kiss at a time?" he asked. The terrible horrid dreams Harry had been enduring drifted through his mind, always there, but fading.

Severus decided it must be okay to proceed. He lifted Harry from the floor and folded him onto the divan. With delicate caution, Severus climbed kisses up Harry’s neck and to his ear. Even as his mind raced around in horror at what he was doing, he couldn’t stop himself. He was rewarded with a gasp as his tongue dipped inside Harry’s ear. Potter scooted downward, paused for a small whimper. He was trying to maneuver so they could both lie horizontally on the small space. Snape sat up and pulled Harry along.

Being careful not to grasp anxiously at the young man, Snape scooted closer to him, and continued to tease the shell of his ear, sucking tenderly on the lobe. Harry pined undertone, clutching Snape’s hands with his own. He kept Snape’s hands firmly locked where they were. Apparently Snape would not be allowed to grope about Harry’s body at will. Little puffs of air were colliding with Severus’s neck and shoulder. Potter was panting, and not in fear. Severus lifted Harry’s hands, and stood from the divan.

"Would you like more?" he asked.

"Mmm hmm," Harry hummed, his eyes glowing with hunger, his mouth a lop-sided twitch of red.

"Bed?" Severus asked, hoping he didn’t sound extraordinarily arrogant and presumptuous. Harry made a disparaging noise, fury taking over his eyes for a second. He tugged Severus back onto the divan.

"No," Potter growled, offering his other ear in a very demanding way. Their knees and thighs tried
Again being sure not to grasp at Harry, Severus nuzzled his other ear. He rose up on his knees, and maneuvered the young man into a comfortable position. Although his first instinct was to start tearing off Potter’s clothes, he stopped himself. Even if he hadn’t stopped himself, Harry grabbed his hands and held them tight, frowning. Apparently Potter was reading his every thought. Any removal of clothes had to be Potter’s choice alone. Severus kissed as much pale skin as was exposed, carpeted Harry’s face and neck with licks and kisses. When Harry released Severus’s hands, Snape took off the young man’s glasses and dropped them aside. Against all odds, Harry was lying there, waiting for him to continue, panting unevenly. Severus waited through two seconds of anxious breathing. Would he bolt for the door? Would he decimate Snape with a single blast of magic?

"Why’d you stop?" Harry slurred, giving another twitchy smile.

"Not going to hurt you," Snape repeated, his tongue all tangled. He tickled the top button on Harry’s shirt. Potter stared at him with blurry eyes, puzzlement on his face. Severus traced one nipple through the material of Harry’s shirt, feeling it rise up to meet the touch. Harry’s mental fog finally lifted. He began to undo buttons, sucking in his bottom lip in concentration.

"Not if you don’t want to," Severus purred at him. He didn’t give Harry time to be embarrassed about his eagerness. He pulled the young man’s shirt open to his shoulders, and admired the view. Wasn’t that what Snape had wanted for so long, he asked himself as he gazed with possessive lust at the young man shivering on the divan. Harry looked less like schoolboy than ever before, less of a boy each passing day. Maybe it was the absence of that cursed Gryffindor tie that helped. At the very least, the expanse of wonderful, imperfect, pale, freckled skin helped change Snape’s mental view of Harry. This Harry was so different from the pale, helpless child that had slept in his arms during November, and different still from the terrified victim of violence that had lurched away from all contact until coaxed and soothed out of his fear. Severus’s own lust must have been rubbing off on Harry through their contact.
"What time is it?" Harry asked.

"Nearly three," Snape confirmed with a passing glance at the wall clock as he moved to entrap Potter in his arms. Could he risk that small display of want? Harry purred as one of Severus’s thighs went between his legs and contacted with his trapped erection. Whatever reason Harry had had for asking the time was instantly forgotten as he rubbed himself instinctively up against Snape. Severus put his fingers up Harry’s spine, and sank their mouths together. The smell and the taste of him was almost too much to digest at once. Snape felt dizzy, out of control. There was barely enough room between them for Severus to maneuver around, latching firm hands onto slim hips in order to rub their bodies together teasingly. Harry wrapped several limbs around him like clinging vines, invoking his name in a husky whisper.

Severus caressed Harry’s hips, teasing him with ghostly thrusts, moving kisses down his throat. By the time he was nuzzling Harry’s navel, licking soft skin and small hairs, Harry was mewing and squirming in anticipation. Severus kept him firmly planted where he was, and started at the top once more, forehead, nose, ears, and finding his wet, wet mouth wide open for another deep kiss.

"Please please please," Potter gasped, hands on Snape’s shoulders, pushing south in a none-too-subtle manner that would have infuriated Severus if it were anyone else. One of Harry’s legs slid off the divan. The young man was burning with frustration and desire. That was indeed encouraging. Snape undid Harry’s trousers, not in a rush but in something of a hurry, lowering them off his frame along with his undershorts. Potter was all gangly legs and eager cock suddenly.

Snape ran his tongue along Harry’s cock, slowly up and down the sides where Lucius had left methodical torture scars after depriving the boy of his foreskin. He couldn’t help but notice the lines were an exact space apart (inches?), each running parallel to a twin on the opposite side. Potter’s fingers dug into Snape’s shoulders. He gasped harshly, fighting back fear this time. ‘I’ll be gentle. I’ll be careful,’ Severus promised inside his own thoughts, hoping Harry might understand. Potter’s harsh, tight breathing faded away as Severus sucked him in and started bobbing with a relaxed, unthreatening pace. He couldn’t stop himself from thinking about it, though, not with his lips passing over the scars. Lucius had been planning to emasculate the boy, taunting him about his manly length and how many inches he was going to lose, depending on how cooperative he was with what Lucius wanted him to do. It was most likely fear of what Lucius had threatened which had given the boy the last spurt of energy to grab whatever part of Lucius had been most prominent and within reach. Unfortunately for Malfoy, it was the most prized part of his anatomy that Potter had latched onto.

"Oh, oh, oh," Harry whimpered in pleasure, a totally different sound than the terrible cries that Severus remembered in his nightmares. Severus tried not to smile but the battle was lost. "Could you please?" Harry gulped.

"Yes?" Snape whispered, letting go briefly.

"What?" Snape demanded.

"Not think about you-know-who?"
‘Voldemort?’ Severus wondered, taking Harry in his mouth again.

"The other one,” Harry managed. He meant Malfoy, but wasn’t going to speak Lucius’s name. Severus resumed a slow, easy comfortable pace, wondering if it were safe to stroke and squeeze Harry’s balls. Surely that wouldn’t alarm the boy, would it? He was rewarded with a guttural, inarticulate utterance from the depths of Harry’s chest. He let go, surprised. It was not the schoolboy squeak Snape had expected, but a gladiatorial growl of satisfaction that made Severus’s own cock stand up higher in answer. He desperately wanted to hear that again. The young man reached down and took Snape’s hand, putting it back where it had been.

‘That’s more like it,’ Severus mused. He teased the head of Harry’s cock and stroked him again. A wicked shudder went through Harry’s torso and along his limbs. Severus licked around and under his cock, gently down between his balls. Harry bucked unconsciously twice before he won control of himself again. His fingers clenched and unclenched in Snape’s hair. Severus caressed Harry’s thighs apart, kissing and kneading. Ah, to be sixteen again, Severus laughed, when the merest of touches would ignite such intensity. He chortled to himself while encouraging Harry with a slow lick and a gentle squeeze. It wouldn’t be long now. Harry let go of Severus's hair and latched his fingers into the divan instead.

Harry’s bottom nearly slipped off the cushions. Snape let go for a second to reposition, caressing Harry’s inner thigh with the flat of his tongue. The young man’s eyes shot open, glazed with pleasure. Severus watched Harry as he opened his mouth to take a deep breath, stretching his legs open even further. Potter's fingers were curled into claws, leaving trails in the fabric of the cushions. Snape rose up high on his haunches in order to slide his mouth over Harry’s cock again, quickening his pace, knowing it would throw off Harry’s last bit of control.

"That’s it. That’s it," Severus whispered, kissing down Harry’s chest once more. Potter tensed up, seizing around him. Severus nearly stopped right there, going cold with horror. What was wrong? Then he heard what had caused Harry to freeze up. Someone was walking up the tower steps!

Snape was halfway to the door, knowing that a cleaning spell and a penile deflation spell had better do the trick for his own bedraggled, aroused appearance. He felt utterly slathered in saliva and cum. Stupid, messy, delicious boy. Snape had his hand on the knob as he closed his eyes in a fast prayer.

"Not finished with Potions yet?” Professor Flitwick asked happily as Severus gaped down at him. "Dear me! Am I early?"
"Um," Snape said cleverly, his mind buried deep between Harry’s thighs.

"I’ll come back in five minutes. Watch must be running ahead."

"Um hm," Severus agreed. Flitwick glanced around before he closed the door. "Potions Lesson," the Charms Professor called out in the hallway. "They’ll be done shortly."

"Nothing to worry about," Dumbledore called back from down the stairs. "I’m sure Severus has Harry well in hand. He’ll be finished in no time. You wait here until they’re done. I’m going to see if I can find Professor McGonagall. Malfoy and Weasley were fighting in Herbology. Professor Sprout has promised to keep them both trapped in the Devil’s Snare until we arrive."

If Severus were any judge, the Headmaster was mere yards from the landing. Footsteps echoed away until they vanished from earshot. Severus heaved a sigh of relief. Slender arms encircled his waist. He turned and received an armful of musky, weak-kneed Harry Potter.

"You’re due for a Charms Lesson," Snape said to Harry.

"Whee. Charms," Harry laughed. Potter hid his head on Snape’s shoulder. The contented sigh that Harry voiced warmed every inch of Snape’s body with animal pride. But what Severus really wanted to hear was that testosterone-powered growl once more. No matter. There would be more than enough time later to see just how sensitive every part of Mr. Potter actually was.

"You have a very full dance card, it would seem," Severus said.

"Thank you. That was wonderful," Harry stammered.

"You’re welcome," Severus mumbled around his amusement, licking the closest patch of skin he could put his tongue against. Harry shuddered, and latched onto Snape’s neck with his mouth. Severus delicately tugged him off.

"No time for that," he wanted to say. The words came out in a rolling rumble as Harry licked the edge of Snape’s jaw with the very tip of his tongue. Severus had to fight hard against the urge to carry him back to the divan. "Manners, Mr. Potter. Manners," he rumbled.

"May I return the favor sometime? If you’re patient, and you can show me what to do to please you?" Harry whispered, lowering his eyes demurely. What a wonderful face he had without those hideous glasses distracting from his features! Those bushy brows were simply adorable on one so young. His nose was long and thin, not the flattened bump his glasses implied, and seeing the whole of Harry’s snout instead of the mere button that poked out from his glasses did much to mature the teen’s face. Severus dotted one kiss on the bridge of Potter’s nose, and another to his red, red top lip. Harry’s tongue darted in and out in an attempt to catch more touches.

"You please me as you are, without effort," Severus whispered to him.

"I’ll do anything you want," Harry promised. "Probably not well, but I’ll try my best. With enough practice, I dare say I might even be good at it someday, as long as you’re not pulling my hair or holding a knife at my throat."

Severus stared back, his heart breaking and his cock swelling. It took complete concentration before he could say, "I have to walk out of here with some measure of dignity in two minutes’ time. That will be much easier without a pitched tent in my trousers."

He was rewarded with a low throaty laugh from Harry. Potter began unbuttoning his shirt, bearing a few inches of his chest to Severus, undoing all the work from Snape’s hasty dressing spell.
"What are you doing?" Snape asked. Harry gave a perfectly innocent smile before he turned his head to the side and exposed his wonderful neck.

"Bite me," he begged.

"What?" Snape asked, mouth going dry. "What do you want?"

"A love bite from you," Harry whispered. "Just small one."

"Harry."

"No one will see it here," Harry pleaded, measuring his words as he rubbed his neck at his shoulder. "I want to be able to touch it, and think of you and me, and think of you touching me."

"Harry, there isn’t time."

"Best hurry, hadn’t you?" Potter murmured, smiling sideways up at him. Snape latched into Potter’s neck with all his teeth, and Harry called out once, a muffled blurt of pain. Feeling foolish and aroused at once, Severus sucked for all he was worth, moving his hands down Harry’s back. He cupped under the young man’s backside, kneading and squeezing. Potter lurched forward away from the hands with a genuine squeal of pain, collide hips against thigh with Snape. Someone was knocking on the door. Had they heard Harry squeak? Snape put Harry back on the ground, patting his bottom carefully. Potter gasped for breath, rubbing the purplish mark on his neck with a mixture of glee and shyness. Severus leaned down and rubbed his tongue against Harry’s exposed nipple, and the teen whispered a curse word under a rushed breath. It was either a curse or a prayer, Snape pondered, perhaps a plea.

"Fuck. Mm. Oh. Oh. Oh," Harry murmured as Severus latched on with teeth and tongue and sucked hard enough to leave another mark.

"I’m going to go find Volkova," Snape decided, letting go and memorizing the anxious heat on Potter’s face and in his eyes.

"Oh, yes, Volkova," Harry agreed unsurely. Someone was knocking again. Against his better judgment, Snape eased a hand inside Harry’s shirt, rubbing up and down both sides of his chest before refitting the buttons together.

"At least try to stop glowing, will you please? Wait here for me after your Charms Lesson. Promise me you won’t rush into action, Harry," Severus pressured. Potter lifted his head and gave his professor a charming, coy smile. Snape unwisely chose to interpret it as orgasm-induced stupidity. The narrowed, gleaming eyes should have been a small hint. But nonetheless, in years to come, Severus would eventually learn that that particular smile was the most dangerous one Harry possessed.
The Bindy

Chapter Summary

In which Snape and Volkova work together and surprisingly, the world doesn't stop spinning (warning: blood is used in a magic spell- hide the children!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Volkova put down her unopened book and gazed bleakly at Snape.

"What makes you assume I need help?"

"It’s eight at night, and you’re sitting in the dark library holding a book you never opened. I’ve been looking all over the castle grounds for you, since late this afternoon. Why are you in the Restricted Section?" Severus asked, handing her a handkerchief.

"I need to know the British equivalent for a potion ingredient I require," Volkova replied, drying her puffy eyes and curling her hand tightly into a ball. "Because every last herb, flower, berry, and brew I had from home got smashed to bits when you dropped the floor out of my closet," she hissed.

"You missed your last afternoon class."

"I don’t care," she cried.

"What ingredient do you need? Why didn’t you ask me? I am the Potions Master."

"I don’t need help," she growled.

"Your son is missing."

Volkova went chalk-white and stood from her chair.

"I warned you before that you should forget about my son."

Severus wanted to walk out of the library at that point, wanted to tell her to forget the offer of help. But his heart was warm from the feeling of holding Harry in his arms, and perhaps also, his heart was sensitive because the remembrance of his mother’s murder was so close to the forefront again. Perhaps his heart was swollen and bruised from all the recent pressure that had been applied to it, both positive and negative, and finding itself totally out of shape, it wouldn’t fit back into the dark corner where he usually kept it hidden away. Maybe he recognized Volkova was pushing him away to protect herself from the pain of dealing with her son’s disappearance. She needed the wall to hide behind, and Severus could sympathize with anyone who clung desperately to their walls of protection. Whatever the reason, Snape reached a hand forward and touched her arm, wanting to convey how much he wanted to help. Harry’s words echoed in his mind– ‘If ever you lost someone who meant the world to you, someone you cherished above all others’.

"Do you need a substitute potion ingredient?" he asked.
"Yes," Volkova squeaked, covering her eyes with her hands.

"You want to transfer the power of Ivan’s Charm to your son?"

"It’s the best way I can help him."

"You don’t carry the necessary ingredients with you?"

"I had most of them in the storeroom," she snapped darkly. "But it’s not a soup mix. It’s not ‘add blood and simmer till you hear voices’."

Snape nearly smiled, glad her tears had been banished by her anger.

"Between us, we might have all the necessary ingredients," he offered.

"You collected them?"

"When I considered making a bindy for Harry, I began to collect what I would need."

"But you don’t have all the ingredients?"

"No. But from my stock and your stock...."

"Yes, perhaps," Anna agreed with a wet, soggy sniff. "A soup mix after all."

"Collect what you need, and we will adjourn to my lab."

"How did you learn my son was missing?" Volkova asked as they headed in tandem out of the library. "Malchik would not have told you."

"Harry knew."

"How did he know?"

"He’s a clairvoyant. It’s what he does best, it would seem, seeking out our deepest fears and needs. He had a blank piece of parchment. I assume he must have read your predicament off the parchment."

"Did I mix it in with his lessons by accident?" Volkova wondered.

"Time is of the essence. How long has your son been missing?"

"Three weeks," Volkova whimpered. "I got an owl this morning. I can’t believe Rubrica didn’t tell me for three weeks!"

They paused at the stairs that went up towards the Dark Arts classroom and her quarters. Snape waited as she vanished upwards into the darkness. She returned with a tiny wooden crate of jars in one hand and a small cauldron in her other hand.

"I’ve been thinking," he said.

"Yes?"

"Rubrica couldn’t tell you your son was missing until she had your son back. It was the safest thing not to tell you."

"Why is that?" Volkova sniffed.
"You are a trained killer," Snape pointed out. Volkova gave a short snort of mirth, smiling darkly.

"That battle-axe isn’t scared of me."

"But she must have had to tell you, because she knew word would get to you."

"I don’t understand."

"Don’t you see? Someone else from the Deusredeti must be on their way to you."

"Sergei couldn’t get this far on his own. He cannot apparate. He hasn’t been off school grounds alone. He might know his way around parts of Venice, but not further than that. He’s a child. He’s barely weaned."

"You always make your reports near the third week of the month. Rubrica knew you would check in soon, and that she would have no choice but to tell you your son was missing. Furthermore, I’m certain they must have sent someone this direction," Severus said, starting down towards the dungeons with Volkova following him.

"How can you be so sure?" she murmured.

"When Illumina was bitten, they knew where she was before I did."

"The Deusredeti employ seers, of course, but surely someone would have warned me about Sergei before this if they had known."

"Not unless those who knew had a reason not to tell you, and now they know those circumstances have changed."

"What circumstances?"

"I don’t know. But I’m telling you, Rubrica revealed your son's disappearance now because she had no choice. Because you were going to find out from another means, she had to tell you. They knew about what was going to happen to Illumina before I knew. I suspect they knew before it happened and didn’t try to stop it."

"What are you saying?"

"Rubrica either knew your son was going to go missing, or she might have engineered his disappearance."

"Preposterous! She’s never liked me, but she would not harm a child."

"Even your child? Only 250 are allowed at one time. With your child gone, another can be allowed."

"She’s never liked me," Anna sniffed. "But she wouldn’t harm a child. She swore a sacred oath."

"How can you keep working for those people?" he asked. "You are, aren’t you?"

"I believe the answer to your question should be wholly evident."

"Indeed. If you were held to Hogwarts by your job as an instructor alone, you would have left us the millisecond you learned your son was missing. But because you are here, in spite of the obvious stress you’re under, you must be here to perform a specific and important task, one that cannot be abandoned no matter what. Shall I try to guess what you’re here to do?"
"Guess what?"

"Your duty, madam."

"Are we there yet?" Volkova sighed.

"You must close your eyes. The wards are secret, of course."

Anna rolled her eyes, but closed them. Severus took her by the arm and led her through the secret entrance into his private lab. He took her ingredients crate and her cauldron and set them up on the table that dominated the room, and then lit a lamp. Volkova’s eyes shot open, and she stared around in amazement.

"Set up your things. I will find mine," Snape murmured.

"You have Ghost of a Chance! I don’t believe it!" Volkova exclaimed, racing over to gaze reverently at the most important, rarest, most precious vials in the room. Snape gave a half-smile. At least it proved she had some talent with potions, if she could recognize the best of the best that quickly.

"It takes twenty weeks to brew a suitable batch," he commented, selecting various ingredients from around the room. "However, part of that particular vial comes from a batch that my grandfather made forty years ago."

"He was trying to banish a ghost?"

"My grandmother kept rearranging furniture in their bedroom after she died."

"Why?"

"She didn’t like that his new wife moved her things around. She did have the last laugh—each new wife changed the furniture around. I’m ready if you are, but we have to use a different cauldron."

"What’s wrong with mine? It’s the purest—"

"I have a special cauldron for such important potions. It would take too long to explain why. You’ll have to trust me."

Snape opened a high cabinet with a golden key that dangled on a chain from the side of the cabinet next to the first one. From inside, he withdrew a cauldron no bigger than an over-sized ramekin.

"Where did you get that?" Volkova wanted to know.

"That’s a secret, I’m afraid," Snape replied. "There is a ritual, of course."

"Isn’t there always?"

"Before we begin, we have to kiss her belly. It’s for good luck."

"This isn’t some perverted game of yours, is it?" Volkova asked skeptically.

"Certainly not," Severus assured her, turning the squat pot over and putting a kiss against the marks on the bottom between the three tiny triangular legs. He held it up for Anna, who hadn’t lost her cynical expression.

"If this works, I’ll kiss even you," Volkova promised, giving the left side of the belly a rough
"Put it on the table," Snape ordered.

"Who does this belong to?" Volkova asked, checking out the initials before putting it on the heavy table. "A curious maker’s mark. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen this type of cauldron elsewhere."

"You haven’t, and you won’t."

"It’s down-right elfish," she decided, her eyes glittering with jealousy and wonder. "Where did you get it?"

"It’s a family heirloom. Here. I believe you’ll need this," Snape replied, handing her a jeweled dagger from the same high cabinet.

"What’s this for?"

"As I recall, this potion requires your blood, and a certain series of words."

Volkova produced her heirloom charm, a silver wand, from inside her cloak. She pulled the cap from the vial and poured the contents swirling into the small cauldron. Severus started a fire, flattening the flames by lifting the cauldron and setting it over them.

"Of course you realize that once you no longer have the charm, you will be vulnerable. You will be a virtual prisoner here, because there’s no safer place than Hogwarts," he said.

"I know."

"Before we do this, can you be certain that your son is alive?"

"Yes," Anna said, taking a painful breath.

"How can you know?"

"Because a mother knows."

"Rubbish."

"We will know soon enough. If he is dead, the spell won’t work."

She picked up the dagger, and pinched the tip of the blade between the thumb and index finger of her left hand. Carefully, she bled seven crimson drops into the mix.

"That’s all?" Snape questioned.

"We have to add the other ingredients. They will bolster the potion, strengthen the charm."

"Seven drops. How appalling."

"Appalling?"

"It’s hardly enough."

"It’s more than enough."

"You could barely do a genetic test in a modern laboratory with that little."
"How do you know about modern laboratories?"

"I have a squib friend who works for a forensics division of Scotland Yard. How will we know when this has worked? Is there a sign? Is there an indication?"

"Aside from the fact Henri Le Clair will no doubt be scratching at the front door?"

"Aside from that, yes."

"We should see apparitions."

"Of whom?"

"All those who have carried the charm before me, and she who created it."

"That should prove illuminating. I’m anxious to see what might drop from your family tree."

"I could say the same for you."

"Ironically enough, now that you appear to have beaten your addiction for the Gallahad Elixir, you’ll have to start taking it again."

"Yes, irony. How charming."

"As we add these vials, I would like to speculate, if I may."

"Speculate about what?" Anna asked, lining the ingredients up in the correct order which did not go unnoticed by Severus. He only hoped she didn't guess that this cauldron would later reveal exactly the components of her special brew. His mother had designed the cauldron as a teaching tool, an experimentation device for a young, curious son.

"Why the Deusredeti have sent you to us, and why the Headmaster approved of keeping you? You are here to look after Mr. Potter, of course How amusing. If we are all looking after him, why does he keep coming to harm?"

"I am not allowed to discuss my duty with anyone not a member of our community."

"You’ve clearly discussed your duty with the Headmaster or you wouldn’t be enjoying your position at Hogwarts. Though I dare say you aren’t enjoying it whatsoever, are you?"

Volkova stared at Snape with a cryptic smile.

"Dear Merlin!" Severus murmured. "Albus has more secrets up those sleeves than even I would have believed. Well, I understand all too much then. He must be linked to your cult, however distant those bonds may be. You may not be allowed to discuss with me why you’re here, but I can ruminate on the subject all I wish. You are here to protect Harry. I’m sure of that. You’ve had an unhealthy obsession with him since the day you arrived for your interview."

"I am not obsessed with Mr. Potter. I’m serious about my work."

"Everyone can tell you have a fancy for the boy. Admit it."

"Nonsense," Volkova sputtered. "I do not fancy him in that way. He’s scant years older than my own child, and too emotionally needy. Besides, I prefer blonds."

"You can’t stand there and tell me you haven’t considered what ten years and a few inches in

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"There’s no denying Potter’s going to be a looker one of these days."

"Yes?"

"He’s adorable now, in that eager puppy sort of way, if you find that attractive." She gave an inch or two of room. "Ten years? You won’t have to wait even five. The seers tell me he’s due to blossom into a simply ravishing creature in mere months."

"Months?" Snape murmured hungrily.

"Weeks, perhaps. It’s going to cause more trouble than you could possibly imagine. He’ll have marriage proposals from the best families. They’ll be squabbling over him before he even receives his release from Hogwarts."

"The Deusredeti didn’t send you here to take him away, did they?" Snape wondered, picking up the dagger in a most threatening manner.

"No. I’m not here to take Mr. Potter from you. I offered him a chance, if he is curious and wants to know more about the Deusredeti, but I don’t believe he wants to leave Hogwarts at all. This place has a certain charm. It is much too close to his heart for him to leave it forever."

"Good to know," Snape decided, lowering the dagger.

She sniffed at him, then smiled. "Is that a hint of fancy I detect?"

"It is not," he replied stiffly.

"Have you checked yourself for bite marks?"

"No need."

"I do believe I smell a fancy," she said. "Yes. Quite sure of it. You are simply reeking of fancy, Mr. Snape."

"I am not," Severus repeated more stiffly than before. Fancy, no, but he might be reeking of musk and sweat, not all of it his own.

"Fancy fancy fancy," Anna rambled, tittering for a half second until a terrible sadness took over her face again.

"How far are you allowed to go in this protection of Harry? Even to the point of killing for him?" Snape wanted to know.

"My lips are sealed."

"Guessing from your previous occupation, I’d have to assume yes. How intriguing. This has to mean that Harry’s well-being has an impact on the Deusredeti, because why else would they meddle in matters this far from home? Why else would your seers be tracking his progress? Why else would they care who or if he marries? There’s only one logical reason."

"No, there could be several logical conclusions, but only one correct reason."

"If Voldemort overthrows the rule of wizard law in the UK, he’ll set his sights elsewhere in the wizarding world. He might decide on a more Mediterranean clime."
"It’s a risk we cannot take. There— that’s the last of the ingredients."

"What now?"

"We wait. If you start to see apparitions, try not to be alarmed."

"I hardly think anyone from your family tree is going to frighten me."

Severus caught his breath as soon as the words left his mouth. He felt dread climb up into his soul and swallow every bit of courage he had ever possessed. Volkova glanced around the lab, wondering what was wrong. It was nothing more than intuition, that crawling sneaking tickle along his spine and scalp, but Snape had to know right that second where Harry was, and that he was all right.

"What is it?" Volkova demanded. Snape fled the room without another word. He dashed into the living area of his quarters. She saw the flash as he went through the Floo. Anna shrugged. She’d never seen him move like that. Who would have guessed he was that agile? She studied the bubbling cauldron, and unrolled the small scroll from her pocket. Clearing her throat, she began to whisper words into the tranquil room.

"Sergei Sergeivitch Volkov,
No sword, no knife, no blade of earthly metals,
No arrow, no lance, no weapon will scar thee.
No fire, no rain, no cold of nature’s fury,
No staff, no rod, no whip will harm thee.
No hammer, no axe, no stake of earthen woods,
No weapon of mortal creation will mar thee.

"May Heaven grant protection from thy every enemy.
Mercy for thy every transgression.
Forgiveness for thy every sin.
With this prayer, I willingly give up my own protection,
 Granted by those who so loved me as I love thee,
and I lay their protection upon you with my own,
Until such time as you must grant your protection
Upon the one you hold most dear,
One who will carry on in your stead
In the heaven-sent duty we must all for our time obey. Amen." (an #3)

After Anna spoke the words, she rolled the scroll up once more and secreted it into her pocket. Even as she stared across the room, she could feel the growing presence of the others as they began to take form.

"What is this? It’s too soon! Not yet!" exclaimed the first. Anna recognized the voice, and smiled through her tears as Vasili Volkov materialized. But there wasn’t time to speak to him. The Floo reactivated in the living quarters. Snape came rushing in, straight through Vasili. The dignified gentleman vanished into mist before solidifying again behind Severus.

"We need to find the Headmaster! Are you finished here?"

"Yes. Only, I wanted to speak with them," Anna murmured.

"There isn’t time," Snape snapped. "Bottle that stuff up in the wand."
"What’s wrong?"

"He’s gone," Severus choked out, whirling to leave the room again.

Chapter End Notes

an #3: The first verse of Volkova's prayer is a mere shadow inspired by a wonderful song from the Cold Mountain soundtrack, "You Will Be My Ain True Love" written by Sting and performed by Alison Krauss. I recommend the book first, the movie second, and the soundtrack only if you like mountain music. "You Will Be My Ain True Love" sounds like a spell to me, or at least the closest thing. There's another really creepy track called "Lady Margret" which is one of those wonderful old story ballads with a dark side. (shiver shiver shiver)
"Severus, try to stay calm. Take a seat. Would you like a lemon drop?"

"HARRY POTTER IS MISSING AND YOU WANT ME TO SUCK ON A LEMON DROP!?!"

"Severus, Harry is going to be fine," the Headmaster soothed, putting one of the candies into his own mouth. "Trust me. Have a lemon drop?"

"How can you know Harry will be all right?"

"Have faith, my friend. Try and think. Professor Flitwick said nothing went awry in the Charms Lesson. In fact, Harry was particularly joyful. He said he hadn’t seen Harry so in control of his magic for some time. You were the last person Harry saw before Filius. Did you do anything that might have upset him or overwhelmed him?"

‘Other than sucking him off?’ Snape thought frantically as he quelled the near-hysterical panic in his chest.

"Think, Severus. Did something upsetting occur?" Dumbledore pressured.

"NO!" Snape lied, angry at being asked.

"Tell me what you see missing," Albus said, staring at the disaster of pages and books on the heavy table in Harry’s rooms in the Black Queen’s Tower. Snape paced his way around the table, studying what remained and what might have been gone.

"He took his special map. He took the blue book from Miss Granger."

"What else?" Albus smiled.

"That scrap of canvas is gone," Snape decided, lifting the ruined square of parchment that was creased with Harry’s hand prints.

"What scrap of canvas?" Volkova asked.

"He had a scrap of canvas. It had blue and gold paint on it. I don’t know where he got it," Severus explained. Anna sat down in the chair, shocked and horrified.

"He must have gone to my office while I was in the library, and taken a piece of canvas from Sergei’s picture. How could he have known it was from my son?"

"Madame, he’s clairvoyant. All he had to do was go to your office, stick out a hand, and find something there that he could use," Snape bellowed back at her.

"It looks as if his clothes have been gone through as well," Dumbledore said, standing at the small trunk at the end of the bed. A stray sock was sticking out of the opened lid, a limp, purple and
yellow, striped snake.

"He’s gone to find Sergei, hasn’t he?" Volkova whispered.

"Harry must have packed a small bag and crept out of the castle using his map," Dumbledore decided. "Where are you going? Stop!" he barked at Snape, who was heading towards the door.

"There isn’t time. We have to find him before the Dark Lord knows he’s not on the school grounds."

"Severus, before we can begin looking for Harry, we have to know where to begin," Albus smiled.

"There isn’t time. You know what kind of danger he’s in out there, alone, without protection," Snape fretted. "I’ll search everywhere, anywhere."

"Severus, I know for a fact that Voldemort has sworn to handsomely reward anyone that can bring him proof of your death."

"That doesn’t matter. We have to find Harry."

"I’ll go," Volkova said. "Voldemort doesn’t scare me in the least."

"No, you will not go either. You transferred the spell on your bindy from yourself to your son, did you not?" Albus asked.

"Yes," Anna said meekly.

"Neither of you may safely leave Hogwarts."

"I’m not afraid," they said in unison.

"Neither of you will leave Hogwarts. Do I make myself clear?"

Snape gave a nasty mutter, glaring at the Headmaster.

"My duty, sir, is to protect Mr. Potter from harm," Volkova protested, "even at the price of my own death. I cannot sit idly by and watch him come to his doom in this sentimental attempt to rescue my son. I swore an oath."

"Neither of you will leave Hogwarts. End of discussion."

"I have to get something from my quarters. I believe it will help us locate Harry," Severus said. "We need the immediate services of a skilled map maker."

"Whatever for?" Volkova questioned.

"It might be easier to show you instead of tell you," Severus replied.

***

"What are we looking at?" Volkova asked as Severus used small potted plants to weigh down the edges of the huge parchment pages he had spread out on the large table in Harry’s room.

"It’s a copy of a map that Harry has. I duplicated his map, made improvements and additions to the enchantments that are on the original parchment."
"How interesting!" Dumbledore smiled, adjusting his glasses and leaning over the table to study the curiosity. "It’s not just Hogwarts now. There’s Hogsmeade. There’s London. It’s crudely-drawn, but it’s very clever. You’ve no idea how proud this makes me," he gloved as he patted Snape on the arm. "You don’t need a map maker. I believe what we need is access to the map books at—"

"Mr. Weasley had a book of maps," Volkova blurted. Excitement lit her face.

"What?" Dumbledore asked.

"He was flipping through it in class. Cartography for Agoraphobics."

"If you would be so kind as to find Mr. Weasley and let him know we require that book, and then make a sweep through the library and find as many atlases there as you can," Dumbledore said, scooting her along. Volkova rushed out of the tower room, almost catching her cloak in the closing door.

"Where shall we begin?" Severus mumbled.

"You’ll have to expand the map several times over for it to prove useful to us," Dumbledore said, moving one of the sheets of parchment slightly to the left.

"I know. There’s no harm in trying," Severus answered.

"There isn’t a lake here? What is that blue spot?" Dumbledore asked.

"I’m a Potions Master, not a cartographer. It’s a fen near here where I grow gilly weed," Snape growled.

"Is there a way to focus on one person instead of seeing hundreds and hundreds of names?"

Dumbledore asked.

"I haven’t found the correct spell as of yet, but I’m sure there must be a way."

"We need someone intimately familiar with this map and its properties."

"Alas, I gather that the four people who might be able to help us are no longer available—Messrs. Mooney, Padfood, Wormtail, and Prongs."

"On the contrary, there are two people available, and they will be very eager to help," Albus grinned.

"Who?" Snape worried.

"George and Fred Weasley," Dumbledore answered.

"Suffering Sufis!" Severus cried.

"Would you like that lemon drop now?" Albus offered. Severus accepted a handful, and threw them all into his mouth at once.

***

"Brilliant," George declared.

"Bloody brilliant," Fred replied.
"You’ve doubled it."

"Tripled it."

"Modified."

"Amplified."

"Such craftiness....."

"....would take a Slytherin, of course."

"Fabulous."

"Wonderful."

"I need to know if you two boys managed to glean any secrets from this parchment while handling it. The original, that is to say, Harry’s copy of this map," Severus pressured, pushing Ron towards the table. The younger Weasley stacked several map books onto the corner as George and Fred smiled at each other.

"Professor, how did you happen to find out about Harry’s copy?" George asked Snape with a sly expression.

"It was included in the box of items sent to him from his friends in Gryffindor Tower, when he was staying in my quarters during November. I told Harry it was pointless to have a map that showed only Hogwarts, because there’s a very large world outside of the school, and sooner or later, he would need to concern himself with the world out there, and not remain in the safety and comfort of his alma mater. We talked about travelling someday, if....when....after the Dark Lord is no longer a concern."

Snape’s voice trailed off into a dismal nothingness. Ron’s annoyance was palpable in the air. He was frowning lines deep into his face. His shoulders tightened as he clenched both fists and fought with the need to grab and choke the Potions Master. On the other hand, Fred and George were taking a different attitude entirely.

"I see," Fred blinked.

"Yes, well," George commented. They leaned their heads close together, as if to block Ron and Severus out of the conversation.

"Mum was right."

"We’ll have to tell her."

The twins laughed softly, discretely, sharing a private look between themselves.

"Oi! Can you help or not?" Ron shouted at them in fury.

"For Harry?" George questioned.

"We’d do anything," Fred concluded.

"Get out your wands and get busy. We haven’t got any time to waste," Snape commanded furiously. "You," he directed at Ron. "To class. At once."
"But it’s night! I haven’t got classes," Ron shouted.

"You’ve got homework, haven’t you?" Snape bellowed back.

"I want to help," Ron declared.

"You can help best by not being underfoot. Go," Snape ordered.

Severus left the Weasley twins to do whatever they could do while he frog-marched Ron back to Gryffindor Tower. Severus had enough time to perhaps eat a small dinner while he left the Weasley twins to their work. He forced himself to go down to the Great Hall and consume at least one potato and a bite of roast beef before his stomach refused anything else he put in his mouth. His body would hear no more of this lolly-gagging around doing nothing constructive while Harry was very probably being starved to death and tortured to ribbons somewhere. Queasy both from food and the lack thereof, he spent time in his office, wallowing in horrid, frightful thoughts about what could be happening to Harry, all the while constructing a surprise quiz for his first year Ravenclaws to take tomorrow.

Once the quiz was finished, he decided enough time had passed, and rushed back to the Black Queen’s Tower, expecting to find Fred and George goofing around. He couldn’t help but expect the worst of them— he’d spent seven years teaching the red-haired devils and knew what they were like. He stepped back into Harry’s room and found to his surprise that much work had indeed taken place. The map was no longer spread out over the table. It was levitating in the air, spun around itself to form a globe. Cartography for Agoraphobics lay open on the floor, utterly denuded of pages. Several other ancient and priceless atlases had been similarly abused. It never occurred to Severus that he should have taught these boys a copying spell before leaving the room. How many precious books had been rendered worthless by his inattention? He stroked one empty cover and nearly cried.

"Madam Pince is going to have our hides, isn’t she?" Fred said, stacking another empty book cover on the precarious pile.

"Most impressive," Snape couldn’t help but comment, walking around the levitating wonder. While some places were more greatly detailed than others, it was clear that there wasn’t an inch of the world that had escaped their notice. "Where are all the names?" he asked, pointing.

"We’re working on that," George answered. The globe rotated around, and names disappeared and reappeared with audible pops of sound, like a certain bowl of breakfast cereal Severus could vaguely remember having consumed during his brief time in the Muggle world.

"Pick a continent," Fred offered.

Snape cautiously stopped the rotation of the large orb, resting his hands on North America and Europe as he pulled the Northern Hemisphere down into easier view, tilting Antarctica towards the ceiling. He eased a hand into the Atlantic Ocean and across Asia, staring at the United Kingdom.

"There are twenty Harry Potters?" he voiced his despair.

"It’s showing Muggles too," Fred sighed.

"I told you not to fiddle with that spell." Fred snapped at George.

"Which one is Harry Potter?" Snape asked as the twins apologized to each other with a mumble and
They’re all Harry Potter," one answered.

"Which one is my Harry?" Severus whispered sadly, feeling defeated at every turn. A twin appeared at his left shoulder.

"There’s no way to tell, looking strictly at the map," he said. The second twin appeared over the other shoulder, bathed in the strange yellow light which illuminated the enchanted pages from within, making the globe feel and look like skin.

"We have to check them out one by one," the first said.

"Exactly," the opposite echoed.

"Thank you for your help, gentlemen," Snape replied finally.

"We’ll get the Headmaster at once," George said.

"No, no, no," Snape conjured a good imitation of an easy chuckle.

"What are you doing?" Fred gulped as Snape laid a blank piece of parchment over the place with the highest concentration of Harry Potters. Snape murmured a quick word or two, and pulled away a perfect replica.

"Bloody hell. We could have used a spell like that," George commented.

"I’m going to start here. Wait thirty minutes, and then summon the Headmaster and tell him where I’ve gone," Snape ordered.

"I don’t think so," Fred laughed, awkward while trying to be firm.

"With all due respect, Professor," George added.

"I seem to recall Headmaster Dumbledore saying you have a price on your head from the Big V."

"A substantial price."

"Are you going to let me leave and find Harry, or do I have to incapacitate you, then leave and find Harry?" Snape asked, his voice rumbling like thunder.

"There’s no need to get violent," Fred promised, backing away and sliding his wand out of his sleeve as Snape raised his wand in a very threatening manner.

"We can work something out, I’m sure," George said.

"Don’t waste much more of my time, or there will be Hell to pay," Snape warned.

"The only way to keep your secret departure safe...." Fred started

"....is to ensure there are no witness left behind," George concluded.

"I was considering that very thought," Snape glowed wickedly.

"What he’s trying to say is we’ll keep quiet if you take us with you," Fred blurted, closing both eyes as Snape raised his wand higher.
"It appears I’ve arrived in the nick of time," Dumbledore chuckled from the doorway. Fred and George parted, leaping aside. "Severus, you are not leaving."

"You’ll have to lock me up to stop me," Snape threatened.

"If you insist, so be it," Dumbledore answered calmly. Snape caught his breath, his face screwing up in confusion. Somehow, that wasn’t exactly how Severus had pictured this conversation would go, at least not this rapidly.
In which Harry tracks Le Clair to his lair, not knowing that he's being followed

The music in the lobby of the building carried all the way up the elevators to the fourth floor. When the elevator parted, there was but one visible suite. The glass entrance was embellished with the single word "Illuminations" in a golden, delicate script. Still in the elevator, Harry glanced down at the gem in his grip.

At Dumbledore’s behest, Harry had kept one emerald from the stash that Le Clair had given him in apology for the bite on Halloween. Lucky thing. Knowing what he knew about what Professor Dumbledore knew, all the knowledge that the Headmaster had accumulated over his many years, Harry decided it could be no coincidence that Albus had wanted him to keep one of the emeralds. There must be grand details and minuscule minutia Dumbledore knew which no one else could possibly ever know, and it all would remain unknown until Dumbledore let it be known, and all for the better, no doubt, because the very idea of all that knowledge crammed Dumbledore’s head made Harry queasy with confusion, brought low by his own ignorance. The smartest thing Harry felt he could ever do was to take the advice of the exceptionally-learned Headmaster. Harry had followed the impressions he received from the gem all the way to this building in Edinburgh. He closed his eyes and concentrated. His instincts were humming. He was close– very close. His entire body felt like a live wire.

When Potter stepped to the entrance of the suite, the glass door swished aside to allow him access. The receptionist at the huge wooden counter and front desk was talking cheerfully on the telephone in her grip. Harry blinked in surprise, two worlds colliding in his head.

It was Raphaella, Le Clair’s newest adopted protégé. That was probably the nicest way to express what their connection was. He was totally astonished to see Raphaella, and had barely recovered from that shock before he noticed that she was using a Muggle device, a telephone, and became astonished for a second time. Granted, it was one of those ancient phones with the fat-bottomed pedestals, and the tall forks for cradling the elongated, slender receiver. Did this qualify as misuse of Muggle artifacts?

"Mr. Le Clair is with a client at the moment, Mr. Waggstaff. I can have him call you when he’s available."

She jotted down a number on a small square of paper, her purple-feathered quill dancing around. She was drawing hearts and flowers on the message too. Strange that her desk contained no visible ink well, Harry thought.

"You’ll be there until 9 pm, but after that, you’ll be having dinner with your business partner. I understand. If he isn’t able to reach you until Friday, what would be the best time to call? Before 10 a.m.? Sir, you do realize that Mr. Le Clair keeps evening hours? Of course, sir. Have a lovely evening."

Raphaella hung up the phone and smiled brightly at Harry. He watched her slide the square of paper into one of the slots on her vertical file on her counter, the one marked with a blue ‘H’. The
note vanished, and the slot burped up a puff of blue smoke. Harry crept forward, holding his knapsack tight against his side.

"Hello, Mr. Potter."

"Hello, Miss...er...."

"Miss Edmundo," she told him, pointing to her engraved wooden name plate.

"Miss Edmundo. I’m here to see Mr. Le Clair," he whispered as she studied him. Her hypnotic red eyes clashed with her cheerful smile. It seemed a few weeks with Le Clair and Mrs. Snape had reignited the young woman's zest for life.

"He’s with a client. Would you like to wait?"

"Yes, please," Harry answered. She pointed to the space to the left of her desk. A flick of her wand brought a chair and a table into existence. Magazines covered the table, spilling onto the floor below. Raphaella flicked her wand again. A light orb appeared, casting dim illumination over the chair. Harry walked over to the chair and sat down timidly, putting his bag at his feet.

"Is the light bright enough for you?"

"Yes, thanks," Harry replied. She picked up the receiver of the phone once more. He raised his eyes, and rushed back to the counter. "You aren’t going to make a call, are you?" he panted with anxiousness.

"Possibly," she said.

"You aren’t going to call someone and tell them I’m here, are you?"

"Why ever would I do that?" she asked, pushing her mouth to one side as if annoyed.

"You must not tell anyone you’ve seen me. You might actually want to forget that you’ve even seen me yourself," he whispered, giving her a big-eyed, very persuasive stare. By this point, she was standing up from her chair, an impish grin on her face. She blinked, her mouth a delighted twist.

"Mr. Potter, are you trying to charisma me into forgetting that I saw you?"

Harry covered his eyes with both hands, resting his elbows on the wooden counter.

"Yes," he admitted, straightening up again as tall as he could in spite of being utterly shamed that his spell hadn’t worked. He hadn’t been able to do the charisma spell with any consistency since Lucius’s attack, and he had to wonder if perhaps the two weren’t connected somehow. He had tried so very hard to use the spell on Severus as well, when they had been bickering about whether or not Harry could visit Tonks in the hospital wing, but had had no success there either.

"That’s so adorable," Raphaella laughed, patting him on top of the head. "Now go sit down and behave. Don’t make me use my stun spell on you."

"Put down the phone," Harry pleaded. "Who were you going to call?"

She turned around her schedule and showed him a name on the page.

"That’s who I’m calling—Gertrude VonHolbrook. I doubt very seriously if she will care if you are here or not, and she’s in Belgium, so if her plan was to rush over and see you, it would take her far
longer to get here than it would take for you to leave."

"She could apparate here," Harry pointed out.

"If she tried, she would run into the wards that cover this entire suite. No one can enter without activating the wards."

"How did I get in?"

"You activated the wards, but they sensed you meant no danger, and allowed you in."

"Well, don’t tell what’s her face you’ve seen me."

"Madame VonHolbrook isn’t going to care about you."

"How do you know?"

"She’s looking for her missing Vermeer, and nothing else matters to her."

"What does her missing Vermeer have to do with you? What kind of place is this?" Harry asked.

"Illuminations?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Le Clair owns the business. He works with personal collectors and museums, arranges to sell them pieces that he has, or helps them meet each other and exchange pieces of interest. He helps people find pieces of history that appeal to them. Art. Manuscripts."

"Art like....?"

"Paintings, sculptures, murals, artifacts, manuscripts, jewelry– whatever people are searching for. They've handled very curious items in years past, but have tried to move away from that. Had a bad incident with a charmed bicycle once, so I’ve heard."

"Where does Mr. Le Clair get them?"

"Some he owns. Others he locates."

"How does he do that?"

"He doesn’t, actually. His business partner does the locating. She used to be a Tracker for the Ministry of Mysteries. I’m sure you can guess who."

"Illumina Snape," Harry nodded. "Is she in her office? Could I see her?"

"Of course not," Raphaella smiled.

"Why not?"

"She’s already left– hours ago, in fact. It’s the big day!"

"Big day?" Harry stammered.

"The wedding."

"Wedding?" Harry paled.
"You are no more surprised than I am," she confided.

"Who is she marrying?"

"Mr. Le Clair," Raphaella replied matter-of-factly. Harry’s jaw must have been hanging open. She tipped a finger against his chin and pushed upwards. "Are you going to sit and read, or should I put away the chair and magazines?"

Harry went to his chair dutifully, and picked up the first periodical on the top of the pile – ‘Art Collecting for New Age Wizards’. It had several useful articles dedicated to being a savvy shopper, where to find the best bargains, how to spot of a fake in three easy steps, how to create a fake that would pass the three easy steps. Given time and opportunity, it would have made fascinating reading, but Harry couldn’t concentrate on the pages beneath his nose because from the desk, Miss Edmundo was making her presence felt.

She was typing on a typewriter– a tall, skinny, silver chrome and black metal square perched on a small table on wheels. Every punch of her fingertips on the manual keys impacted with the captured paper and skated down Harry’s spine. Each heavy thunk and whack collected in the base of his bruised tailbone, making him shift around uncomfortably in his seat. This definitely constituted misuse of Muggle artifacts. He was of half a mind to contact Arthur Weasley, only that would mean that Mr. Weasley would then be alerted to the fact that Harry wasn’t at Hogwarts and was in fact on the loose. Were the rules different for vampires? Did they not have to abide by the laws set down by the Ministry of Magic?

Raphaella whipped the sheet out of the typewriter, and laid in on the desk. It unfolded itself into two other sheets of paper, each a duplicate of the first. She picked up her quill and signed all three pages. Wouldn’t it have made more sense to sign the form and then unfold it, Harry thought. When finished, she touched her wand to the typewriter, and it sank into the small table, vanishing from sight. Harry shook his head and tried to concentrate on the magazine.

Then it hit him. Copenhagen. He went back to the wooden counter.

"Could you slip a note to Mr. Le Clair?"

"Could I what?" she questioned, puzzled.

"Through that?" Harry pointed to the slot where the first note had disappeared. She gave him a small square of paper and watched with a smile as he used her quill to write on the square. He was utterly amazed because it appeared to have a never-ending ink reserve inside the quill itself. It was the wizard equivalent of a ball-point pen! Someone connected to this office had spent time in the Muggle world, no doubt about it! Or perhaps this was merely a portion of the wizarding world he had never been exposed to before.

"‘Don’t buy it. He’s selling the real one in Copenhagen next week.’ What is that all about?" she said, reading the note before putting it into the ‘H’ slot. "That had better not be a joke. He's in a mood today," she warned as he gave her back the quill.

Seconds later, the wall behind her parted. A much-embarrassed, very annoyed young man stalked out, carrying a small wooden box under his arm. Harry had visions of Viktor Krum going through his head. The young man was similar in shape and size and attitude, but was clearly not Krum. He tossed a poisonous look at Harry before storming out of the suite. The glass door sealed behind him with a harmonious clink.

"Raffles, what is the meaning of.....my word," Henri Le Clair said, emerging from the very dim
office. "Mr. Potter. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Shh. He said no one is supposed to know he’s here," Raphaella snickered before putting on a serious face.

"Did he?"

"He tried to charisma me into believing so," she snickered again. Henri shared her amusement in spite of the storm brewing in Harry’s eyes.

"How adorable," Le Clair mused. Harry stared at the floor and frowned. "Raffles, in honor of our special guest, I believe you should lock the front door and put up the very advanced wards on the entire floor."

"Right away, Mr. Le Clair."

"Mr. Potter, follow me, if you please?"

Harry followed Henri into the dim office. Le Clair closed the doors and handed Harry his note.

"Copenhagen? How the hell did you know?"

"I sat in the chair out front and picked up on his last thoughts before he came into your office. He was certain he could fool you without Mrs. Snape here."

"He nearly succeeded. How extraordinary. Illumina said Severus had asked her to tutor your budding clairvoyance. I’d say you’ve rushed past ‘budding’ and are careening wildly towards ‘fully grown’."

Harry refused to be swayed by the charming compliment. He clutched his bag tightly to his side and tried to keep his eyes on Le Clair steady in spite of the shiver of fear that was shuddering along his spine.

"You saved me several thousand pounds and my reputation. I shouldn’t have dealt with Wulfhelm while Illumina was out of the office. How did you get here? What are you doing here? Are you supposed to be traipsing around without someone to protect you?"

"I’ve run away from school."

"Clearly."

"I needed to find you, needed to talk to you."

"I’m sorry to hear that. You see, it’s not uncommon for victims such as yourself to track down the vampire who injured them in an effort to settle the score. Sometimes that’s all that makes them keep going, humans and vampires alike. I imagine that’s why you’re here, hot-headed boy like you. Are you going to chase me around the room, or shall we duel right here on the rug? I haven’t had a decent duel in ages. I hope you’re up to it. Shall I take out my wand? Shall we count to five and lunge for each other? What’s in the bag? Stakes, hammers, holy water?"

If Le Clair thought Harry had come all this way to harm him, he didn’t seem at all worried, that much was clear. He was struggling to control a grin of delight, staring Harry up and down in a hopeful manner, expectant of something impressive.

"Um, no. It’s clothes and stuff," Harry mumbled, opening the bag to show him. Satisfied with no
more than half a glance at boxers and socks and the blue book on top, Henri nodded, rather glum. He had wanted Harry to come here and attack him? Potter was suddenly confused. Le Clair reached down and unfolded Harry’s hand, finding the single emerald in his grip.

"That’s how you tracked me?" Le Clair asked.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Very impressive," Le Clair rumbled, pleased once more. "How lucky you didn’t hone in on the previous owner of the gem. You’d’ve found yourself in the very seediest part of Mongolia. Well, here you are. Here am I. What do you need to talk to me about, petit cher?"

"Don’t pretend you don’t know why I’m here," Harry said, pocketing the gem and closing up his bag.

"I’m sorry?"

"I know you harbor an extreme dislike for Professor Volkova, and I understand that your history with her family goes back for many years, centuries in fact."

"Yes?" Le Clair puzzled.

"But an innocent child that has never harmed you does not deserve to bear the brunt of your hatred and anger," Harry challenged.

"What innocent child are we talking about?" Henri questioned.

"Knowing you won’t give him up without a better offer, I’m here to ask you to let him go, please."

"Um....what?"

"Perhaps I’m not being clear. I’ve come to trade myself for Professor Volkova’s son," Harry announced, straightening up to his tallest again.

Henri blinked at Harry for a few seconds before pulling out a chair in front of the immense wood desk. He guided Harry to the seat and put him down gingerly. With his eyes, Harry followed Henri around the desk as the vampire made his way to the large chair on his end. Once settled, Henri gaped at Harry in undisguised alarm before he shook himself sane again.

"Volkova’s son is missing? I’ve been so occupied with other things lately that I haven’t had time to concentrate on her too. I try to limit myself to one tempest per month. I’ve felt her spells in action, yes, only today in fact, but there are too many other things going on in my life at this particular moment. I simply don’t have the energy to keep track of her all the time. Believe it or not, Madame Volkova is not always the most troublesome witch in my life."

"There’s no point in denying it. I saw that you have him. Someone gave him to you as a gift at a very large, very lavish party. If you let him go to his mother, I will remain here with you. I’m offering myself to you as a hostage for his safe release," Harry said.

Henri was frowning now. He opened his jacket and pulled out his wand. Flicking it at the middle of the desk, he produced an elaborately-decorated china teapot and one cup.

"Sugar and cream?" he asked, lifting the pot and pouring steaming liquid into the waiting cup. Harry noted that the motif on the china had very small orange pumpkins, green vines with leaves, and tiny bats in it. He knew instinctively that Le Clair would never buy such an item for himself,
and the vampire must be keeping it because of sentimental value. The very fact that the vampire placed sentimental value in something did much to lighten Harry’s nervousness about confronting him this way.

"No, thank you."

Henri handed the cup to Harry, and sat back in his chair to watch the young man with keen eyes. Harry sniffed—it was a fruit tea of some sort. But the cup, it was full of memories more than tea. Harry flowed through the images to the beginning when the cup had come into Le Clair’s possession.

A small, frail girl with dark hair was waiting on the edge of her seat as she watched Le Clair unwrap a glittering box. It contained the pot and several matching cups. The girl smiled proudly, and moved to hug him, dropping to the floor when she rose up out of her cushioned chair. Le Clair filled with panic and lifted her form, worried about her weak movements.

‘Papa said you didn’t have a decent set of cups,’ she said. ‘But now we may have tea together as often as you like, yes, Captaine Le Clair?’

Pity consumed Le Clair, followed by an intense wave of hatred for his former faith as he watched the cross swinging on the little girl’s neck.

"It’s raspberry," Le Clair provided. Harry shook away the little girl in his head, and took a polite drink and waited as Henri continued to study him. When the vampire began to test out a smile, Harry could feel his courage shaking. He tightened his grip on the cup, and put a foot against the desk to steady himself. Voices took over his head.

Le Clair, sometime in the past, had been staring down into the cup that Harry was holding now, avoiding the eyes of the man across from him.

‘I don’t want her to linger in pain.’

‘But what you ask of me, Baron, it’s unspeakable. It’s a sin.’

‘A sin? What are God’s rules to me? He’s taking my child from me. He’s taking my life from me a piece at a time. I care nothing for His rules.’

‘Perhaps there’s a cure out there.’

‘There is no cure. We’ve seen the best doctors, the most learned wizards, the most renowned healers.’

‘Is there no hope at all?’

‘None, sir. None.’

‘I’m sorry, Baron,’ Le Clair nearly whimpered the words.

‘Rosamund is my life. I cannot bear to let her linger in pain, dying by heartbeats, by seconds, in constant agony, but you see, I haven’t the heart, I haven’t the courage, I haven’t the will to end her life myself.’

‘I’ve never killed a child. I had children once myself. I swore no matter what Fate made of me, that I would never take the life of a child.’
'Being a father, then you know how I feel. You must know! I’ll do anything to ease her pain, but I haven’t the heart to do this myself. Please, Le Clair, I’m begging you. To watch her suffering is the worst torture I have ever endured. If you do this for me, I am your man for life.’

"You found a window in to me, didn’t you?” Le Clair asked, nodding to the cup. Embarrassed, Harry couldn’t meet his eyes. He had gone into a private place where he was not welcome, and Henri was annoyed with him for it.

"Sorry."

"Lulu tells me it's addictive. Once you begin to learn how to use your clairvoyance, you'll be feeling up everyone and everything you can lay your hands on, trying to learn all that you can learn."

"Scary thought," Harry smiled.

"If you're here to plumb my depths, perhaps I can save you the energy of searching every item in the room," Le Clair muttered. The vampire put forward his hand, sliding ice cold fingers under Harry’s. "Delve to your heart’s content. I do not have Volkova’s son."

Harry tightened his grip on the cold fingers, and timidly opened a conduit between himself and the vampire. He encountered a shimmering twilight space, and beyond that a deep blackness that he could not penetrate no matter how hard he concentrated. Henri was smiling again. The blackness wasn’t as solid as it first appeared. It seemed to waver, like dark water or dark light. Harry knew it was a cloaking spell, or perhaps a protective block he put up against intrusion.

"Mon Dieu. What courage you have!" Le Clair whispered in a husky voice that tickled Harry’s ears and groin. "Most people would not have the courage to connect their magic with another’s. Such a fire-breather. You are a dragon, Mr. Potter! A fire-breathing, meat-eating dragon!"

"You could help me here," Harry complained, battling against the immense darkness that would not let him in. "Let down your guard and allow me to see what I’m looking for," he requested. Le Clair purred another chuckle, stroking Harry’s fingers.

"I do not think you need to see such things as I have seen in my time. I swear to you on my mother’s grave that I do not have Volkova’s son. You don’t know how it pains me to admit that. You can tell by the contact that I am not lying to you, yes? Illumina can tell that way."

"How can I believe you? You might be able to lie to me, and I couldn’t tell."

"Mr. Potter, would I not gain more by telling you I had him and that I would accept your offer? I stand to gain nothing unless I have her son, and therefore I have no reason to lie to you."

"But if you did have him, you would accept?" Harry questioned.

"If only for the pleasure of being in the presence of a wizard such as you.” Le Clair’s voice continued to weave its own magic. "What I could make of you with enough time and the proper training! Continents would tremble. Kingdoms would bow to you!"

"That’s all well and good, but I haven’t found Volkova’s son yet, and that means I have to leave,” Harry said, taking his hand away from Henri. "There’s a defenseless ten year old out there with hordes of revenge-hungry vampires hot on his trail."

"Finish your tea first," Le Clair cajoled, amused again. "I should tell you that in spite of appearances, if the boy is truly a Volkovi, he’s anything but defenseless. He could be saved if he
has inherited her criminal knack for weaponry if nothing else. Anna made her first kill before she was twelve, using nothing more than a hairpin she plucked from her crown," he said, echoing the motion by drawing his hand away from the top of his head. "It was most terrifying to witness. If I could have had her for my apprentice as a Transfigurationist, we would have made history together."

"I wasn’t aware." Harry’s voice dimmed with confusion. "She doesn't think she's very good at Transfigurations."

"I and many others were fully prepared to dismiss the girl. A woman vampire hunter?! Unspeakable! Her mother was a complete mouse– slit her own throat to avoid capture. I fully expected tears and tantrums when I first encountered Anna. But let me tell you, only the very lucky ones have lived to regret such foolish misogyny where Volkova is concerned."

"She doesn’t like to talk about her years as a hunter."

"No, I imagine not." Henri pressed a button concealed in the desktop. "Raffles, darling? Are you there?"

"You said you’d call me Miss Edmundo at work."

"Miss Edmundo?"

"Yes, Mr. Le Clair? Did you get your note from Nico?"

"Yes, I did."

"Aren’t you going to call him?" Raffles was anxious.

"Soon."

"He wanted to wish you luck. That’s so sweet."

"Yes, he’s very much a gentleman. Would you be a dear and call Mrs. Snape on the car phone, let her know I may be delayed."

"She’s not going to be happy with you."

"Tell her I’ve got a very good reason. I swear I will be there by midnight."

"The ceremony starts at midnight."

"Yes, darling. Call her, please."

Henri released the button and smiled patiently at Harry.

"I wasn’t kidding, you know, about continents and kingdoms."

"If you don’t have Sergei Volkova, who might have him?"

"There is a minor point you should know about Russian names."

"What’s that?"

"She’s a Volkova. He’s a Volkov. They together are the Volkovi."
"Can we get back to the point here?" Harry asked impatiently, wondering at the perverse and strange obsession both Volkova and Le Clair had for correct grammar, and Severus, and McGonagall too come to that. Would he ever be that obsessed with the proper placement of the indefinite article, or the correct gender-specific endings for nouns and names? Would it hit in his thirties or his forties, like a flu without a remedy? Take two adjectives and ring the doctor in the morning?

"I suppose. Any number of vampires who have as much of a score to settle with his illustrious, stake-wielding mother as I have. I caution you, if your plan is to save her son from harm by offering yourself to whoever might have him, you will want to reconsider that strategy. Not many will exercise the same amount of restraint that I possess."

"Duly noted. But I am poisonous to you, and I believed that might work in my favor," Harry said tartly. Henri gave a slow, husky laugh, and flashed sharp teeth in a smile. Harry quivered, remembering the feel of those teeth buried deep in his skin. Funny that they didn’t all appear pointed. In fact, they were all normal but the canines. Harry wondered if the master transfigurationist mutated his teeth whenever he wanted to make a bite in a victim. More teeth for a bigger bite? Did that take a lot of concentration to do, Harry puzzled, tipping to the right to get a better look. The desk buzzed, and Harry tensed, straightening up in his chair. Henri pressed the button, curious what had been going through Potter’s brain.

"Yes, Raffles?"

"Miss Edmundo," she whispered.

"Yes, Miss Edmundo?"

"Mr. Le Clair, Mrs. Snape said to tell you if you aren’t in the field at the monoliths by midnight, she is going to stake you herself."

"The nerve of her! We’ll be lucky if she gets there by midnight, the way she drives. Call her back and tell her I’ll be there. While you’re at it, where are we staying again?"

"I’ve already made the reservations, Mr. Le Clair."

"After you’ve called Mrs. Snape, call the hotel and let them know we’ll need an additional room."

"Sir?"

"One with a lovely view of the city, and with the same high level of security as the other suites."

"Yes, sir, but they were full-up last time I checked."

"Maybe someone has changed their mind since."

"Understood, sir."

Raphaella’s voice went away. Harry put down his empty cup as a small giggle echoed in his mind, along with a name. Rosamund Romovski.

‘I'm going to kill you now, Rosamund. I hope you will not be offended.’

‘Offended? I would be nothing but thankful.’

'I promise not to hurt you, petite chère.'
"If you do, I doubt I shall notice."

"You'll drift away, like sleeping and floating at once."

"Thank you, Captaine. Tell Papa not to cry."

"I doubt he'll ever stop. He will miss you."

"I will miss him, and I will miss you."

"Feel better?" Henri inquired calmly. The tea cup and pot vanished away.

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. I have a proposition for you, Mr. Potter, if you're of a mind to trust me, which I believe you are."

Le Clair opened a drawer and withdrew a sheet of vellum paper with slightly uneven edges. He pushed the piece at Harry, and produced a green quill with a snap of his fingers. Harry waited for an ink well, before realizing it must be like the purple quill that Raphaella had.

"I will speak. You will write. Feel free to fill in the blanks along the way," Henri said. "Are you ready?"

Harry picked up the quill and put it to the paper.

"Light might be helpful," he commented. Le Clair aimed his wand at Harry.

"Lumos minus viridian," the vampire spoke. An eerie green light bathed Harry and his half of the desk. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure of what you’ve offered? I’m giving you one last chance to change your mind," Henri said.

"I’m sure."

"I, Harry, middle name, Potter. Blood of Christ, boy, don’t write ‘middle name’. Fill in your middle name," Henri bitched, getting up from his chair and looming from the other side of the desk. "Being of sound mind and body, do hereby promise Henri Philippe Le Clair; one l, two p’s, e on the end; that should Sergei Sergeivitch Volkov come into his possession, I will trade myself for the safe release of Mr. Volkov, and remain in the company of Mr. Le Clair."

"That’s fair enough," Harry agreed. "Is it a binding contract?"

"When we both sign it, it will be."

"You will keep your word?"

"I’m going to sign, and you’re going to sign, and we will both keep our words. Heaven protect us."

Harry finished writing, and turned the parchment around for Le Clair’s inspection.

"Hideous penmanship and questionable spelling, but we won’t count off points for such as that."
"I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to spell Sergeivitch."

"To be honest, neither do I," Le Clair commented. "I speak more Russian that I can write, and what I do know would only be repeatable in the roughest of company."

"How did you know what his full name was?" Harry asked. Le Clair coughed around a blood-curdling grin, wondering how to sugar-coat unpleasant truths, Harry knew instantly.

"If his father is who I believe he is, we’ve met."

"Under pleasant or unpleasant circumstances?" Harry wanted to know.

"Most unpleasant," Henri promised. Harry paled at Henri’s stark admission. "Sergei Père– I recall him well. A singularly-unattractive man. I’ve never been cursed at in so many languages. He had a certain puppy eagerness for the job that made up for his inexperience, at least until he met me. I have to admit that I do retain a passing admiration for any man willing to be naked and vulnerable to Volkova though. I doubt Sergei Fils will quibble at your rescue gesture on the basis of a couple mislaid vowels. Sign and date at the bottom," he ordered.

"What about you?" Harry said. Le Clair took the quill and signed as well.

"There. You have my word, and I have your word. That will have to do for the meantime."

"I suppose so," Harry agreed reluctantly.

"I hate to rush off, but I have a wedding to attend. My own, in fact. A simple civil ceremony. At my age, one has grown tired of elaborate ceremonies and such."

"Not so fast," Harry said, as Le Clair rolled up the parchment into a neat scroll.

"What?"

"I’m sticking to you. You aren’t getting out of my sight," Harry warned as Henri gave him the scroll.

"I couldn’t agree more– the closer you remain to my side, the safer you will be, at least until I can deliver you back to your school. Hence the reason I asked Raffles to secure another room at the hotel!"

"Oh," Harry said in a small voice, hunching down in his seat. The desk buzzed again. Henri rolled his eyes and pressed the button.

"Yes, Miss Edmundo?" he murmured.

"Uncle Henri? You need to come out here and see this."

"See what, dear?"

"Outside our office," she said. Her voice was missing its customary layer of good humor. Harry put down the quill on the desk top, following Henri to the doors. Le Clair parted the doors, and Raphaella fell through into his arms. Harry stood behind them both and peered around Henri’s side.

Voldemort stood outside the glass entrance, surrounded on all sides by his black-robed minions. There had to be twenty Death-Eaters crammed into the tiny foyer, and all of them were joining their master, throwing spell after spell against the barrier. The glass shivered and quaked, but held
tight. The bursts of power and light were being repelled, as were the intruders, for the moment at least. A wind storm was being whipped up by all the magic being released in such a small space.

"Mr. Potter, do you know these people?" Henri asked Harry calmly as Voldemort sent another wave of red and black crackles of lightning against the glass.

"Unfortunately yes," Harry said, grim as death.

"That’s YOU-KNOW-WHO," Raphaella whispered.


"Yes," Potter said, cringing when the spells shook the entire floor of the building.

"I must keep more abreast of current situations," Henri chided himself. "I confess that I pictured someone taller, scarier."

"He’s scary enough," Raphaella said back.

"What happened to his face?"

"Dark Magic has warped him," Harry shuddered.

"How very rude your Lord Voldemort is, Mr. Potter. Much more of their nonsense, and it’s going to start raining in the foyer. Did that horrible man chase you all the way here from Hogwarts?" Le Clair soothed Harry.

"No. I had no idea I was being followed."

"You are going to require more training that I thought," Henri frowned. "With all the fuss they are making, you didn’t know you were being followed? All they lack is a brass band and cannon fire. If he mars those doors, I’m going to bill him for repairs. What a savage. What has happened to the days when men could be counted upon to duel like civilized wizards?"

"Maybe we shouldn’t loaf about waiting to see if he gets through," Raphaella suggested.

"You’re so very practical, dear. Are you done for the day?"

"We both are. If you aren’t at that ceremony, you’re a dead man."

"Put away your desk."

Raphaella motioned with her wand. The counter and her desk popped out of existence. There was the impression of the furniture feet and a few stray paperclips on the carpet, but nothing else remained. Harry’s chair and the magazines vanished too. Miss Edmundo put away her wand and stepped back into Henri’s office.

"Coming, sir?" she asked.

"Un moment, s’il vous plaît?" Henri grinned boyishly and aimed his wand at the floor. A ferocious jolt of energy seared through the carpet and out into the foyer without damaging the glass. Voldemort and all his Death Eaters leapt upwards as one, screaming in pain. When they came back down, it was in a jumble of limbs and robes, like a very disorganized game a Twister. Masks went everywhere. Harry recognized both Narcissa and Goyle before they managed to right themselves. They had to pull Voldemort upright by both hands.
"That wasn't very civilized," Raphaella chided him.

"Perhaps he needs to be reminded what it’s like, fighting with a full grown man instead of a prodigy wizard child," Le Clair chuckled, making a rude gesture to Voldemort before closing the doors to his office. Henri herded Raphaella and Harry through his office, closing a series of doors that led through smaller and smaller offices until they located another elevator at the other end of the long, narrow building.

"What if they’ve already thought of this?" Harry asked.

"This is a private elevator," Henri sniffed.

"What if they’ve already thought of this?" Harry repeated, narrowing his eyes.

"Raffles, did Mrs. Snape take the black car?" Henri asked.

"Yes, but not without protest. She said the clutch doesn’t like her, and she would prefer an automatic transmission. If not for the fact she needed to transport luggage..."

"She has no appreciation for Italian cars. Automatic transmission, indeed! I’m going to shut down the wards. Apparate to the monoliths. We’ll be right behind you. On five."

"Yes, sir," she said, snapping him a salute.

"Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq. That’s five, dear."

Raphaella popped out of the room. There was a tremendous explosion from the front end of the building. Henri scooped Harry close to his side. Potter fought the desperate terror in his chest at being clutched at without warning, but quelled his fears with steady breaths.

"I’m going to have to have a word with that man, aren’t I? After the ceremony. After," Henri muttered angrily. "Illumina will kill me if I’m late."

Harry felt himself enveloped by magic, and instinctively held tighter to the form next to him as they apparated.
Chapter Summary

In which two mismatched vamps get hitched, and Harry talks vamp pros and cons with Raffles

Harry couldn't see much of the ceremony taking place on the hilltop above the field. He was sitting anxiously on the hood of a car, eager to be off again in search of Volkova’s son. Le Clair had convinced him to wait until after the ceremony, when he could help search for Sergei, and Harry had agreed to wait, not sure he could trust Le Clair, but willing to give him a chance. It didn’t make the waiting any easier though, especially feeling he needed to act fast to be of any help himself. This small vale was much darker and spookier than Harry would have liked too. He wasn’t alone, thankfully.

Raphaella was sitting in the backseat of the car, chatting happily on a mobile phone. She was holding Harry’s bag on her lap, toying with the handles. He considered reaching in to snatch it away from her, but she would have only held it out of his reach. Her conversation was too soft for him to hear, except she kept repeating ‘Aloha’. He could make out two different voices, and every time Raphaella laughed, but that was all. Her face was animated with amusement, her features lit by the phone. He moved to slide off the hood of the car, and she was immediately out of the car and at his side.

"Where are you going?” she demanded, picking him up and putting him back on the hood. Though she seemed but a handful of years older than Harry, she knew how to make every second of their age difference count.

"I wanted to see what they were doing up there. I’ve never been to a proper wedding, not a wizard wedding. Come to that, I’ve never been to a wedding of any sort. I’m curious– that’s all,” Harry said.

"I don’t think you’re old enough to see this particular ceremony,” Raphaella replied. She was taking Henri’s directive to look after Harry to heart. Harry hunched up where she had placed him, and squinted meanly at her in the minimum of glow offered by the moon and stars and the mobile phone. Unfortunately, his sulking made her grow more amused with him. She patted him on the head, and got back in the car. Annoyed, Harry turned his attention to the top of the hill.

Henri and Illumina had their hands linked together, and were standing in a circle of branchless tree trunks. Or perhaps they weren’t tree trunks, but stone monoliths. Someone had mentioned monoliths. Harry couldn’t tell at this distance. There were four other people present, one of whom was wearing white robes that glowed with gold and silver symbols. She was wrapping a symbolic cord around Henri and Illumina’s wrists, while the other three people shook vials above them and sprinkled liquid of some form over them. The figure in white would murmur, and the other three people would chorus in reply, then sprinkle the pair. It was all very curious, and Harry itched to get closer so he could hear what they were saying.

"How long will this take?” he asked. The roof of the car opened, and Raphaella popped up. The phone conversation had ended, he supposed. She smiled at him, holding up a jar of fireflies.
"Not much longer," she promised in the greenish light as she set down the jar. Harry peered closer, adjusting his glasses. They weren’t fireflies at all, but tiny fairies, who pressed their faces to the thick glass and blew kisses at him. "I hope they hurry. It’s getting chilly. These girls are going to freeze," Raphaella added.

"What are you doing with a jar full of fairies?"

"When the ceremony is over, they get released. If any of them land on the couple, it’s good luck."

"Aren’t they going to seal the ceremony with a kiss?" Harry asked.

Raphaella snickered. "You should probably look away," she answered.

"What? Like I’ve never seen two people kiss." Harry’s mouth fell open when he stared back up the hill. Henri and Illumina were slowly disrobing, their pale skin throwing off light. "They aren’t going to...I mean....in front of....all those people??"

Raphaella put her hands over Harry’s eyes, and he dodged away, but kept his back to the goings-on.

"I haven’t had sex with a woman in hundreds of years. You’re going to have to be patient," Henri was explaining.

"Traditional priestess," Raffles said. "That’s all I could find on short notice. This is a marriage of convenience. It’s a business partnership. They’re getting married so if anything happens to one or the other, Illuminations will remain in the rightful possession of the other. His ex-wife Marguerite stopped by the office, snooping around."

From the top of the hill, Illumina snarled, "For God’s sake, will you let me do this before one of us gets hurt?"

"Beastly woman, that Marguerite," Raphaella shuddered, turning her back as well. "We’re supposed to be impressed that her brother was once a general to the King of Bavaria? I think she ate the King of Bavaria, if you want to know the truth. Illumina said that Marguerite and Krieger aren’t siblings but husband and wife. Uncle Henri’s no fool. That’s why they divorced- he and Marguerite. She was setting him up to get killed by Krieger, so she would stand to inherit all that Le Clair owned. But he got wise to their plans and sent her packing back to her home estate. Divorced her through their advocates as far as the process could go. They hadn’t seen each other since the very acrimonious final court session, a day that judge never forgot, let me tell you! Then suddenly for the last few months, she’s been showing up on a regular basis to annoy him. She must have found out that until Henri remarried, she would inherit as his most recent ex-wife."

"I don’t mean to display how very thick I can be," Harry said. "But I couldn’t fail to notice that Mr. Le Clair doesn’t seem to be all that interested in women. Was I mistaken?"

"No. He’s gay as a lavender leisure suit. The marriage to Marguerite was a political partnership. Strictly speaking, marriage for love is a very modern thing. Most marriages before modern times were to gain financial or real estate fortunes and to secure family alliances. Henri’s been married four times before this, and gained meaningfully from three of those marriages."

"Does Henri have living family?" Harry puzzled. He watched the fairies doing circles inside their jar, and wondered if they could breathe through the holes in the top of the container. They didn’t appear to be in distress though.

"He has a distant descendant or two, but in that situation, Illumina holds the higher cards. She’s
from a very distinguished old wizarding family from Venice," Raphaella said. "Have you heard of the Cassavechi?"

"No. Does she have living relatives?" Harry wondered.

"Many, in fact, both in the UK and in Italy," Raphaella nodded. "Her oldest brother is being groomed to replace the current Minister of Foreign Relations, and several of her cousins are in politics as well."

"Any in the Deusredeti?"

"Yes, a few."

"So why did you hire the traditional priestess?" Harry asked, wondering if Bill and Fleur were going to have one too.

"It was very short notice. She was the only one who agreed to the time and place, and these particular participants. I had to pay her ten times the going rate for a nuptial union spell, and promise it would be only the bride and groom at the ceremony. And I had to catch the fairies myself."

"When did you have time?"

"It was very easy. Put out some honey and dandelion wine, play sweet music, and they come running."

"Can’t the traditional priestess tell if the people getting married don’t love each other?" Harry asked, believing right from the start that Raphaella was pulling his leg about the fairies. There was probably a store in Diagon Alley where you could buy them by the truckload.

"That’s not entirely true. They do love each other," Raphaella protested. "I mean, it’s not like you have sex with everyone you love, right? And we sometimes don’t love everyone we’ve had sex with."

There was a dark bitterness to her words, such a difference from her usual cheerfulness, that Harry couldn’t help but notice. He waited in uncomfortable silence as Raphaella booted off her shoes and toed around the interior of the car.

"I saw him the other day," she said.

"Saw who?" Harry asked.

"Him," Raphaella whispered. "The one who bit me," she added as she stared ruefully down at the fairies. The jar was vibrating from all their humming and spinning around inside.

"Did you tell Le Clair?"

"Yes, but he had already gone."

"But Illumina can track him, can’t she?"

"She tracks objects, not people."

"Was it scary, seeing him again?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "He must have heard who took me in."
"Through the grapevine?"

"He must have heard," Raphaella nodded.

"Le Clair strikes me as the protective type. Maybe he’s running scared from Uncle Henri, your boogey-vamp, and that’s why he’s afraid to show his face."

Raphaella gave a small snort of a giggle, wiping her eyes.

"Boogey-vamp," she laughed.

"What’s it like, being a vampire?"

"The pay is good but the hours are hard," she laughed unevenly. "What do you mean, what’s it like??"

"Well, what’s it like?"

"I miss cheesecake."

"You can’t digest human food any more?"

"No. It goes right through. Is that too graphic? TMI? You made a face. I miss my mother’s cooking, and I miss my mother. I miss my younger brothers and sister."

"Can’t you call home and talk to them? You’re part Muggle, aren’t you? You’re comfortable with phones."

"Yes. My father is a Muggle, and my sister too. My parents won’t answer if I call, won’t talk to me, and won’t accept owls either."

"I’m sorry."

"They blame me for what happened, told me that if I had been where I was supposed to be, doing what I was supposed to be doing, that none of this would have happened."

"How did this happen to you?"

"I was at a party with friends on Halloween night."

"Against your parents’ wishes?"

"I ducked out of a night class and went with friends. At least they’ll still talk to me, some of them," she sniffed.

"You met your boogey-vamp at the party?"

"Yeah. He was in the band. Oh, don’t make fun. I know what a cliché it is. Believe me, I know. Harry!"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Potter apologized, still snickering. "It’s so....such a....he was in the band?"

"Yes."

"Lead singer?"

"Yes."
"Pale sorta fellow? Dark hair? Hypnotic eyes?"

"Yes."

"A goth band?"

"Yes."

"You got bit because you were a vampire groupie??" Harry smothered a laugh in one hand, tisking at her. Raphaella stared up the hill, presumably to see if Henri was watching, and then tapped Harry roughly upside the head two or three times. He pushed her away, undaunted.

"I said stop," she huffed, scratching her nails up and down both sides of his waist. Harry burst into laughter, ducking downward, his feet leaving scuff marks on the car. Raffles continued tickling him until he pulled out of reach. Seeing her furious was worth the scratch marks. The jar of fairies turned over and started to roll off the car. Raphaella squealed, forgot Harry, and snatched the jar back from certain doom.

"Your boogey-vamp is a goth rocker," Harry laughed.

"Is that a love bite on your neck?" she asked, peeking into his collar once she had the fairies upright again.

"No," he said, pushing her hands away. "Is there any advantage to being a vampire?" he wanted to know.

"I’m learning very quickly how to handle body fluids I wouldn’t have touched before. Needles always used to make me queasy. Now they make me hungry."

"Why needles?"

"We go to blood drives. I’ve gained ten pounds since Halloween. It’s a bit of kinky fun, getting to dress up in a nurse’s outfit to go out with Uncle Henri."

"Don’t you stop growing when you’re bitten by a vampire?"

"If you start life as a human and are bitten, you will remain that age forever. But you don’t stop growing," Raphaella said. "I’ll be nineteen, forever. Ugh."

"There are people who might find that an attractive idea, being nineteen until they die, you know."

"They’re imbeciles," she replied pointedly. "Illumina said that maybe I could consider taking an aging potion in a few years, to see if I’d like to be a different age."

"You can do that?"

"Sure. When I’m ready to start a family, maybe I will."

"You can have children too?"

"You didn’t think vampires have sex?" Raphaella frowned.

"Yeah, sure, I knew about that," Harry stammered. "You can have children?"

"Yes."
"I always thought since vampires were dead, they couldn’t get pregnant."

"We’re undead. That’s not the same as dead. Yes, vampires can get pregnant. I was afraid for a few weeks after Halloween that I was pregnant by the little fucker who bit me. Wouldn’t that have been insult to injury?"

"Look, I’m sure other women have fallen for him as well, so don’t beat yourself up about it, okay?" Harry said, giving her a supportive pat on the shoulder. The fairies were all plastered to one side of the jar. They swooned and sighed, talking to each other while pointing at Harry and Raphaella.

"Yeah, I suppose," Raphaella said in a sullen tone. "Thanks."

"Can vampires have children with wizards or witches?" he asked.

"It’s been known to happen," she smirked. "Next you’ll be asking if we all sleep on native soil in coffins in the basement."

"You don’t?"

"Potter, one more question like that, and I’m going to bite you," she threatened.

"Be careful. I’m poisonous," he warned. "Extremely, exceptionally, dangerously poisonous." Harry added, trying to look fearsome in case it might be necessary.

"More than likely, you’re under a dark spell. It could be from when you received your scar, or maybe a different curse altogether," Raphaella said, growing serious. "Has anyone cursed you lately? Mallus Umbrus can be a treacherous thing.

"Being under a dark curse would make me taste bad?" Harry wondered.

"Just as someone cheerful and happy would taste sweet," she said.

"Do virgins taste different?" he asked.

"I dunno," she shrugged.

"Have you bitten anyone since you’ve...you know?"

"Not yet," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Anyone you’ve wanted to bite?"

"You. Right now."

"No, seriously."

"Yes, seriously."

"How do you know you want to bite me? Are your teeth getting longer? Is your stomach growling?"

"No, I'm growling. I'm having PMS."

"What?" Harry blushed.
"Pre-Mangle Stress. The more you talk, the more likely I am to mangle you."

"Oh, ha ha ha. Could I keep you back with a cross?"

"Do you even own a cross?"

"No. That’s not the point."

"No, you couldn’t. I’m a devout Catholic."

"What? You can be a Catholic and be a vampire?" Harry puzzled. "Henri doesn’t like crosses."

"He and God are fighting. Maybe they’ll work it out someday, though I doubt that they will, not until God apologizes for Constantinople. See, cross," she said as she pulled a rosary out of her pocket and showed it to him.

"Whoa. Another myth busted. Garlic? How do you feel about garlic?"

"I happen to love the smell of garlic," Raffles said, putting away the rosary. "I am a terrific cook. Henri said if I hadn’t liked garlic before, I would find it very offensive now, because of the heightened senses, but as I liked it before, it won’t bother me now."

"What about holy water? That must work. I got burned with it."

"Holy water works. It burns like heck."

"You got splashed?"

"I put my fingers in the font at church before the evening service, not thinking. Duh. I’ve done that a million times before– it’s a reflex. You walk in, you dip your fingers, you cross yourself and genuflect towards the altar. Luckily Illumina was there. She cast a silence spell so no one could hear me cursing."

"Do stakes and hammers work?"

"Yeah, but I’m guessing anyone you stab through the heart with a sharp, pointy piece of wood isn’t going to survive, vampire or not. Especially if you take off their head as well. Some cultures do that, you know."

"Is daylight a problem?"

"Artificial light, no. Daylight, yes. I went out on a totally-overcast day and got a sunburn that you would not believe. I was peeling for a week."

"So, no daylight, no holy water, no stakes, no cheesecake? But other than that, you’re about the same?"

"Yes, mostly. You should know that most of the modern myths about vampires come from a work of fiction that was woven together from the tales and legends of several cultures. Not to mention what kind of fanciful nonsense Hollywood has turned out about us."

"What about the bat thing?"

"The bat thing?" Her eyes widened. "What an impressive vocabulary you have, Mr. Potter."

"Are you getting the hang of the transformations? Is that difficult? I’ve been considering learning
animagus spells, but I want to know how hard it is first."

"I’m working on it," she replied, annoyed at his questions.

"If you weren’t a bat, what would you be?"

"I don’t know."

"How do you know what your animagus form will be? Can you control it?"

"I don’t know."

"I’d like to try it, but...I’m worried. What if I get stuck? What if I turn into something ghastly, and I’m stuck like that forever?"

"What are you worried about? You’d probably ace it on the first try, produce a fire-breathing platypus or something impressive like that. Mr. Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived....twice even. Not so much a boy any more," she smiled at him. "I can’t help with that particular spell. I’ve a vampire, not an animagus. There’s a difference."

"I know. But, you could answer lots of questions for me."

"What are you doing, taking a vampire survey for your Dark Arts Professor?"

"No. But I can’t help but wonder if being a vampire might help me defeat Voldemort. I want to find out what I’d be giving up if I had to make the choice to get bitten again."

"You’d go through the trouble of getting bitten again?" she goggled at him.

"To get rid of Voldemort, yes."

"Idiot boy," she said, popping him once in the back of the head.

"I’m not an idiot," Harry howled, giving her a shove. "I’ll do whatever it takes to defeat Voldemort."

"Be nice. I’ll stuff the fairies down your clothes," she threatened when he made a petulant face at her.

"Are they anything like roving fancies?" he asked, pointing at the fairies.

"Very similar. Distant cousins."

"Do bad things happen if they bite you? Will I go insane? Will I suddenly want to dress in lavender and shave my chest hairs?"

"I doubt it. But their bites do burn and itch, and if you’re allergic to them, you could swell up and die, right here."

"How do you know if you’re allergic?"

"The only sure way is to let one bite you," she said, putting the jar against his shoulder. He pulled back.

"Thank you, no," Harry refused.
"Don’t be such a baby," Raphaella teased him. "I’ve got a medical kit right in the trunk."

"But you aren’t a medi-witch,” he protested.

"No, but I do look fetching in the uniform," Raphaella grinned.

"What were you studying at university before...you know...all the excitement on Halloween?"

"Economics."

"What?" Harry teased. "Not what I pictured."

"What did you picture? Something frilly and pink?" Raphaella’s brows went together.

"Not economics."

"What do you mean ‘not economics’, like that? You don’t think a girl could study economics?"

"I don’t mean anything by it!" Harry howled. "I do have one last thing I’d like to ask about being a vampire," he added, dropping his voice.

"What’s that?"

"If you were a vegetarian as a human, and you were bitten by a vampire, would you become a fruit bat?" Harry grinned at her.

"Mr. Potter, you are one stupid question away from a big, nasty love bite. Another one, I should say."

"It’s not a love bite."

"Is too," she countered. "Who gave it to you? Your guard dog, I’ll bet. Illumina’s ex-husband. The tall, dark, and brooding one."

"He’s my Potions Master, thank you, not my guard dog," Harry huffed.

"I can’t believe you fell for that."

"Fell for what?" Harry asked, growing defensive.

"The dark, brooding sort."

"At least he’s not in a goth rock band."

"Uh oh. Get off the hood," she said, popping back down into the car and putting her shoes on once more. Henri and Illumina were squelching curse words at each other all the way down the hill. The other people who had been beside the monoliths vanished into apparition spells. Harry tried not to stare at the newlyweds as they straightened their clothes and rearranged their long hair, moving in a nearly identical manner. What was one supposed to say? Should he shake their hands? Wish them eternal happiness?

"Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Mrs.....um...hi," Harry said uncomfortably. "Mrs. Le Clair."

"Well, that was awkward, yes?" she nodded. "It must seem to you that every time we meet, I have a
different name."

"Wait! Wait!" Raphaella said, rushing over to them with the jar.

"Oh, Christ," Henri fussed, stopping in his tracks as if she were brandishing a stack and hammer.

"It’s traditional," Raphaella insisted.

"I know. I’m not new to this. Go on then. Be quick about it," he agreed. Raphaella twisted off the lid and waited. The fairies wouldn’t come out. She gave the jar a small shake, and they clung to the inside and to each other to remain where they were. Harry couldn’t help but laugh, discretely of course.

"It’s too cold for them here," Illumina said, blowing warm air into the opening before putting the lid back on. "We’ll try again at home."

"I hope that isn’t an ill omen," Henri said.

"As if it could get any worse? Without being mean-spirited, let me just say I’m amazed you ever managed to become a father," Illumina growled.

"I’m not surprised you never became a mother. You think of men as performing bears, by the looks of it."

"It’s usually not that difficult for me to pique someone’s interest, okay?"

"I’m sorry. All right? I’m out of practice with women. Not my favorite game," Henri replied, putting away his wand and tying back his dark hair in a thin leather strap. Raphaella handed the jar of fairies to Harry, and he held it up to look inside. They were all pressing their faces to the glass and smiling back at him.

"I want you to know that is the first and last time we are doing that," Illumina muttered at Henri.

"Thank God!" Henri shot back.

"Would it have killed you to take a basic biology refresher course? Read a trashy sexy novel if nothing else?" Illumina snapped.

"I’ve read hundreds of trashy novels, thank you."

"Really? One could not tell by demonstration. I’m going to have chaff marks from that monolith."

"Could we get in the car and quit making a scene in front of the children?" Henri bellowed.

"I’m driving," Illumina said, holding out her hand for the keys.

"You are not," Henri declared. "It’ll take us twice as long to get there."

"I’ll drive," Raphaella offered, grinning wickedly. Henri started to give her the keys, but Illumina took them away from her and shoved them back to him.

"Try to keep the car on the roadway," she growled.

"Want your fairies back?" Harry asked Raphaella.

"No. You may keep the shiftless wenches," she sulked. The fairies gasped in anger at the insult.
"After all the time I spent gathering them up! What nerve!"
Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Henri discuss the Volkovi situation, and Henri and Illumina kiss and make nice

"There. I feel nearly myself again," Henri said as he emerged from the bathroom dressed in a long green robe that swept the ground. Harry jerked awake in his cushiony chair and dropped both feet off the end of the bed. The long ride on the train, because he was too scared to apparate himself around in search of Le Clair, had finally caught up to Potter.

"Hm? What?" Harry mumbled.

"Thank you for letting me share your room. God alone knows why Raphaella booked the bridal suite for Illumina and I."

Perverse humor, that was Harry’s best guess. " 'S okay," he mumbled, sitting up straight. At least the bed was large enough that should he eventually have to share it with Le Clair, they could both feel perfectly alone in it. Admittedly, Harry was hoping he would not have to share the bed, but perhaps Le Clair knew it was in his best interests to protect Harry like a hawk until he was safely back in the fold at Hogwarts. Le Clair wasn't likely to try anything stupid. Harry wondered what time it was. It was impossible to tell in the shaded suite.

"Where in hell did that bellboy put my suitcase?" Le Clair cursed as he wandered around the cavernous room. Harry pointed to a particularly-dark corner of the suite.

"That way."

Henri trailed a green train that direction. The vampire vanished behind a piece of shadow which could be moved around. He repositioned it, and ducked behind it. Was it a dressing screen?

"You were asleep. My driving obviously didn’t frighten you at all."

"No," Harry answered. Henri was fumbling with the locks on his valise.

"I can’t believe Illumina screamed the entire way. Why is she so nervous around cars? I keep telling her she’s no safer with a stick of wood and a few twigs under her bum. Please tell me you hate brooms."

"No, actually, I love to fly," Harry babbled enthusiastically as he rubbed his eyes.

"Oh, that’s right. Mr. Quidditch. Foolish youth," Henri muttered. "You’ll grow out of that, surely. I find driving to be very relaxing." Harry must have been smiling. "You think it’s odd? A vampire who likes to drive?" Henri questioned.

"No, but a very ancient vampire who drives for pleasure is odd."

"Very ancient?" Le Clair wailed. "How terribly old it makes me feel when you put it that way!"
"Sorry."

"I’m not so old as all of that. I was forty-five when I took my last breath as a mortal. Young enough to still enjoy myself but old enough to have a sense of how to enjoy myself."

"Sorry," Harry said again.

"As far as I’m concerned, I will be forty-five forever."

"My Aunt Petunia was twenty-nine for several years," Harry said.

"It’s not vanity," Henri replied crossly before he caught himself. "Forgive me. The evening has spoiled me as company. Tell me about this vision you had about Volkova’s boy. Someone gave him to me as a present at a party?"

"Yes."

"Did you recognize the presenter?"

"No. I’d never seen him before."

"A man, then. Tall? Short? Hair color? Eye color? Manner of dress? Station in life?"

"Paddington," Harry offered, snickering.

"Thank you, but that isn’t very helpful, Mr. Potter."

"King’s Cross?"

"I know you’re tired, but you have to concentrate," Le Clair replied. "What was he wearing?"

"It was a big party. Everyone was well dressed."

"That’s no hope. I don’t frequent parties like that. I haven’t been to a formal dress ball since France was a monarchy. I grew bored with continual parties centuries ago. It’s so very.....nouveau-vamp. How was the child when he was presented to me? Did he seem in good condition?"

"Sergei hadn’t been harmed. This man walked him through this crowd by his hand and presented him to you formally. The boy was very interested to meet you."

"What did the man look like?"

"In his fifties, bald, slightly paunchy."

"That narrows it down," Henri said in a dry, sarcastic manner that made Harry think immediately of Severus. For a moment, Harry drifted away, remembering the feeling of their mouths together, and savoring the tingles of pleasure that had consumed his body and soul as Severus licked and sucked at him. His cock was rising at the very thought of it. A cold hand on his propelled Harry back to consciousness as he wanted to drift back to sleep.

"What?" he gasped as he jerked awake.

"You need to eat before you sleep. Stay for dinner, and after you’ve had some rest, I’ll take you home to your castle."

"I need to stay. You’re going to get Sergei. I want to keep my word."
"I will contact you the minute he is given to me. You have my promise in writing."

"Will our agreement remain binding if I return to school?"

"Yes, I promised you. You have my word. Think I’m the sort who goes around lying to impressionable schoolboys?"

"Oh no. School. Professor Dumbledore is sure to be furious with me," Harry said miserably.

"We’ll explain about your vision. He’ll understand."

"Severus is going to be angry too."

"Severus, is it?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Nothing. How did you ever sneak away from him? I was left with the impression he wanted to keep you very close."

"I didn’t sneak away."

"All right. You didn’t sneak. You crept away under cover of darkness."

"I did not."

"Don’t be so sensitive. Let’s see if this place has room service. You must be starving. I heard your stomach growling in the car. Besides, I need a glass of wine. Who am I kidding? I need a hogshead of wine to forget about tonight."

"Henri?"

Illumina was knocking on the door to the suite.

"What does she want?" Le Clair frowned.

"More sex?" Harry suggested. Henri went by the chair where Potter was sprawled. Claws raked a mere inch from Harry’s face in a harmless swipe.

"Insolent whelp. I hope you won’t let our fussing put you off marriage totally. This is rather an old-fashioned wedding. It’s purely business, that’s all."

"I understand," Harry smiled. "Raffles said something about your pesky ex-wife who ate the King of Bavaria."

"HENRI!" Illumina wailed.

"What?!" Henri wailed back as he yanked open the door. Illumina had showered and dressed next door in the bridal suite, which she was sharing with Raphaella. She was wearing a blouse the same shade of green as Henri’s robe had been. Harry smiled when he thought about the look on the bellboy's face when the youth had been ordered to deliver the women's luggage there and the men’s luggage here.

"I’m sorry I snapped at you. I know that was awkward," Illumina began as Henri ushered her inside and shut them all in darkness once more.
"Awkward? No, darling. Crossing Russia in December with ten thousand men and no food is awkward. That was unspeakable. Simply mortifying."

"Let me make it up to you. Raffles and I arranged for a quiet dinner for us all."

Harry tried not to imagine what a quiet dinner for three vampires and one human might include. He supposed that any meal that didn’t end in the vampires eating the human would qualify as quiet.

"Where’s she at?" Henri asked.

"On the phone. Aloha."

"Again? Is that normal for girls her age? This phone thing?"

"It’s perfectly normal for a witch raised with a Muggle parent and siblings."

"What about economics? Is that normal for girls these days?"

"Perfectly normal," Illumina assured Henri as Harry snickered to himself.

"I’ve heard all the people coming and going down below. There’s either a riot or a rock concert in progress somewhere in the building. Let’s have room service, please," Henri begged.

"Oh, darling. Play nice. Raffles will be crushed. She wants to bat her eyes at Harry for a couple hours."

"Where are we having this quiet dinner?" Henri asked.

"In the dining room downstairs, like civilized people. You’re going to have to put on clothes, I’m afraid."

"I don’t want to be anywhere near all the racket that’s taking place," Henri protested. "I’ve got a headache that would kill a mortal."

"Quit your whining, and take a pain potion. We’ll have our own private dining space. No one will even notice us," Illumina insisted. "We can discuss what we’re going to do with Harry."

"He’s going to eat dinner, get some rest, and tomorrow evening I will see him home safely to Hogwarts."

"Aren’t you worried about Volkova?"

"No! My world doesn’t revolve around that woman!"

"I’ll go with you. I need to talk to Severus as it is. It’s best he learns from me about our little arrangement. He’s sure to be very put-out otherwise."
In which Harry has a quiet dinner with the vampires, and Le Clair gets to pick on Voldemort and the Death Eaters

As it turned out, dinner began as a very civilized affair. The vampires were all comfortable with the dim artificial lighting in the private dining area. Harry was given an extra candle with which to examine a menu. They were given four small vials to sample. Harry hid behind his menu and tried not to listen.

"For the young lady?" the waiter asked, casual enough about his clientele.

"I’m not sure," Raphaella stammered.

"Yellow vial. It’s very sweet," Illumina suggested.

"Yellow," Raphaella said.

"For the mistress?"

"Yellow as well."

"For the master?"

"Wine, please. Anything Chateauneuf-du-Pape. The stronger, the redder, the better."

"Henri," Illumina chastised.

"Glass or bottle?" the waiter asked.

"I’ll start with a magnum and let you know."

"You mustn’t drink on an empty stomach," Illumina continued.

"I’ll get drunk and dance naked on the table if I want," Henri declared. "You are my wife, not my mother, thank you."

"Mother? I’m young enough to be your great-great-great-great times five great granddaughter."

"Jesus Christ, I need a drink," Henri whined.

"You’ll be sorry," Illumina chorused in a soft, sing-song tone.

"For Mr. Potter?" the waiter asked. Harry’s menu wiggled without interference from other hands. Harry lowered it.

"Soup and salad?" Harry puzzled.

"Nonsense. I won’t hear of it. Not for a growing boy. He needs food– the more, the better. Look
how thin he is. Bring him a medium-well steak, jacket potato, and a salad if he insists on the
madness of raw vegetables. Bring him bread. It is the staff of life, after all. Bring him a light ale.
Something suitable— I suspect he doesn’t drink much."

"Merlin’s balls! Did you just order a steak?" Illumina snickered as the waiter bustled away. Le Clair caught himself and gave a muted chuckle.

"Should I stop him and specify which spelling?"

"I cannot believe you ordered a steak," Illumina cackled. Harry fiddled with his place setting, straightening the silverware. He tried to brush off the terrible feeling that in spite of that polite exterior, Henri Le Clair was capable of being downright over-bearing and brutish. Pushy, at the very least. What in the hell had he gotten himself into?! Illumina didn’t find his autocratic behavior too irritating, apparently. Perhaps after being married to Severus, and knowing how very domineering Snape could be, Henri didn’t seem all bad.

"Did you call Nico back yet?" Raffles asked.

"Not yet. He’s probably out with friends," Henri answered. Illumina smiled at Raphaella and then gave Henri a pleading glance.

"Are you sure he doesn't have a straight older brother?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

"Quelle dommage," Illumina sighed.

"Mr. Potter, you neglected to tell me how long Volkova’s son has been missing?" Henri commented, derailing whatever Illumina had been planning to say.

"Her son is missing?" Illumina gasped.

"Three weeks," Harry answered. A chirping rang out from and lit up the right side of Raphaella’s jacket. Henri stared at her, eyes wide.

"Have you a fairy in your pocket, Raffles?" he asked.

"No," she said, pulling out a mobile phone and staring at the display.

"Mon Dieu. It’s one of those communication things. A mobile."

"Yes."

"You brought it to dinner?"

"Yes," Raphaella smiled.

"How insidious. Is there nowhere you can be alone? Put that evil thing away. You will not have distant conversations with total strangers at the dinner table. How very rude," Le Clair chided her. Raphaella shut off the phone and hid it again.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Mr. Potter is on a rescue mission. We must not try to dissuade him. I do so admire young men with determination and purpose. You don’t see that often enough these days," Henri teased, merriment twisting his face. He wasn’t an unattractive man, Harry admitted to himself. He sure
didn’t look forty-five though. More like fifty. Was he lying about his age? Was he really forty-five for eternity, or at least until someone put a stake through his heart? How would it feel to be forty-five forever? Of course, Harry couldn’t stare at Le Clair for too long without thinking about how much he resembled Severus. That resemblance had allowed Le Clair to get the jump on Harry the first time they had crossed paths, outside of Hagrid’s hut in the forest. Would Le Clair have snatched Harry that day, if he had been able?

"He left school without permission. I should have guessed," Illumina chided.

"Particularly since you’re a clairvoyant," Henri teased her.

"You could track Sergei Volkov." Harry’s face lit up.

"Inanimate objects only, dear. Sorry. I could track something he’s holding, or something he’s going to be holding, but not him personally."

"Oh bother," Harry sighed. "I’ve a piece of canvas somewhere in my bag in my room," he added. "But it belongs to Professor Volkova, not to Sergei."

"We already know where she is, at school at Hogwarts, where you should be. The Headmaster is going to be upset with you," Illumina warned.

"Think how bad it looks for the She-Wolf," Henri laughed. "Isn’t she there to protect him from me? I mean, how ironic that he should slip away from her and seek me out. Perhaps I should send her a note with a lock of his hair in it? I could transfigure a finger to send to her if we can have a piece of bone, or wouldn’t she find that funny? You’re considering throwing china at me. I’ve seen that look before in wives."

"I’m not the president of Volkova’s fan club, but have a bit of pity for her. I dare say you could walk straight up to her and tweak her nose at this point and she wouldn’t care less about you. She’s probably frantic about where her child might be," Illumina chided Henri. "You were a father. You know how that must feel. You ripped up half a city looking for one of your daughters."

"Yes, yes, I did," Henri agreed somberly. "But I am yet a father." His eyes regained some of their happiness as he smiled at Raphaella. She smiled back, her eyes misting with emotion.

"You’ll never guess what was in the bridal suite," Raphaella said.

"Alcohol?" Henri dreamed with a brilliant, funny smile.

"No. Well, yes, but that’s not what I meant."

"What kind of alcohol?" Henri pressed, elbow on table, chin in hand, giving Raphaella his rapt attention. Harry could see why this side of Le Clair could be fun to be around.

"Champagne. If you’re still too sober after dinner, you can drink it," Illumina told him.

"There was a veritable vat of fairies in the room," Raphaella snickered.

"Aren’t you glad I gave you back your fairies? What did you do with them?" Harry asked her.

"They’re refusing to come out of the jar still," she sulked.

"Were you mean to them?" Harry wanted to know.

"No," Raphaella replied. "I opened their jar, put them by the other fairies, left the room thermostat
on high so they could warm up."

"But you took them out in very cold temperatures. I should report you to the Fairy Mistreatment Department," Harry teased. If there was a Minister of Morality, there HAD to be a Fairy Mistreatment Department, unless fairies were lumped together with house elves, in which case Harry might have been delivering an empty threat. His bluff seemed to amuse Raffles regardless.

"Did I tell you that I met that Voldemort fellow?" Henri added to the conversation.

"Raffles told me he wreaked havoc at the office," Illumina answered.

"When we get back, we’ll rebuild. Won’t take any time at all," Le Clair dismissed. "Not when you have me at your disposal. The suite has been needing remodeling as it is. You said you wanted another wall of windows facing south."

"By the way, did I tell you I got an owl from my parents? Grandmother sends greetings. She would like for us to come to Venice."

"Venice, this time of year? Is she mad?"

"She’s not going feel our marriage is official until she has given us her blessing in person. Cousin Matilda is there at the moment."

"Can’t your grandmother come here?"

"She could, but wouldn’t it be more civilized of you to go to her?"

"I don’t like Venice," Henri sulked. "Not in March."

"You would make a nearly-blind ninety-eight year old witch travel all this way because you don’t like Venice in March?"

"I’m five hundred and fifty years old, and she can come to Scotland. Or at least as far as Paris or Calais."

"No. You will be nice to my grandmother. She may be one fourth of your age, but she is in very ill health, and I am her favorite grandchild."

"Is she the one who said...?"

"Yes," Illumina interrupted with a smile. "I told her what had happened to me in Bucharest, that I had become a vampire, and she said, 'I don't care about politics, darling. When are you coming to visit again?'"

"She sounds like a lovely old witch, but--"

"She wants to give us a blessing in person. We should go to Venice and see her."

"Why should we?" Henri persisted.

"Everyone will be there, from all over. We can travel with Uncle Leonard and my parents. Cousin Matilda will be there. I haven’t seen Tilda since she moved to Argentina. We were best friends in school. She hasn't seen me since...you know. Her husband wouldn't let her see me. But now she's divorced him, so she's her own woman again. She'll be scouring Venice for a new husband to take back to Argentina. I would love to see her."
"Venice doesn’t like me, and the feeling is rather mutual."

"That was four hundred years ago, and it’s time you got over it," Illumina said in a commanding voice. Henri blinked at her, frowning his way through several dirty words on the tip of his tongue. Apparently he decided to change the subject.

"That Voldemort fellow— he was very rude. You never told me he was rude too."

"Darling, one does not become the most feared dark wizard of the age without stepping on a few toes along the way. To say that Voldemort is rude might be stating the least of his faults."

"Why is he so intent on killing Mr. Potter?"

"If I may be the Devil’s Advocate for a moment? To begin with, Mr. Potter has escaped death time and again. That can be so very damaging to a villain’s reputation, not being able to take care of a mere schoolboy. Mr. Potter also killed Lucius Malfoy. The Dark Lord was always inordinately fond of Lucius, in a manner that some might suspect was unacknowledged adoration," Illumina mused.

"You believe Mr. Dark Wizard had a fancy for Malfoy Père?" Henri gasped.

"No, not like that," Illumina corrected.

"Quelle dommage," Le Clair snapped his fingers. "I do so love juicy scandals."

"I don’t mean to insinuate that the Dark Lord had a crush on Lucius. But you see it with half-bloods all the time, the way they treat pure bloods with such remarkable deference," Illumina said.

"That is the sort of statement one might expect from the purest of pure bloods," Henri teased her.

"That’s not where I was going," Illumina insisted.

"Mr. Potter, don’t let the air of disdain fool you. She’s very proud of that heritage. If she were a race horse, she’d be priceless."

"How unfortunate for you I am only a woman," Illumina frowned at Le Clair.

"You know, we should cross your blood lines, darling, while the boy is with us. I would very much like to see what resulted," Le Clair suggested with a wicked wink.

"Henri," she chided him.

"But your parents would approve of him far more than they will approve of me. He’s a fetching boy. I predict a growth spurt any day now. A few more inches on him, and another ten pounds or so? We shall have to feed him very well. Raffles might be persuaded to cook for him, if we plead enough."

"He is a very skinny boy," Raphaella agreed, tisking as she touched Harry’s side.

"It’s not funny. Stop it," Illumina scolded them both.

"I’d be very careful how you treat him in bed though. Don’t forget what he did to Malfoy Père," Le Clair cautioned, his wicked amusement rising and falling with his raspy voice.

"Now you’re sounding like the unlamented late Mr. Malfoy," Illumina said sullenly as Harry went utterly silent and red. Raphaella wasn’t sure if she should laugh or not. Illumina reached over to
Harry and took his hand in order reassure him with a gentle squeeze.

"He’s kidding," she whispered. "You know that, right?"

"Right," Harry said, anxious and nervous.

"Why should I not tease? The boy knows I’m not serious. Besides, you never liked Lucius. You’ve told me a hundred times what kind of monster he was," Henri stated to Illumina. "I’d say your assessment of him proved correct."

"I begrudged him the very air he breathed," Illumina growled, her expression darkening. "I myself was saved from certain humiliation only by a fortunately-timed amorous rendezvous between Remus Lupin and Sirius Black under the Quidditch bleachers."

"See, you’ve upset the boy," Henri murmured, staring at Harry. "He’s gone three different colors in as many minutes."

"You’re the one who is talking about breeding us like horses," Illumina snipped back at her new husband.

"Remy and Sirius were a couple?" Harry whispered as his eyes went wide. Illumina paused, wincing.

"You didn’t know? I assumed one or the other of them or Severus had at least told you about their relationship. I forget myself. I’m sorry."

"Remy and Sirius were, like, together?" Harry slowly mouthed the final word. Suddenly that hug in the Shrieking Shack and Snape’s nasty comments about them arguing like an old married couple made complete sense.

"Well, having finally met him in the flesh, I’m of the opinion that someone ought to teach this Voldemort a lesson," Henri said, impatiently steering the subject around.

"It’s supposed to be my job to kill him," Harry explained. "There’s a prophecy at the Ministry of Magic and everything."

"Prophecy, hm? Why haven’t you killed him yet then?" Henri wanted to know.

"I’ve been trying," Harry promised.

"Very hard?"

"Yes," Harry stressed. "He’s proven particularly difficult to kill."

"We shall have to suggest some helpful strategies."

"Henri, maybe Harry doesn’t want you to suggest any helpful strategies," Illumina said tactfully.

"Nonsense. I’ve marched from Asia to Europe, from Venice to Moscow. I’ve done war with dukes, barons, kings, presidents, popes, wizards, warlocks, and a demon."

"Here we go again," Illumina grinned, whispering to Raphaella, who became alarmed at the mention of demons. "It wasn’t a demon. It was not a demon."

"It was so a demon," Henri shot at her. "Horns, tail, cloven hooves."
"It was not," Illumina sounded back. "It was a satyr, not a demon, and you should know because you’re the one who conjured him in the first place. You shouldn’t pour charmed wine on mosaics in Roman ruins."

"Nonsense, child. It was as demon. That doesn’t matter at this point. I’m certain if I were to offer Mr. Potter suggestions on how to kill Mr. Dark Wizard Voldemort, he’s a smart enough boy to take my advice," Henri defended. "I could kill him for you?" he offered hopefully. Harry waited to answer, not sure if he were joking.

"No, thank you. That’s kind of you, but it’s my job."

"I assure you it would be no trouble. I’d try very hard to enjoy myself doing it. Please, please, please? No one lets me rush into mayhem any more. I miss that."

"It’s my job to take care of Voldemort, and it will be my pleasure."

"Well, he is a determined boy," Illumina agreed.

"May I at least suggest how you might kill him?" Henri pleaded. Harry agreed cautiously. Henri’s face bloomed with happiness. "Wonderful! Mayhem. I’m so excited! Lulu, be a love and trade places with the boy so that he and I might talk war."

"If you call me Lulu again, I’m going to hurt you," she warned.

"But it suits you. My darling girls– Lulu and Raffles."

"Remind me again why I married a chauvinist pig born half a millennium ago?" Illumina murmured in a rhetorical tone.

"Because in my day, respectable women could either marry or become a nun. I’m much better company than a convent full of discontents, am I not, pig though I may be?"

"I fancy you’re more ham than anything else. You know, Hank, today there are respectable women who never marry, and men like you are the reason why."

"Hank?" Le Clair shuddered. As they traded places, Harry worried Illumina might be feeling rudely brushed off by Le Clair. When Potter sat down in her chair, Illumina pretended to nip at his neck from behind. Harry ducked, and Henri swatted at her.

"There will be no nibbling on the boy. He’s got important work to do, evil wizards to kill. Besides, do you want to spend a month with your head in the toilet? No, I think not."

"If only the effort that is put into war could be directed towards achieving peace," Raphaella said sadly.

"Do you know what stands between all the people of the world living in peace with each other and with nature?" Illumina asked her.

"The reliable and equitable distribution of food, clothing, and shelter. Security from danger? The freedom to express oneself without the fear of reprisal?"

"Probably that has a good deal to do with it, yes. But I was going after the question from a more carnal approach."

"What stands in the way?"
"Men with small cocks who feel they need to prove themselves masculine in the eyes of the world," Illumina whispered. The ladies laughed discretely as Le Clair flamed with wounded pride. Harry wondered if that had been a personal stab at Henri or directed at all men in general. Should he be angry as well?

"All the people of the world, that’s what stands in the way of peace," Henri put in. "There will never be true peace. Peace, armistice, or any near facsimile is but the pause between wars while we devise messier and nastier ways to kill each other. It is in our nature to struggle, with ourselves, with our consciences, with each other. We greet each other with a handshake in one hand and a dagger in the other, and we always will. Having seen five centuries of warfare, I’m convinced of it. We aren't comfortable without a bit of war now and then."

"Henri, don’t be such a cynic. The boy will think you’re nothing but a barbarian, a war-mongering Crusader."

"I am not a Crusader. I was born too late for that. But you can bet your arse the French flag would be flying in Jerusalem if I had been around for those particular conflicts. You’d be able to get a decent wheel of brie in Algiers at the very least."

"You take such pride in your ability to create carnage. That’s so cute in a man," Illumina taunted. "I bet they still tell stories about you in Istanbul."

"I admit I may have caused some damage in Constantinople while looking for Jeanne-Marie, perhaps, but that was in the name of love, not war," Henri grumbled.

"Istanbul," Illumina corrected him.

"Yes, of course. One must keep up with modern times. Istanbul."

"Istanbul was Constantinople, now it’s Istanbul not Constantinople," Raphaella was whispering, bobbing her head back and forth.

"What?" Henri cocked his head.

"It’s a song. I’ll find a copy for you," Raffles laughed.

"You do know what music is! I was beginning to worry that your head was filled with nothing but telephones and money matters."

"I know what music is," Raffles laughed again. "I’ll find the song for you."

"I look forward to it. But for now, Harry and I must talk war, if the boy is willing, and has the constitution for that sort of thing."

"The boy is very willing," Harry replied.

Le Clair puffed with warmth and pride. He tugged Harry’s chair closer to his own, and cleared his throat.

"Very well. We shall start in France, the center of the civilized world."

If not for the timely intervention of a new guest to the private dining area, Harry might have heard tales of battles fought and decided long before he or Voldemort either one was a concern to the wizarding world. As it was, Henri saw Illumina rise quickly to her feet. Raphaella rose as well. Henri looked over Harry’s shoulder.
"Stand! Stand!" Le Clair urged. Harry rose up and turned. He promptly stumbled and nearly fell over the chair behind his knees. It was the man who had given Volkova’s son to Henri in his vision.

"My dear Baron Romovski. I did not know you were back in Scotland. I would have come to pay my respects," Henri said, giving a polite bow. Harry followed suit once he righted himself.

"Le Clair, you are a most humorous fellow," Baron Romovski said as he chuckled. "I returned at once when I heard you were to be married. It’s in all the papers. How could I not, after all we’ve been through?"

"You do me great honor, sir."

"Have you had your fairie sprinkling yet?"

"We tried, but the wingéd ladies were uncooperative," Henri answered.

"Is this the lucky one?" the Baron studied Harry with piercing red eyes. Henri’s flustered laugh made Harry blush.

"Alas, no. I went the traditional route again."

"You married another woman? My God, man! Are you mad? Didn’t you swear wives off after all the trouble with Marguerite?"

"I did, but I have since recanted."

"You must be cautious. They’re going to be the death of you."

"Has Marguerite been making a nuisance of herself with you?"

"No, she’s no trouble at all, if I let her come and go as she pleases. A most agreeable partner, especially when she’s not underfoot. She’s at her home today. She’s been uncharacteristically cheerful as of late. Been that way since she’s been seeing some damn, gypsy, ball-gazer. You haven’t given her back her grimoire, have you?"

"Absolutely not," Le Clair gulped. "It's locked up safe where she'll never find it."

"Brilliant!"

"What have you done with Krieger?"

"Not to worry. I keep Herr Krieger busy in India so they cannot conspire together against me."

"I expected as much of you, sir."

"When you conclude this private tête a tête, I hope you will consider joining us in the next room. The party is in your honor, after all."

"Party?" Henri gulped. Harry was breathing as if attached to a smithy’s bellows.

"I’ve managed to secure a very scandalous gift for the occasion. You’ll never guess," the Baron laughed.

"Perhaps I might," Henri decided from Harry’s expression what must have been going through the boy’s head.
"Join us, would you please? Your guests await, and I am most anxious to give you my surprise."

"Mon Dieu," Henri whispered as the Baron rounded the table. "We should bring Mr. Potter?"

"Certainly. He'll be the life of the party," The Baron was greatly amused with himself. He wheeled around the table and began flirting with Illumina. He picked up her hand and pecked a kiss on her knuckles. "Madame Le Clair. Finally, Henri has chosen a wife who is beautiful and brilliant, not terrifying and brilliant."

"Thank you, sir," Illumina said demurely.

"I assure you, she can be terrifying when she wants, Baron," Henri warned.

"Don't listen to him. He's mad we got the traditional priestess, by accident, I’m sure," Illumina explained. Baron Romovski gave a lecherous chortle.

"You have had a trying evening, haven’t you, Le Clair?"

"Yes, yes, we have," Illumina admitted.

"You should be happy, dear lady. You’ve married the man with the biggest balls this side of the Danube."

"Well, that’s a fascinating tidbit I would have never guessed," Illumina’s face lit up with shock and humor. "However did you discover this fact, Baron, if I might ask?"

"But how else? He brought a date to your wedding party," the Baron grinned at her. They smiled in unison at Le Clair, who was gazing in naked lust at the side of the boy’s angelic face. When Henri heard their words, he caught himself, and glared at them.

"That’s enough from you two," Henri barked.

"Join us in the main dining room," the Baron begged, retreating from Illumina’s company. He paused beside Raphaella, taking her hand and kissing it as well. "Enchanté, pretty girl."

"Merci," Raphaella laughed.

"You must be Miss Edmundo. I was told Le Clair had taken on another pupil. How you look like my Rosamund!"

"Thank you, sir," Raphaella replied.

"She would have been a beauty too," the Baron faltered, sadness darting through his playful eyes. "Portuguese, aren’t you?"

"Partly," she admitted as she blushed.

"Yes, she was too. New to us, aren’t you? I don’t remember any Portuguese Edmundos from the last meeting. I would have remembered a beauty like you."

"Very new, yes, sir. Thank you," Raphaella blushed darker. Perhaps she wasn’t accustomed to being considered beautiful, Harry wondered. Well, she wasn’t that ghastly to behold! Where had she gotten the impression she wasn’t attractive?

"Welcome to our little fold. Did you have a pleasant transition?"
"Quite the opposite, in fact," Le Clair frowned. Raphaella suddenly looked as if she’d like to yank out Le Clair’s voice, not allow him to continue. He did continue, but walked carefully around his words, mindful of her discomfort. "These uncivilized youths we have roaming around today. If I get my hands on the one who converted her, I’m going to chain him in my attic and shine daylight at him by inches."

"Poor darling," Romovski cooed at Raphaella. "If you have any trouble, you come to me. Le Clair will tell you, I am the one for solving problems, whatever they may be. This boy sounds like a problem, yes he does."

"He was nothing but trouble, sir."

"Tell me about this cad who converted you. May I track him for you? Do you want him on his knees before you?"

"No, really."

"Make him beg your forgiveness?"

"That’s very tempting, but I should probably decline."

"I pride myself on being able to fix problems for my friends," the Baron continued. "I have it! What every girl your age needs! We must find a husband for you! A new man always brightens a girl’s outlook. When you’re ready to settle down, pretty child like you, I have just the young man in mind," the Baron tisked, kissing her hand again. "A nephew of mine, a very respectable boy. Much more handsome. Not so round. Much more hair too."

"That’s very thoughtful of you, sir, I’m not quite ready to settle down."

"But when you are," the Baron persuaded. "It won’t be long. You mustn’t dwell on unpleasantness, darling girl."

"I’m told they don’t all want to be married nowadays, Baron," Le Clair said as Illumina ground her back teeth together.

"Really? What more could a girl want besides a handsome husband and a beautiful home?"

"Independence and equality are currently all the rage," Le Clair smiled.

"Really?" Romovski blinked. "Does it work?" he asked Le Clair while gazing nervously at Raphaella and then Illumina.

"Not always well, but it seems to make them happy."

"Who wouldn’t want everything on a silver platter rather than having to work for it? It’s madness. You give them the right to vote, and this is what happens. They start thinking for themselves, and suddenly husbands become unfashionable. Henri, your wife is simply vibrating with anger. Have we said something gauche?"

"Probably, yes, but she’s far too polite to say so, I hope."

"I assure you, Baron, that my opinion of men does not rise and fall with the silly things they might say," Illumina smiled, a hint of sharpness in her words nonetheless. The Baron bowed to Raphaella again before he scooped up Illumina’s hand and kissed it, bowing to her.
"Apologizes, Madame Le Clair."

"Accepted, Baron Romovski," she replied with a curtsey.

"Oh, it may be a while on your food, if you ordered anything. All the staff is busy trying to toss some blighter name Lord Voldemort out of the front lobby," the Baron said, staring at the dinnerware on the table as if it had only now occurred to him that he was standing in a dining room.

"He’s followed us here?" Illumina cried out.

"Do you know him?" the Baron asked.

"He is chasing Mr. Potter," Le Clair motioned to Harry.

"How interesting," the Baron commented with a cat-like smile.

"Perhaps I’d better go see what I can do," Harry said, motioning out the door.

"You aren’t going to battle anyone on an empty stomach. I’ll go talk to him," Le Clair said.

"Darling, do be careful. Voldemort is a very dark wizard," Illumina cautioned.

"Dark wizard? Hmph. I’ll piss on his bones someday," Le Clair purred. "Mr. Potter, you stay right where you are," Henri said as Harry started to follow him. "Mr. Dark Wizard is going to get a piece of my mind."

"You’re not going to kill him, are you?"

"Sit." Henri pointed to Harry’s chair.

"I want your word you aren’t going to kill him."

"But you agreed to let me have a bit of mayhem."

"Mayhem. Not murder."

"I swear I’m not going to kill him. Sit. Stay," Henri growled under tone.

Harry sat down, watching in concern as Le Clair left the dining room. Shouts could be heard outside in the open area. The Baron pulled a monocle out of his tuxedo, clipped the golden circle over one red eye, and turned to watch as sparks literally flew in all directions. A Cheshire Cat grin rounded his face. Golden dust and reddish explosions lit up the space outside their private dining room.

"My word!" the Baron exclaimed. "Smashing!"

The excitement and noises eventually died down. Le Clair reappeared, looking no worse for wear. He straightened his hair, dusted off his cloak, and returned to the table as if nothing had happened.

"All right, dear?" Illumina asked.

"Oh, yes. Perfectly fine."

"You enjoyed that," Baron Romovski smirked at Le Clair.
"Immensely," Henri replied.

"Is he gone?" Harry wondered.

"For the moment," Henri answered.

"What did you do to him?" Harry asked, burning with curiosity.

"I sent him to Thorn Vale Manor."

"Which is what?" Harry asked as Illumina’s eyes got wide. Raphaella was as puzzled as Harry was.

"His ex-wife’s estate. You mean to say she hasn’t changed the wards yet?" the Baron questioned.

"She can only change the ones she knows about," Henri laughed.

"What about the other people who were with him?" Romovski asked.

"I sent his minions to Omaha, and their clothes to San Juan," Le Clair said gleefully. "That should keep them busy for a while and out of our hair."

"If you’re finished being a dashing hero, I’d like to celebrate your wedding."

"I’m covered in dust," Le Clair exclaimed, taking several swipes at his clothes.

"Quit preening for the boy. You’re a married man," the Baron chided him.

"The boy hasn’t had dinner yet. He may perish from starvation before our very eyes," Henri protested.

"We’ll scare something up for him at the party," Baron Romovski promised. Harry hoped he didn’t mean that literally.
Chapter Summary

In which Hermione and Ron bicker, and Illumina bring Sergei Volkov safely to Hogwarts

"Snape has been locked in the Room of Doom since yesterday," Hermione said to Ron. "I saw house elves bringing him books not ten minutes ago. They’ve been scouring the library for anything concerning conduit spells."

Cold, biting winds whipped through their hair as they stood on top of the Astronomy Tower. Weasley lifted the slender, small, leather-covered telescope in his hands to his eyes and gazed across Hogwarts to the front gates when he saw a flash outside. His muffler ends drifted upwards in the winds.

"I thought you weren’t speaking to me," Ron said, giving her a half smile.

"I’m not speaking to you, unless it has to do with finding out what in the world is going on with Harry. After we figure that out, we’re not speaking again."

"So I’m being punished for giving you an honest answer to your absurd question, is that it?"

"We’re not talking about it, Ron!"

"Fine," he smirked.

"Absurd question?!!" Hermione fumed.

"You did ask if I would prefer you to be one of those compliant, sweet, easy-to-control women, and I gave you an honest answer– yes."

"For your information, you aren’t perfect either, Mr. Weasley."

"You would change me if you could, and I would change you if I could. There. We’ve both said it. Neither of us is perfect. Why do you have to go on being angry about it? The truth is what it is. I can accept it and not be angry. Harry was right– we should be friends and nothing more. The truth is what it is."

"The truth is you want a pet, not a wife. Something cute, decorative, and barely sentient."

"That’s not true!" Ron shouted. "Sweet. I’ll settle for one out of three. Can’t you at least try for sweet?"

"If you’re looking for some girl willing to wear your collar, I hear the Three Sheets is having a sale this week."

"Three Sheets? That’s a brothel in Knockturn Alley! How would you know they’re having a sale?!!"
"Can we concentrate on Harry?" Hermione growled.

"Then what?"

"Then you can drown yourself in a vat of pumpkin juice for all I care."

"Fine. We’ll concentrate on Harry. He’s not in the Black Queen’s Tower. The theory is that he slipped out of Hogwarts sometime yesterday, after Charms Lessons with Professor Flitwick. Snape has been locked up, presumably to prevent him from leaving Hogwarts to find Harry. McGonagall has cancelled classes for the rest of the week in order to search the entirety of the school, in case Harry has merely fallen into one of the rooms in the castle and can’t find his way out."

"If he were here, someone would have found him. I feel it’s safe to assume Harry has left Hogwarts, but the question is why."

"Because he’s gone barking mad?"

"Neville is on the way up," Hermione said. "Ginny’s headed over too," she pointed. Ron lowered the telescope he had borrowed from an abandoned classroom, as a broom raced straight for the tower at breakneck speed. Ginny Weasley screeched to a halt, dismounted in a pile of limbs, and gasped for breath.

"Well?" Ron demanded.

"The Minister of Magic and... someone from ..... the Dark Force Defense League," Ginny gasped, holding her chest with one hand.

"What about them?" Hermione asked as she took the telescope from Ron and stared around the castle grounds.

"They’ve apparated...at the front gate."

"Not the entire Dark Force Defense League, surely?" Hermione asked. "I see two people. Oh, she's a big one, isn't she? Wonder who she is."

"All this before noon on a perfectly ordinary day?" Ron echoed.

"We’ve got to talk to Professor McGonagall," Hermione said.

"I tried," Ron sputtered, exasperated. "No one on the faculty is talking about what’s going on. But it’s clear something’s very wrong, and Harry’s at the center of it."

"You aren’t going to believe this," Neville said as he burst onto the Astronomy Tower roof. "You are NOT going to believe this!"

"What?" the other three chorused.


"Are you sure that isn’t the April Fools’ Edition out early? No one in their right mind would believe that," Weasley mocked. "Come on! NO ONE is going to believe that!"

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"I told you this would happen, Albus. The boy is out of control. I told you at Christmas that it was
time we did something about it while you still held sway with Potter. But it’s too late, I tell you. It’s too late!"

"Calm down, Minister." The voice of reason belonged to Wartsilla Wickerwell, a well-heeled member of the Dark Force Defense League.

"Don’t tell me to calm down!" Fudge shot back. Wickerwell stepped closer to the Minister and glowered at him. An imposing woman who might have easily been mistaken for Teutonic warrior, she was tall and rough-built, sporting a waist-length blonde braid and size twelve, square-heeled, snake-skin boots. She was pondering the possibility of planting those size twelve boots in various parts of Fudge's anatomy. Wartsilla drummed her fingers on her crossed arms and waited for Fudge to stop ranting. Dumbledore walked a circle in the floor as the house elves doused the fire that was burning away in one of the fireplaces in the Great Hall.

"Headmaster, do you have an explanation for what is going on with Mr. Potter?" Wickerwell asked. "I spilled my morning tea on the Daily Prophet when I opened it. Harry Potter Joins the Forces of Darkness! What is one to think?"

"You can’t believe everything you read, least of all what’s printed about Harry," Dumbledore smiled. "Especially if it appears in the Daily Prophet. They've taken a set against him."

"Is it true that he attacked a fellow student not long ago, not once but twice."

"YES!" Fudge bellowed.

"There are extenuating circumstances. Harry did not attack Mr. Malfoy," Albus corrected. "Mr. Malfoy sneaked into Mr. Potter’s room and tried to make Harry believe he was seeing ghosts and losing his mind. They got into a fighting match when Mr. Potter confronted Mr. Malfoy. The boys have been having an on-going feud since they stepped off the boat first year. I’m afraid there’s little or nothing any of us have been able to do to discourage them."

"Son of the late Mr. Malfoy, I presume?" Wickerwell said knowingly. "Nasty piece of work, that man was. Can’t imagine the apple fell far from the tree where his son is concerned. I read a report about you having to unlock Lucius’s crypt and take his son out, that Mr. Potter had sent Draco there? Transportation of a wizard against his will; that’s serious stuff, Headmaster."

"Harry sent Draco into Lucius’s crypt after the boy said crude and malevolent things about Lucius’s attack," Dumbledore explained. "Some have speculated Draco knew about the attack and did not try to prevent it, which would make him an accessory to the crime."

"Draco has been cleared of all charges. It’s wrong to bring them up," Fudge snorted and stamped his feet.

"Charges?" Wartsilla questioned. "I didn’t realize there was talk of charges."

"Mr. Malfoy might have had prior knowledge of his father’s attack on Harry. It’s probable Draco witnessed the attack from a remote location. He may not be the only one, either." Dumbledore ground his teeth together as he glared at Fudge.

"I had no idea," Wickerwell murmured, giving Fudge a piercing glance.

"Draco swallowed Veritaserum and passed a very thorough examination," Fudge snapped. "It’s wrong to dredge those rumors up again, Dumbledore. Besides, that’s not why we’re here. How do you explain the article in this morning’s Prophet? What the devil is going on with that Potter? He’s totally out of control!"
"Harry is not out of control. He’s merely in search of direction, that’s all," Dumbledore defended. "Many of us spent our teen years in much the same state of confusion. I seem to recall something about wanting to join a commune and raise vegetables while I studied ancient philosophy."

"Dumbledore, you can’t go on protecting Potter. He’s got to face the music at some point," Fudge barked angrily.

"The music, yes. Not the firing squad," Albus returned, his voice sharpening around the edges. A woman’s voice came through the Floo.

"We’re ready on this end, Headmaster."

"I must ask you both not to panic," Dumbledore said, using his wand to dim the sun through the windows and from the ceiling overhead.

"I am not the sort who panics easily," Wickerwell sniffed.

"Good to know. Ready!" Albus called through the Floo. Green flames and sparks erupted. A very short woman with dark hair stepped through, remaining inside the fireplace itself. She was holding the hand of a small blond boy. His round face was smeared with Floo powder. He coughed and waved the smoke away.

"Buono!" the boy exclaimed, bouncing out of the fireplace and gazing around the Great Hall. "Can we do it again?"

"Illumina. How wonderful to see you. Past your bedtime, isn’t it?" Dumbledore smiled at her. The others pulled back in alarm when Illumina stepped to the edge of the fireplace. Her pale skin and red eyes were clearly visible.

"Good Lord!! She’s a vampire!" Fudge howled. Everyone stared at him when he stated the obvious, and quickly tried to ignore him in order to not encourage another outburst from him. Unfortunately, the ploy didn’t work.

"This is Mr. Volkov, I presume?" Dumbledore went on, seeming to not miss a beat because of Fudge’s outcry. To her credit, Wickerwell didn’t shout or flee.

"Mr. Sergei Volkov, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore," Illumina pointed. The boy bowed, glancing around expectantly when he straightened up.

"Don’t worry. Your mother is on her way downstairs as we speak," Dumbledore said. Sergei brightened after a few seconds. It was clear he was working his way through the English just a moment more slowly than the Italian he was accustomed to hearing.

"You know the dangers of letting one of those creatures near the students! What is the meaning of this?" Fudge demanded loudly, taking out his wand and pointing it at Illumina. She gave him a look that would have frozen fire.

"You really are a very rude little man," she murmured, eyes darkening.

"Minister, please lower your wand," Dumbledore ordered.

"I agree," Wickerwell said. "Can’t you control yourself for ten minutes?"

"Headmaster, this is a copy of the contract," Illumina said, handing a scroll to Dumbledore and ignoring Fudge and his shaky wand. "Where is Severus? I really must talk to him."
"Snape’s wife! I should have known!" Fudge howled.

"He’s temporarily incarcerated. A necessary precaution, I’m afraid, to prevent him from leaving Hogwarts," Dumbledore replied to Illumina.

"Assure him I will look out for Mr. Potter. I know he must be worried. I assume you’ll want to have an advocate examine the contract."

"I do need to verify that it is legal and binding," Dumbledore said. "There may be additions we might like to see."

"Yes, sir. Of course. I’ll be going then."

"I would like to request an audience with Mr. Le Clair and yourself this evening, at your leisure," Albus added.

"As you wish, Headmaster. After sunset?"

"After sunset. In the meantime, thank you for shepherding Mr. Volkov to us."

"You’re very welcome," Illumina replied. She reached an arm out and tickled Sergei under the chin. "Ciao, bambino."

"Ciao, bella donna," he answered brightly.

"Wait a minute. Wait just a minute. You can’t let her leave. She knows where Harry Potter is, and she’s holding him against his will," Fudge protested when Illumina withdrew into the fireplace. She glared at the Minister again.

"She came here under a flag of truce, and she will leave unmolested," Dumbledore responded tersely to Fudge.

"Are you holding Mr. Potter against his will?" Wickerwell asked.

"No, ma’am," Illumina assured her. "He came to Henri for help. Henri did not seek him out. As far as I’m concerned, you can come get him as soon as you want him. I’d rather not have the wrath of the Dark Lord hanging over my head any longer than necessary. But alas, that’s not my decision."

"You’re free to leave then," Wickerwell decided.


Sergei rushed towards the Floo, taking Illumina’s hand.

"Will I see you again?" he asked.

"You’d better ask your mother for permission first," she told him grimly.

"I would like to paint you," Sergei said. "Is that permitted?"

"Better ask your mother," Illumina repeated, tickling his chin with one long finger. "Be off now, bambino."

"Get the child back from the monster!" Fudge said, tugging Sergei away from Illumina by both shoulders.
"I wouldn’t do that," Illumina warned too late. Sergei spun on Fudge, stomped hard on one of the Minister’s feet.

"Mongrel! Take your hands off me!" the boy commanded.

At that moment, Professor Volkova came wheeling around the corner into the Great Hall. She appeared to have run the entire way from her quarters, and was gasping for breath.

"SERGEI!" she exclaimed. The boy stopped glaring at Fudge and flew across the room on fast feet.

"I’ll be going now." Illumina ducked away.

"WAIT!" Anna shouted. Illumina reappeared, wincing, eager to be away. Volkova scooped Sergei up in her arms and plastered his small face with all the kisses she had saved these many years. Eventually, she managed to walk to the fireplace, dropping the boy’s feet back onto the floor. He stood at her side, grinning worshipfully up at her. Across the threshold between dim light and pitch darkness, Volkova extended her hand, her arm stiff as a stick.

"She brought me to you," Sergei explained.

"Thank you, Mrs. Snape, um, Miss Cassavechi," Volkova stammered.

"Mrs. Le Clair," Sergei corrected her. Anna shushed him.

"Illumina, thank you," Anna repeated. "I am in your debt."

"I am not the one to whom you are indebted, Volkova. But I will express your sentiments to Mr. Potter."

"Thank you."

"I’m told he has your father’s smile."

"Really?" Anna wondered, staring anew at Sergei. Illumina took Volkova’s hand and shook it once or twice. After Volkova had stepped back, the Floo belched green sparks and Illumina vanished. Anna bent down and kissed Sergei hard on the top of the head.

"Hello, again," Sergei beamed up at her. "Mum."

"Don’t you ‘Mum’ me. You, young man, are in such trouble," Anna warned him, shaking one finger at him in a threatening manner.

"I needed to talk to you," he said, chin dropping to his chest.

"We’re going to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey will check you over and make certain you are unharmed," Anna said, straightening Sergei’s blond hair and smoothing a smudge of soot off his cheek. He recovered his happiness quickly.

"Then what?" he asked.

"I haven’t decided. I may want to beat you within an inch of your life."

"You aren’t going to make me go back to Venezia, are you?" the boy bawled.

"Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous," she soothed. "You’re never going back to them, I promise you."
"Don’t you want to hear about the vampires?" he asked, eyes bright with mischief.

"Very much. Promise me they did not harm you."

"They didn’t hurt me."

"Where in HELL have you been all this time? People have been searching for you from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arctic Circle."

"With the Baron."

"What Baron? Which Baron?"

"Kazimierz Romovski."

Volkova flinched and stifled a wail of horror.

"Don’t be upset," Sergei insisted. "The Baron was a civilized man. He was very nice to me. By the way, who is Ivan? What charm were they talking about?"

"It’s a long story. But I suppose it is about time you heard about it, being as you’re the one it belongs to now," Anna began, taking his hand. "With your permission, Headmaster, we will proceed to the hospital wing."

"By all means," Albus said, eyes misty with sentiment. Volkova bowed stiffly, and led her son away.

"That’s it?!" Fudge demanded as Dumbledore opened the scroll and examined the words inside. The Minister was nursing his wounded toes, limping after the Headmaster.

"Until we have the contract examined by an advocate, yes," Dumbledore said, unabashed amusement on his face again.

"May we sit in on the meeting with the advocate?" Wickerwell asked.

"A perfectly acceptable plan, yes," Dumbledore agreed. He returned the sunlight to the room, and motioned for Wartsilla Wickerwell to proceed him out of the Great Hall. Fudge followed behind, protesting the whole way.
Chapter Summary

In which McGonagall lets Severus out of his cell, and Hermione, Ron, and Neville make plans to rescue Harry

"It’s official. I’m furious. Harry Potter has done it this time, gotten himself into a fine mess. Do you know, he’s run off and traded himself to the vampires, to Henri Le Clair of all people, to secure the safe release of Professor Volkova’s son? Leave the books here. I’ll have them sent back to your quarters for you."

Severus emerged from his temporary cell, the Room of Doom, and followed Minerva McGonagall into the bright hallway. He didn't need her to tell him Harry had placed himself in grave danger. Snape's nerves were shot after a night of pacing to and fro. Minerva was escorting him somewhere with a fast, determined stride. He had to rush to keep up. It took several corridors for him to realize they were headed for the Headmaster’s office, because Minerva circled the same square of corridors twice in her unsettled frenzy of steps.

"You must be so proud. Potter has proven to be the perfect Gryffindor," Snape sniped at her. He stiffened his spine and adjusted his sneer, waiting for her reply. Minerva paused for a half-second in her stride, whirling on him, fists clenched at the end of stiff arms.

"When I get my hands on that boy, I’ll make him wish he’d been sorted into Hufflepuff," McGonagall rumbled before spinning back around and continuing on down the surprisingly-empty hallway. Severus wondered where the students were.

"The whelp has been safely returned, I’m assuming?" he questioned.

"Yes, certainly. Volkova is with her son in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey is making sure the child is unharmed."

"I was referring to the other whelp," Severus clarified. He had waited all night and day for the chance to get his hands on Potter, mostly to punish him for leaving. Certainly the boy needed to be punished for putting him through all this worry. He planned to spend at least a week yelling at Potter, and then a year kissing every inch of the boy until he was reassured he was all right.

"No, Harry has not been returned to Hogwarts," Minerva sniffed.

"Why not?" Severus' heart fell down through his chest and wobbled between his knees.

"There is the small matter of a signed contract," Minerva declared between gritted teeth.

"Potter signed a contract?!" Snape gaped. He sputtered fury like a boiling tea kettle. "A legal, wizard's contract?!!"

"Are you hungry? Would you like anything to eat?" Minerva asked, her heels clicking as she walked. "Have you had lunch?"

"How can you think of food at a time like this?! I may never eat again!"
"We need you in the meeting with the advocate from Honeydew, Hollyhock, Hemlock and Associates. It may take some time. Eat now or hold your stomach a few hours at least."

"Potter actually signed a contract?"

"He not only signed it. He wrote the ruddy thing," McGonagall barked. "I'm sure he has no idea the implications of what he's done. It’s up to us to repair the situation with a couple of well-placed addendums that may well save Mr. Potter’s life and future."

"What, pray tell, are we adding? How could we possibly fix this?"

"We need to specify a length of time for the duration of the contract, to obtain a promise of non-transference, and anything else the advocate thinks prudent."

"That doesn’t sound too bad," Snape decided maybe he could look on the bright side just this once. "You believe we can repair the situation then?"

"The contract is not the worst of it."

"What could be worse?" Snape gave up on the bright side very easily.

"No matter what we accomplish with the contract, Cornelius Fudge has made it pretty clear he’s had enough of Potter’s antics."

"Enough of what?"

"He left not ten minutes ago. He and Dumbledore have been shouting at each other for the last few hours. I'm surprised you couldn't hear them. Fudge is threatening to have Harry declared a ward of the state, and then committed to the asylum at St. Mungo’s Hospital the minute he’s released from his contract with Le Clair, if he ever is released!"

"Can he do that?"

"Cornelius is under the impression that because he is Minister of Magic, he can do whatever he damned well pleases."

"We shall have to do our best to rid him of this impression," Snape warned.

"If we don’t find Remus Lupin, and if Petunia Dursley gives up custody of Harry, the boy is doomed, because Fudge is out for his blood! Luckily we appear to have a level-headed representative from the Dark Force Defense League in our corner. But even with Wickerwell on our side, there are twelve other people to convince. She left in order to raise a majority of the league, to explain the situation to them. Albus has owled the Wizengamot as well."

"On what grounds is Fudge seeking to have the boy committed?"

"Inability or lack of inclination to control his magic. He feels Harry is a danger to himself and to others around him."

"Not that I agree with the Minster, but we’d better hope Le Clair agrees to a long contract."

"Miss Granger! Mister Longbottom! What are you doing out of Gryffindor Tower"

Minerva’s voice froze the two students in their tracks as they came around a corner and tried to vanish back again. They reappeared sheepishly, accompanied by Ron as well. There were odd bulges in Weasley’s robe, as if he were hiding something under his cloak. He was attempting to
conceal the abnormal lumps by lurking behind Longbottom.

"I wanted to check my Herbology homework," Neville offered, squeaking. Did McGonagall know the students had been outside the Headmaster’s office, listening to the words fired back and forth as they echoed down the hidden staircase?

"I want you back in your tower in five minutes, or you’ll be in detention until you graduate. I expect you to set an example of obedience for the younger students. Is that clear?" McGonagall fumed.

"Yes, ma’am," Hermione assured McGonagall at once. Ron turned to go, but not without giving Snape a dark look. It was pretty clear where Weasley stood on the subject of Harry being gone– he was placing the blame firmly at Snape’s feet. Minerva waited until the students had turned the next corner before she spoke again.

"Did they hear us?" she wondered.

"Shouldn’t we tell them what is going on? Might they not be able to talk sense to Potter?" Severus asked. "Might they not be able to help us understand what he is doing?"

"The Headmaster is of the opinion you might be best qualified for reaching Mr. Potter and talking sense to him. It’s the reason he’s letting you out of your cell."

Snape and McGonagall went the other direction, their footsteps echoing away. Hermione, Ron, and Neville reappeared. Hermione dropped the invisibility cloak out of her robe, and Ron shifted his lumps around.

"Told you we should have been wearing that," he said glumly.

"Do you think it’s true?" Neville worried. "Could Fudge have Harry committed?"

"If his aunt doesn’t help him, I’ll personally curse her boobs off," Ron muttered.

"That horrible woman is not going to help Harry," Hermione said in despair. "She’s hated him from the minute he was put on her doorstep."

"What about Volkova? Harry saved her son’s life. How come she’s not racing off to rescue him from Le Clair?" Ron wanted to know.

"Maybe because you’ve stolen her vampire-hunting tool belt," Hermione suggested.

"Hurry up. This thing really chaffs," Ron complained.

"It’s up to us to rescue Harry," Hermione decided in her usual, take-charge manner. "We aren’t going to be able to depend on anyone but ourselves."

"I’ve been telling you that for years!" Ron bellowed.

"Will this emergency portkey thing of yours work, Ron?" Neville asked. "If it does work, how are we going to deal with the vampires once we appear where they’re holding Harry?"

"We all know the Lumos spell. How hard will they be to handle?" Ron said. "If we go in broad daylight, we’ll be fine."

"How do we get them to give Harry up?" Neville asked. "There isn’t much daylight left. Maybe we shouldn’t go today."
"Oh, I’ll make them let him go. You bet I will," Ron glowed with anger.

"If we aren’t back in the Tower, McGonagall is going to know," Neville warned. "Maybe we shouldn’t charge off without finding where things stand."

"Getting in on that meeting would let us know," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"I say we walk out of the castle this instant and find Harry," Ron charged ahead.

"Shouldn’t we wait until tomorrow?" Neville asked. "You said we should attack in daylight."

"It’s daylight right now!"

"We’ve got no better than forty-five minutes of daylight left, and we need to be able to get out of the castle without being noticed," Hermione protested. "McGonagall is going to know if we’ve gone, and you can bet she’ll know where we’ve gone. It’ll only lead to trouble. Neville’s right. We need to know how things stand before we shove around in the situation like bulls in a china shop."

"How do you expect we find out?" Ron blared at her.

"I’ll go," Hermione said, wrapping up in Harry’s invisibility cloak and vanishing from sight. "You two head back to Gryffindor Tower. I’ll meet you there in one hour."
In which we meet the poor bastard who gets to somehow fix Harry's legal problem, and we meet Volkova's sinister, snippy rival from the Deusredeti

"How can it possibly be a legally binding contract?" Snape complained in a braying bellow.

"Two wizards have given each other their written promises. That makes it a binding contract," the advocate said.

"Professor Snape, Mr. Honeydew is here to help us. Could you please try to conduct yourself in a civil fashion?" Dumbledore requested tersely.

"Let him be helpful then. How can we break this contract?"

"You cannot break it. Only the two people who have signed the contract can break it," Honeydew replied, pushing his glasses back up on his thin nose. It was strange to see such a meek man standing up to Snape. Honeydew had the look of a schoolboy himself– a thin frame with a head of nearly-white, tousled blond hair and hazel eyes behind his glasses.

"Is a contract of such serious nature considered binding even when signed by someone of Mr. Potter’s tender age and complete inexperience?" McGonagall asked.

"If she felt he was being taken advantage of, Mr. Potter’s guardian could go before the Ministry of Magic and break it on his behalf," Honeydew suggested.

"His guardian is a Muggle," McGonagall said in a low embarrassed whisper.

"More to the point, she couldn’t care less about him," Snape added.

"What about his godfather?" Honeydew brightened.

"Sirius Black is no longer with us," Dumbledore reminded him.

"But what about Mr. Lupin?"


"I’ve met with Mrs. Dursley on a previous occasion. Perhaps if I were to talk to her? Explain the seriousness of the situation to her?" Volkova suggested from where she was staring up at the portraits of the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts.

"I’m afraid any attempts with Petunia would not play in our favor," McGonagall said. "She has lost whatever tolerance and patience she might have once possessed for Harry. She’s banned him from returning home this summer. She never wants him to darken her door again. She swears she is utterly finished with him."

"She’s never cared about the boy," Severus growled. "Abused and neglected him emotionally and..."
physically for years, and we did nothing but turn a blind eye," he added, with a dark look at Dumbledore.

"What you’re saying isn’t bolstering my courage," Honeydew said. "How could it hurt if Mrs. Volkova wants to talk to Mrs. Dursley? There’s no harm in trying to sway her to our way of mind."

"Ms. Volkova, thank you," Volkova hissed at him.

"I beg your pardon." Honeydew dropped a quick bow in her direction. The gesture appeared to mollify the Dark Arts professor.

"If you say to that woman that the Minister of Magic believes Harry Potter is a danger to himself and that she must give her permission for him to be locked up, she will have four words for you. ‘Where. Do. I. Sign?’," Snape growled. "She’ll give Harry over to Fudge in a heartbeat and count herself lucky to be rid of him for good. No. If anything, we need to have a guard around the house to make sure Fudge doesn’t visit her to woo her to his plan. I’ll be amazed if he hasn’t already visited her."

"We don’t have the people to spare to guard the Dursleys' house," Dumbledore complained.

"If there is no way to break the contract on Harry’s behalf, might we not try our cause with Mr. Le Clair?" McGonagall asked. "Perhaps we could convince him to break the contact, have it declared invalid on further consideration. He must know he took advantage of a naïve child."

"You’d be wasting your breath," Volkova said. "Le Clair has been waiting months to get his hands on Mr. Potter. I told you that they rarely give up when they’ve decided on a particular prey, and now he has Harry in the palm of his hand. There must be a way to convince Mr. Potter of the extreme danger into which he has put himself. We must convince Harry he must break his word."

"Harry will never go back on his word," Dumbledore decided.

"Stupid Gryffindors," Snape muttered from his dark corner.

"These addendum that we discussed?" Dumbledore silenced Snape with a glare and turned to Honeydew.

"I believe the non-transference clause is the most important, but the contract fails to cover even the most basic things. Will Le Clair provide food and shelter? Will Le Clair continue Mr. Potter’s education? Will Le Clair provide adequate protection? I must assume the person who wrote this is either an ignorant child or a blithering idiot."

"You'd be right, in both cases," Snape snipped.

"One more peep out of you, Severus, and you're going back to your cell," Dumbledore threatened.

"If you rewrite the contract to include all the necessary amendments, and both parties agree to the newly-forged contract, will that be acceptable in a court of law?" McGonagall asked Honeydew.

"Yes, it should be."

"As long as Harry is in Le Clair’s custody, Fudge cannot have him declared a ward of the state, even with Petunia Dursley’s blessing, can he?" McGonagall asked.

"Minister Fudge could still have Mr. Potter declared a ward of the state. It’s serving the notice to Le Clair to hand the boy over that would be the tricky part," Honeydew smirked. "A bit like
hanging a bell on a hippogriff, I’m afraid. Fudge can draw up papers until his fingers are stumps, but as long as this contract is binding, and Harry is under Le Clair’s protection, Fudge can’t touch Mr. Potter without going through Le Clair. He certainly won’t be able to commit the boy to St. Mungo’s. His grounds are extremely flimsy and, might I say, most difficult to prove. He won’t find much backing for this charge, I promise you."

"Let’s talk more about this non-transference clause," Dumbledore started to smile once more.

"If Le Clair will agree to nothing else, insist on that one addition."

"Why?" McGonagall wanted to know.

"Le Clair is over 500 years old, correct?" Honeydew asked Volkova.

"Five hundred and fifty," she replied.

"Odds are greatly in your favor that he will expire before the contract does," Honeydew added.

"Especially with people like Volkova hunting him," Snape murmured.

"Partially because of vampire hunters, but also because of in-fighting in the subculture itself. There’s nothing one vampire hates more than another vampire who has done very well for himself," Volkova said impatiently.

"How long do you suggest for the duration of the contract?" Dumbledore asked Honeydew.

"Owing to the fact that Le Clair is of an advanced age, and that he’s considered a dangerous beast by the Ministry of Magic, meaning that he may be hunted freely by those with the proper licensing, I’d say you should base the duration of the contract on the amount of time it will take Fudge to draft his papers for making Harry a ward of the state and committing him for his own safety."

"I don’t follow you," Dumbledore puzzled.

"Wait to see what Fudge is about, and if he manages to drum up support. If we’re lucky, he will hang himself if you give him enough rope."

"Why should he have all the fun?" Snape asked. "I’m perfectly willing to go hang him myself right this moment."

"We have to know what he’ll try to pull before we can be prepared to fight him," Honeydew said. "I’ll look into all foreseeable possibilities, of course, but I really feel Fudge doesn’t have a leg to stand on when it comes to this attack on Mr. Potter’s mental health. He’s going to come off looking pretty low indeed for attacking the Boy Who Lived so shortly after the dreadful events between Lucius Malfoy and Mr. Potter. Kicking a wizard while he’s down– it’s bad form, and it’s not easily forgiven by those who make Fudge’s job possible. Where do you believe the Wizengamot will stand on the topic?"

"They won’t rush to decision," Dumbledore began.

"But they might be equally persuaded by the argument Fudge will present to them as they might by our argument that Harry did this out of some misguided hero-impulse he has," Snape replied.

"Herman, thank you so much for your help," Dumbledore said, shaking the advocate’s hand. "You are very appreciated, I hope you realize."
"It’s my pleasure to be of what assistance I can," Honeydew said, bowing to the Headmaster.

"If Fudge is serious about wanting to pursue this, I’m going to need your help to fight him. Harry’s future will be at your mercy."

"My firm is always at your service, and it would be my honor to serve you and Mr. Potter in any way that you require," Honeydew bowed again. "Might I say, Hemlock and Hollyhock are raring to go- ready to be of service as well."

"Professor McGonagall will show you to an office where you can work in peace. Let me know if you require anything."

Minerva showed Honeydew out of the Headmaster’s office. In the silence, metallic pings rang out. Snape paced in his corner, and Volkova unfolded her hands, brushing dust off the picture frame in reach.

"How long is it going to take him to draft that contract? Is it too soon to go have our talk with Le Clair?" Snape asked impatiently.

"The contract won’t be done for several days, I should think. I believe we should wait another half hour before Flooing over. We don’t want to wake anyone prematurely," Dumbledore replied, checking the angle of the sun out the windows. He spotted the glinting of gold at the windows, but said nothing. The delicate footfall of someone walking out of his direct line of sight went unheard by the others in the room.

"Perhaps it would be helpful if Professor Volkova’s son could tell us about the time he spent with the vampires. I would be curious to learn how a mere tot of ten found his way through Europe and across the Channel and clear to the UK unaided," Snape suggested.

"You shouldn’t pressure him," Volkova said. "He’s putting up a brave front, but underneath it, he’s as scared as anyone in his position would be."

"Did you learn anything useful from him in the infirmary?" Dumbledore asked.

"That Baron Romovski has excellent taste in art, a stable full of prize Arabians, a well-furnished library, and a pair of twin house elves named Fritzi and Mitzi who know how to juggle and turn somersaults."

"Very helpful," Snape commented snidely.

"He’s ten. What details do you think he’s going to pick up?" Volkova fumed. "At least Romovski didn’t take him to the lower floors of his castle. The Baron has tortured and killed seventeen vampire hunters in his time. He has what’s left of them lined up in the hallway, stuffed, mounted."

"How many Volkovi among them?" Snape asked.

"At least two," she shuddered. "Worst of all, he’s married to Marguerite Baum."

"Who?" Snape growled.

"Only the most ferocious female vampire to have haunted the Black Forest. She and her brother Krieger kidnapped and killed over three hundred young girls before they were run out at the edge of a pitchfork and torch procession. She used to be married to Le Clair, and the circumstances under which they divorced and she remarried to someone reputed to be one of his best friends is still a matter of debate among those who know both."
"What was your son’s impression of her?" Dumbledore worried.

"Romovski kept them apart, knowing that Baum made a name for herself by bathing in virgin’s blood in order to retain her beauty."

"So you and she have something in common then?" Snape tormented Volkova. She narrowed her eyes at him, wearing a small smile as acknowledgment of the well-placed shot at the dubious deeds in her past.

"Why did they not harm your son?" Dumbledore asked.

"They had ample time, and more than enough motivation, to be sure," Snape put in. Volkova nodded, taking a deep breath.

"For the life of me, I have no idea. The bindy has protected him since I transferred the spell, but before that, it’s very true that they had ample enough time. I do not know what stayed Romovski’s hand."

"Mercy?" Snape suggested dryly.

"Romovski isn’t known for his compassion. Guilt, perhaps. He has laid waste to entire fiefdoms, killed hundreds of people in one go, and yet refuses to ever harm anyone who could prove they were remotely Portuguese."

"What?" Severus puzzled.

"Before becoming ensnared by Frau Baum, Romovski was married to a minor noblewoman from Lisbon. He fairly worshipped the ground she walked on. His wife died shortly after giving birth to a daughter, and their daughter died before her eleventh birthday. Beyond that I don’t know his reasons," she shrugged.

"Is your son at all Portuguese?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Not that I’m aware," Volkova frowned. "As far as I learned about my family history, he should be predominately Russian, with dashes of Norwegian and German from my mother."

"Why did Sergei leave school to come find you?" Dumbledore asked. Volkova crossed her hands behind her hips.

"What I gather is that he had an unpleasant altercation with one of his den mates. Sergei wants to be a painter, and Paolo told him learning to paint was a waste of time, because all the elders were going to make of him is a killer, just like his parents. Sergei didn’t take the insults well."

"How did he react?"

"He broke Paolo’s nose and knocked out his front teeth. Paolo told Sergei who I was, who his father was, what we were, and that he was not going to be a painter, ever, and that all the elders kept him around for is the hope he’ll be a good killer too."

"How on Earth would Paolo know who you were to your son? Your children aren’t told about their parents until they reach age eighteen," Dumbledore gasped.

"I suspect that Paolo has heard other community members talking about me and my son in connection with one another. Sergei and Paolo’s den mother is Paolo’s natural mother, and she is a vindictive cow. We vampire hunters used to call her La Exaltissima because she thought herself so
above the rest of us.

"Did you talk to your son about what Paolo told him?" Dumbledore asked.

"I tried," Anna mumbled. "He’s very upset about it."

"Perhaps if I were to talk to him?" Dumbledore offered.

"You’re welcome to give it a go," Volkova agreed.

Professor McGonagall reentered the office. Behind her, waiting in the outer area, was a woman cloaked in blue from head to toe. When she saw the visitor, Volkova went rigid, and her expression darkened with hatred.

"Headmaster Dumbledore, may I present Lady Sophia diPietro? She’s from the Deusredeti," Minerva added pointedly.

"La Exaltissima, I presume," Snape said to Volkova. She cast her eyes at him, and nodded. "I told you they had someone coming your way," he added to her under-breath.

"Lady Sophia, a pleasure to meet you," the Headmaster said, standing up from his desk and reaching forward to shake her hand. She accepted politely, and turned to Snape, expecting the same cordiality. He stared at her hand and backed away without offering his. She seemed able to walk past his rudeness without much effort. Perhaps people were often rude to her.

"Volkova," Lady Sophia said as she centered her attention on the Dark Arts Professor.

"DiPietro," Anna returned the cold greeting with a clipped nod.

"I’m sure you know what brings me here," Lady Sophia continued.

"You followed my son."

"No. I learned of your son’s location only this morning. You are the reason I am here. How lucky you are free at the moment. We can make this quick and painless."

"How is Paolo? Did you manage to get his teeth back in place?" Volkova asked, a feral smile weaving onto her face.

"I’d prefer not to discuss this situation in front of strangers," DiPietro frowned.

"Rather a change of tune for you, not wanting to talk. Perhaps if you had kept your fat mouth shut in front of YOUR son, MY son wouldn’t be in his current predicament. Isn’t there an edict with your job concerning allowing children to find out who their parents are?"

"Everyone has already figured out who spawned your ill-mannered wretch. I revealed nothing. What are you insinuating?"

"I’m not insinuating a thing, Sophia. It doesn’t take psychic abilities to conclude you told Paolo personally or allowed him to overhear you in conversation with someone else. Probably your keeper. She pulls your chain and you jump."

"I know you have no love for Rubrica."

"Nor she for me, because I would never let her own me the way she owns you."
"Let us not do this in anger, shall we? You’ve never accepted that I was chosen as a den mother and you weren’t. You have to let go of it at some point. Some of us have talents that are maternally-inclined, and some of us have talents that lend themselves in different realms. When will you get over yourself, Anna?"

"I don’t give a damn that you were chosen as a den mother when I wasn’t."

"You did apply for the position."

"Once, at the behest of my grandfather."

"Yes, well, there you are."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Volkova snapped.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Can’t we be adults here? Can’t we be pleasant to one another for a change?"

"I can’t bring to mind a single pleasant thought I’ve ever had in connection with you, except that time when we were five, and you had the measles, and I thought you were going to die. I tried to bribe your medi-wizard to slip you a vial of hemlock. Old Gunderson. He scolded me, gave me a book on undetectable poisons, and sent me on my way. It was a very interesting book."

"How very charming," Sophia frowned at Anna disdainfully, which only served to further annoy Volkova.

"DiPietro, why the hell are you here, and what do you want?"

"If we’ve dispensed with the pleasantries, maybe you’d like to hear me out."

"Ladies! If you please!" McGonagall interrupted, stepping between Sophia and Anna as Sophia whipped off her long blue gloves and stuffed them into her cloak.

"I’m here to make certain that your brutish heathen sprout didn’t get injured while he was being held by Baron Romovski," Lady Sophia shouted at Professor Volkova. "I don’t care one way or the other, but I’m doing my job without letting my personal feelings interfere with my performance. That’s yet another talent you never quite mastered."

"You’d do well to remember I kill for a living," Volkova hissed.

"Silly me. Here I was led to believe you were a teacher!" Sophia snipped.

McGonagall pulled out her wand, and used a burst of energy to send Sophia and Anna back from each other several paces.

"LADIES!! We will have civil conversation. There will be silence until you calm down, both of you," Minerva raised her voice.

"You seem to have the situation under control, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "We’ll leave you to mediate while we go see how Mr. Potter is holding up. Any message you’d like delivered?"

"None that bears repeating in polite company," Minerva replied.

"We’ll simply give him your deepest affections."
"Fair enough. Safe journey," McGonagall said.

"Ta," Dumbledore waved, grabbing Snape’s arm and rushing him out of the office. Behind them, Volkova and Lady Sophia started up again.

"The mystery, dear Sophia, is how a child unfamiliar with the wards around his home castle could have managed to get out without help, let alone navigate through the city itself."

"Exactly what are you insinuating?"

"Did you put my child in danger to get at me?"

"You’re not helping your position by hurling insults at me, Volkova. Let’s be done with this."

"Tell me exactly how Baron Romovski got his hands on my child, when my child was in Venice and the Baron was in Krakow the last I knew."

"I’m sure I have no idea what you’re going on about. I’m told your father was prone to paranoia in his early thirties. Perhaps your condition is hereditary?"

"You do know if I find out you put Sergei in danger to provoke me, there won’t be a hole deep or dark enough for you to hide in, don’t you? I will find you if it takes the rest of my life. You won’t be safe on the moon."

Sophia blanched white, and Volkova growled deep in her throat. DiPietro fished around in her cloak, giving Volkova an ornate scroll.

"Your son is delivered safe unto you, and yet you still cast about these insulting accusations. You have more gall than the entirety of France," she hissed at Volkova.

"There are only three people at any given time who have the knowledge to open the wards at home. These three people must all be present in order for the wards to be opened. You’ll forgive me if I find it nearly impossible that one small boy would have been able to get out unless someone opened the door and pushed him out, or left the door open and allowed him out," Anna continued.

"You don’t know what you’re talking about," Sophia said, getting more white by the second.

"If it wasn’t you, tell me who it was."

"There’s no point in arguing with you. I’m wasting my breath and my time. Those are your dismissal papers. You’re finished, exiled, banned. Whatever you want to call it, that’s what it is. You are officially no longer welcome in the family."

"You couldn’t have owled these to me? You had to have the pleasure of delivering them in person?" Volkova asked, tossing the scroll away and letting it scuttle across the floor.

"No, I had to come in person."

"Why?"

"I have orders to complete. You may be exiled, but Sergei is not. I am here for the boy." DiPietro delivered the words with a nasty smile she couldn’t hope to hide.

"Are you?" Anna laughed, her throat scratching.

Without warning, she flew at DiPietro, nails and teeth flashing, dagger in hand. Sophia gave a high-
pitched scream and fled in the other direction. Minerva decided not to get between them again. Why risk it? She’d have plenty of other opportunities in the future to get herself mauled by angry mothers protecting their children. It was best to let these two get their differences out of their systems. They’d been carrying around anger and resentment for one another since they could walk and talk. It would be healthy to give them a chance to work it out.

McGonagall watched the women chase each other around the room, first left, then right, dodging around Dumbledore’s desk and past his cabinets filled with all manner of sorceric toys. Volkova was shouting all manner of obscenities in several languages. DiPietro simply replied by screaming here and there as she ducked and swooped around, avoiding the vampire killer. The sound of the office door opening and closing made McGonagall spin around that direction. Empty space greeted her curious stare.
Chapter Summary

In which Dumbledore and Snape pay a visit to Le Clair, and have a chance to talk to Harry

"That conversation might have proven truly enlightening," Severus commented to Dumbledore after they stepped out of the Floo at their destination.

"Not really. I’m sure you’ve guessed Professor Volkova is not popular among her peers. They did not approve of her being allowed to return to the community after the last time she fell afoul."

"What about her son?"

"He may be the sole reason she was allowed to return last time. This situation with Baron Romovski may have altered that for them both."

"How so?"

"I did not bring this up, and you may not, but I fear that the Deusredeti may have sent Lady Sophia to tell Anna that neither she nor her son may return to the community. Either that or Lady Sophia has come to banish Anna and take Sergei back. Those are the two possibilities that spring to mind. She had to have a purpose for coming all this way. She had to have a valid reason beyond annoying an old adversary."

"I don’t know. Some people will go to great lengths to torment an old foe."

"She was sent with a mission to complete. Trust me. I can feel it."

"Do you honestly believe Volkova will allow her son to be taken back to Venice?" Severus wondered.

"Not for a second," Dumbledore said. "I doubt they are foolish enough to attempt to take her son back from her. If that is diPietro's mission, I fear for her survival."

"I don’t think they’ll want Volkova’s son back," Severus commented.

"Why not?"

"Will they not consider that his ability to serve as a vampire killer has been compromised because of his stay with them? He does not see them as monsters. He knows first-hand that they are as human as the rest of us, capable of both extremes of good and evil. He has been shown great mercy by a very infamous vampire, and owes Romovski a life debt if nothing else."

"Whatever the Deusredeti elders’ motives are concerning Sergei, they are looking for any excuse to be rid of Anna," Dumbledore commented. "I do hope you two might continue to get along so smashingly, because it appears she’ll be here for some time."

"I have become the ambassador of good relations lately," Snape almost smiled. "She will never let
them have her son, if that is their intent."

"No, no, she won’t."

"Are you willing to offer asylum to them both?"

"Quite willing," Albus smiled.

"I suspected you might be," Snape nodded. "Why did the vampires not harm her son? It is a question that must be answered."

"I don’t know, Severus, but I’m sure we will find out one way or the other."

"Why would the Deusredeti send a person they don’t trust or like on a mission to protect Mr. Potter, knowing that his survival and his defeat of the Dark Lord are fundamental to their not having to deal with Voldemort in their own region?" Snape puzzled aloud.

"Simply put, she was the best person for the job that needed to be done."

"Come here and teach Dark Arts, defend Potter, kill whoever tries to harm him?"

"Might I remind you that the class is Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Dumbledore replied sharply.

"Do tell?" Snape answered, pretending to be shocked.

"It’s an edge-of-the-empire job that would keep her out of their hair. Of course they would send her here, if only because it served the dual purpose of keeping her away from her son as well, so she could not be an influence on him. Where is our guide? I thought Illumina would be meeting us here," he said, glancing around the small chamber into which they had landed. It was lit by four candles, and held one chair and a door out. It was a cold and dreary coffin of a room.

"I thought you weren’t allowed to discuss Deusredeti business with anyone not in the community."

"Oh, tosh," Albus grumbled. "That’s more of a guideline than a rule."

"What is your connection to them? Are you a member?"

"One of my great grandfathers was a member, and by extension I can occasionally call on the Deusredeti for certain favors, as they can call on me for certain favors, which they did in allowing Volkova to interview for the Dark Arts position in the first place. Severus, I’d like to believe there is nothing I cannot discuss with you. You are one of my oldest and dearest colleagues and friends. Minerva is my right arm, and you are my—"

"Left arm?" Snape questioned.

"My other right arm," Dumbledore replied testily. "Minerva has a head for the details and minutia of running the school, for which you have no patience. Yet you aren’t afraid to get your hands dirty if the situation calls for it, and Minerva considers herself quite above such beastliness."

"You mean that as a compliment, yes?"

"Don’t fuss. I absolutely expect you to become Deputy Headmaster when Minerva assumes my position. I swear I’m going to retire someday to a private island all my own. Somewhere exotic and remote and untouchable. But I won’t retire until I know Hogwarts will be cared for, that my students will be watched over by people who love and care for them. Minerva will need you as
much as I have needed you, and you will need her as well."

"This room is most unsettling and cold. Do you feel a chill?" Snape said. The candles went out in a
gulp, and fluttering was heard. Two red eyes appeared in the darkness, and a wand lit with faint
green illuminated the small antechamber.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," the young woman said, giving a small curtsey which drew their
attention to her pale bare feet.

"Where is Illumina?" Dumbledore asked.

"Where is Mr. Potter?" Snape asked.

"Right this way, please. Follow your step," she called, going out through the door.
"Nice to see you again, Professor Snape."

"Do you know her?" Albus asked Severus.

"She was on the Tower on New Year’s Eve. I believe her name is Raphaella."

She led them through a long corridor, where portraits came and went in her pale green path. She
opened one door, peeked inside, and closed it again. At the next door, she put her head against the
wood, and shook her head.

"This way," Raphaella motioned to them.

Snape hurried to catch up while Dumbledore lingered by the door she had leaned her ear against.
On the floor above them, footsteps could be heard running fast. Boyish laughter rang out, and steps
went another direction. Blasts of magic echoed loudly. Raphaella led Snape and Dumbledore to
another door, which turned out to be a staircase. Snape raced on ahead, steadying himself against
the railing as Raphaella burst into bat form and fluttered her way up through the stair well. A teeny
green glow came from her feet. She must have shrunk her wand to keep it in her grip. That
explained why she had remained bare footed.

The smell of burning wood was evident when they reached the next floor. The bat became a young
woman once more. She picked up her wand off the ground and aimed it at the glowing spot on the
wall, and the wood that had been smoldering calmed to inert form once more.

"Be careful! You’re going to burn down the house!" Raphaella shouted in warning.

Up ahead in the pitch darkness, figures approached. As they neared, it was apparent that one of
them was airborne. Snape went against the wall in the nick of time as someone on a broom roared
past. Dumbledore straightened his hat in the wake of the tailwind. The second figure stopped in
their midst, heaving for breath. It was Le Clair. He leaned against the wall, put away his wand, and
mopped off his brow.

"POTTER!" Snape bellowed.

The flying figure met a wall at the end of the junction, some fifty yards away. Raphaella cackled
with wicked pleasure at the sound of breaking glass and a muffled groan. Severus raced to the end
of the corridor with his wand drawn. Dumbledore wasn’t far behind. Raphaella turned into a bat
again and fluttered through the corridor.

"LUMOS!" Snape yelled.
"Oh, brilliant!" Le Clair exclaimed, drawing his wand as well. Snape’s wand lit the end of the corridor, but it was stopped some ten steps out. There the light met Le Clair’s wall of darkness. Where the two spells joined, there was a strange, twilight effect. "Why don’t you use your head before you go shouting such spells?" Le Clair snapped, keeping his cloak around Raphaella’s bat form.

Snape wasn’t listening. Harry leapt up from his pile of limbs on the floor and threw himself into Severus’s arms. The strange goggles he was wearing clunked against Snape’s collarbone. All other eyes stared at first, then as the hug continued, people looked away in uncomfortable silence, except for Raphaella, who reverted to her human form and started making kissing noises. Harry pulled away, giving her a dirty look which made her snicker. Severus sheepishly released Harry from the tight embrace, examining him as well as he could in dim light. There were no outward signs of trauma– no bumps or bruises save the lump on his forehead from the impact with the cracked mirror they were standing in front of. He was hot and sweaty from exertion, but fairly glowed with power and energy rather than being drained of it.

"Nox," Snape murmured, lowering his wand finally. "Are you unharmed?"

"I’m fine," Harry said, letting go of Severus long enough to shake hands with Dumbledore before burrowing against Snape once more. Harry raised one hand and pulled off the goggles, revealing his glasses underneath.

"If you can tear yourself away," Le Clair said dryly. "Illumina must be waiting upstairs to greet us. You’ve come about the contract, no doubt. I read today’s Daily Prophet. Mon Dieu! How those people can twist things!"

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed.

"I assure you, Mr. Potter has certainly not sold his soul to the Prince of All Vampires, and joined the dark side of evil for all time."

"I’m glad to hear that," Albus said.

"I’m not a prince. I’m not even royalty." Henri chuckled until Snape and Dumbledore frowned at him. "I’m sorry. Not funny. Not funny," he corrected himself. "Right this way please."

"Sorry about the mirror," Harry said, limping after Le Clair while keeping a tight grip on Snape’s arm.

"I’ll repair it later," Le Clair shrugged.

"Why do you keep a mirror, if you can’t cast a reflection?" Harry asked, looking back over one shoulder and squinting in the darkness.

"One doesn’t always look in mirror to see one’s self," Henri answered cryptically.

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"This is not what I started out to do," Harry insisted, filling glasses of pumpkin juice for Dumbledore and Snape and himself. He offered some to Raphaella, and she accepted a small amount. Le Clair accepted a cup, and promptly turned it into a viscous red liquid. He pointed his wand at Raphaella’s glass, and it became a liquid not unlike his own but more fluid in nature. Le Clair’s eyes and then his hands went straight to a small white card that was lying face down on the long table.
"What were you doing flying on a broom in a dark hallway indoors?" Snape asked pointedly.

"Raffles was practicing her bat transformations, and Harry was practicing flying maneuvers. I was mediating to make sure no one got hurt," Henri said.

"You were playing Quidditch with a live snitch?" Snape asked. Harry blushed and avoided his gaze.

"Where is Mrs. Snape?" Dumbledore asked, looking around for Illumina.

"It seems she had a sudden, keen desire to go to London," Henri said, turning over a note he had discovered on the table. "I was under the impression she wanted to talk to Professor Snape. But against all good sense, she has gone out for the night," he added. Plainly, he would have preferred she had remained.

"I thought we had Flooed to London," Snape said, glancing around.

"No, this is the other house, Monvert Mansion," Henri replied. "I suppose you two would like an explanation from Mr. Potter about how we’ve come to this, and also about that contract."

"We’d like nothing better," Dumbledore smiled. "Start from the beginning, Harry, and don’t leave anything out."

"I learned indirectly from Malchik that Volkova’s son was missing," Harry began, licking his lips nervously.

"Indirectly?"

"She couldn’t tell me personally, but gave me a sheet of parchment, from which I learned that he was missing, and that Professor Volkova was most distressed."

"Go on," Dumbledore said. Le Clair stood from his chair and walked to the other side of the room, where he shuffled through letters on the ornate table.

"I left the Black Queen’s Tower to go to Volkova’s office, to find something that belonged to her son, so that I might be able to track him."

"You were not supposed to leave the tower," Dumbledore reminded him. Le Clair was studying Potter with a careful eye.

"I wouldn’t have, sir, but it was terribly important. I believed someone’s life was on the line. When I came back to the Tower, Professor Snape was waiting for me. I asked him to help me focus my magic on the piece of parchment and piece of canvas from the picture in Professor Volkova’s office."

"Was Professor Snape able to help you?"

"Yes."

"You saw who had her son, and you came here straight-away?"

"Um, no, not exactly," Harry hedged. "I had a Charms Lesson with Professor Flitwick. After that, I
went back to the piece of canvas and focused myself. I had a vision that someone gave Sergei to Mr. Le Clair at a lavish party."

"You set off in search of a lavish party?" Dumbledore mused.

"I set off in search of Le Clair. I thought that was the most reasonable approach to finding Volkova’s son," Harry almost smiled.

"Did you find your party?"

"The party found me."

"What kind of party? What sort of present?" Dumbledore asked.

"Wedding party," Harry answered. Le Clair came back to the table, and slipped a letter towards Snape. "Wedding present," Harry added, his face falling to misery. Severus glanced at the envelope– Harry could see it was addressed to him in a delicate, feminine handwriting.

"Why would someone give you Volkova’s son as a wedding present?" Dumbledore asked Le Clair.

"Because he got married," Snape provided.

"Congratulations!" Dumbledore beamed. "Who is the fortunate lady?"

Severus tossed the letter up into the air, and made it burst into flames. It landed on the table in a heap of ash, seething black smoke and soot.

"She divorced me to marry you?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. Le Clair sat back in his chair, looking embarrassed and pained.

"Yes," he admitted.

"She divorced me to marry you?" Severus shook his head in disbelief.

"I’m sorry she didn’t tell you in person," Henri murmured. "I realize this is most difficult. Perhaps she feared telling you face to face. She's not good at confrontation."

"You are even less capable of meeting her womanly needs than I am!! Why would she divorce me and marry you?!" Snape boiled to a frenzy. Harry reached over and put a hand on Severus’s arm.

"I realize this is very awkward," Dumbledore interjected. Harry stroked Severus’s arm, giving him a pitiful, puppy-like stare. Dumbledore tensed, waiting for Snape to jerk away and lash out at Harry. To his surprise, Snape endured the caring gesture until he realized Dumbledore was staring, and he drew his arm away from Harry.

"It’s a suitable arrangement with concern to our business venture, nothing more. It involves nothing amorous, nothing carnal," Le Clair defended to Snape. "Well, we did have a traditional priestess, but it was a most unpleasant experience that neither of us wants to repeat."

A grandfather clock in a near-by hallway started to bong loudly. Raphaella jumped up from the table.

"It’s seven already?" she exclaimed.

"Hurry, dear. You’re going to be late for class," Le Clair said.
"Will you Floo over with me?" she pleaded, pawing at his arm with one set of fingers.

"Of course I will. There's no need to be nervous. Madam Juarez is a patient and wonderful teacher. What she values above all else is punctuality. Hurry and get ready."

Raphaella transformed into a bat and fluttered from the room. Dumbledore took off his tall hat and placed it on the table, and smoothed down his beard as if in pensive thought.

"Continue what you were saying, Harry," he commanded.

"Baron Romovski brought Sergei Volkov to the party and presented him to the Le Clairs as a gift. As per our agreement, Mr. Le Clair released Sergei Volkov, and I have stayed here. That’s pretty much all there is to discuss," Potter replied, ducking down as he anticipated the anger brewing in the Headmaster and Potions Master.

"Do you know how Sergei Volkov come to be in the company of Baron Romovski?" Dumbledore asked Le Clair. The vampire paled at the question.

"Yes, sir," he whispered. "It is a matter I should like to discuss with Volkova in person, if she is of a mind to do so."

"I shall approach her on the topic," Albus promised.

"Harry, you skipped the part about where you wrote and signed a contract that seals you to our host, forever," Snape said, his voice dipping down into dark sarcasm once more, where he felt safe and warm. Harry’s mouth turned up on one side.

"You may call it Gryffindor spirit if you wish, sir."

"Perhaps I should call it an act of monumental stupidity."

"You left the tower, you left the SCHOOL, against my wishes, against the conditions of your punishment, and went in search of Le Clair, in spite of the terrible danger you knew you were placing yourself in, being outside the protective space of Hogwarts?" Dumbledore’s voice boomed. "Have you any idea the amount of trouble you are in, Mr. Potter?"

"Something of an idea, sir," Harry admitted with a grim face.

"With that contract, you’ve sealed yourself by means of your word of honor....."

"Yes?" Le Clair waited with baited breath for how Snape had first thought to finish his sentence.

"To someone who may not have your best interests in mind," Severus amended whatever dark words had been on his tongue. "To someone you cannot trust unless you can see both his hands at once."

Le Clair waved both his hands at Harry, one in turn then both at once. Potter stifled a nervous snicker that welled up in spite of the fury billowing off of Snape and Dumbledore both.

"Whatever possessed you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his impatience clear.

"I did what had to be done. Professor Volkova was more upset than I’ve ever seen her. It’s clear how much she loves her son. All I could think about was my....my mother," Harry said, his voice squeaking, "how much she risked, what she sacrificed to save me. I didn’t want the same thing happening all over again to someone else. I knew that I had to talk to Le Clair, to offer him
something he might value above having his enemy’s son. He did seem interested in me, and I thought…"

"No, you didn't think!" Snape shouted. "You apparated to Edinburgh, and threw yourself at Le Clair and into the task in true Gryffindor fashion?"

Snape drew out the bitterness in his words, hoping they hurt. Instead, Harry grinned at him for a full two seconds before dropping his head like a chastised puppy. Harry rubbed the nape of his neck as he fumbled for words, aware suddenly of Dumbledore’s intense scrutiny. A blush rode up Harry’s cheeks as he mustered a glare to toss at Severus.

"For your information, Professor, I didn’t apparate. I rode the train, which you’d have known if you had checked at the train station. Any reasonably-intelligent person would have started there."

"How did you track Mr. Le Clair?" Albus asked as a crackle of fury went through Snape’s dark eyes. Harry was smiling again.

"I used the last emerald, sir."

"The contract was my idea," Henri interjected.

"Let me pretend I’m surprised by that," Snape growled.

"I had planned to let him spend a night or two, and then bring him back to you safe and sound. I am fully prepared to release Mr. Potter from his contact with me. It’s not his responsibility to bargain for Volkova’s son’s life," Le Clair said.

"Actually, it’s far better for Mr. Potter if you both stick firmly to this contact for the meantime," Dumbledore insisted. "I’m having an advocate fine tune the original document, and when he’s done, all we’ll need is for you and Harry to sign the new version, and all will be legal and official."

"That’s a curious turn of events," Le Clair stated, tilting his head in puzzlement. "Why, pray tell?"

"The Minister of Magic has made it his special mission to bring down Mr. Potter at all costs," Severus explained. "Cornelius Fudge swears he will make a formal petition in the courts to have Harry declared a ward of the state and then to have him committed to St. Mungo’s."

"On what grounds?" Le Clair demanded as Harry paled.

"I believe I struck a nerve when he was questioning me about Draco’s whereabouts," Harry whispered to Snape.

"Not the dim bulb you’d like us to believe, are you?" Severus praised, putting his hand on the back of Harry’s neck. He stroked slowly back and forth, and Harry sucked in his bottom lip, nibbling.

"Failure or inability to control his magic," Dumbledore said to Le Clair, watching Harry and Severus, and watching Harry watching Severus.

"Fudge is convinced you’re a danger to yourself and to other wizards," Snape said to Harry. "We’re worried he may contact your aunt about giving up her custody of you."

Potter ducked his chin for a few moments of semi-private panic. "I am screwed, screwed, screwed," Harry whispered, shaking his head.

"Fudge would have to get your aunt’s permission first of course," Dumbledore softened the blow of
Snape’s words.

"Which he’d get in a heartbeat," Harry blurted, his head popping back up. Snape retracted his hand from the nape of Harry’s neck.

"There’s nothing to worry about. Some petty minister," Le Clair said to Harry. "Can I kill him for you?" he offered, a cajoling tease in his words.

"Would you please? That would be ever so kind of you," Harry replied with a half smile.

"Mr. Le Clair, I must ask you not to harm Minister Fudge. It’s very important that he be left to his own devices," Dumbledore insisted.

"To what end?" Henri asked.

Raphaella pounded her way back down the steps from the upper floors. Harry was astounded at the amount of noise she was making, far more than normal.

"Ready!" she said brightly. She embellished the doorway wearing khaki trousers, a neon-orange Hawaiian shirt, and several leis of tropical flowers. Even her feet were ready for sand and sun—she was wearing sandals.

"That’s a very different uniform," Harry commented. "When you said you were headed for class, I assumed—"

"I am," she beamed.

"—vampire training or economics. Why are you wearing that?" he questioned.

"This week, the Hula. Next week, the Tango," she laughed, darting from the room again with an excited laugh.

"She’s going to dance class?" Harry questioned, sounding as if he were vaguely appalled and jealous at once. Le Clair stood from the table and moved to the doorway to follow Raphaella to the Floo.

"She wanted to take up her studies again, and I encouraged her to sign up for something fun this term. Nothing serious this go-round. She’s got years and years to study economics. The instructor is an old friend of mine. She's been twenty nine for decades," Henri said with a wink at Harry. "We have the course schedule around here somewhere. Perhaps we should enroll you in something entertaining as well. You could do with a bit of fun, Mr. Potter."

"I can’t believe you’re taking a dancing class!" Harry shouted towards the direction Raphaella had departed. Her only reply was a loud laugh which echoed back at him.

Once the vampires were gone, Snape came to life.

"Get up, Potter. We’re leaving," Severus announced, seizing the boy’s arm.
"Sir?" Harry questioned. Dumbledore wasn’t moving.

"We don’t know how long he’ll be gone, and we have to move fast," Snape said.

"I’m not leaving," Harry said, sitting tight in his chair. "I gave my word, and I won’t go back on it."

Dumbledore hadn’t moved yet. He was watching Harry closely, testing him, to be sure, as much as Le Clair was testing him by giving him this out.

"Don’t be stupid, Harry," Severus said, scooting his chair back for him and yanking him to his feet.

"Severus, stop it," Potter threatened.

"Severus, calm down," Albus said.

"We have to go! We have to go now!" Snape shouted. Harry began to struggle, and Snape held on tighter.

"While Harry is under Le Clair’s protection, Fudge cannot touch him," Dumbledore said, rising from his chair and slowly putting on his hat. "While Harry is here with Le Clair, Fudge won’t be able to come near him. Kindly let go of Mr. Potter, Severus."

"Before Mr. Potter curses your balls off," Harry said, his eyes narrowed green slits. It was going to take a lot more than that to dissuade Snape, however.

"You can’t mean you intend to leave him here!" Severus barked at the Headmaster.

"I most certainly do intend to leave him here if he wishes to stay," Dumbledore replied. Severus went black with rage and stiffened in place.

"Thank you for understanding, sir," Harry bowed to the Headmaster.

"Harry, I will be back as soon as the advocate is finished drawing up a proper contract. You will do whatever Mr. Le Clair tells you to do. You will not, under any circumstances, leave this estate alone," Albus said to Harry.

"Understood, sir."

"As soon as I know the lengths to which Minister Fudge is willing to go to have you placed in St. Mungo’s, I will do my very best to foil his plans. You must do your best to stay out of Fudge’s path, if at all possible."

"Of course, Professor," Harry quickly agreed. Snape was holding onto Harry’s arm, unwilling to let go. "Don’t worry. I’ll be all right," Harry turned and whispered. Severus was twitching with unexpressed fury and fear.

"Don’t go to Bucharest," he pleaded.

"I wasn’t planning on it," Harry replied, confused.

"In the meantime, Harry, we would like a tour of the house, in order to assure Severus and myself that you will be safe here. If you could lead the way?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Absolutely, sir. I have to warn you, I haven’t been in every room. I’m not sure anyone here has. I’m starting to suspect the rooms rotate too. The bathroom has moved one room down the hallway four times since last night. If that’s true, the rooms move clock-wise."
"How curious," Albus commented.

"We can’t go in Raffles’ room either. She booby-trapped it against entry."

"Why did she booby-trap her room?" Dumbledore asked.

"I transfigured her furniture into circus animals, and she failed to see the humor in it, to say nothing of the skill it took!"

"Why did you----?" Snape started to ask.

"She started it!" Harry blurted. "She stuffed fairies down my shirt!"

"Why did she stuff fairies down your shirt?"

"No good reason!"

"What did you do to her?" Dumbledore pressed, having had ample enough years with Harry to realize there was more to the story.

"I was practicing spells from Le Clair’s grimoire. He gave me one of his very first ones to read."

"Yes?"

"Who knew girls were so sensitive about their hair?" Harry laughed, shrugging. "It grew back overnight. Nothing to worry about."

"Come along." Dumbledore murmured, frowning.

"You should see the bite marks those fairies left on me trying to get back out again," Harry fussed as he led them upstairs.

"How terrible," Dumbledore started to smile.

"Things got out of hand after that. Raffles put me under a Vulgato spell, and of course I had to retaliate."

"Is it safe to leave you two alone together?" Snape worried.

"Oh, yeah, perfectly," Harry grinned back at him.
In which Dumbledore and Le Clair discuss the contract

"Twenty six pages?" Le Clair scoffed, flipping them end over end to examine them at random. "That's what advocates are good for. He must have been up all night for two days. From one concise paragraph, a straight line from point A to point B, your lawyer has produced twenty six pages of meandering, dark pathways which lead in tangents no one would ever need pursue in this situation."

"Mr. Honeydew felt it was his job to extrapolate on every conceivable possibility that might arise," Professor Dumbledore replied. "Nothing should be left to chance."

"Page Eighteen, the non-transference clause– it has to go," Le Clair said, turning to the passage in question.

"Why?" Dumbledore asked. "I have been told it’s rather a standard passage in contracts such as this."

"Your hero’s life may depend on my ability to transfer this contract to my wife or my ward in the event that I meet my demise before you are ready to do battle in court against Minister Fudge."

"Time appears to be on your side, Mr. Le Clair."

"On the contrary. The older I become, the more likely I am to be killed. I am a finite creature, in spite of what you might have heard. If I expire before the contract, your minister would be able to make another attempt at committing Mr. Potter. I’m not planning on expiring, but as it is, I’m a hunted man. One never knows which vampire hunter is waiting around the next corner."

"There’s no need to be difficult."

"I’m looking out for Mr. Potter."

"You don’t believe I am?"

"Well, if we’re being perfectly frank with one another, Headmaster, I’d say you more often than not place more value in what Mr. Potter might be able to do for you rather than solely in Mr. Potter, the person."

"On what do you base this inaccurate assessment of me?"

"I am a student of human nature– it’s been the key to my long survival. I had a long talk with Mr. Potter when I returned the other night. He never said anything negative about you, except perhaps his suspicion that you haven’t been entirely honest with him about the dire situation with Mr. Dark Wizard Voldemort. He’s a vulnerable boy, emotionally and psychologically. He feels his only worth to you is as a wizard soldier. The Boy Who Lived. Rubbish."

"It is not without good reason that I didn’t tell him everything at once," Dumbledore said sadly and
I understand that the clause is included because you fear I might pass Mr. Potter around to my friends and acquaintances as a trinket of amusement. Nothing could be further from my intentions," Le Clair said, marking through the passage in question with his quill. "No. What I believe is that for whatever reason, Mr. Potter needs something from me, or why else would the fates have placed us in each other’s paths? I am to serve a purpose to him, or he is to serve a purpose to me. Either way, I want to know that if I come to harm, he will be protected."

"I really would rather leave it in, unless you can give me a compelling reason otherwise."

"Let me set your mind at ease. You have no need to worry. Illumina would never see Harry come to harm either, and she is the one who would assume responsibility for him in the event of my death. She’s fond of the boy in her own way. Raffles may tease him and throw curses at him, but I suspect he fills the void she feels after being separated from her younger siblings, of whom she was exceptionally fond."

"As you wish," Dumbledore agreed very reluctantly.

"Raffles heard him whimpering in his sleep the other night, and tip-toed past his room every hour afterwards to check on him. It was very endearing. If you could have seen her fussing over him in the kitchen this evening, teaching him how to make 'pain perdu', it would have brought tears to your eyes."

"Harry could do with some mothering," Dumbledore put in. He had thought the place smelled a bit like burnt bread and maple syrup but couldn’t place why.

"I have to say that I feel there are passages in this version of the contract that glow with mistrust," Le Clair muttered.

"In the spirit of being frank with one another, you cannot pretend you’ve always had the purest of motivations where Mr. Potter is concerned."

"Admittedly, yes. But things have happened in my life since Halloween. Happy things. You’ll find I’ve calmed somewhat. How could you believe I would have to be ordered to feed and house, to protect and educate him? It’s insulting. Did you think I planned to chain him up in the basement and toss him raw soup bones to gnaw on?"

"The fear had crossed my mind, with a thousand others, much worse," Dumbledore glared at the vampire.

"What he needs is a holiday from all the responsibilities you’ve placed on him. He doesn’t know how to be himself. He hardly knows how to have fun beyond straddling a broom and whisking around the stratosphere. He needs time to be a child before you can make him into a man, let alone into the hero of the wizarding world. If you give me the time I need, I will give you that hero and more."

"Have you had much experience shaping heroes?" Dumbledore prodded.

"As a matter of fact, when I was in the military, I used to train the new recruits. I took in boys and turned out men, men who fought battles and won wars from Venice to Moscow, from London to Constantinople, Istanbul," he corrected himself.

"I’m not asking you to turn him into a solider. I merely want you to keep him safe within the confines of this ill-advised contract you two have signed, until I can figure out what Fudge is up to
"I will lay down my life to protect him," Le Clair purred, half in jest but half in truth. He put a hand over his heart, and then set the contract down on the table. He turned to stare out into the moon-lit gardens, where Harry was walking around with Hermione. "Who is this young woman you brought with you?"

"A school friend of Harry’s. She came along to speak with him at my request."

"Why does he seem agitated in her presence?"

"He’s not agitated. Animated, perhaps," Dumbledore shrugged.

"Are they close?"

"Friends since first year."

"That’s a good sign."

"Mr. Weasley, Harry’s other best friend is serving a detention tonight, or I would have brought him along as well."

"Where do I sign this foul document?" Le Clair asked, turning back to the table. Dumbledore flipped to the last page and pointed to a particular line. "How is your Mr. Snape holding up? I expected you to bring him as Mr. Potter’s guard. Frankly, I’m stunned you could keep him away."

"Severus has other students who need his attention nearly as much as Harry does. I felt he should stay at Hogwarts."

"You don’t have to put on a facade for me. I saw the look on your face. Let’s be honest with one another. You’re keeping them apart because you don’t approve of their rapport."

"I won’t pretend I understand what is going on between them. Though I have questioned Severus, he hasn’t been forth coming," Dumbledore admitted. "Whatever is between them, it can only come to ruin."

"Is this for you to decide?"

"It most assuredly is," Dumbledore retorted, "especially when Mr. Potter is still so young. The boy has had a rough year. He’s emotionally vulnerable. I’m shocked that Severus would even consider venturing down such paths with him."

Dumbledore’s voice trailed off as he shook his head. When he thought about how many hours he had spent raking Severus over the coals since what had happened here in this very house, this very room, when Harry had thrown himself into Snape’s arms, it made his blood pressure shoot through the roof. They had actually sat side by side and STROKED each other’s arms in turn. What about that greeting? It boggled Albus’s mind, not an easy task. Had Dumbledore been blind to what was going on right under his very nose? How long exactly had this been going on, whatever this was? Snape had been his usual obdurate self when questioned. Albus felt as if he had been talking to a pillar of stone. Severus insisted that he and Harry had finally reached an amiable arrangement, a truce between themselves, and Albus should be glad of it. Other than that, he would say no more. No amount of prods or threats would provoke Severus out of his story.

"Illumina is in London again, avoiding Professor Snape in case he should come with you. I do apologize for that. Apparently he makes her queasy with fear," Le Clair was talking, and
Dumbledore nodded along.

"It’s more likely that it’s guilt she’s feeling, I’m afraid."

"Yes, perhaps. All in all, though, he took the news of our marriage better than I expected."

"I suppose you weren’t expecting much."

"There, you have my signature. Shall we ask Mr. Potter in to sign as well?"

"Before we do that, I wanted to talk to you about Voldemort, more to the point, how you’ve been taunting him."

"Did he resurface from Thorn Vail Manor yet?" Le Clair smirked.

"Yes. He was spotted in Hogsmeade last night. Why do you chuckle?"

"Not over your discomfort. No. I do so long to have seen Marguerite’s face when he burst out of the pantry at her, that’s all," Henri mused. "My ex-wife. It was not an amicable split, but you would think she’d get over the disappointment of not having succeeded in killing me. It’s been centuries, after all."

"Voldemort in Hogsmeade is no laughing matter. He burned half the town looking for Mr. Potter."

"What incredibly bad manners he has!"

"He was informed that Harry went to the house in Hogsmeade last night."

"Yes, well, Mr. Potter wanted to see if he could find things in the house that belonged to Remus Lupin. The wards were broken again. Their home had been looted several times over, desecrated, vandalized."

"You admit that you took Harry to Hogsmeade without a protective escort?"

"We went in the middle of the night, and I am certainly capable of protecting him for a one-hour jaunt across Scotland. I had assumed no one would be about who would see us. The only light we saw on was that of the book-seller across the street."

"You assumed incorrectly. Someone else must have been about. I must ask you please, for the love of all that is holy, don’t go traipsing around with Harry in tow. You must stop teasing Voldemort. It infuriates him, drives him to do rash things in order to get his hands on the boy. Innocent people are getting hurt."

"Innocent people don’t concern me," Le Clair said crossly. "What Harry needs— that’s what concerns me. He was very upset at the condition of the house. What meager possessions he had are all gone, stolen by souvenir seekers. How could you not keep a proper watch on his home?"

"We’ve tried several times to keep his house in Hogsmeade protected. None of the wards we put in place last more than a week before they disintegrate. I don’t have the manpower to guard an empty house. Our goal is better served by putting what resources we have where they are most needed. It’s more important to guard Harry than to guard that stupid house."

"Illumina keeps insisting we must go to Venice to be blessed by her grandmother. Can I safely assume you don’t want me to take Mr. Potter out of the country?"

"I won’t say no, but I would prefer you stay as close to home as possible."
"Illumina has business in Prague and Bologna next week. I assume she’ll want to go to Venice from there, with or without me. Concerning the boy’s house, I should like to take measures of my own."

"What measures are these?"

"Would it be considered gauche if I were to level all the establishments on the block and build him a proper house and garden, a sanctuary where he can retreat when he’s in need of comfort?"

"I doubt the other shop and home owners would be amused with your plans, nor their patrons either."

"Well, if that Voldemort fellow burned half the place away, the second time it’s burned in two or three months if I’m not mistaken, perhaps a few of them might be willing to sell," Le Clair said.

"Harry doesn’t have the money to buy up half of Hogsmeade, and even if he did, I believe this is an ill-advised plan."

"I have the money, and I think it’s a terrific plan."

"Have you talked with Harry about this?"

"No."

"Before you do anything rash, talk to him. I’m sure a proper house and garden sanctuary are the last things on his mind. You mustn’t spoil him to win his affection."

"He’s willing to risk body and soul for you, anything if only you will love him just enough. If he’s going to die trying to kill your Mr. Dark Wizard for you, the least you damned people could do is build the boy a safe and decent house to call his own."

"Have you talked with Doctor McGonagall?" Dumbledore asked impatiently.

"Who?"

"Harry is supposed to meet with her twice a month to talk."

"Talk about what?"

"Trying to work through his feelings about what happened with Mr. Malfoy."

"Ah. I understand. She’s a mental health healer. No, I have not talked with Doctor McGonagall. I have talked repeatedly with Professor McGonagall about his schoolwork, and she also enquired if I had spoken with Doctor McGonagall. If it’s so bloody important that Mr. Potter talks to Doctor McGonagall, tell her to Floo herself over here today."

"It’s actually more important that Harry goes to see her at her office."

"Why?"

"Because, it will give him an opportunity to be in a neutral environment."

"What rot."

"It’s in the contract. You must uphold your end of the agreement by seeing that Harry meets with Doctor McGonagall a minimum of twice a month."
"I see you brought schoolwork for him," Henri said gruffly as he nodded towards the stack of books on the dining hall table. "Uh oh. Here they come."

"Hedwig returned with this for you, Professor Dumbledore, sir," Harry said, hurrying over to give Albus a thick parchment envelope. No doubt Harry had recognized the hand writing on the paper belonged to Professor McGonagall. Dumbledore opened the seal, and an inside note popped out. He lifted the second note with one hand while holding the first letter aloft in order to read the small words inside.

"McGonagall has had a note from your Aunt Petunia," Dumbledore revealed.

"What did she say?" Hermione questioned.

"'Give the freak to Fudge, lock him up, lose the key’?" Harry pondered. Dumbledore frowned at Harry, and continued reading.

"Yes. It seems Minister Fudge did visit her concerning your guardianship."

"What did she say?" Hermione worried.

"She is currently too busy to be concerned with you because she is has more important matters on her mind," Dumbledore told Harry, who exhaled and began to breathe again. Potter could try to hide his nervousness all he wanted, but it was evident he was worried. "She's been redoing the entire back garden. Time to shake off the dead leaves and begin anew. Also, it appears your uncle is in the hospital."

"Oh," Harry said softly. "What happened? What’s wrong?"

"He had a terrible fall down a flight of steps at home."

Harry gave Henri a darting glance, and Le Clair stood up from the table, leafing through the books that Dumbledore had brought. The vampire whistled nonchalantly, and Harry grew more suspicious.

"She wants to know where you were last night. The neighbors claim they saw strange people on the street," Dumbledore said as he closed the outer letter.

"Luckily you have an alibi, Mr. Potter. We were in Hogsmeade," Le Clair said.

"Yes, but not all night," Harry said.

"I brought you straight back here when we finished in Hogsmeade. We met Raphaella as she returned from class at midnight. You remained up for an hour or two with Illumina, sorting through what few things you could find at the house."

"Where were you while he was doing this?" Dumbledore wanted to know.

"I went out to meet a friend."

"You left Harry here and went out alone?"

"Illumina and Raphaella were here with him. I could have taken Mr. Potter along, but I got the distinct impression you would prefer that I not feed in front of the boy. Did Mr. Dursley have bite marks? Blood loss? Missing limbs?"

"No."
"Then it wasn’t me, was it? I hardly ever take the time to push people down the stairs and break their legs if I’ve already drained them of their blood," Le Clair said tartly. "This man is roughly the size of a tug boat. Perhaps he lost his way in the fog."

"Yes, perhaps," Albus murmured as Harry and Hermione both struggled to control snickering. Dumbledore allowed a smile as well.

"She didn’t sign you away, Harry. I’m surprised at her," Hermione said, squeezing his hand in hers.

"You ain’t the only one," Harry replied. Dumbledore and Le Clair cringed in unison at his use of slang.

"Mr. Potter, you appear to have a lot of reading to do. What shall we start with?" Le Clair pressed.

"Harry should first read this contract and sign it. Then I would like a few words alone with him," Dumbledore said, putting a hand on Harry’s arm.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, exchanging an uncomfortable look with Hermione.
Le Clair opened the front door around five, tiptoeing inside. He deposited car keys in the bowl on the table, and turned around as he adjusted the collar of the cloak he wore. He encountered a skinny form seated on the stairs, wearing goggles and a friendly smile.

"What scandalous hours you keep," Harry teased.

"Are you still awake?" Henri asked.

"Afraid so," Harry replied.

"You should have been in bed hours ago," Henri chided, yawning. Harry had been asleep for a short time, but dreams about Lucius had propelled him to a terrified wakefulness he wasn’t likely to overcome for many days, let alone hours. "Is your Headmaster still here?" Le Clair asked. If he suspected the reason why Harry was awake so early, he apparently wasn’t going to make a fuss about the matter.

"No, Professor Dumbledore and Hermione returned to Hogwarts. How far is fifty paces, give or take, would you say?"

"Why?" Le Clair mused, taking another step across the floor. Harry jumped to his feet eagerly.

"I’m not supposed to get more than fifty paces from you. Where did you go?" Harry asked.

"To feed. To meet a friend."

"Is that a love bite on your neck?" Harry asked.

"I should have known better than to teach you a night-vision spell," Henri lamented, taking out his wand.

"Are paces like meters? Whose paces are we to measure to determine?" Harry asked. "You’ve got longer legs, and so your paces would be further than mine."

"You might be taking the Headmaster’s words too literally. He wants to make sure you don’t do anything rash like flee to another time zone or something."

"I gave you my word that I won’t flee. You released Sergei Volkov, and I will keep my word to remain with you. I admit I’m a bit fuzzy about the time frame clause that they put in the new contract. Does it make sense to you?" Harry said.
"Not really. I suppose if neither you nor I fuss about the time frame, then no one else will have grounds to either."

"A mutually-acceptable time-span to be decided on by both parties or their legal representatives. Would that be Aunt Petunia or Remy?"

"Your aunt, unless she signs you over to the state, or Mr. Lupin, if you manage to find him and convince the state to allow him custody of you. It’s not so long until you will be of age– a few months, yes? By that point, these arguments about protective custody of your person will become, well, pointless. Perhaps we should consult your advocates and ask them to explain in more detail?"

"Have you ever had an advocate in the past?"

"Yes, and he was very delicious. Hold still," Le Clair yawned, pointing his wand at Harry. A burst of radiant energy glowed around Harry, slowly dissipating into the air. "There. Ça suffit." (an #1)

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"A spell," Le Clair said, tucking away his wand. "I’m keeping up with the contract and all its myriad of promises."

"What kind of spell was it?"

"The less you know, the better."

"Wait. Stop. I’m sorry. No. You don’t put a spell on me and not tell me what you did," Harry frowned, taking out his wand. "You didn’t even ask first."

"What are you going to do about it?" Le Clair grinned. Harry’s mouth hung open, as if he’d been stung. He put away his wand, sulking.

"It was rude, very rude," Harry protested. "What did you do to me?"

"Relax, Mr. Potter. It’s a mirror spell- a seeing-eye spell."

"A what? What did you do to me?" he gasped.

"You’re perfectly fine. I can now watch you from my looking glass in the hallway. I learned the spell from a very ancient and wise mentor of mine some years ago."

"What sort of wizard would want to go around spying on people?" Harry blanched. He was mentally cataloging everyone he knew that had a large ornate mirror in their office, in their quarters, in their rooms. Severus. Professor McGonagall. Dumbledore had one. Minister Fudge. Doctor McGonagall. Doctor Mesarik had one too for that matter. Were they all spying on him?

"I will use the mirror spell only if I can’t find you and need to know you’re not in danger."

"It’s rude to spring a spell on me without telling me what you’re doing," Harry frowned, feeling powerless and weak in the knees suddenly.

"Perfectly harmless spell," Henri promised.

"Don’t ever do it again without my permission." Harry's voice caught in his throat, a tangle of hurt.

"It’s a completely harmless spell, and I will not abuse it, I promise you," Henri said, scanning Harry's face and cataloguing the emotions he saw there. "I apologize. I did not mean to startle you,
or make you uneasy."

Harry nodded, looking awkwardly away. He didn't like feeling weak in the knees and vulnerable, but he liked even less than Le Clair could read his every thought and feeling on his face. Le Clair gave a stiff bow, a departure, and started up the steps.

Harry trailed behind Henri closely. A salty-sweet smell emanated from his cloak as he brushed near the young man. Two different colognes lingered in the air as well, one of them unfamiliar to Potter’s nose. Harry wanted to put a hand on Le Clair and find out where he had been for so many hours.

"Why did you leave while I was talking to Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

"Your Headmaster wanted to question you about how I’m treating you, and I wanted you to be able to tell him the truth," Le Clair said. It was beginning to dawn on him that the boy was anxious for company.

"He must not believe I would tell the truth. He made me drink Veritaserum, only a drop or two. I wasn’t supposed to know it was in the pumpkin juice. Hermione warned me about it when we were talking in the garden."

"She warned you ahead of time?"

"In case I should have anything to reveal," Harry nodded. "She was coaching me how to tell the truth without telling the real truth."

"You and she are close?"

"Not close like you’re asking close. We’re friends, that’s all. Like you and Illumina are. Hermione warned me because she cares."

"Really? You’re good friends?"

"Yes. Believe we’ve covered that.‖ Harry’s brow furrowed with annoyance.

"My advice is to marry her at once. It could be the best decision you ever make."

"What?‖ Harry goggled at him. "Ew. No. I love Hermione, but she would drive me barking mad ordering me around all the time. Why did you leave?"

"Because the Headmaster wanted to talk to you alone. Believe we covered that too. He wanted to make sure I’m not hurting you. Forgive him his harsh tactics– Veritaserum in the pumpkin juice. Even if Hermione did not tell you, you should have suspected something like that. Regardless, Dumbledore does care about you very strongly."

"I know he does. He left you a copy of the newly-revised contract."

"I am speechless with joy."

"I must know. Did you go to Little Whinging and push Uncle Vernon down the stairs?‖ Harry asked. "You were angry after I told you about how he treated me when I was growing up, but that’s not why I told you, to make you angry, and I really don’t want you to go around beating people up because of how they’ve treated me. I'm not going to tell you anything personal if you're going to go around roughing people up. Vernon Dursley is a rotten, horrible sod, but you can’t go around pushing people down the stairs and stuff like that. It’s not right."
"You don’t believe in mincing words, do you? I admire that. No, I did not push your uncle down the stairs. There isn’t a flight of stairs long enough for the push he deserves,” Le Clair barked.

"How did you know what he looks like then? Have you ever seen him before?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"We did a blood drive in their neighborhood a few months ago. Back in October, I believe. He is the sort who would stick in one’s mind."

"Raffles was serious about the blood drives? I thought she was pulling my leg."

Le Clair pondered one door handle, and shook his head, moving to the next one in the line of rooms in the hallway Harry had followed him into.

"Why do the rooms move like that?" Harry asked, having had his suspicions confirmed finally.

"Monvert was designed by a crazed clock-maker."

"Why did you buy a crazy house?"

"It amuses me, keeps me on my toes. I’m told that in daylight, it has a spectacular view of the village in the valley."

"What village? There’s a village out there?" Harry spun to look at windows behind him in the hallway. There were faint lights far in the distance, if one squinted. "Do you actually do blood drives among the Muggles?"

"Yes. You’d be surprised how much less stressful it is for both parties when you don’t have to hunt for your food. Blood drives are a simple solution. We offer gifts and prizes in exchange for donations, and what we don’t consume, we allow the hospitals and clinics to keep."

"That’s kinda lazy, isn’t it? It’s very nearly cheating," Harry laughed.

"It’s a perfect solution to an age-old problem. The blood is collected and screened to avoid the problems like my taste of you caused. Nobody gets hurt. There’s no screaming and kicking, and flailing about. No one tries to poke you with stakes or crucifixes. You don’t have to use up energy with charisma spells. You don’t even have to break a sweat. All that’s required is a good relationship with an understanding and skilled phlebotomist, one of our own might I add."

"But you didn’t go to a blood drive tonight, did you?"

"No. I met a friend."

"A friend who is just your type?"

"Indeed," Henri purred.

"Is it serious? How long have you been seeing this friend?"

"I try not to get too involved with my food."

"But you were anxious to see him tonight? You were anxious when you left."
Harry leaned closer to Le Clair, reaching for his arm. Henri arched back against the doorway, going into the room and putting the wood between himself and Harry. The truth of it was that if Henri hadn’t been able to meet with his particular friend tonight, he was determined to go out and find someone, anyone, and fuck him to a state of delirium he wouldn’t soon forget. Anything to relieve the aching desires that were consuming him. Being around Harry night and day had been having the most embarrassing sort of unexpected effect on Le Clair— that of resurrecting a libido that had been practically dormant since the death of his beloved companion Radu. Once when Henri dreamed, it was Radu’s deep brown eyes and wonderful olive skin that haunted him, made his hands wander, made his heart race. Now emerald eyes and porcelain skin followed him to sleep and remained with him when he woke up. This living incarnation of mortal temptation trailed after him like a puppy, as if completely unaware of the power of his physical presence.

"That’s enough of that, Mr. Potter," Le Clair said as he peered out through the spare inches where the door wasn’t entirely closed. "It’s not nice to use your powers on people without asking."

"Oh? I’ll keep that in mind," Harry smiled.

"Yes, I can appreciate irony as much as the next fellow, but I’m really quite tired at the moment."

"I don’t doubt that. You smell like sex," Harry told him with a pert, quirky smile that startled and annoyed Le Clair.

"There’s more than one way to make your prey feel secure with you. I’ve found that sex can open many doors."

"Veins as well, it would seem. Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with your food?"

"I’m bone tired, and you’re being far too familiar, young man," Le Clair said, pointing one long finger at Harry. "I need a shower. You need to go to bed. Is Illumina back from London yet?"

"She came home and went in her room. She’s determined to go to Venice, it seems. She was packing, and she was throwing up. Raffles went in her room to check on her. Said she’s going to be fine."

"Where is Raffles now?"

"Left to meet with a friend." Harry motioned towards the window. "She put a shocking spell on the front door knob to keep me inside. I was going to go out through the windows, but it seems someone already thought of that possibility and had them covered with bars. I thought about the apparition spell, but what if I messed it up? I could get stuck in a wall somewhere."

"The bars are not to keep you in, but to keep others out," Le Clair promised. "I will check on Illumina before I turn in. I suggest you do the same."

"Talk to Illumina, or turn in?"

"Turn in."

"Turn into what?"

"A sleeping boy."

"I don’t want to sleep. I’m not tired. I’m a bit bored, really."

"Do something constructive with those piles of schoolwork that were sent to you," Le Clair
suggested.

"I don’t want to do homework," Harry whined.


"I feel like a ride on my broom. Can I go outside?"

"Yes, you may. The wards will protect you. Don’t go beyond the borders of the estate. You’ll be able to see the boundaries from the air. You may even be able to see the village. Perhaps in the daylight, I may take you down for a look."

"You’ll take me out in daylight?? How?"

"I own more than one ensemble that is specifically for that purpose," Henri bragged. "They cover the face and hands and body, like a Muslim woman’s veil. I added a mask. But you may not go down to the village tonight. Understand?"

"Yes!" Harry exclaimed, snapping his goggles back on.

"Repeat after me: I will not go beyond the borders of the estate," Henri said, taking one of Harry’s hands.

"I will not go beyond the borders of the estate," Harry said.

"Under threat of pain and torture."

"Under threat of pain and torture," Harry echoed. He caught his breath as a fraction of a vision washed over him:

Henri was watching a tall, athletic man with dirty-blond hair and green eyes, and a vaguely familiar face. They were in a room filled with laughing, drinking, partying people. It was an inn or a bar. The young man spun to put on his cloak (a wizard then?). His movements were a poem in their own right. He gave Le Clair a friendly wave good night.

"Uh oh," Le Clair mumbled, dropping Harry’s hand. That wave had been only the beginning of the evening, as it turned out. Le Clair had followed Nico and begged him to spend a few hours more, in some place more private, naked, and horizontal.

"Who was that?" Harry gasped.

"The less you know, the better," Henri said, concerned.

"I’ve seen him before somewhere," Harry puzzled.

"I doubt that," Le Clair smiled.

"No. I’m sure I’ve seen him," Harry insisted.

"I must remember not to touch you," Henri said, then gave a small mocking laugh. "Convincing proof there is a God, and He hates me. Good night, Mr. Potter."

"Night," Harry beamed, rushing away.

After visiting Illumina’s room, only to receive a gruff ‘go away’ Henri headed back into his own rooms. As he undressed and walked towards the shower, Le Clair crossed by windows and could
make out Harry’s figure on a broom as it rushed around and around the perimeter of the estate grounds, first clockwise, then counter-clock-wise as the sun began to tickle the horizon. Potter was patrolling the area. How very adorable. Shower completed, Le Clair shaded his room, climbed into bed, and waited for the sounds he knew would come soon– Harry and Raphaella’ voices as they rose the stairs in tandem.

"Shhhh. You’ll wake everyone," Raffles warned him.

"Cutting things mighty close, weren’t you?" Harry asked. "Another thirty seconds, and it will officially be dawn out there."

"I took a heavy cloak in case."

"Were you weaving as you fluttered in? I could swear I saw you weaving."

"I was not weaving."

"I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to report you for flying while under the influence," Harry tormented. "Even vampires have traffic rules."

"Pretty pretty Potter boy, please shut up."

"Whew! What were you drinking? Petrol?"

Harry’s voice was muffled, and there was a thumping noise as the two proceeded ahead down the hallway.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" Harry echoed.

"Shhhh!" Raffles hissed.

"GBH! GBH!" Harry teased. His calls became muffled again. Le Clair smiled to himself and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

GBH - Grievous Bodily Harm
Dear Hermione,

Thank you for sending me the book on conduit spells, and the book on Ancient Runes. Curiously, I received your letter by owl today but the books by post yesterday. I can only assume that Hedwig was tampered with, because she was in a particularly foul mood. Please do not include any information in future letters that isn’t meant to be read by others. I will practice sending you things without the benefit of owls. If you could ask Ron to keep the end of my bed cleaned off in Gryffindor Tower, I will try to place things there for you.

Please impress upon Ron that he must remain where he is, safe at Hogwarts. I know because you are not currently speaking to him this might prove tricky, but try nonetheless please thank you. There’s nothing Voldemort would like better than to torture my friends in lieu of getting his hands on me, evidenced by our ever-so-public discussion with Malfoy Fils. Do not let Ron come here and try to rescue me. Take Professor Volkova’s vampire hunting tools back to her at once. I do not need nor do I wish to be rescued. I am not in danger staying with Le Clair. He keeps me on a very short leash. Not literally, of course. Please assure Ron that Le Clair is not trying to have sex with me. Ron is very concerned about that, if his letter is any indication. Le Clair has a boyfriend, it would seem. I have no confirmation, but I am convinced of it. The minute our recent house guests left, Le Clair disappeared to go see him. Henri has been out of the house nearly every night to visit him, and comes back all cheerful and perky and grinning, smelling like someone else’s cologne, often bearing love bites and sighing happily at odd moments.

Illumina was going to go to Venice, but for inexplicable reasons, her family came here instead. (our recent guests) Her extended family is huge! One of her male cousins shared my room because there weren’t enough rooms to go around. He hardly slept at all– a very nervous fellow. Her grandmother kept pinching my side and tisking about how thin I am. You should have seen the meals she cooked! Directed to be cooked, that is, because she is nearly blind. Everyone seemed to like Henri, which I suppose was a relief for him. Henri and Illumina’s father and brothers spent several nights getting plastered on expensive Italian wines. I think that means they’re friends now. Raffles was nearly engaged off to one of Illumina’s young cousins, and has a standing offer if she changes her mind, which I’m concerned she might, because he was a great-looking bloke.

I do hope Professor Volkova’s mood has improved since the safe return of her son and the departure of the representative from the Deusredeti. I plan to send her a letter too. Le Clair would very much like to meet with Professor Volkova to discuss what happened with her son. If you have any influence on her, could you talk to her about it?

Mrs. Le Clair has been ill all morning, for some time, come to that. She’s had her head in the toilet more often than not, and spends a considerable amount of time in her room with the curtains drawn and the door closed. She’s got business in Prague and Bologna, which she postponed from this week, but I don’t know if she’s well enough to travel. Raffles says that she is going to be fine, but that’s all she says, while chuckling to herself. Perhaps Illumina ate someone who disagreed with
her. I can’t tell, because she’s got a permanent blocking spell set up around herself, in order to prevent me from reading anything off of her or her things with my second sight. She’s been helping me with the classwork that Professor Trelawney sent, but I have to say that she doesn’t have much patience as a teacher. I couldn’t get a couple of the sensory spells to work, and she nearly took my head off in anger.

I should warn you that Raffles nicked the blue book out of my room. She read all the stories, and would like to write one too. I suspect it will entail a vampire who is the lead singer of a goth rock band who seduces naive young women to their doom. Update– she is now beating me with her shoes for tonight’s dance class. Luckily, they are soft-soled.

I hope you are not too bored without me in Gryffindor Tower. Please take care of yourself. Don’t do anything risky. Stay at Hogwarts where you are safe. Give everyone a big hug from me.

Love from
Harry

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Dear Harry,

How long did it take you to figure out to dip the letter in water to read it? Just curious. I supposed that the more I repeated how ‘on fire’ I was for you, you would eventually understand what to do to get the invisible ink to appear. Your letters appeared, completely unharmed and perfectly whole. Seamus nearly peed his kilt. If I were to leave letters there on the end of your bed, would you be able to pick them up? Say at a pre-arranged time of day, check the bed for letters? I would like to suggest 8 pm if that works for you.

It seems you were correct to suspect that Hedwig was delayed and my last message tampered with. Fudge, naturally. He has been raising a stink in the ministry, using his influence and sending all these declarations through the court system to have you declared a ward of the state. He does not have much support yet, but Dumbledore fears his support could begin to grow because he keeps stressing that he only wants what is best for you. He is also having all mail to and from the school monitored for ‘dangerous and incendiary discussion of the Potter Situation’. I do so hope you will forgive me for sending this to you under the guise of a whisper. I was certain you would recognize passages from ‘Dark Night in Ravenna’ and understand that while I do love you, it is not in the terms previously pervasively described.

You have the backing of the Wizengamot against Fudge, which goes a long way. Dumbledore has had several private meetings this week with various members and before the entire assembly. As Hooch was overheard saying to Snape, Albus has kissed more bottom than Filch’s favorite punishment paddle.

You should also know that the Dark Force Defense League has been having every student at the school, several shopkeepers in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, and possibly everyone in the wizarding world that you’ve had contact with questioned about you, in connection with these declarations that Fudge is pushing through the courts. Manglebranch and Nimblewyck have been making the rounds at Hogwarts so much that I believe they may qualify for earned school credit.

The Daily Prophet reports, and I’m sure you have read, that your aunt is close to signing over custody of you to the state, meaning that if you are released from your contract with Mr. Le Clair, you would be at the mercy of Minister Fudge. I’m so sorry your aunt is being this way. Let’s just hope your uncle is ill enough that she will concentrate on him and ignore you for a few more weeks. I’ve heard she’s also tearing out the gardens in the backyard and replanting the entire thing. The neighbors are in an uproar, so McGonagall reported.
Raffles may of course write a story in the blue book, but I suggest you save it and we share it at another time. You would not wish the blue book to fall into the wrong hands, and have your tale ‘Conjugation’ printed up in the Daily Prophet. Although I dare say ‘Vegetable Intentions’ might draw more than a bit of humorous attention and praise, and wreck the British carrot industry altogether.

Ron promises he will stay put. For now. If necessary. We are keeping an eye on him– Neville, Luna, Ginny, and I. He and I are not speaking because he is the King of Pigs, but we are both worried about you and want you to be safe. Your absence from Hogwarts leaves a big hole in our world, of course, and I know I’ve said it before, but I’ll say it again, that what you did was incredibly brave and selfless. Professor Volkova worries about you– I’ve seen her disappearing into the chapel in off-times. I bet you didn’t even know that Hogwarts had a chapel. It’s not a chapel, per se, so much as a room for private religious meditation. She has taken to wearing a cross, which she hides under her cloak, but I can tell that’s what it is. Even Professor Snape has reluctantly admitted he admires your courage in the situation. He has been having trouble concentrating in class. You can tell he’s distracted, concerned for you. He’s been exceptionally irritable and moody as well. You must return soon if only it will improve Gryffindor’s chances of keeping a few house points this year. Professor McGonagall said she is going to talk to him about improving his mood. I’ll let you know if she succeeds.

All my love– Hermione

Dear Professor Volkova,

I am writing to let you know that I am doing all right here with Le Clair. Hermione told me that you have been worried. Le Clair has been very kind to me, and I have to say that the longer I know him, the more he reminds me of you, in good ways. You’re both very strong and determined. You both are mourning the loss of loved ones. You both have an uncanny talent for murder and mayhem. Did you know he has a copy of Blunt Objects as well? It’s in French, and it has blood stains on it. Perhaps he took the forward much too literally?

He would like to meet with you and discuss what has happened with your son. Although he would not give me specifics, and I have not been able to detect details by other than normal means, I can tell that what he wants to discuss with you is wearing on him. He will agree to any time or place that you desire, and you may rest assured that he means this to be a completely neutral and safe meeting. You may bring anyone else that you would like to bring. I know that he would like to bring Baron Romovski with him, but Romovski would not agree to meeting with you, worried that you would not believe what he had to tell you, and he’d rather not have you fly out in anger at him. It appears the last time you flew out in anger at him, he nearly lost an eye.

How is Sergei adapting to the change? It must be a big adjustment for both of you, I imagine. Perhaps Madam Grimwood might have a book that will help? She sent me a book on infants and toddlers, but I don’t think that would be of much help for you at this point. If you go to the bookstore, could you check if she has any more books on conduit spells? That and cookbooks. Raffles is teaching me how to cook, and we need more recipes.

I wanted to offer, and I hope you won’t feel I am being too forward, but if you need a place to stay, if you would like a place to feel at home when you are not at work at Hogwarts, you are more than welcome to stay at my house in Hogsmeade. I have no wish to return there to live, and it's in need of repairs, but if you'd like a place to go, it's available. I know that during the school year you and Malchik and Sergei will remain at Hogwarts, but on weekends and during summers, everyone
needs a place to relax and unwind. It’s not that I fear Remus will never return, though there are times when I do lose hope of finding him. I want very much to extend this offer as a token of appreciation for all you’ve done for me. I can’t help but feel I’ve somehow gotten you into this predicament, and I very much want to help. Please let me do something that in some small way will make things easier for you.

I am working yet on my zombie reanimation essay and assignment. I hope to have it to you before Friday’s deadline. Ha– deadline. Ha ha ha ha ha! I slay me. Have a nice day and think happy thoughts.

Respectfully,
Harry Potter

P.S. If you go to the house, don’t go in the attic. It’s haunted.

***

Dear Mr. Potter,

In an attempt to follow your charming directive to ‘have a nice day and think happy thoughts’ I was sitting in my quarters with the lights off, watching an approaching thunderstorm while polishing a small collection of personal weapons, considering your letter and how to respond. Sergei is asleep in the room next door. Malchik is humming while sewing, sitting in front of the fire in his room. I believe she is very pleased to have him here. I, on the other hand, find the task before me to be a very daunting one indeed. Sergei doesn’t seem shocked by the change– he follows me like a shadow, wanting attention and conversation. I am told that will change and I should take advantage while he finds me interesting. Sergei misses his friend Ulfie. That is the only distraction for him.

I have considered the very kind and generous offer of unwinding at your house in Hogsmeade. I must say it is a most irregular and scandalous offer, and I should be very much inclined to refuse simply because it would be far too shocking to accept. But the fact of the matter is that I am writing to accept, in hopes that it will be found very shocking. The truth is that I have no talent for domestic settings, and perhaps I may be able to glean from you how one sets up a house and makes it feel like a home. If I didn’t have Malchik, I’m not sure what I would do. I find myself most lacking in this realm— that of being a mother. The first place to begin if one wants to make a home is to find a residence, and happily, you’ve solved my first problem. Thank you very much for your offer.

You have no doubt heard that I have been summarily dismissed by my friends in Venice. I do not know if you know the full details– alas I cannot set them down here because our mail is being monitored, opened at random, and I do not wish information to fall into the wrong hands. Suffice it to say that I find myself like a ship adrift in heavy fog in a rocky harbor– surrounded by hazards at every turn. Thank you so very much for extending your home to Sergei, Malchik and I. It shows what a generous and giving soul you are. You are a lighthouse in my harbor, and I thank you. Ah, such drivel. I’m not one prone to emotionalism. I hope you will forgive me and my dreadful clichés. I don't express my emotions well. I apologize.

You may in no way blame yourself for the fate that has befallen me. I find myself at this juncture out of personal error and not from anything you have said or done. You have saved my son’s life, and for that you will forever have my gratitude. He speaks glowingly of the wedding party– I have heard the tale several times in as many days.

As to your zombie reanimation assignment and those agonizing puns about deadlines, please note I have included next week’s reading, somewhat unorthodox. I had to search far and wide for an
appropriate level of humor, in the hopes that any future correspondence about your assignments, if jovial in nature, will be more advanced in art. This was the last copy of ‘A Beginner’s Guide to Wit’ available at Flourish and Blotts. Has there been a rush on wit lately?

Madame Grimwood was in a curious mood when I was in her bookshop. Most curious. She asked me about you, how you were, if you were being well-treated. She wants to know if she may continue to send you books. I said you were in fact looking for books on conduit spells, and she nearly swallowed her tongue. She managed to find one for you, but I seem to have misplaced it and am not sure where I put it down last. As for cookbooks, you neglected to narrow the category, and I didn’t know where to begin. It would be helpful to know what you plan to cook. Or whom?

Please relay to Mr. Le Clair that I will agree to meet and talk with him about the circumstances under which my son came to be in his possession. I believe he must remember a certain ruined abbey that is near enough to where you are staying that we might meet there and be in no danger. It’s a pity that Romovski would not agree to meet with me as well. I imagine our conversation would have been interesting indeed, as the last time I came face to face with him was indeed under less-than-civilized conditions. I will leave it up to Mr. Le Clair to decide the time for our meeting, as I have chosen the place.

Any attempts to continue having a nice day appear to have been diverted. While completing your letter, I have received an owl informing me that I am to prepare for another visitor from Venice. I will of course hope to send you a report at the end of that visit. Do take care of yourself, Master, and thank you again for your kindness and warmth.

Respectfully,

AV Volkova, Mistress of Dark Arts
"Thirty seven students with detentions? One hundred points deducted from Gryffindor? What could my students have done to merit such harsh treatment?"

"They were breathing, loudly."

Minerva was poking food around with her fork, watching Snape glare across the dining hall towards the Gryffindor table.

"Yes, it’s like a funeral over there, isn’t it?" she commented. "I haven’t been able to raise their spirits, and you’re not helping taking away points for such trivialities as unknotted ties and dull quills. It’s like someone has sucked the life right out of them. Perhaps this weekend will cheer them up. Hogsmeade lightens their moods. What about you? What would lighten your spirits, Severus?"

"My spirits don’t need to be lightened," he muttered, emptying his goblet and shuffling his feet under his table. His untouched food was growing cold. Congealing gravies were gluing vegetables to the surface of the china.

"Sulking about isn’t going to change the Headmaster’s mind, so you may as well change your tactics."

"Sulking about?"

"Albus is displeased with you. You can’t pretend you’re ignorant as to his reasons either."

"I’ve done my best within my means to stop Draco and his fires. When I have permission to appropriately punish him, the fires will stop."

"He’s not going to let you hang Mr. Malfoy by his ankles in the lake. You may as well stop asking."

"Five minutes to do as I wish to that boy, and he will mend the error of his ways."

"There’s no denying that the Slytherins have been all but running wild since Harry has been gone. Mr. Potter’s continued absence bolsters their courage. Perhaps it’s time you gave them a firm talk."

"Draco has been telling everyone who will listen that he and Fudge are doing everything they can
to get Harry committed to St. Mungo’s. Some of the students actually whisper that it has already happened. I’ve tried my hand at every gentle persuasion that I know to bring Mr. Malfoy to heel. But he won’t keep his mouth shut.”

"It won’t do a bit of good. He feels he’s won a victory over Harry, because he is here and Harry is not.”

"Mr. Filch was showing me an ingenious device only yesterday. You put it in the mouth of the offending student..."

"Severus,” Minerva warned deeply.

"Yes, I know. No corporeal punishment.”

"Professor Volkova has developed a certain knack for communicating with Draco. Perhaps you should ask her for pointers.”

"Her method for handling Mr. Malfoy is a far more hands-on approach than I should ever like to employ with him, thank you.” Snape’s whiplash snideness made Minerva cough up a laugh.

"She is not doing what you’re hinting at. The Headmaster would put a stop to it at once.”

"Would he?"

"Why don’t you ask her how she is getting through to him?"

"Perhaps I will.”

"Perhaps you should.”

"Fine.”

"If it will make you lay off my students, I will talk to Albus about letting you see Mr. Potter, if you’re chaperoned, of course.”

"He’s going to fall behind in Potions. There’s only so much one can take in with self-study, particularly a student like Harry, who has always been so hand-to-mouth when it comes to learning.”

"Le Clair is doing what he can. So is Illumina.”

"Neither of whom, you’ll forgive me, has an ounce of talent in Potions. He is a transfigurationist, and she’s a clairvoyant.”

"At least Harry’s marks in those two classes will rise.”

"He’s going to fall behind in Potions,” Snape fretted.

"It’s basic potions. Any reasonably-trained witch or wizard of more than half a brain could demonstrate the assignments to him. Where are you going?”

"To throw myself from the Astronomy Tower. Clearly if any reasonably-trained wizard can teach my subject, I am no longer necessary.”

"Oh, stop the dramatics. Walk with me. Come. Come,” she growled, standing up. "We’re going for a walk.”
"I don’t want a walk."

"You need to stretch, smell the spring air, and clear your mind."

"Clear my mind?" Snape mocked. McGonagall grabbed his arm and hauled him out of the dining room by means of the back exit.

"There is a patch at the edge of the forest that Hagrid says would be perfect for anyone looking to put down a crop of shade-loving plants."

Minerva spoke as they walked along. Severus followed, remaining mute as he echoed a dark cloud of annoyance about himself. He stopped only to glance upwards at the Black Queen’s Tower, Potter’s Prison as Draco laughingly called it. He felt a singe burn through his heart, and he trudged along after McGonagall. Her sudden, mirthful laugh made him scowl at her.

"I’d forgotten what a sulky boy you could been when you’re angry," she explained, tugging on his arm.

"I won’t deny I’m put out that the Headmaster won’t let me see Harry, nor will he let me correspond with him."

"Albus feels the longer you two are kept apart, the more likely it is you’ll be able to break yourself out of the charisma spell Harry has cast on you. He’s doing this for your own good."

"Is he? It may interest you to know that Harry hasn’t been able to cast a charisma spell since Lucius attacked him."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"I see." Minerva considered the words, frowning.

"Has the Headmaster pressured you to talk?" Severus asked.

"He wants to know what I think is going on between you and Harry, yes."

"Six years he’s been telling me I need to get along with Potter, and now he’s got the nerve to complain because we’re being amicable to one another??"

"Harry hugged you."

"He was excited about seeing someone from home, and latched onto the first person he saw. It could have been any of us."

Minerva stopped, gazing hard at Severus.

"Let me rephrase. As the Headmaster described the situation, Potter threw himself into your arms, burrowed into your embrace."

"He hugged me. What’s your bloody point?"

"Perhaps I am being too gentle in my approach to this. Do you respond better to salt than sugar?"

"I’m sure I don’t know what you mean."
"Dumbledore wants me to make it clear to you that a sexual relationship between yourself and Mr. Potter will not be tolerated so long as you are his teacher and authority figure." Minerva pursed her lips and waited for Severus to respond.

"One hug in public and he thinks we’re in a sexual relationship??"

"Severus, half the school believes you and Harry have been intimate."

Snape bit back words, longing to put his hands around Draco’s throat and throttle the life from him. Severus knew of course who was behind the virulent rumors that had been infecting the school. It caused a bitter sting, being wrongly accused of an act he would have given anything to be guilty of accomplishing.

"You know the Headmaster cannot condone a relationship between the two of you, however consenting it might be. It cannot be allowed as long as Harry is under your authority. Even if the relationship is consenting, it smacks of abuse of position on your part," Minerva scolded.

"Then I will resign my position at once."

"You cannot resign, Severus. You aren’t safe outside these wards, and I won’t let you leave, even if Albus would, which he won’t. Even if we weren’t fond of you, we would be hard pressed to replace you, and I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"Misplaced maternal instincts," Severus heard himself saying.

"All you have to do is keep your hands to yourself for a year and a half. Is that too much to ask? You’ve been the object of student crushes before. Why are you mishandling this one so dramatically? You’re going to wreck your career, your future. Keep your hands to yourself."

"I wasn’t using my hands." Well, if he was going to be hanged, at least he’d speak his mind.

"If you please!!" Minerva wailed. Snape couldn’t help but laugh. "Albus believes either you were under the sway of a charisma spell, or that Harry was unable to refuse you because of your position over him. He couldn’t imagine any other reason you two would wind up together. You must keep your hands and the rest of yourself to yourself. That’s why you aren’t being allowed to see Mr. Potter."

"The unwholesome acts clause in our contracts?"

"Precisely."

"For one brief shining moment, I put an ounce of joy in Harry’s life. What could be unwholesome about that?"

"Let’s start with the fact the boy has less than half your years. Second, he’s of a very tender age and disposition. Impressionable. Easy to manipulate. Easy to hurt."

"He is starving for the affection and attention. You have to stand up to Dumbledore on this."

"Severus, you’re going to have to go a long way to convince me this isn’t the biggest mistake you’ve ever made, trying to kindle a relationship with Harry."

"You can’t help Albus build a wall between us."

"You aren’t even going to bother denying it, are you?" She flamed up with color and annoyance.
"It’s not a relationship. I made him hot and bothered, once, briefly. I hardly had to do more than blow in his ear."

"Albus said you were letting Harry sneak into your quarters at night-- into your quarters, and into your bed."

"He's been having nightmares about Lucius."

"How are you helping that with what you're doing?"

"It's...he's never had...can you imagine as a child not having someone to turn to when you were afraid? Can you imagine not being comforted when you were upset, not being soothed when you hurt yourself, not being tended when sick, not having a single place of comfort and security in your entire world? It's no wonder Potter spent five years at this school getting himself injured at every possible turn. It's no wonder he spent five years doing anything and everything, right or wrong, to get attention. Someone was finally noticing him. When all you've ever known is pain, it's all you ever respond to, and all you ever seek. Maybe I'd like to change that in Harry, before it's too late."

"You're not his mental health counselor. You are his teacher. You are his friend."

"He's needs someone he can trust. Someone he can lean on."

"Can't you let him lean on you without involving intercourse?"

"We haven't had sex. It's not like that."

"What is it, then?"

"It’s not like we’ve exchanged vows and moved into a cottage in the Highlands."

"The Headmaster cannot allow this to develop, Severus."

"He didn’t boot Volkova out for using Mr. Malfoy for her Gallahad Elixir."

"Because they weren’t technically touching, and even if they had touched, the basis of their relationship was the procurement of a potion ingredient. It was not sexually-motivated."

"That isn’t what Mr. Malfoy believes."

"My opinion as well. It should be noted that Professor Volkova has since broken her addiction for the Gallahad Elixir, and she and Mr. Malfoy are no longer, how to say it kindly?"

"Hand in glove together?"

"What a colorful way to put it! As far as I know, they are no longer doing....whatever they were doing together."

"Your point is that I can have sex with Harry if I use his semen for a potion ingredient and we don’t touch each other?"

"No! Don’t twist my words. The fact of the matter, the rule of law, Severus, is that you may not fornicate with Mr. Potter until he is no longer under your authority."

"We were not fornicating."

"You were so fornicating."
"He’s not ready for that."

"I can’t believe you’re telling me this. I don’t want to have to picture how you convinced the boy to get between the sheets with you, if you don’t mind."

"We never got between the sheets."

"I don’t want to know."

"He wouldn’t step near the bed. I foresee a phobia in the making."

"I do not want to hear about this, if you please."

"What he and I did was no more than what we allow in the broom closets every night of the week."

"The difference being that sexual curiosity between two youths is not the same thing as you taking advantage of a frightened child." Minerva stopped herself, shaking her head. "Severus, after what he’s been through? How could you possibly do such things to him? You did say we need to convince him we still care about him after what Lucius did to him, but this is, need I tell you, the very worst way to approach the situation? He’s so fragile, Severus, so very fragile."

"You aren’t under the impression that being attacked by Lucius will make Harry never want to have sex again, are you?" Snape asked, brows dipping.

"I’m sure someday he’ll want to, certainly. But it’s indecent this soon."

"I did not take advantage of a frightened child, I assure you."

"No. I don’t doubt that. I can’t count the number of times I sent James Potter scurrying out of dark closets and hidden niches around this school, pants around his ankles, naked arse shining in the moonlight," Minerva muttered. "I was worried Harry would turn out the same, once his hormones took control of his good sense. I’ve been dreading it for years. He’s such a wonderful boy, so well-behaved usually."

"Well-behaved!?"

"At least you’re still capable of seeing his faults," Minerva tittered. "The Headmaster will be pleased to know that."

"Why did you drag me out here, Minerva?"

"To startle you out of the charisma spell. May I try?"

"There is no charisma spell, and if there were, you would have lost the element of surprise."

"Pity."

"You can of course try if it will make you happy."

"No. There’s no point if the surprise is lost."

"Can we get back to dinner? Night is falling, and I’m sure your Gryffindors are up to no good somewhere in the castle."

"I’ll keep them in line. You take to those Slytherins."
"Thank you, I will," Snape said snidely.
The Ruined Abbey

Chapter Summary

In which Le Clair and Volkova have an awkward heart-to-heart, and Harry gets a little surprise

"Le Clair."

"Volkova."

"You’re early."

"As are you."

"I felt it was appropriate to examine the lay of the land before you arrived."

"Cautious, as always."

"Thank you."

"You’re welcome."

There followed a silence so awkward even Harry didn’t know what to say.

"I would ask you what a desolate girl like you is doing in a nice place like this, but I know how my bon mots tend to grate on your nerves, and I will try to refrain from my usual, humorous tendencies," Le Clair began again.

"Most appreciated," Volkova murmured, allowing a small smile to grace her face. "Mr. Potter? Is that you in the shadows?"

"I was just looking at this writing over here. There’s appears to be a crypt beneath the building," Harry murmured, looking back over one shoulder towards her as she moved into the failing light that was filtering through the open socket of a missing gothic window. "I wanted to see if I could get a reading off of the inscriptions," Harry added.

"He’ll be busy for hours. I let him in the 17th century storeroom in the basement the other day, and found him there still the next morning, stroking a rapier in a most disturbing fashion. We can talk over here if you like." Le Clair motioned to the smashed remains of a pew and an altar.

"Watch your step. There’s a loose stone," Volkova called.

"There are several," Le Clair said, skating gracefully across the uneven floor.

"Did he make you sign a no-mayhem contract?" Volkova asked.

"Yes. You?"

"Yes."
"Then we are under oath to remember our manners."

"So it would seem. I have not properly expressed my gratitude to you for your release of my son," Anna said as she followed Le Clair’s path across the pock-marked, moss-covered stones. "Nor to Baron Romovski either."

"You must thank Mr. Potter, not the Baron or myself."


"No big deal?" Le Clair echoed for Volkova’s amusement.

"At first I believed you were using the circumstances of the situation to pull Mr. Potter into your grasp once more, but the Headmaster has helped me understand that this contract has saved Harry from falling into the hands of Minister Fudge, whom he believes is operating either in conjunction with the Dark Lord or under his impression."

"A happy coincidence then that Mr. Potter should be poisonous to me, or he would have never risked coming to me in the first place. I promise you I did not do this in order to have Mr. Potter in my sway. He’s an intriguing boy though. Good company. A trifle stressed because of all the pressure he’s under. I hope he will find his stay with me educational and diverting."

"You make it sound like a holiday."

"I hope it will be. Heaven knows he could use one. So here we are. You have your son, and you should be thrilled, yes?"

"Yes."

"But you are not. It’s plain to see you’ve been up for days. You look ghastly."

"I had a visit from diPietro."

"You’ve been exiled. I suspected as much would happen after the Deusredeti received news about what Mr. Potter had done in order to save your child. And yet, puzzling isn’t it, that to arrive here on the day such news was made public by the Daily Prophet, and the day that Sergei was returned to you, diPietro would have had to have traveled at minimum two days?"

"I believe I follow you. The elders knew before-hand what was going to happen."

"Yes, my dear. They most assuredly did. You have had another visit, I understand. Who?"

"Delacroix," Volkova murmured. Le Clair laughed out loudly. Harry’s head popped up at the sound.

"I’m trying to concentrate over here," Potter growled.

"Insult to injury. You are to be exiled, and you are to be replaced by a man so incompetent his own keepers assign him as far away from home as possible in order that he might inflict the least amount of damage on them," Le Clair mused.

"He might be taking over my vampire assignments, but he will not be taking my place at Hogwarts. The Headmaster has forbidden that."

"The Headmaster has a soft spot for you."
"There is no such sentimentality involved. I am a valuable asset. Delacroix’s lack of skills is only equaled by his lack of personality. However, it was clearly not my decision who would take over my hunting assignments. You have become Delacroix’s first priority as a hunter. All his other targets are temporarily safe until you can be brought in."

"I’m insulted, even if you aren’t. Where is the dreaded Mr. Jagr?"

"He’s on Tiberia’s trail."

"She will eat him alive, given half a chance. What about Mr. Samuelsson?"

"You don’t rate Samuelsson."

"I, who have been around for half a millennium, am not important enough for your measly, one-eyed, bean-pole of a Norwegian vampire killer?"

"He’s busy."

"With whom?"

"Gregori."

"Absurd! Gregori has been dead for fifty years at least."

"He was spotted in Moscow last month."

"Nonsense. Probably one of his sons. I’m told several of them bear a striking resemblance."

"Nonetheless, Samuelsson is not available. You’ll have to settle for Delacroix."

"I merit being chased by Kyprios at the very least. Is he available?"

"He’s busy."

"With whom?"

"Indira."

"I’m sorry. I don’t believe I’ve met her."

"Just as well you haven’t. She’s his new wife. They’re expected to produce a child within the year, and Kyprios’s current assignment is to remain between the sheets with Indira until she is confirmed pregnant."

"That must make chasing vampires seem boring by comparison. What about Kasparitis?"

"Dead."

"Undead?" Le Clair hoped, his voice filled with glee.

"Dead. Stone dead. Totally dead."

"What happened?"

"I don’t know. He went to Tunisia by plane and came back in a box."

"Kolzig?"
"Romovski."

"Oh, he'll be very impressed to be chased by someone so renowned. A great compliment. And I get....Delacroix? Have you no French vampire hunters besides Delacroix?"

"No. Perhaps if you succeed in killing Delacroix, they will promote another aide. Keep your hopes up."

"There it is. What an insult. I am assigned to Delacroix, and you are given the heave-ho."

"Yes, that would appear to be the case."

"It must make you angry."

"Not angry. My life is finally my own. It’s invigorating. What shall I do with my free time?"

"Frustrated, then?"

"No. Not particularly. I’ve a fine job at Hogwarts, and I won’t go hungry. There’s an extremely well-furnished library at the school and a bookstore beyond compare in Hogsmeade Village. My son is with me. What more could I possibly want in life?"

"You must feel used if nothing else."

"Oh, yes, but then I’ve felt used for the last ten years."

"You could challenge me to a duel now, regain your former glory. We shall battle to the death, snarl and snap at each other like old times. Mr. Potter may officiate. It will scare the daylights out of him!" Le Clair suggested happily.

"Just a bloody minute! I told you both there wouldn’t be any of that!" Harry hollered from his hidden niche.

"Relax, Mr. Potter. He’s jesting with us. Besides, why should I do Delacroix any favors? He was never a friend to me. Let him track you himself," Volkova complained to Le Clair.

"I have never been your friend either, little girl."

"No, certainly not, but at least you are honest in your animosity, and have a clear reason for such animosity."

"I took Sergei from you, and you took Radu from me, each for our own selfish reasons, glory, satisfaction, blood-lust."

"And poor Papa?" Volkova frowned, overcome with sadness.

"What I did to your grandfather...that was...I am sorry. I lost my temper," Le Clair offered, bowing his head. "It loses its appeal after too long, doesn’t it? All the killing."

"Yes."

"The trouble is, it could go on and on forever. I kill someone you love, you kill someone I love, we both kill everyone the other loves. Eventually, we’re going to run out of people to love."

"I suppose."
"You’re miserable, girl. Homesick. I know the look. Won’t they take you back if you prove you are worthy of them? You might win if we duel. I haven’t had a decent duel in ages. My skills are rusty."

"I don’t want to go back. I’m not going to beg. I certainly will not help Delacroix by killing you. Let him do his own damn job."

"From what I have heard, his aides do more killing than he does."

"Yes, for as long as they last," Volkova agreed grimly. "He’s gone through three this year, and it’s only April."

"Perhaps the elders will let you return if you prove yourself ambitious enough."

"I do not wish to return."

"May I ask why not? Your ancestors did not walk barefoot in winter over mountains out of Russia so you could wallow in self-pity in Scotland."

"You’re here to tell me this assignment was a set-up from the beginning."

"Am I? What makes you think so?"

"Delacroix warned me I was not to believe anything Romovski or you told me. What need would he have to reinforce my mistrust except that he worried I might be tempted to believe otherwise?"

"Go on."

"I was sent to guard Potter when the elders knew full well that I would fail in keeping him away from you, or you away from him. They sent me knowing I would fail, so they would have an excuse to be rid of me once and for all. That’s what I’ve been to them— a joke. A failure. A buffoon."

"What a miserable, depressing wretch you’ve become, Volkova. This is what love will do to you."

"Love?"

"You were always self-assured, proud of your abilities, able to do whatever unpleasant task was laid before you, at least until you fell in love with your language master. Your aide. The boy’s father."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Here you are, messing everything up again, turning your life into a complete tangle, and I say to myself, there must be, there can be, there is only one reason. The girl is in love again."

"Preposterous."

"I’m not going to ask who, because I do not want to know which unlucky wretch it is this time around, in case something unpleasant should happen to him. If I don’t know who it is, I can’t be blamed, can I? Only, promise me it isn’t Mr. Potter. He’s not your type. Not at all."

"You presume too much, Le Clair."

"I’ve been around too long. I know how humans work, how they feel. You were a complete terror until you fell in love. Didn’t you learn your lesson the first time around?"
"Look, what do you know about my son?"

"Romovski knew where your son would be."

"What?"

"He was not outside the boundary of his school for more than two minutes before the Baron picked him up."

"How did the Baron manage to convince him to come along?"

"He promised the boy he would take him to you."

"Why did it take three weeks? You knew where I was. I’m sure you told Romovski and anyone else who wanted to know."

"Romovski wasn’t sure how to approach you without getting a stake in the chest for his troubles."

"My son was with Romovski the entire time? But how could the Baron have known where my son would be? There are more than one hundred exits from the perimeter, all guarded by a three-person spell. There’s no way he could have stumbled upon Sergei by chance."

"There had to be three people involved in letting your son out."

"Was the Baron in Venice by chance?"

"You should know better than to ask."

"The Baron was forewarned?"

"The Baron was contacted, told where to be. They practically placed your son in his hands."

"Does the Baron know who contacted him?"

"No. Unfortunately he does not. Though I suspect you may have an inkling."

"More than an inkling. But to use my son to get at me? It’s lower than I believed anyone who hated me would sink."

"Would it be any help for you to know that your son shares your opinion of Delacroix?"

"It might."

"He remarked that a man unable to properly use a dinner fork was a poor choice for a trained killer."

"Did he? It’s not customary for the children to dine with the adults. When did they have an opportunity to dine together?"

"It makes all the sense in the world that Delacroix should conspire against you. He was jealous of your accomplishments. He was an aide for how many years before the elders had no choice but to promote him? You suspect diPietro as well, and why not? They do have a child together. The question for you to answer is who the third person should be, and why? There is more you should know."

"Yes?"
"The Baron was told there would be two children."

"But there was only one?"

"Yes. The other boy got cold feet, and would not leave the perimeter of the school. Sergei went on ahead without him."

"Which boy, do you know?"

"Alas, I do not know. Neither does the Baron."

"Why tell me these things?"

"I hoped to make you very angry and annoyed."

"Besides that?"

"I hoped to open your eyes perhaps to how you have been used all these years."

"You don’t think I know how I’ve been used as a pawn in all of this?"

"You are not asking yourself the obvious question."

"Of course I want to know. Why should they wish me to fail? Why should they wish to be rid of me?"

"God’s blood, Volkova, this isn’t all about you!" Le Clair scolded her like a school master.

A circuit of indigo energy jolted through the ruins, bringing both Le Clair and Volkova to their knees as the ground wobbled around them. As quickly as the tremor ran through, it focused in the shadows, and was gone, disappearing into the air in a faint mist. In the shadows, Harry could be heard laughing to himself. He rose to his feet and staggered over to the others, kneeling down between them as they rose to their feet.

"Mr. Potter? What was that?" Le Clair asked. Harry’s chuckling became more unstable. He dug his fingers in between the stones under his knees, rising up and pulling one hunk free of the soil below.

"We have to move these," Harry said.

"Why, pray tell?" Le Clair asked. Volkova put a hand downward as if to touch the top of Harry’s head. Slivers of magic coalesced in the air between her fingertips and his hair, which was standing up rather more than usual. She drew her hand away until the cords of magic vanished. She blinked at him, astonished.

"The trees asked if I would help them," Harry reported.

Volkova and Le Clair looked skyward. In fact, there was a brace of tall oaks leaning against the ruins from the western side, and their limbs were hanging over the open roof of the church, branches yearning, twigs outstretched. The rising moon was cradled in their crowns.

"All this was a forest once," Harry said, moving to another stone after stacking the first aside. "A holy site for thousands of years."

"Yes, but, Harry, what are you doing?" Volkova hesitated.

"The trees want the land back. No one else is using it, and they would like it back, so they can
march to the sea again. We only have to move a few stones. The trees will do the rest themselves."

Harry set about shifting stones aside here and there, revealing the beginnings of a crypt beneath, surrounded by bare earth and rocky soil. Le Clair and Volkova moved out of his path, shaking their heads at him.

"I never knew he was a budding environmentalist," Henri commented.

"Have you been keeping him awake nights? Those rings under his eyes are shocking."

"He has nightmares, of course, but that is none of my doing. His internal clock is resetting itself. He spends more time running around by night than by day. He longs for company and wants to be awake when the rest of us are."

"Yes, well, I understand. Loneliness is a very universal condition. So, what am I to do about this situation with my son? That is the obvious question. Do I stand aside and let it pass that diPietro, Delacroix, and most probably Rubrica have put my son in jeopardy?"

"That’s purely between you and them, but before you go around putting stakes in people, you need to ask yourself why they did it."

"To get rid of me and keep my son. That’s why diPietro came here."

"Can that be the entire reason? What’s so important about you?"

"I am an infamous vampire killer."

"Former infamous vampire killer," Harry called out, lifting another stone and bringing it out of the way.

"A raging ego-maniac as well. But who am I to cast stones? Could your son be the reason? Could he be important in some way?" Le Clair asked.

"He wants to be a painter when he grows up."

"Art does have its influence on people, but to kill over a painting? Preposterous. There is never any need to kill an artist. Artists are silenced when their art is censored."

"It could be they are making room for another member," Volkova suggested. "Or for someone to have a child."

"I dare say there some facet of this jewel, this puzzle, that we are not able to admire, at least not yet."

Harry made his way by them, picking up a terribly-heavy stone and pulling it to his stack. He hauled it on top, and stood back with a satisfied smile. The stack crumbled downward, vanishing. Harry blinked, and his smile fell. Henri reached forward, snatching Harry back from the edge of the hole that was appearing at his feet. Potter watched in concern as the hole grew larger, and larger. Everyone moved out of the path of the widening maw as the abbey itself shivered once more. More earth and stones crumbled away. Volkova navigated her way up over the smashed pew and altar, and tiptoed across the small wedge of the floor that remained on the right side. Volkova, Le Clair, and Potter backed themselves out of the ruins even though the rumbling stones and shifting earth had calmed to a peaceful quiet.

"Potter, what did you do?" Volkova gulped.
"I moved the stones. I stacked them up. They fell through the floor into the crypt below. I guess the floor was more unstable than I thought."

"Do you suppose we should put it back the way it was? There’s a hidden cavern in there, it would seem," Volkova said. "Not unusual for the Pre-Christian Celts to have holy sites in caverns, ones with sacred springs or hidden pools of water."

"We can’t put it back together. The trees said they wanted me to move the stones so they could plant their offspring in the soil and march back to the sea," Harry murmured.

"The trees obviously tricked you," Le Clair told him sternly, "which is what you get for listening to trees in the first place."

"What do you suppose is in the cavern?" Harry asked.

"I think it’s best we don’t ask," Le Clair murmured, holding tight to Harry’s arm and pulling him backwards more. "Let’s just walk quietly away, and maybe no one from the village will notice we’ve destroyed their ruined abbey."

"What if there’s something dangerous in there trying to get out?" Harry worried.

"You should have thought of that before you opened it, hm?" Le Clair scolded. Harry hung his head.

"It could be very dangerous," Volkova agreed grimly. Harry shrugged his shoulders, moping.

"What should we do?" Le Clair wondered.

"I’ll go look," Volkova volunteered brightly. She created a wisp of light on the end of her wand, and headed back towards the ruined abbey, which now looked as if it had been cleaved in half by a giant on a rampage. A wall of windows was all that remained standing on the left side. Harry sat down on the ground and balled up with his knees under his chin, watching Volkova anxiously as she picked her way around in order to peer into the cavern below the ruined abbey.

"Did you use a conduit spell?" Le Clair asked Harry.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to channel a more-powerful magic than my own into the inscription and see who wrote it, and knew there would be strong vibrations in the building itself."

"You summoned the magic of the building, and that’s when the trees starting talk to you?"

"Yes," Harry said, humbled.

"Have you done this sort of thing before?"

"Um, yes. Off and on. I borrowed Severus’s magic to read a piece of canvas."

"Not quite the same scale of damage occurred, I hope?"

"No," Harry mumbled.

"It’s probably best you don’t go around revealing you can do this sort of thing."
"What sort of thing?" Harry asked, biting his lip.

"Conduit spells that summon earth magic and stone magic. Talking to the trees. That sort of thing. There are some people who might believe you are a reincarnated Druid sorcerer or some such nonsense as that."

"Yes?"

"There will be other people who will want you burned at the stake," Le Clair warned him.

"Not good."

"Decidedly not good," Le Clair agreed as Volkova vanished down into the dark cavern. Harry leapt to his feet.

"What’s she doing?" he gasped.

"Risking her life. Laughing in the face of danger. Mocking death. The usual. She really is a very bad influence on you, I feel. How could they even think of letting her near you?!"

"Should we go get her out of there?"

"Um, no."

"Why not?"

"I’m sure you know how she feels about being rescued."

"Yes, but...."

"She’ll be back in no time. We’ll wait."

"No, we won’t," Harry blurted, dashing back to the ruins with Le Clair in close pursuit. A bat form raced past Harry’s shoulder as he lay flat on the ground and peered down inside the cavern. The bat danced around in the air before descending into the darkness. Where had Volkova’s light gone? Harry waited, panting in fear. It wasn’t a minute before the bat reappeared, carrying Volkova’s wand. The wand dropped beside Harry, and Le Clair materialized. He composed himself calmly by Potter as the boy rolled to a seated position.

"She’ll be along by and by. She’s bringing you a gift."

"Gift?"

"Potter!" Volkova’s voice sounded from down in the hollow. Harry put his head over the broad expanse once more. "Do you know what you’ve done?"

"Something horrible," Harry worried.

"Bought yourself another university, I imagine," she called back. A gold coin appeared in the air, and another, and another. "We’d better contact the Headmaster," she added.

"It’s a gold hoard?" Harry asked, plucking one of the pieces out of the air before it fell back inside. "The trees said if I moved the floor, they would reward me. How did they know about the gold?"

Le Clair needled Harry with a penetrating stare. "Potter!" he stressed the word. "We don't talk to trees, remember?"
"Do you need help down there?" Harry asked Volkova.

"No," Volkova replied from the top of the hole. She levered herself up, and handed Harry a golden circle. He held it in his grasp and stared at it a full minute before he realized what she had handed him wasn't simply a collection of rubies held tight by heavy metal. By that point, Volkova, heaving for breath, took the ornament from him and put it on top of his head. "You found a treasure hoard, Potter, one concealed beneath the church, one the churchmen could possibly have been hiding. Notorious hoarders, holy men."

"Dragons, also notorious hoarders," Le Clair interjected. "Did you smell smoke or sulphur?"

"Alas, no," Volkova replied.

"Do I look as silly as I feel?" Harry asked. Le Clair and Volkova nodded in unison. Potter pulled the crown off his head and held it absently in his lap. "What do we do now?"

"We contact the Headmaster," Volkova replied. "I must get back before he knows I am gone. Of course, once I tell him what you have found, he will know I have been gone. Nonetheless, a most necessary meeting. Thank you for the information, Le Clair. Thank you for meeting with me."

"You're welcome."

"This could be good-bye. I'm not so sure that I will be allowed to live long outside the fold. Other members who left were never heard from again."

"Don't be dramatic. They probably slipped into anonymity and went on with their lives," Le Clair said reassuringly. "You worry yourself needlessly."

"My mission to protect Mr. Potter becomes even more important than before. What if the reason that I've been dismissed is because the elders no longer want to protect Mr. Potter, but wish to harm him? Or what if they plan to kidnap him and make him a member of the group in my place. You must be vigilant in your protection of him, Le Clair."

"Volkova, you're going all warm and fuzzy with sentimentality. Don't worry. The boy is in very good hands."

"Does this mean you two have kissed and made up?" Harry asked, smiling innocently.

"Certainly not. What rubbish," Le Clair frowned. "Shall we set a date for that duel to the death, little girl?"

"How long are we bound by that no-mayhem contract?" she asked Harry.

"Until I say otherwise." Harry frowned his displeasure.

"My calendar is filled for this month, but we'll look at our long-term schedules and see what we can do," Volkova replied to Le Clair, taking her wand from Harry. "I won't be long," she promised, vanishing from sight in an apparition spell.

"You didn't tell her, did you?" Harry whispered, staring at the space where Volkova had been.

"Tell her what?" Le Clair asked Harry.

"The reason Romovski didn't kill her son."

"We mustn't bother her with triffles."
"The Baron knew that she had been tricked, that her son had been put in danger to make her lose her mind, that the Deusredeti was hoping her son would be killed, and she would go berserk and start killing vampires left and right, and that’s why the Baron did not harm Sergei."

"No. I didn’t tell her. The Baron would be embarrassed if she knew he had been merciful for her sake. She wouldn’t know how to take that gracefully. Besides, it can be very bad for a vampire’s reputation, you know, showing mercy."

"I didn’t realize," Harry said, staring suspiciously at Le Clair.

"Yes. After all the considerations I have shown you, I’m sure there’s talk I’ve gone soft, lost my edge, that I’ve become one of those batty old vamps who wander around sipping cooking sherry, and wearing out-of-date clothes while they fade slowly into non-existence."

"How awful for you."

"I may have to go mangle a couple Londoners to save face among my own kind. We have another gathering planned for the June solstice. If word I’ve gone all soft gets out, I’ll have no end of trouble. I won’t be able to show my face," Le Clair suggested. Harry gave a soft laugh. "I might even have to rough you up a bit now and again, to prove I haven’t gone all sensitive," Le Clair insisted with a sexy hiss. Harry blinked at him in surprise, wondering if Henri was flirting with him.

"I’m very dangerous, you know." Harry narrowed his eyes playfully at Le Clair, lifting his chin and tightening his mouth. Henri chortled and purred at once. He drew himself a couple inches away from Harry, clearing his throat.

Good Boy

Chapter Summary

In which Harry puts homework aside and goes out with Raffles in order to make someone she likes jealous

"I'll help you with your homework if you help me with mine," Raphaella said, rushing into Harry’s room and tossing herself down in a chair.

"No thanks. If you’re in the mood to grope someone, you can go to Knockturn Alley and pay like everyone else does."

"I was not groping you. It’s not my fault you have two left feet. How can you fly so well and dance so badly? Did you read this morning’s Prophet?"

"Yes," Harry replied sourly. Raphaella rocked back, laughing.

"You mean you’re not summoning Dark Magic Forces in order to uncover hidden dragon hoards around Scotland?"

"No, I’m not," Harry huffed. "Those people wouldn't recognize Dark Magic Forces if they were marked and hand-delivered by post."

"You ought to write the Prophet a letter and complain about their coverage of you," she told him. "Of course, if you can uncover a couple more dragon hoards, you could buy the Daily Prophet outright and be rid of the meddling bastards. That’s what Uncle Henri thinks you should do."

"Yes. He told me."

"Did you figure out where the gold came from?"

"All over the Roman Empire."

"You found a stash of Roman gold? Probably tribute from the local tribes then. That would explain the crown. How disappointing. Only Roman gold. I thought there was a dragon skeleton and everything."

"Not that the Headmaster said. He contacted the Gringotts goblins and asked them to supervise the removal of the gold without disturbing any more of the landscape around the abbey. He didn’t mention anything about a dragon skeleton."

"Can you believe nothing that’s printed in the Daily Prophet?"

"Trashy gossip rag," he pouted. "Shove off, Raffles. I’ve got two essays to write before Thursday."

"That’s what I get for my troubles. A rude shove off?"

"Where’s Henri and Illumina?"

"She’s taken him out for dinner and long talk. An overdue talk."
"Uh oh."

"I suspect the evening will end in a ball of flames, but who am I to say? Oh, look. You combed your hair."

"I tried a new potion on it," Harry said, running his fingers experimentally through the somewhat mannered locks.

"It’s shiny," Raphaella said, coming over to his desk and standing behind him in order to massage his scalp with her long nails. "It smells odd," she decided, sniffing at him.

"What? Is that supposed to be flattering?"

"Do you have a list of the ingredients somewhere?" she asked. Harry moved pages around the desktop, shuffling parchments until he located the one he wanted.

"There," he said, lifting it up to her. "Will you leave me be?" he demanded. She detracted her claws from his hair in order to read the page he had given her. Harry glanced over one shoulder when Raphaella started to giggle. By the time she finished reading, she was sitting on the end of the bed howling, and Harry was worried.

"Here," she squealed, giving the parchment back.

"What?" Harry blushed.

"Sit. Stay. Good boy." She patted the top of his head.

"What?"

"Did you read the top of the page before you tried the potion? For shiny coat and healthy skin."

"Yes. Just what I need."

"Where did you find this?" Raffles whispered.

"Crumbled up on the floor of Sirius’s room when Henri and I went to the house. Why do you ask?"

"It’s a potion for improving your dog’s fur."

"Really?"

"Better get those glasses checked, Potter."

"Dog’s fur?"

"Dog’s fur."

"Hmm. That goes a long way in explaining why I want to chase cars and lick my balls," Harry murmured.

"Lovely mental image. Thank you so much."

"What kind of homework could you possibly have, Miss Happy Feet?" Harry frowned at her, tilting his head backwards. Raphaella stood behind him again, reading his parchment.

"Madam Juarez was very specific. We are to dance at least two hours a night."
"Oh, how very trying for you. How do you keep up?"

"I'm bored. The dance class is fun. I already went through Uncle Henri’s financial ledgers and rebalanced them for him. And I went through his personal bank accounts and rebalanced them. What are you working on? History. Dull. ‘A comparative study of acceptable forms of social interaction among differing cultures, using house elves and humans as examples’? How about a bit of field work?"

"What?"

"Truth is, I need your help."

"Why?"

"There’s someone in my class I want to see at work."

"At the office? You’re off tonight, aren’t you? Henri said the paint has to dry, and the bogs need to be delivered."

"At his work."

"Ah ha. It’s a him. It is Spring, and love is in the air, and young vampires are on the wing, so to speak."

"He's actually not a vampire. He works some nights at a little place over near Edgware."

"In London?"

"Yes. In a bar. Trouble is, I can’t get in alone."

"Why not?"

"It’s couples night."

"Take a girlfriend. You’ll be all the rage."

"Not my cup of tea. Besides, same sex couples are not allowed."

"Discrimination!"

"My point is that those under transfiguration spells will be promptly ejected. Don’t make me beg, Harry."

"I don’t follow."

"Shall I be plain? I can’t get in unless I am accompanying or wearing a penis."

"Are you asking to borrow my cock?"

"It continues to be a man’s world, Mr. Potter. Sad but true."

"I’m willing to lend it if you bring it back when you’re done with it."

"I want to make Jeremy jealous. You are the perfect bait."

"How is that?"
"You're adorable. He despises you. Says you're a fraud and a charlatan."

"Must be he subscribes to the Daily Prophet," Harry murmured bitterly.

"It will make him insane to see you with me."

"You do know how to make an evening sound appealing."

"I try."

"I'll go, but it's going to cost you."

"Wait. Did you or did you not just uncover a hoard of Roman gold?"

"Yes, but that's for other, more important plans."

"Is it a nest egg? You plan to retire someday?" she teased. "What has happened to the whole 'have to kill the Dark Lord or die trying' fatalistic boy we know and love so well?"

"I'm still fatalistic, but there's nothing that says I can't think about the future. It's actually going towards something else though."

"What?"

"Henri suggested rebuilding my house in Hogsmeade, and I thought, well, since Voldemort has torched Hogsmeade twice because of me, and it's more than enough gold to rebuild the whole thing, and I'm not the only one who lost a house and stuff, why stop with just my house when I can help other people rebuild too? We can redo all of Hogsmeade in style with all that gold."

"Maybe you'll be lucky and they'll rename it Potterville."

"Oh, very funny."


"Hogsmeade. End of story."

"All right, you philanthropist you. If you go, I'll buy you a drink."

"You buy me lots of drinks, and you get to tell Le Clair why we're not here when he gets home."

"I don't know if we should do this. If anyone sees you drinking in public, the club could lose its liquor license."

"Excuse me. If I'm going to be masquerading as your boyfriend for the evening, you will be buying me at least one drink."

"You can have a few sips off mine. Come on then. Let's take your shiny coat and healthy skin out for a walk. Good boy!"
In which Harry gets a little first-hand experience in the wizard criminal justice system

"All rise for the Honorable Magistrate Mab Strangefolk."

Bodies snapped to attention around Harry, and he rose as well, shaking the fog from his head. Just when he thought he would be able to focus, things went blurry and he returned to the self-same weird, disoriented, floating feeling beyond which hours disappeared. The medium-sized man who stood next to him gave him a reassuring smile. He wore a very flattering dark suit, and had a warm manner that Harry found calming. His curly brown hair bobbed back and forth as he moved.

"Be seated," a voice commanded. Harry understood they were in a court room, but he wasn’t sure where, or why. He had a vague recollection of awakening in a white bed in a blue room, with two Aurors (two of the biggest, strongest men Harry had ever seen in his life save Hagrid) standing at the foot of the bed, watching around the room but not looking at him. Had that been a few minutes ago? He wasn’t sure. He had bathed and been given clean clothes which were a perfect fit if a bit more formal than he was accustomed to wearing. It took several minutes of staring down at himself for Harry to realize he was wearing a wizard suit. Once Harry was dressed, the Aurors had allowed the brown haired man into his room, but there had been other voices shouting in the hallway, other people trying to get in as well. The brown haired man had brought Harry here to the courtroom in a violent flash of apparition which had stupefied him. Harry shook himself. People around him took their seats and concentrated on the woman in the dark robe in the high bench before them. He followed suit.

"The defendant will rise," called out the squat man to the right of the high bench. The man next to Harry stood and pulled Harry upright once more.

"Case Number 7415234. Mab Strangefolk presiding," the judge said. A young woman down to her left scratched away on her tablet. She must be the court reporter. The judge pulled on a pair of glasses and frowned down at the folder in her grip. "Counsel for the defense?" she said, annoyed. "Please introduce yourself for the court."

"Mr. Morley Mahoney Hemlock of Honeydew, Hollyhock, Hemlock and Associates, Advocate for the defense, if it pleases the court."

"Counsel for the prosecution?" the judge called out.

"Mr. Arch Hawkins for the state, if it pleases the court."

Harry glanced over at the same instant that Hemlock did, and Harry couldn’t fail to take in the glimmer of worry that went through Hemlock when he faced the competition eye to eye. Harry understood fully. Hawkins was ram-rod straight, and thin as a starved hound, exceedingly arrogant in bearing, and had a frown etched into his granite-hard face. The color of his suit matched his long hair, somewhere between dark gray and dark brown, and it gave him the appearance of an upright, snarling whippet.
"The counsel for the prosecution will state his full name for the record, please," the judge persisted.

"Mr. Arch Hawkins. Arch, as in enemy."

"Mr. Hawkins will state his full name for the record, please."


"Mr. Hawkins will state his occupation as well." The courtroom sensed that the judge was toying with Hawkins. There were titters of excitement and amusement from the very brave.

"Advocate for the state’s position."

"Mr. Hawkins will state his full occupation, or he will leave this court."

"Advocate for the state’s position, and Minister of Morality."

"Thank you, Mr. Hawkins.

"You’re welcome."

"The court is honored by the presence of the Minister of Morality."

The judge went back to reading the folder in her grip. Harry blinked and shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around this. Hemlock offered him a glass of water from the table. Did Harry look thirsty? Harry drank the water and gave back the glass. Hemlock patted his arm in a comforting manner.

"Counselors for both sides will approach the bench," Strangefolk said. The court reporter put down her quill, and gaped at Harry with curiosity and warmth. He could feel her reassuring him from a distance. He shyly ducked his head, and then ventured a glance behind himself. The galley of the court room was filled clear to the ceiling, with faces that were blurry and faces that were semi-clear. Harry spotted Professor Dumbledore sitting next to a person cloaked from head to toe in black. At this distance, it could have been a dementor next to Dumbledore, for all Harry could tell. Where were his glasses? He could tell Dumbledore was frowning though, without or without his glasses. The Headmaster’s fury and fear were palpable.

"I don’t understand your point, Judge," Hawkins was saying sharply. Harry snapped back around. Hemlock took Harry’s glasses off the table and handed them to him. Harry slipped them on, and the world became more focused for him.

"Mr. Hawkins, my case before this was a wizard who hacked up his children and ate them with peas and carrots. The case after this is a witch who hypnotized her entire coven and made them hand over their life savings to her. I want to know why I’m going from cold-blooded murder, to public drunkenness, to grand theft. Why is this case on my list today?"

"I asked for you specifically, Judge."

"Why, Mr. Hawkins?"

"To bear out the seriousness of Mr. Potter’s actions, the reports of which you are able to read for yourself. You are known for your objectivity."

"You asked for me specifically to hear Mr. Potter’s case. How nice," she said, as if the task were
anything but.

"I will provide more eye-witness accounts, if it pleases the court."

"Mr. Hawkins, you couldn’t please this court with a private lap dance and a bottle of tequila. The counselors may return to their places. Mr. Potter will please approach the bench so that I may have a better look at him."

Hemlock made his way to his chair and motioned for Harry to step around the table to get closer to the judge. Hawkins brushed past Harry with a growl of fury. Harry walked shakily forward and stood where Hemlock had indicated, folding his arms in front of his stomach and lifting his head to view the judge. She glanced around the folder, read a bit more, turned a page or two, and put the folder down. Judge Strangefolk took a calming breath and looked long and hard at Harry. He held perfectly still, yet worried he might be swaying with the dizzy fog dancing in his brain. Huffing her impatience, the judge stood up from her chair.

"The court will recess for one hour, while I question Mr. Potter, his guardian, and both counselors in my chambers. I will return after that hour, when I will give my verdict in this matter to be entered into official record. Court is temporarily adjourned."

The squat man to the judge’s right came forward and motioned for Harry to follow him. Hemlock was at Potter’s side in an instant, guiding him to follow the bailiff. Hawkins brushed past them and into the judge’s private chambers, burning anger like a roman candle.

Although she had been the first to leave the court, Judge Strangefolk was the last to enter her private chambers. She was about to close the door and end the glaring sessions taking place between Hawkins and Hemlock, when a figure in black knocked on the closing portal. She turned around and cleared her throat.

"Bailiff, please escort this person back to the courtroom," she said to the squat man standing right outside the door.

"You did say you wished Mr. Potter’s guardian to be present."

Harry recognized Le Clair’s voice, and sagged with relief. But where was Professor Dumbledore?

"Of course," the judge agreed, ushering the cloaked figure into the room.

"Could you draw the shades?" Le Clair requested. The squat man walked around the private room, closing them in near darkness. Henri lowered the cowl off his head and face, and peeled off his mask. "Thank you again."

"Gentlemen, please take a seat," the judge ordered, sitting down in one herself. Hemlock and Hawkins were gaping in alarm at Le Clair. But the judge was more than relaxed. Harry supposed she spent all day seeing murderers and criminals, so one gentile vampire wasn’t enough to frighten her. Was she already familiar with Harry’s contract with Le Clair? She held Mr. Potter’s folder in her lap as the bailiff lit a candle and brought it to her, standing beside her and casting light about the room. "Hawkins, I’m going to have your ass on a platter for interrupting my day this way," she warned as she glared at him.

"I do apologize," Hawkins said, giving a slight bow of his head.

"I will make you beg. I will make you crawl," she warned.

"Your Honor is too kind," Hawkins replied.
"Now, to the case at hand. Mr. Potter, do you know why you’re here?"

"No, ma’am," Harry whispered.

"Of course you don’t. Let me enlighten you. If these apocryphal reports are to be believed, last night you were in the establishment known as Club Dead, where you consumed thirty seven shots of O’Bannon’s Finest Black Label Whiskey. Mr. Potter? How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Not yet old enough to purchase alcohol, which would lead me to believe you did not go into the bar alone."

"No, ma’am," Harry replied, the situation sinking in on him. Where was Raphaella? How had he gotten here? What kind of trouble had he gotten Raffles into? He glanced at Le Clair, but could discover no answers. The vampire was as unreadable as a slab of marble.

"How tall are you, and how much do you weigh?" the judge asked.

"I fail to see why Mr. Potter should need to state his personal characteristics for the judge,"
Hawkins muttered.

"Humor me," Strangefolk smiled through her impatience.

"Five-seven or so, I think," Harry answered.

"He weighs no more than eight or nine stone," Le Clair murmured.

"Yes, I would have to agree," Strangefolk replied. "Hawkins, do you know how much alcohol is in one shot of O'Bannon's?"

"No, I do not, Judge."

"More than enough that if someone of Mr. Potter’s height and weight and we shall assume inexperience at drinking were to consume thirty seven shots thereof, he would be unconscious, if not dead from alcohol poisoning. You can substitute O’Bannon’s for antiseptic in surgery and fire starter in the fireplace. What he allegedly consumed would have made Mr. Potter flammable and germ-free for days."

"I suppose so, Your Honor."

"O’Bannon’s is eighty-proof, Mr. Hawkins. Consuming that much of it would have made Mr. Potter practically bio-hazardous. Are you following what I’m telling you, Hawkins? We can assume that this report about how much Mr. Potter drank is unreliable at the very least, and a bald-faced lie at the very worst, can we not?"

"I cannot prove what he drank because I was not there to serve it to him and I did not watch him drink it," Hawkins retorted.

"The court will grant that whatever Mr. Potter drank, it was more than enough to allow him to become inebriated beyond good sense."

"Thank you," Hawkins whispered. "One small grace."

"But I didn’t drink that much," Harry protested. The judge shot him a dark look, and he immediately shut up.
"Because he did so in public, he did break the laws against public drunkenness, but that sort of offense is not something I usually deal with, nor you, Hawkins," she continued. "What is the meaning of this?"

"If you will continue going through the folder?"

"Why would the Minister of Morality choose to become involved in this case? Surely you have other matters of more urgency than one teenage wizard drunk in public, even if that wizard happens to be The Boy Who Lived."

"If you will continue flipping through the folder, your honor?"

"I will continue to flip through the....oh, my," the judge’s voice rose.

"That is why I took a special interest in this case."

"Where did you get these horrid pictures?" she asked, turning the folder around and around. "My word! Is that your daughter, Hawkins?"

"No, it is not," Hawkins howled back. "She might bear a striking resemblance, but I'm sure...no, it's not my daughter. If it pleases the court, I can only relate that the pictures were secured from an anonymous source."

"A well-placed anonymous source, to be sure. Quite a curious camera angle. Almost as if someone were lower than the floor itself, or viewing them from an upward angle, at the very least. How curious," Strangefolk mused. "If these pictures became general knowledge, Mr. Potter, I dare say your friends would have you bronzed and displayed for posterity."

"Your honor," Hemlock cleared his throat. The judge closed the folder, and stared hard at Harry.

"You find yourself here, Mr. Potter, because you were inebriated in public, and managed to be photographed while fornicating with a young woman in the broom closet of the aforementioned drinking establishment, Club Dead, if these pictures are to be believed."

"Zut alor!" Henri blanched. Potter was beginning to panic now. What in the hell had happened last night? How was he ever going to explain this to Severus? What woman?

"I'm sure Mr. Potter has a good explanation for whatever appears in those photographs," Hemlock started to explain.

"Thank you, Mr. Hemlock. That’s quite enough of that," Strangefolk growled. "Mr. Potter, can I safely assume this is the last time I will find you before me in my court, having been inebriated beyond reason in public and fornicating like an alley cat in a pub house broom closet?"

"Yes, ma’am."

"To say nothing of letting yourself be photographed in the act."

"Yes, ma’am," Harry winced. He didn’t remember anyone with a camera. He did remember a very large pair of breasts, but couldn’t place whose they had been.

"Very well then. The court is releasing Mr. Potter on his own good word to his pro-tem guardian, Mr. Henri Le Clair. I look forward to not seeing so much of you in the future, Mr. Potter."

"The Minister of Magic would like to request, and the Minister of Morality must agree, that Mr.
Potter should be held in custody until the verdict is given in the matter of Mr. Potter’s permanent guardianship, and the matter of his ability to control his magic,” Hawkins motioned.

"Is it Fudge who put this fancy up your kilt?” Strangefolk asked Hawkins. "You raided the place to get your hands on the boy so you could give him to Fudge? How did Fudge know Mr. Potter would be there?"

"You may not hold Mr. Potter if the judge is of the opinion he should be released," Hemlock reminded Hawkins.

"This judge is very much of the opinion that Mr. Potter needs to be gone before the Minister of Magic can waddle down here from his high tower and abuse any more positional power than he already has," Strangefolk said to Harry. "I was informed he spent half the night trying to talk his way into your detention area. Not a man to be trifled with, Cornelius Fudge."

"A thousand blessings on you, Magistrata," Le Clair bowed to the judge and seized hold of Harry’s arm above the elbow.

'I’m going to take him home and scream at him until I’m hoarse,' Le Clair was thinking, and Harry read the thoughts through their contact.

"Mr. Potter should be held here at least until the Minister of Magic can have his say before the court. Judge Strangefolk, I simply must lodge a protest against the rushed ruling in this case,” Hawkins said.

"Yes, and I think you know where you can lodge your protest too, Hawkins,” Strangefolk replied with a bitter smirk.

"It will appear that you are showing rank favoritism in the face of Mr. Potter’s blinding celebrity."

"His blinding celebrity? He’s a terrified sixteen-year-old who can’t remember the last twelve hours of his life. If my sixteen-year-old were in this predicament, I’d want an understanding judge to let me, as his parent, decide what punishment is best. If I’m swayed by anything, it’s pity, not celebrity."

"You’re letting personal judgments interfere with the course of the law."

"Shall I judge him more harshly than I would any other sixteen-year-old defendant with no prior criminal record who appeared before me still under the influence of whatever confundus spell was used on him? Don’t annoy me, Hawkins. I’m in no mood."

"Are we now to let your moods decide our cases for us?" Hawkins prodded. Strangefolk’s blue eyes flared like over-boiled poisons.

"We could let the letter of the law prevail. I should press you further for the source of these pornographic photographs you had ready at hand, acquired, I suspect, by a mirror spell set upon Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced at Le Clair, who was just as shocked to hear this as Harry was. So, Potter decided, Le Clair was clearly not the only one who had a mirror spell focused on him.

"Mr. Hawkins, should I wonder how the Minister of Magic convinced you to take this case out of the juvenile circuit and place it in the criminal circuit? How he persuaded you to take time out from finding pedophiles and child slave brokers and illegal prostitution rings in order to argue against Mr. Potter in this case? Can I ponder for a moment longer as to why the Minister of Magic is using
my courtroom to act out his personal vendetta against a young man who to my knowledge has never done the Minister a moment of harm in his entire life? Was he hoping I would ask for Mr. Potter to be held in custody so he could get his hands on the boy and put him away in some oubliette in St. Mungo’s? I’m not blind, Hawkins, nor am I stupid. I will not be a party to this unseemly crusade Fudge has taken up against Mr. Potter. If it is within my power, I will put a stop to it. How lucky for me that today, it is within my power. Shall I continue, Hawkins, or am I making my point to you?"

"You are making your point to me, Madam Judge."

"Good. Bailiff!"

"Yes, Judge."

"I want the paper contents of this folder sealed inside, with the verdict printed plainly on the front so the folder will not have to be opened for any reason."

"Yes, ma’am."

"It is to be taken to juvenile court, where it will be stored in the files of Judge Audwina Hurley. It would have been her case, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, your honor."

"I also want the photographs taken from the folder and destroyed."

"That’s evidence!" Hawkins bawled.

"Evidence against my client that was illegally obtained through means not entirely explained," Hemlock interjected.

"What part of anonymous is above your comprehension?" Hawkins snipped.

"Yes, it is evidence, and yes, it will be destroyed," Strangefolk interrupted.

"It’s against the law to destroy evidence in a criminal case," Hawkins said.


"I fail to see how."

Strangefolk opened the folder and took out the three photographs inside. She walked over to Harry’s chair and stood before him, showing him the backs of the pictures but not the fronts.

"I’m told you are training as a clairvoyant, Mr. Potter. Would you be able to touch these and tell me who gave them to Mr. Hawkins? Would you be able to tell what spell was used to obtain these photographs?"

"I really must protest." Hawkins shot out of his chair, coming forward to take the photographs out of Harry’s reach before he could touch them.

"I thought you’d see things my way, Arch," the judge laughed darkly, taking the photographs back from Hawkins and putting them in the folder once more before she gave it to the bailiff.

"I’m going to lodge my complaint with the Minister of Law," Hawkins warned.
"You go right ahead," Strangefolk smiled. "He and I are due to have lunch together at noon. We're in discussions to marry my Joseph to his Mariette. We'll be happy to discuss this, at length too. Good day, gentlemen."

Hawkins gathered himself slowly from his chair, muttering all the while. Le Clair whisked Harry to his feet, bowed to Hemlock then to Strangefolk, and hurried Harry for the door. On his way out, Harry heard the exchange between Hawkins and Strangefolk.

"Why are you letting Fudge use you like this, Arch?"

"Yes, why indeed?" Hawkins replied.

"It isn’t like you," Strangefolk complained.

"No, it isn’t, is it?"

"I’m surprised at you, and I’m disappointed."

"I hope I can somehow raise your opinion of me, Mab."

"Try very hard, Arch," she answered. "I am free for dinner this evening."

"As am I. Perhaps I will start with a lap dance. But first I must locate some quality tequila."
Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Raffles try to make sense of the events of his missing hours from the previous night

Chapter Notes

Warning for het sex being mentioned and described briefly in very foggy detail

Aurors surrounded Harry as he was bustled from the courthouse to a waiting car, one he recognized as the shape and size of the one he had been sitting on top of while Henri and Illumina were being married. The back door opened, and Harry was pulled inside by a very powerful hand. Pushing his way through the crowd of reporters mobbing outside the vehicle, Le Clair appeared in the front seat and slammed the door. He took out his wand and touched the windshield. All the windows darkened black as night, and Henri was able to remove his mask once more.

"Buckle yourselves in," he cautioned, starting the engine. Outside the windows, Harry could barely make out the figures of the Aurors as they pushed people back from the car. Le Clair started the engine and hurried away. Harry finally looked down at the hand that was holding his. Albus Dumbledore had a perfect death grip on Harry.

"Perhaps you’d like a bit of privacy in which to chide him?" Le Clair asked.

"No, really, that’s fine," Dumbledore said. Harry sat back nervously in his seat, using one hand to secure himself in safely.

"Is there anything you want to say, sir?" Harry asked without daring to look at the Headmaster.

"I’m not sure what there is I could say right at this moment that would fully indicate how very very close you came last night to getting yourself captured and killed, Mr. Potter. Is there? I am at a loss as to how to convey to you what kind of danger you are in, and how careful you must be. No matter how many years I tell you not to go into the Dark Forest, you can’t help yourself but to traipse in there. This situation is much the same, and my results have been no more promising. There appears to be no way I can stop you from putting yourself in danger. I have no idea how to get through to you. I feel it’s best I not even try. I end up feeling completely foolish. You have me at my wits’ end, Harry."

"I’m sorry, sir," Harry whispered, hiding his chin in his chest.

"Everything is going to be all right. Everyone is fine. The ladies are waiting at the house. Buck up, Potter," Le Clair called.

Harry leaned his face against the window, closing his eyes and longing for Severus. Professor Dumbledore’s hand around his was like a manacle, and the man remained unreadable as his eyes
bored through Potter. Harry didn’t even try to use his clairvoyance. Words drifted down to him as the hum of the engine glowed around him.


Harry drifted away on Dumbledore’s voice, recognizing Snape’s spell with a homesick, forlorn sigh.

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"That was a near thing, Mr. Potter. A very near thing."

Harry nodded, chastised to his core. He glanced around the room they were in, a small sitting parlor with rows of books and a couple comfy chairs. He hadn’t been in this room before. Was it Henri’s private study?

"If I have to tell you one more time to not leave this estate alone, I’m going to chain you in your room," Le Clair warned. Harry nodded meekly again.

"He didn’t leave alone," Raphaella spoke up. "He went out with me because I asked him to help me."

"Which is not going to happen again, is it? There are people trying to kill him, Raphaella. People who would kill you to get to him. I don't want either of you to be in jeopardy, certainly not for something so pointless and stupid as a night out."

"Yes, sir."

"What were you and your friends doing giving him alcohol?"

"He had a sip of whisky and a sip of rum. I don’t know how he got so completely tanked."

"When did he wind up in the closet with Miss Hawkins?"

"I have no idea. I was trying to talk to Jeremy. One second Harry and Hawkins were at the table, and the next second, they were gone. I thought he went to use the restroom or something."

"Where is Miss Hawkins? I want to talk to her."

"Oh, no!" Harry gulped. "She really was the daughter of the Minister of Morality?"

"She’s in my room."

"Bring her down here."

Raphaella streaked out of the room, and pounded up the stairs. Harry rubbed his eyes and longed to know where Dumbledore had gone. The car ride here had been a two hour blissful nap for Potter, but he needed another twelve hours’ sleep before he was going to feel like himself again. Pounding feet erupted in the hallway, and two women entered the room. Raphaella was pushing her friend along, and their exchange stopped when they stood in front of Le Clair.

"Aloha. We meet at last."

"Mr. Le Clair, I wanted to say, I’m really sorry about what happened with Harry, and if we had known what was going to go down, we would have had him out of there in a second."
The young woman didn’t look like a danger to society, or to Harry either one for that matter. She was certainly not the sort of girl who would go around throwing confundus curses at young wizards. She looked around Raphaella’s age, maybe a year younger, and had whippet brown curls around her face. She was also very completely human, with bright brown eyes. She did not, however, have very large breasts, and Harry distinctly recalled being nestled between such creatures for several moments. He rubbed his temples, trying not to stare at Raphaella’s friend.

"Miss Hawkins, how did you and Mr. Potter come to find yourselves in the broom closet?"

"Well, it was one of those things, Mr. Le Clair."

"One of what things?"

"We were dancing. I had a drink or two."

"Were you providing alcohol to a sixteen-year-old with the intention of dragging him into the nearest broom closet?"

"No, not expressly."

"He’s six years your junior. I’m sure you could find a young man more appropriate to your age, can’t you?"

"Yes, well, no one nearly as charming and sweet."

"If the Aurors who raided that place for underage drinkers had found you in that closet together, you’d’ve still been in the high court. Giving alcohol with the intention of seduction is a criminal offense, Miss Hawkins, as you should well know, given who your father is."

"Harry had one sip of each drink. He didn’t have enough to get drunk. There’s no way he got drunk from how much he drank!"

"Unless it’s the Peaceable that Dumbledore mentioned," Le Clair said, mostly to himself. "Why were you even there at Club Dead? It’s not like there aren’t bottles upon bottles of alcohol around here if you wanted a drink."

"We were there so Raffles could talk to Jeremy," Hawkins said.

"Jeremy? Who is Jeremy?" Henri snipped at Raphaella.

"From dance class," Raffles said.

"I don’t remember a Jeremy," Henri defended.

"You called him Slack-Jaw most of the night."

"Oh, him. Oh, Christ! You were out flirting with that caveman?"

"Can we focus here?" Raphaella asked.

"We are focusing. You two young ladies will solemnly swear not to go dragging Mr. Potter out to bars, not to get him drunk, and certainly in the unlikely event the other two occur in a realm out of your control, you will never again allow him to fornicate in public with complete strangers. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Raffles replied.
"Yes, sir," her friend echoed.

"I’m going to go find Illumina and the Headmaster, and escort Professor Dumbledore back to Hogwarts. Maybe you’d like to introduce Harry to your friend. I doubt he recalls much of last night. Perhaps you can jog his memory."

Le Clair left the parlor, closing the door. Harry glanced nervously at Raffles, who glared daggers at Aloha. Her friend came over to Harry and stuck out her hand.


"He’s adorable, and he’s very friendly," the friend smiled, winking at him.

"Your name is Aloha?" Harry questioned dimly. She lit up, moving to hug him.

"Yeah, my mum's idea. When I was born, she didn't know if she was coming or going. Apparently she settled for going, because she left a year later."

"Sorry," Harry whispered.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I got you in trouble," she said, squeezing him tight.

"Will you stop mauling him? It’s embarrassing," Raphaella protested. "How could you sleep with Harry? He’s sixteen! You’re practically 30!"

"I’m 22!" Aloha howled.

"When your father finds out what happened," Raphaella warned her.

"He already knows," Harry added. Aloha sucked in a quick breath.

"Fuck."

"I can't believe you mauled Harry," Raffles repeated.

"I’m sorry, okay?" Aloha added, letting go of Harry but straightening his hair for him. Raphaella made a face at her.

"No. It’s not okay. And you, you!" She crossed her arms and glared at Harry. He bowed his head. "We’ve got more important things to worry about," she huffed, changing her mind. "We have to figure out who took those dirty pictures of you two," Raphaella said, pacing back and forth with a determined expression.

"We could ask Jeremy if he knows," Aloha suggested.

"Yes, he’s sure to be a big help, isn’t he?"

"It’s not our fault he got fired."

"No."

"The Minister of Morality raids the club where he works and drags away all underage people drinking without permission, and he gets fired, and you don’t think that’s our fault?"
"No. Harry wasn’t the only one drinking who shouldn’t have been. You don’t think Jeremy spiked the drinks, do you?"

"Probably did, rat bastard. I wouldn’t be shocked to find out he’s the one that confunded Harry. How did the Minister of Morality know we were there?" Raphaella questioned, examining Harry with one eye.

"I did not tell him where I was going last night," Aloha defended. "Where did he get pictures?" she wondered.

"Harry, do you remember anything helpful?" Edmundo asked, concern coloring her pale face. Harry shook his head no, believing that to tell the truth in this situation was very likely to get him slapped in the face.

"Is it true the pictures were from inside the closet?" Aloha blushed. Harry nodded even though he wasn’t sure. But logic did dictate that pictures from outside the closet wouldn’t have been nearly as revealing. Raphaella took out her wand.

"Harry, hold very still."

"No, no, no, stop, stop, stop," Harry protested, finding his voice at last when Raphaella raised her wand at him.

"It won’t hurt a bit," she soothed. "I’m going to find out who is watching you."

"No, Don’t you dare," Harry insisted firmly. "I’m tired of people zapping at me. One flick and you’re toast."

"I don’t blame you. What if she missed?" Aloha winced. Harry couldn’t bring himself to look at her. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he felt a fragment of last night go through his mind.

‘Harry. Very impressive. Good Goddess! So nice. I bet you’ll feel wonderful inside,’ she whispered, mouthing against his ear.

"We’ve got to find someone to remove whatever jinx is on you," Raphaella said.

"Does anyone know a witch doctor?" Aloha suggested. The sound of her voice was shaking memories loose in Harry’s head. He ventured a look at Aloha, and she gave him a sly smile.

A tongue slid along his cock, hands lowered his trousers. Lust was burning off the young woman he was with. He had had his eyes closed, and was thinking about Severus, imagining Snape’s hands in his clothes and his mouth around his cock. Someone laid down against him on the cold, wooden floor, and pulled him up inside themselves into warm, wet heat. A mouth latched onto Harry’s neck and sucked as two bodies moved together on instinct.

"Harry, you look pale. Do you want some tea?" Raphaella asked.

"Yes, please."

Raphaella waved her wand at a table next to Harry’s chair. A tea cup appeared, filled with steaming liquid.

"Were you with Harry the entire time he was in the broom closet?" Edmundo asked Hawkins.

"Yes."
"Sure?"

"Quite sure," Aloha nodded, annoyed. "There was no one with a camera. There wasn’t proper room for the two of us."

"It had to be a mirror spell. Someone has him under surveillance, and they're taking pictures of him," Raphaella decided.

"What are we going to do?" Aloha asked.

"If we could get our hands on those photos, we could tell if they are fake, or who they were made by. Illumina would be able to tell in a minute," Raphaella nodded.

"The judge ordered them to be destroyed," Harry said.

"Thank God," Aloha whispered.

"Maybe it was all a dream," Harry pondered.

"Why do you think that?" Raphaella wanted to know.

"I remember very large...." Harry lifted his hands in front of himself in imitation of breasts.

"Oh, no. You didn’t," Raphaella accused Aloha before Harry finished his garbled, hesitant sentence.

"What?"

"You promised you wouldn’t."

"What?"

"I should have never taught you that spell."

"What?" Aloha whined.

"What?" Harry echoed quietly.

"Show him," Raphaella insisted. Aloha looked at the door, then back at Harry. Before his very eyes, her normal-sized breasts ballooned outward and upward. He began to relax. As Aloha’s breasts shrank again to a normal size, Raphaella rolled her eyes. Harry took a sip of tea and tried not to smile.

"That is so dishonest," Raffles chided Aloha.

"What? You’ve never done that to impress someone?"

"Any chance we could get our hands on those photos before they’re destroyed?" Raffles asked Harry.

"No. I doubt it. Judge Strangefolk wanted to them destroyed right away."

"Potter, we need to make sure you’re not under a dark spell. We should see your doctor, make sure you’re all right," Raphaella said.

"Maybe he’s not really Harry. They could have switched him while he was being held at the
detention center," Aloha suggested, staring hard at him suddenly.

"He had a guard on him the entire time. More than one Auror, if I’m not mistaken. Very big Aurors."

"The Aurors could have been switched too, or paid off."

"He’s Harry."

"How do you know?"

"Yes, how do you know?" Potter asked.

"If I tell you how I know, then my secret is out. He’s Harry. Trust me."

"How do you know he’s Harry?" Aloha asked. "I want to know."

"He smells right."

"What?"

"He smells right."

"You know what Harry is supposed to smell like?"

"Yes. Hyperactive senses, vampire traits, remember?" Raffles said, pointing her wand at the tip of her nose.

"You could tell if someone wasn’t who they said they were if you knew what they were supposed to smell like?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I’m a veritable blood hound."

"What do I smell like?"


"But I took a shower. I cleaned up."

"You still smell like you."

"Spent a bit of time memorizing him, have you?" Aloha whispered cattily.

"What?" Raffles hissed.

"Nothing," Aloha grinned.

"Harry, let’s owl your doctor and see if she’s awake."
Ravensrood

Chapter Summary

In which Harry visits Doctor Mesarik at Orpheus Snape's home, and Severus find out exactly how to get Harry to talk non-stop

Chapter Notes

Warning for medical procedure hinted at but not discussed in detail

"Shall we begin?"

Harry went tense as Doctor Mesarik approached him. She stopped two feet away, holding back her wand.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asked. "I hope you don’t mind meeting me here at Ravensrood."

"No," Harry said, voice rising.

"I’m sorry I couldn’t meet with you yesterday, but in light of things, I’m sure you understand why."

"He understands, Timma. At least we’re not at Upside."

"Upside?"

"That's the estate that Mesarik sold," Timma replied to Harry.

"A much too bright and shiny place for the Snapes," Orpheus smiled. "Too many windows. Too much light. We're sensitive to light, you know."

"Grandfather, I’m sure Mr. Potter would be much more relaxed if you would leave the room."

"I shall be silent as the grave. You won’t know I am here."

"Grandfather. Leave the room. Please."

"No. I want him to stay," Potter insisted.

"Harry, what’s wrong?"

"I suspect he doesn’t believe you are who you say you are," Orpheus said mischievously. He sidled around Timma’s arm and sat down beside Harry on the divan where the boy was perched, assuming the same tight pose. The room itself was a large place lined with several, grand french doors and about thirty-odd settees, divans, couches, davenports, and chaise-lounges of varied assortments. It reeked of furniture polish. Harry saw the small heads of house elves bobbing up and down, hard at work at the far end of the room away from him. Hands and fingers brandishing
shining cloths came and went as quick as dancing spiders.

"Would you go pester Rowena?" Timma asked Orpheus.

"She is entertaining Mr. and Mrs. Le Clair and the charming young lady that accompanied Mr. Potter. One can hardly blame Harry for being unsure of you, having heard what he has heard. I know you're you, but you're going to have to prove to Mr. Potter that you are you."

"I understand that this incident might make you nervous, Harry, but I promise you that I am myself," Doctor Mesarik said.

"Tell me again what happened yesterday, from the beginning," Harry requested.

"If you wish, of course I will," Timma replied, putting away her wand and scooting a red and brown plaid over-sized chair close enough to see him face to face.

"Give me your hand," he added.

"Now you’re on the hot seat," Orpheus mused as Timma slid her fingers into Harry’s grip.

"I arrived home from St. Mungo’s at six, to find that my apartment had been ransacked, my patient notes and case records stolen, my potions and ingredients destroyed. Because I did not feel safe at home, I picked up Dreddy from the sitter, and came straight here to Grandfather’s place," Timma recited.

"Do you know who broke into your home?"

"No."

"But you suspect it’s connected with Toadvine’s disappearance?"

"You haven’t heard, have you? The Board of Governors kept it out of the papers. Toadvine is no longer missing. He was found dead in Margin Alley Thursday last. He had been hiding out there under an assumed name, beneath a glamoire spell so strong he had half-melted his own face away."

"How did he die?" Harry asked.

"We can safely rule out suicide."

"Why is that?"

"His head was found across the room from his body."

"Decapitated," Orpheus whispered to Harry. "Cut clean through."

"McNair," Harry murmured distantly, remembering the keen edge the executioner kept on his blade at all times.

"I told you he’d know who did it!" Orpheus whispered to Timma. "This boy is a treasure beyond price."

"Can you think of no way I can prove to you who I am?"

"Where is your husband buried?" Harry asked. Timma blushed with shame.

"The frog pond," she sighed.
Orpheus cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his head as he ducked down. He crossed one leg over the other, hiding a grimace.

"Actually, no. I moved him," the elderly Snape admitted.

"What?!" Timma gasped.

"I wasn’t going to leave Horace in the frog pond. It was undignified, and stupid. The investigators would have to be brain-dead not to search there. I moved him for you. Don’t worry. He’s in a perfectly safe place where no one is going to search for a dead body."

"You moved him?!" Timma growled. "Where?"

"I can’t tell you where. Sorry."

"Where?!"

"Sugar, I don’t remember."

"How long ago did you move him?"

"It’s been several months."

"Grandfather! How could you do this and not tell me?"

"You had enough on your mind with a new baby and all the work you’re doing. Speaking of which, now that we know Toadvine is not coming back, I expect you to apply for his position."

"He’s not even cold yet. It would be unseemly."

"Nonsense. It’s time a Snape was in charge of St. Mungo’s again. The entire place is going to Hell in a handbasket."

"Doogan or Fergus could apply."

"You outshine both of your brothers. They would never be granted an interview if the board of governors knew you were interested. I want a Snape handling St. Mungo’s, a Snape with more than half a brain. It’s time the place was put back in proper order."

"Can we discuss this later?"

"No. I want you to promise you will apply to run St. Mungo’s."

"If it makes you happy, I will apply."

"Wonderful! It will make me very proud."

"Can I get on with Mr. Potter’s examination now?"

"If that’s all right with Mr. Potter," Orpheus said, giving Harry a testing glance. "Uh oh. He’s reading you," the elderly Snape decided from the smile on Potter’s face. Harry shook himself, letting go of Timma’s hand.

"You tried to give Severus a used lolly?" Harry asked, smiling yet.

"I’ll be right outside the room if she sprouts horns or spits venom at you," Orpheus said, patting
Harry quickly on the knee before standing up and striding away. He paused by the house elves polishing furniture and made them come with him as well.

"Lie down and I will do a scan spell on you," Timma said, stroking through Harry’s locks.

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Severus was in his sixth year Potions class, ignoring the daily death-glare he was receiving from Ron Weasley. At first it had annoyed him. Now he was beginning to find some humor in the way Weasley’s brows burrowed together, and how red the boy stayed the entire time he was in Potions. When the strange tingling started in Severus’s toes, he did his best to ignore the sensations, to carry on with his lecture. Had Ron somehow perfected his death-glare? Was it actually beginning to work?

"The rosemary that you use must be of the highest quality for the potion to reach the desired potency."

He paused, shaking and twisting his left foot when the tingling turned into a stabbing pain.

"Professor, are you all right?"

Severus felt himself thrown down with a horrible suddenness, and knew beyond a doubt that the screams he was hearing belonged to Harry. Snape was on his feet with his wand drawn. He used a flashing jolt of magic to illuminate the dark room in which he found himself.

"Lumos Maximus!"

Harry’s screams were drowned out by those of Henri Le Clair’s. A balloon of darkness fought with Snape’s light spell. The balloon was hovering over a divan, in a room stuffed with furniture that Severus recalled seeing often as a small boy. The shades had all been drawn, and the daylight blocked out, but he recognized the furniture and its weird layout pattern nonetheless.

"SEVERUS! Turn off that spell!"

Doctor Mesarik’s voice rang out, and Snape obeyed at once. He put away his wand and came forward to the divan where Le Clair and Timma were trying to hold Harry and keep him from hurting himself. The boy was caught in a seizure or a fit of some sort, and was thrashing and shivering. Le Clair stuffed a wand crossways between Harry’s teeth to keep him from swallowing his tongue. When Snape scooped both arms around Harry, Le Clair and Timma let go. Potter went limp in Snape’s grip, echoing terrified whimpers and moans.

"What is going on here!?" Snape shouted at the other two. Timma made a dim light glow from the tip of her wand, and Le Clair moved back, still smoldering from Snape’s spell moments ago. Severus pulled the wand from between Harry’s teeth and cradled him close. He let the wet object drop to the seat cushions, amazed at the deep indentations created by Potter’s teeth. He understood that Harry must have pulled him here because he felt in danger. Harry had yanked him out of class and brought him here to Ravensrood? How had Harry gotten here?

"At least it wasn’t a manticore this time," Timma was laughing.
"I want an explanation," Severus demanded, locking his arms around Harry.

"I was examining Harry."

"Yes, clearly!"

"I’m afraid he’s under a Mallus Umbrus," Timma whispered.

"Impossible!"

"I have to consult a couple texts in the library. Can you sit with him until I return?"

"Certainly."

Timma’s dim light spell disappeared and her footsteps trailed away. A distant door opened and closed. Le Clair’s red eyes were the only light in the room now. He was glaring at Snape in annoyance.

"Must you always cast light spells when you’re about? I’ll be seeing spots for a week. A few more seconds and I would have been crispy."

"Baby. Baby," Harry was mumbling. Severus stopped glaring back at Le Clair and ducked down to whisper against Harry’s cheek.

"I’m here. You’re all right."

"Baby," Harry mumbled. Le Clair’s eyes blinked and stretched out into thin lines. He was raising his wand. Harry stiffened in Severus’s arms, arching upwards and crying out as a green glow enveloped him.

"What in the hell are you doing?!" Snape howled at Le Clair.

"I don't want your cousin to know that I had a mirror spell on Mr. Potter so I could watch him. If she finds out, she may not understand. I'm afraid my spell may be interfering with the Mallus Umbrus, if there is one."

"She wasn’t even sure. Mirror spell? Why did you put one of those on Harry?"

"So I could find him if he got lost."

Henri lowered his wand. Harry deflated from his arched position and coiled up in Snape’s arms, mumbling incoherently.

"Baby, baby, baby."

"I’m here," Severus replied. Le Clair smirked, putting his wand down into Severus’s line of sight.

"He’s not talking to you," Henri clarified, tapping Snape on the arm.

"Is he talking to you?" Severus snapped.

"Somehow he’s under the mistaken impress that he’s pregnant."

"Mallus Umbrus can be confused with certain fertility spells," Severus paled.

"Good. I see you’re not as naive about the spell as your cousin pretended to be."
"It’s not possible. Harry can’t be pregnant."

"You’d better hope he’s not," Le Clair put in.

***

Harry opened his eyes at the touch on his shoulder. He was in a happy, warm place, and his half-lidded eyes showed it. Harry felt himself being laid out on a tall surface—too tall to be a bed. He relaxed, nestling into the strange, sponge-like material under him.

"I should have mentioned the necessity of removing his clothes," Doctor Mesarik murmured somewhere behind him.

"I didn’t know you planned to do that thorough of an examination," Severus was saying.

"It’s only prudent that we examine him very thoroughly, under the circumstances," Timma answered.

"Shouldn’t I leave the room?"


"But I shouldn’t...not proper..."

"Severus, get over here and help. Harry?"

Potter opened his eyes and focused slowly on the source of the soft, gentle voice.

"Mm hm?"

"Severus and I need to remove your clothes. Please don’t turn us into newts."

"Clothes?" Harry worried.

"I need to examine you."

Harry frowned. "No."

"Harry, don’t be afraid," Severus whispered, his face appearing right in front of Potter. "Nothing to worry about," Snape promised. Reassured, Harry closed his eyes. When he surfaced again, he was lying on his stomach, and the room was considerably more breezy. But he felt warm and secure, strangely. There was no reason to worry. Severus was right. He decided he could drift for a while in this feeling.

"Of all the people I’ve had in this position, he is by far the chattiest," Timma was saying with dry amusement to someone else. "Forget about Veritaserum. The next time I want to know someone’s deep dark secrets, I’m going to undress them and give them Soothe-a-spine."

"It’s very likely the effects move up the spine as well as down," Severus said. "You may have numbed part of his brain, likely the center for verbal expression."

Harry puzzled. Had he been talking the whole time? Why were Severus and Timma standing behind him?

"Because while I could, in theory, reach what I need to examine from your other end, it would be a
far more unpleasant journey for the both of us," Doctor Mesarik said. Harry decided he really
didn’t need to know that, and was pretty sure he said so, because Snape laughed again.

"Relax, Harry. It’s all right. She’s almost done. Would you like for me to keep talking? You seem
to find it very relaxing."

Hadn’t McGonagall said he could sing? That was something Harry would like to hear.

"No. I will not sing for you," Severus told him as Timma laughed.

"Go on. He won't remember if you do."

"No."

What Harry really wanted suddenly was to be lying naked on a beach somewhere, enjoying sand
and water and sun and sky, maybe with one of those tropical drinks with a small umbrella in it. He
felt all warm and sticky and aroused. Maybe some kind of sex would be nice too, sex that didn’t
involve pain and humiliation and sucking Lucius Malfoy’s cock.

"Poor love," Timma murmured.

"I understand fully," Severus soothed, stroking Harry’s shoulder. "This summer perhaps you can
take a holiday at the shore. I haven’t been to the beach since I was small, that one summer
traveling with my mother."

Harry imagined for a moment that there was a hand on the small of his back rubbing in a slow
circle. He tensed and protested. Snape’s face appeared next to him, concerned.

"Harry, are you comfortable? Tell me when you can feel my hand? Here? Here? Right here?"

There was a palm on Harry’s left shoulder. It moved lower, lower, about to the small of his back
before it vanished. Timma’s face appeared, serious and worried. Her hand was covered with a
bloody glove. She hid her hand from him when she realized his eyes were open.

"Harry, I need to secure you with a binding spell. I don’t want you to move. Don’t worry. I promise
it will be all right. Do you understand?"

Harry whimpered, and his eyes searched around. Severus came into view as Timma went away.
Harry closed his eyes and whimpered again. He wanted to reach out but his hands wouldn’t move.

"Shh," Severus whispered, touching a kiss to his cheek and covering his upper back with a blanket.
"Don’t worry, Harry. Everything is going to be fine. Don’t you worry. No one is going to hurt you.
I’ll take care of you. Everything is going to be fine. It’s all right, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes and stayed hidden under the arm that moved around his shoulders. He didn’t
care any more. He realized on some level that this was taking far too long to be a simple
examination. Timma was doing something back there– a pretty unpleasant something if Severus
had had to feel how far up Harry’s body he was numb. A cold, nasty, horrible feeling went through
Harry with a shudder of panic and fear. He wondered if he were screaming, and what he might be
screaming about.
In which Harry soaks in a tub of hot water, and sulks and frets

Chapter Notes

Warning - in spite of what Harry fears, this is not about to turn into an mpreg story - promise!

Harry sat in the tub of water, arms curled around his knees. It was a very ornate, ancient bath, with shiny brass faucets and a high marble sides that was nearly perfect for leaning on for a good mope. He was staring at his reflection as it bobbed and wandered around the silvery water. He should draw more hot water--he was shivering from the chill in his bones. Raising a hand, he turned the faucet, letting hot water pour into his bath. It did much to soothe his aching limbs. As for his aching head, that would take more time. He sniffed, shifted his sore backside, and put his head down on his knees. A knock on the bathroom door was shortly followed by the turn of the knob. Harry reached for his wand and his glasses, hiding himself down in the tub as far as he could scrunch.

"Are you alive?" Severus asked, entering the room walking backwards.

"Yes."

"Are you ready to get out of there?"

"No."

"Are you touching yourself?"

"No," Harry replied with an awkward sniffler-laugh.

"I was worried what was taking so long. I should have known you were having a sulk."

"I’m not sulking."

"Do you plan on a good long sulk, or do you feel you may be done soon?"

"I’m not sulking. I don’t sulk."

"You spent the better part of fifth year in a sulk as I recall. Perhaps you should learn to channel your energy in more constructive ways."

"If I want a sulk, I’ll have one."

"Mr. Potter, you’ve been in here an hour. That’s a long enough sulk. Save some negative energy."
Someone else might need to have a sulk later."

"Is he all right?" Le Clair called from out in the bedroom that was attached to the bathroom.

"He’s fine," Snape answered.

"I’m not fine," Harry squeaked, struggling not to shout or cry.

"Your doctor said you are perfectly fine."

"I’m pregnant!"

"You’re not pregnant," Severus murmured, facing Harry and kneeling down by the tub. "No. You are not pregnant. Stop saying that, please! We’re trying to convince the wizarding world that you are not insane. Going around telling people you think you’re pregnant is not a step in the right direction."

"I had visions. I saw what I saw," Harry cried.

"Potter, you’re not pregnant," Le Clair’s voice called from the bedroom.

"You’re not pregnant, Harry," Severus whispered.

"Illumina is pregnant," Henri added, chortling. Severus winced as if in pain.

"You were reading through her blocking spell, somehow. That’s what you were seeing," Severus soothed, putting an arm around Harry’s wet form and hugging him close. "I promise you, you are not pregnant."

"But I saw...I saw myself with...I saw....a baby," Harry stammered. "You told me how much he looked like me."

"A dream, Harry, or a vision through someone else’s eyes. Timma has removed the Mallus Umbrus that was on you," Severus promised. "Mr. Le Clair has removed his mirror spell. There was an inert jelly-legs spell hanging over you, looking for a way inside, and also, a luke-warm, amateur confundus lingering from the other night in the bar. There were also two different mirror spells."

"What’s this...."

"Mallus Umbrus. Evil Shadow. I suspect it’s been on you for some time."

Harry rubbed his scar as Severus reached over and turned off the hot water tap.

"Is it possible I could have been pregnant?" Harry asked. "Tell me the truth."

"When have I told you anything but?"

"Tell me the truth," Harry repeated firmly.

"I’m going to go find Lulu and Raffles," Henri called out. It was clear he wanted to show he was leaving earshot in order than Severus and Harry could speak.

"A Mallus Umbrus is a curse on your shadow," Severus began.

"Why would someone curse my shadow?" Harry asked.
"The shadow is as much an extension of your body as your hair or your nails. You can interpret pain through your shadow."

"I didn’t know that," Harry sniffed. "Is that why Lucius cast those conduit spells on me?"

"That’s a totally different matter. The conduit spells Lucius cast on you were a way to steal your magic and channel it to the Dark Lord. I don’t believe Lucius cast the Mallus Umbrus on you."

"Maybe he wanted to steal my shadow?"

"Lucius was going to drain you of your magic and channel it to the Dark Lord. I don’t know if he was going to steal your shadow. It’s not a spell Lucius would have favored. If Timma knows who cast the Mallus Umbrus, she didn’t say."

"Is it possible Lucius wanted to make me pregnant? Tell me the truth."

"I won’t lie to you. There are powerful potions a wizard can drink which will reform his body temporarily, allowing him to carry a child. If those potions are consumed in conjunction with the performance of certain fertility spells, a male can become pregnant. But you are not pregnant. I promise you."

"Those runes on the floor that morning?"

"In your tower?"

"Yes."

"Those were not fertility runes, Harry."

"What were they? You were scared when you saw them."

"They were nothing to bother yourself about."

"What were they?" Harry pressed.

"A memorial inscription."

"For who?"

"For you."

"Who would have written them?"

"Draco. I’m sure he copied them letter per letter just as his mother wrote them out for him."

"I’m not pregnant?"

"No. You are not."

"Why do I feel so sore down there?"

"The sedative and pain killers have worn off. Timma examined you to make sure you were healing properly, and had to remove some excess scar tissue that had formed. It’s nothing to worry about. Do you remember at all?"

"No," Harry mumbled. Mostly he didn’t want to remember. He vaguely recalled fighting his way
up off of a table and having all of his limbs being held down and being terrified for his life. How was he ever going to look Doctor Mesarik in the face again? "Tell me more about these pregnancy spells," Harry requested.

"There’s not much to tell, really. Why would you want to know? There have been wizards made pregnant by other wizards, and wizards made pregnant by witches as well. It’s long been an option for childless couples, or for same-sex couples. Of course there are social arguments against the use of these spells, and emotional arguments for the use of these spells, but you don’t have to worry, all right? You are not pregnant."

Harry nodded. Severus picked up the wash cloth from the side of the tub. He took away Harry’s wand and retrieved a bar of soap.

"You’re going to turn into a wizened old man in here," he murmured, his deep voice tickling Harry’s ear.

"I’m sorry about what happened with Raffles’s friend," Harry whispered as Severus stroked the soapy cloth up and down his back.

"I read all about it in the Daily Prophet."

"Oh bother. Again?"

"How amusing that you should somehow manage to get yourself in a closet with the daughter of the Minister of Morality."

"It was wrong, and I'm sorry."

"From my understanding, you were either too drunk or overly confused to know what you were doing."

"But it doesn’t excuse cheating on you."

"You’re sixteen. I hardly expected you to be able to master complete control of your body and your emotions overnight."

"Please don’t be so nice to me. I’m a horrible person. I cheated on you."

Snape faltered, stroking the cloth under Harry’s chin and unwinding his limbs in order to wash his chest. Harry timidly met Severus’s amused face. Snape tried in vain to hold back a smile.

"You are conducting yourself within the understanding that we are a couple?" Snape asked. Harry filled with dread. Had he jumped to an incorrect conclusion? Had he put too much into what had passed between himself and his Potions Master in the Black Queen’s Tower? Why was Severus smiling that way?

"Yes," Harry said, biting his bottom lip.

"That’s so cute." Severus beamed for a moment before frowning again. "That’s flattering," he added, stern once more.

"Don’t you want...?" Harry let the question fade with a sinking feeling. He must have read too much into what happened. Severus nuzzled against Harry’s ear.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to torment you. I want you more than you can understand." The voice
touched down inside Harry’s chest, soothing the burning in his stomach. "I want you more than I should. I’m so wrong for you, Harry. What’s the matter with me?"

"Why shouldn’t you want me?" Harry asked.

"The Headmaster is very much against the idea of you and I in any way, shape, or form, as is your Head of House."

"I don’t doubt they’re not the only ones. But they’ll all have to get over it."

"I owled the Headmaster to let him know you would be spending the day here at Ravensrood, and will be returning to Mr. Le Clair’s house tonight."

"Thank you."

"You caused something of a stir by yanking me out of Potions class."

"Sorry."

"Nonsense. I’m flattered to be ranked as your most protective spirit."

"You’re welcome," Harry whispered, trying out a small smile. They had conducted their conversation in the softest of tones, and left without words, merely gazed at each other.

"You need to get out of there," Severus whispered finally.

"Why?"

"The entire household is waiting on you. Dinner is usually at six thirty. It’s nearly seven. Unless you’d rather have dinner in your room? I can arrange that."

"No. Will you be staying for dinner?"

"Grandfather has threatened me with random tingling spells if I try to leave. Illumina said she’ll curse my toenails off if I don’t stay."

Severus reached down further to wash along the length of one of Harry’s thighs, and Potter sat up higher. He brushed a kiss to Snape’s cheek, pulling back out of reach with another shy smile, hoping Severus’s hand would move from his thighs to other places more in need of attention. If he were to lie back in the tub, would that be too overt? Then Harry had an idea, a remembrance of sorts.

"After dinner you could show me around the garden?" Harry suggested, dropping his eyes.

"I’m very sure I shouldn’t."

"Why not?" Harry whispered.

"The Headmaster will lock me up in the Room of Doom for my troubles."

"If he doesn’t get out of that tub before long, he’s going to shrivel up."

Le Clair’s amused voice was no more than a whisper at the dark doorway.

"If you don’t mind....." Snape growled towards the portal.
"I wouldn’t interrupt but your grandfather is trying to teach Raffles how to waltz in the dining hall, and I feel only bad things can come of this."

"Unfortunately, I’m inclined to agree," Severus whispered.

"Give the boy a kiss, and please be so kind as to come detach your lecherous progenitor from my ward."

"I was told he prefers red-heads," Harry whispered.

"Oh, he’s never let something as trivial as hair color stand in the way. I dare say all he requires is a pulse, a compliant partner, and a horizontal surface," Severus said, standing up beside the tub. He bent down to Harry and placed a tender kiss on top of his dark locks. "We will wait for you downstairs."
In which Le Clair explains to Harry the true purpose of the ossuary Volkova gave him, and Harry interrupts a duel between Volkova and Lestrange

"What is in our homework today?" Le Clair asked as Harry unpackaged the box that had been delivered by Dobby the house elf.

"It is terribly charming that my homework amuses you, but I promise I will complete my assignments without you looming over me."

"Mr. Potter, to say that you are an uninspired student would be a gross understatement. My encouragement is a form of positive reinforcement. Rest assured I do have methods of negative reinforcement as well."

"The beatings will continue until my marks improve?" Harry questioned. Dobby stopped mid-step and gulped audibly. Potter gave a tiny smile, and the house elf understood that his idol must have been jesting.

"I dare say the reason you do not excel is that you have never been properly motivated, or perchance, amply rewarded for good work. If you had seen the concrete rewards of a superior education, you would take more interest in learning," Le Clair said.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said, shaking the house elf’s hand.

"Mr. Potter is most welcome."

"I made some scones. Would you like some?" Harry asked, picking up a plate of treats off the table and putting them down into Dobby’s reach. With a scone in each hand and one in his maw, Dobby bowed to Harry and vanished into a flash of magic.

"Let’s separate it into piles and go from there," Le Clair suggested.

"I thought you had a date tonight."

"I do not have dates. Dates are for people younger than two hundred years."

"Appointment?"

"I have a rendezvous. Surely you have heard of the French language? For centuries it was the mark of culture and breeding, the language of the civilized world."

"When is your rendezvous?" Harry asked dryly.

"Not for three hours, time we will not piss away. We have Transfigurations, Charms, Divinations, Herbology, Potions, History, Dark Arts, and a box."

"Oh! It’s the ossuary!" Harry said excitedly. "I thought I lost it!"
"Someone has given you an octonarium? What curious friends you have, Mr. Potter, that they would send you such things."

"Volkova said it’s an ossuary."

"Volkova gave it to you? Did she mean it as a warning?"

"She wanted me to translate the runes on it. I got side-tracked and never finished the assignment. I’m sure that’s why she sent it to me here."

"Do you even know what an octonarium is?" Henri frowned.

"She said it has the mortal remains of someone inside."

"Harry, an octonarium is a charmed prison."

"What?"

"There was a time they were all the rage. Nearly everyone had an arch enemy in an octonarium on the mantle," Le Clair said with a morbid frown. He raised a brow and stepped further away from the wooden box. Harry was curious how many people Le Clair might know who wound up in one of these boxes.

"Volkova didn’t say it was a prison, but we did try to speculate about who was inside. What do you know about these runes?"

"Didn’t I see you with a book on Ancient Runes?"

"Yes, but I’m afraid Raffles took it with her. But you could translate them."

"You’re not going to learn anything if I do your work for you," Le Clair murmured.

"How long will Raffles and Illumina be gone on business?"

"Illumina is going to trudge through a few estate sales in Prague and Bologna, and go on to Venice from there. I encouraged Lulu to stay as long as she likes. It will make her grandmother happy, and having been around pregnant women before, I know the further I am away from her as this child develops, the safer I will be."

"Because women lose control of their magic when they are with-child?"

"Partially. Also because I thought perhaps you would be less distracted by the clairvoyant readings you are picking up from her. She agreed with me. You should know that clairvoyants are often nervous around other seers, worried about the inherent rivalry, and concerned about being taken for a fake or a fraud. She’s wary of you and your talents."

"I’d never think she was a fraud," Harry protested.

"I know, but she’s sensitive. Most seers are."

"I'm not," Harry protested. Henri merely smiled indulgently at him.
"There is also the possibility she might be feeling replaced by you."

"In what sense?" Harry asked.

"With Severus."

"Oh," Harry whispered, feeling awkward clear down to his toes. "I hadn't considered that."

"She remains fond of him, in a brotherly way, God alone knows why."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry frowned.

"Nothing," Le Clair denied, grinning wickedly.

"Did you send Raffles away because of the whole thing with Aloha?" Harry worried. Le Clair studied him, annoyed suddenly.

"Yes and no. Raphaella has never been where Illumina will take her. It will broaden her horizons as well as help her become more familiar with the business."

"Avoidance behavior," Harry said, eyes lighting with mischief. Le Clair wasn't amused.

"Your Headmaster warned me that you seem to have an incredible ability to either create or attract danger. Speaking frankly, I don’t want Raffles to be in danger because she is around you. More to the point, I don’t want being around you to be the death of her, and so I encouraged her to join Illumina. Besides, the less time you spend around her friend Miss Hawkins, the better off you will be."

"You don’t like Aloha?"

"She’s charming and lovely, but her father is not. I have no desire to bring the wrath of her over-protective parent down on your head. Perhaps after you have taken care of Mr. Dark Wizard, you can see Aloha again, irritate her father, etcetera."

"I really wasn’t in a hurry to see her. Feel a bit awkward about what happened. Don’t remember but bits and pieces. I just didn’t want Raffles to feel hurt, to feel that she was being sent away because of me."

"She wasn’t hurt. She understood perfectly what I meant. She’ll be very very busy on this trip."

"What about her dance class?"

"She’ll resume when she and Lulu return."

"So, Illumina is pregnant, and that’s where I was picking up readings. I really did believe I was pregnant," Harry said, bowing his head. "You must think I’m so stupid."

"Not stupid. Frightened, as anyone who has been through what you endured would be," Le Clair said. Harry didn’t reply, running one hand over the ossuary. "You aren’t talking to your Doctor McGonagall about these dreams when you see her, are you?" Henri asked. Harry shook his head no. "Of course not. What would she know about what you’re feeling, unless she had been similarly injured, which I doubt."

Le Clair picked up Harry’s transfigurations homework instructions, letting the boy stand quietly, running his hands over the box.
"If I could get a clear picture of these runes, they might be easier to translate," Harry said, turning the box around to what he wanted to believe was the front side. "I could use thin paper to get a rubbing."

"You’re putting away your feelings and your fears into one of those boxes," Le Clair whispered. Dobby reappeared in a blink of light, and Harry turned to face him.

"Hi, Dobby. Back for more scones?" Harry asked. "They are very good, Mr. Harry Potter," the house elf said with a bow. "But Dobby is here on important business, sir."

He handed Harry a letter, and put both his hands up into the plate of scones. He managed to smear blueberry around most of his face and mouth as he watched Harry read the name on the front of his correspondence.

"Who is Wartsilla Wickerwell?" Potter asked. Dobby shrugged, pushing crumbs into his mouth and licking off his fingers.

"Dobby doesn’t know her. She came to see Headmaster Dumbledore, and wrote this letter at Hogwarts at his desk. A very tall witch." Dobby demonstrated Wickerwell’s height by reaching far above his head with both arms.

"No," Le Clair said, taking the letter away from Harry when Potter went to open it. "No. You must learn to apply your talents practically, Mr. Potter."

"She would like to meet with me, tonight if at all possible," Harry said. "She has concerns about the Minister of Magic, even more so after her talks with Arch Hawkins and Judge Strangefolk."

"Who is she?" Le Clair asked.

"A member of the Dark Force Defense League," Harry said. Dobby chuckled to himself, reaching up blindly to snatch the last scone off the platter on the table. He crammed it into his open mouth, swallowing fast. "Dobby?" Harry smiled at him in a suspicious manner.

"Yes, Mr. Harry Potter?" the house elf twitched.

"You know how to read runes, don’t you?"

"Dobby doesn’t read or write, Mr. Potter."

"I’ll bake more scones for you if you translate this box for me," Harry offered, picking it up off the table and giving it to the house elf. Dobby gave a shriek of terror, and dropped the ossuary to the ground. He shrank under the table and refused to come out. Harry knelt down and peered between the legs of the chairs. "What’s wrong?" he asked Dobby.

"Where did Mr. Harry Potter get that!?"

"What? This?" Harry picked up the box and pulled two chairs aside, sitting down in the space they had occupied on the floor. "It’s an ossuary. That’s all. Nothing to be scared of, Dobby."

"IT’S AN OCTONARIUM!" Dobby howled, hiding his face and turning away.
"Stop terrorizing him," Henri chided, taking the box away from Harry and putting it on the table once more. Dobby scuttled out and stood behind Harry, refusing to get near the wooden box. "You aren't going to learn anything by having him translate them either. Good leaders must know how to do their own work. Don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty."

"Good leaders also know how to delegate when faced with their own inabilities, or with a lack of time. It could take years to learn how to translate these. I’m simply using the people willing to help me."

"He seems anything but willing to me," Le Clair commented.

"Do you know who is in there, Dobby?" Harry asked.

"She is," the house elf sniveled.

"She who?"

"The Black Queen," Dobby whispered.

"How do you know?" Harry whispered back.

Le Clair muttered, pointing to the top of the ossuary. "He read it off the top."

"Dobby doesn’t read! Dobby doesn’t read!" the house elf wailed.

"Maybe Dobby knows because someone else told him?" Harry asked, taking Dobby’s hand and caressed his fingers soothingly as Le Clair turned the box around and around on the table. "I will bake you dozens and dozens of treats if you tell me what’s on the box, Dobby," Harry persuaded. "I will stay up all night baking you cakes and pies and scones and biscuits. I’ll knit you scarves. I’ll knit you sweaters. All you have to do is tell me what the box says."

"Dobby doesn’t read!" the house elf howled.

"Dobby," Harry persuaded smoothly. "I’ll convince Malchik to marry you if you can open the octonarium."

Dobby screamed and raced towards the fireplace, disappearing into another blink of light. Le Clair watched him vanish, and narrowed his eyes at Harry.

"It cannot be opened, not from the inside nor from the outside," he chided Potter. "You shouldn’t get others to do your work for you."

"I don’t have time to learn Ancient Runes. I’m going to have to rely on others if I have any hope of destroying Voldemort. How do you know about the locking spell?"

"Right there," Le Clair pointed.

"What if I alter the letters? Would that render the locking spell useless?"

"Well, I might say that would be a start, but I suggest you at least learn why she was put in there before you let her out."

"Who usually gets locked in these things?"

"Those who have been so twisted by dark magic that they are unredeemable."
"Hmm," Harry said. It was actually possible to see wheels turning inside his head.


"Raffles took my book," Harry reminded him.

"You have some of the most extensive libraries in the known world at your disposal. I’m sure there must be other copies of Ancient Runes around this country somewhere."

"We could go to Madam Grimwood’s store. She might be open, if we’re lucky."

"The Headmaster did express the desire that I not flaunt you about the place, openly taunting Mr. Dark Wizard Voldemort."

"We’ll pop over to Grimwood’s bookshop after we see Wartsilla Wickerwell."

"I have to feed before we go traipsing about. Go in the kitchen and busy yourself making scones for that terrified house elf. I will be back in one hour. We will then go see Madam Grimwood and Madam Wickerwell, respectively. I’m going to lock the house. You will not be able to open the doors or windows until I return."

"What do I do in case of fire?"

"Don’t you know a Frigidarium spell?"

"Yes but that’s not going to help if the place is burning down around my ears."

"Then do your absolute best not to create a large fire," Henri consoled with a devious grin. "I’ll be back in one hour."

***

"Hello. Is anyone home?" Harry asked, knocking on the front door of Madam Grimwood’s bookstore.

The portal gave way with a chilling squeal of metal and wood, leaning open with an ominous moan. Harry rubbed his hands together and stepped into the hallway.


No one responded. There were footsteps upstairs though. From where he stood, Harry could see that the fireplace in the Modern Era room was burning bright. A teapot was waiting. Biscuits were stacked high on the plate on the table between the two chairs closest to the fire. The warmth beckoned Potter invitingly. Harry turned to close the door, giving his house across the street a timid glance. Had Volkova had a chance to go inside and make it comfortable yet? He saw a faint light and squinted at it, forgetting how to breathe as his heart leapt up into his throat. Lucius Malfoy’s specter was smiling down at him through the tiny front window of the attic bedroom. Lucius's face lit up with an evil leer and he gave Potter a languid wave. Harry slammed shut the bookseller’s door and leaned his back against the wood, panting in terror.

When he had calmed his breathing, Harry ventured forward into the Modern Era room. Small footsteps raced across the floor above him. Harry had been stirring scone batter not three minutes
ago when it occurred to him that whether or not the doors to Le Clair’s house opened, he could still get out if he wanted to. Was he or was he not capable of apparition spells that had conquered even Hogwarts’ incredible wards? He put the scones in the oven, set the timer for fifteen minutes, and simply apparated to Hogsmeade. As easy as that. He would find Madam Grimwood, ask her for a book on Ancient Runes, trade her the dusty old cookbook he had found abandoned in Le Clair’s kitchen. He would be back before the scones had finished baking.

That was the plan, anyway.

"Madam Grimwood?" Harry called. He walked around the chairs at the fireplace, puzzling at the silence.

He supposed he could leave her a note on the counter, and ask her to send him the book on rune translations when she returned. Harry walked away from the chairs and went to the waist-high counter, hoping to find a stray sheet of paper and a quill lying about. He didn’t want to rifle through things if no one was around. That wouldn’t be proper.

As he had hoped, a sheet of parchment lay on the counter. It was a list of trade-ins and trade-outs for the last week. Harry picked up the quill that lay beside the parchment and turned the page around in order to examine it. The last transaction had been no more than ten minutes ago. Volkova had traded a travel book from Italy for a manual on basic painting techniques. She must have been in here with her son Sergei. Perhaps that was who kept running back and forth across the floor above Harry’s head. Potter dipped the quill in the inkwell and began to scratch on the page.

"Harry Potter would like to trade one very dusty German cookbook for a book on ancient runes, if one becomes available. Thank you," he wrote and spoke aloud. Once finished, he put the cookbook under the parchment and turned to leave.

The floor above him opened, and a person in black plunged through, followed by another person in black. Harry stepped back against the counter, jaw on the ground. He had Rover in his hand in a fraction of a second. A splash of blood crossed his front, and the end of an unsheathed sword swung less than an inch from his chest. Harry went up onto the counter and cast downward at both figures at once.

"IMMOBULUS!" he shouted.

His spell froze them solidly in place. Harry leapt down when he recognized the sword-wielding one of the pair was in fact Professor Volkova. He touched her shoulder with the tip of his wand, and she was released from the body-bind spell. A wave of blue curse words filled the air, none of them in English. Harry stared hard at the second figure, Bellatrix Lestrange, and from her wicked, twisted face, knew there was something wrong. He snapped back to study Volkova more closely.

"Are you all right, Professor?" he whispered, gulping. Volkova pushed a bloody hand through her mussed hair and landed on the floor on her knees. Harry dropped next to her when he realized she was bleeding profusely from a wound in the side. A nasty, black dagger was still embedded in the wound. He pulled the dagger free, and Volkova clasped a hand over the wound and the rents through her shirt and jacket.

"I’m going to need a doctor," Volkova trembled. Harry took up the offending dagger with his free hand, pointing it up under her assailant’s chin. He put the point of the blade to Bellatrix’s jugular vein and stretched to touch his wand to her upraised hand.

"I felt the late return policy was much too lenient," Lestrange intoned. Her dark and mirthful voice scared Harry witless for a second. She wasn’t eager to be poked with that dagger though, leading
Harry to believe it might be poisoned.

"Professor Volkova? Do you have enough strength to apparate?" Harry asked without looking around. A bloodied hand climbed up his side. Volkova was pulling herself to her feet, using him as a support.

"I'm not leaving you here alone with her," she gasped when she was on her feet.

"She'll be dead in three minutes," Bellatrix whispered. "You can save her or duel me."

"I'm sure we'll meet again, Trixie," Harry growled.

"Let her die! Don't disappoint me, Harry! I've so been looking forward to seeing you again. My, how you've grown," Lestrange taunted, reaching over and running her long nails down the surface of the tall counter. Harry allowed Volkova to take his wand, and Lestrange’s eyes watched him, glowing with anticipation.

If she was looking for small talk, Bellatrix was in for a rude disappointment. In one motion, Harry dropped the dagger and vaulted at Lestrange, knocking her flat to the ground. Heaving with uncontrollable anger, he straddled her chest, seized her neck in both hands, and squeezed with all his might. If Harry’s purely Muggle, purely physical response hadn’t been enough of a shock for the smirking Lestrange, who had been expecting spells and curses from the budding wizard, he also began pounding her head against the ground and the raised edge of the counter base. Forgetting her own magic, Bellatrix started to fight back physically. Amid the kicking and screaming, biting and scratching, Harry might have been nicked here and there by Lestrange's sharp nails, but little by little, Bellatrix was becoming less and less feisty beneath him.

Without warning, a powerful arm hauled upward on Harry’s neck and chest from behind, and a halo of protective magic enveloped Lestrange. Harry was lifted off of Bellatrix, and held back from her as she rose up to her knees on the floor. She was gasping blood and wheezing for breath. Green runes danced a circle around her as she collapsed back to the floor.

"I took your scones out of the oven," Le Clair murmured, lowering Harry to the ground. Potter reached back and picked up Volkova’s hand. She was cold and clammy, and she was beginning to lose consciousness. But she was smiling at him. Henri had an absolutely savage gleam in his eyes, and his fangs were jutting out further than normal. Harry realized that the smell of Volkova’s blood must be arousing Le Clair’s vampyric senses.

"We have to get Volkova back to Hogwarts!" Harry shouted. Bellatrix was taunting Potter from inside her green prison. Harry’s hand prints were livid around her throat. Volkova’s inert sword transfigured back into a ring and a wand, lying dormant on the floor. Her magic was beginning to weaken. Harry picked the items up and gave them back to his instructor.

"You’re too late! You’re too late!" Bellatrix taunted. Harry loomed over Lestrange, fighting the burning need to knock her back to the ground and choke her again. Would he only hurt himself if he kicked the protective barrier?

"If I am too late, you going to be late yourself," he warned. Bellatrix spit out blood which dotted the halo of Le Clair’s green magic.

"Mr. Potter, take Professor Volkova back to the infirmary at Hogwarts. I will join you there shortly," Le Clair ordered, panting.

"How did you know where I had gone?" Harry asked, straining to get Volkova into a seated
position. She was beginning to foam at the mouth.


"I followed my nose," Le Clair whispered huskily. Volkova heard a strange timbre in his voice, and raised her chin at him, whispering. Le Clair bent close, and her words became clearer.

"You protect him, damn you."

"I’m trying," Henri assured her.

"What about her?" Harry asked, indicating Lestrange.

"Leave her to me," Le Clair smiled.

"Are you going to kill her?" Harry asked.


"Do it slowly," Harry requested.

"I believe you need a book on ancient runes, yes?" Le Clair said casually as whoever was upstairs began violently kicking and pounding. Harry nodded. "I’ll bring you one. Be gone now. This isn’t going to be pretty."

"Say hello to Lucius when you get there," Harry whispered to Bellatrix before he linked Volkova’s arm up over his shoulders and vanished away.
In which Harry and Henri discuss mayhem over dinner

"‘Harry Potter Saves Famed Vampire Killer’," Le Clair called out from the dinner table the next night. Harry staggered into the dining hall at Monvert, putting his plate of beef and cabbage on the table. "‘Anna Volkova, Defense Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, owes her life this morning to the timely intervention of The Boy Who Lived.’"

"Five more minutes and she would have been my former professor."

"Nonsense. She’s been stabbed before. I for one have stabbed her through and through her left hand with a wooden stake, and she laughed me off, joking about splinters. Of course, I only winged her, but still. It’s going to take more than a poke in the ribs to do that woman in, believe me."

"When Volkova wakes up, she’s gonna be mad," Harry decided.

"Perhaps. Why in particular?"

"I rescued her."

"Yes, true. She may never forgive you," Le Clair agreed.

"Maybe she'll reconsider," Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Potter, I am appalled at this strange need you have to play hero all the time," Le Clair teased from behind the expanse of newsprint. The cover of the paper had a picture of Volkova lying flat on her back in the infirmary at Hogwarts. Her face was as white as the bed sheets. Sergei was plastered to her side, holding her hand as she slept. Draco Malfoy could be seen behind the privacy curtain. Henri put down the Daily Prophet and lifted his goblet of murky red liquid and studied Harry with an inscrutable smile on his face. Was he ordering take-out from his rendezvous friend, Harry wondered.

"Hero," Harry scoffed.

"You look ruffled, Potter, as if you had trouble sleeping," Le Clair said finally. "Scruffy."

"I don’t have a need to always play the hero. More often than not, I have no choice in the matter," Potter grumbled.

"What are we having tonight?" Henri asked as he peered at Harry’s plate. "Beef and cabbage. Not bad. Your cooking skills are improving each day."

"I miss Raffles’ cooking," Harry moaned.

"Nonsense. A man must learn to be self-sufficient. Where is your bread? You need bread with that."
"Was Sergei hiding upstairs at the bookstore? I heard footsteps."

"Yes. He was locked in the Dark Arts room. I found him when I was looking for your rune book."

"Volkova must have surmised that Bellatrix was masquerading as Madam Grimwood, and Lestrange attacked her while her back was turned," Harry said, stirring his food around. "Does the article say anything about what happened to Madam Grimwood?"

"No, alas, it does not."

"What about Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"In a footnote in the crime blottter, it mentions that the body of an unidentified female was found floating in the Thames. Do you think that could be her?"

"Perhaps you shouldn’t have killed her. We might have been able to learn something from her."

"We might yet," Le Clair promised, giving him a long dark braid of hair from the floor. "You may add it to your collection."

"You cut off her hair before you killed her?" Harry wondered, taking a bite of beef and accepting the bedraggled locks.

"I hate to spoil the nefarious opinion you have of me, but I did not kill Lestrange," Henri reported. "Once upon a time, I couldn't go a week without mangling someone. Nowadays, I'm afraid it's lost the appeal it once had."

"The bloody mess? The piercing screams? The possibility of witnesses?" Harry wondered.

"The terrible bother of it all. It's a chore to detach people properly, make no mistake. You nearly did the deed yourself, choking Lestrange like you were. If I hadn’t pulled you off of her, who knows what might have occurred!"

"I was angry. I’m sorry. What did you do with her?"

"I considered taking her to Krakow and giving her to Baron Romovski, but I’m afraid in my very bad judgment, I turned her over to your Headmaster before I came to find you in the hospital wing. It’s my understanding that your Headmaster promptly turned Lestrange over to the Ministry of Magic for delivery back to Azkaban."

"He what?" Harry moaned, holding his head in both hands.

"Yes. I found it curious as well. Does he not believe that Minister Fudge will more than likely release Mrs. Lestrange?"

"Unless Dumbledore is hoping Fudge releases her?" Harry wondered, his face furrowing with confusion as he lifted his head and stretched his neck.

"Why would he want her released?" Le Clair pressed.

"I dunno. But Professor Dumbledore has things in his head, things none of us could possibly understand. There must be a method to his madness if he turned Lestrange over to Fudge."

"Her release or escape would expose a link between Fudge and your Mr. Dark Wizard."

"That it would," Harry agreed. "Shall we see what we can see?" Potter whispered, holding the
braid in both hands.

"Not on an empty stomach," Le Clair chided, taking the hair away from Potter. "Finish your dinner. We can read Trixie’s hair another time. We’re going to work on rune translations and transfigurations."

"Homework?" Harry bawled his disappointment.

"Even heroes have homework. We need to channel this anger of yours into constructive forms."

"Do we? Choking the piss out of the witch who killed Sirius felt pretty constructive to me at the time. Felt bloody good, to be honest."

"For one thing, it’s bad form to attack women. Manners, Mr. Potter. Manners."

"Fuck manners. Maybe it’s time we took the gloves off."

"Mr. Potter, I want to encourage you to conduct yourself with manners at all times. Manners are what separate us from the animals. Manners are what separate you from your enemies. They distinguish you as a wizard of breeding rather than a rat-tailed minion of some jumped-up half-blood. Do you understand?"

"May I choke Bellatrix if I say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’?"

"Finish your dinner. We’re going to learn a few spells tonight."

"Don’t you have a rendezvous with Mr. Right?"

"I have a rendezvous with him, but I shall owl him and delay. I don’t want to take the risk of you sneaking off on me again."

"You could always bring him here and save yourself the trip out."

"I could," Le Clair whispered. "I might, after you’ve gone to sleep."

"I’d like to meet him."

"I suspect your Headmaster would take a rather dim view of you meeting my paramour."

"Paramour?"

"He will feel I’m being a bad influence on you."

"Is it serious then? He’s gone from food to paramour."

"You’re much too interested in my personal life, Mr. Potter."

"It’s jealousy, I promise you. You have a personal life, and I’m not allowed one."

"You’re simply going to have to stop letting other people decide what you can and cannot have," Le Clair smiled.

"Does your paramour have a name?" Harry cajoled.

"He does."

"Does he know about you and Illumina?"
"Naturally."

"Does she know about you and him?"

"YES," Le Clair pulled the word out to two syllables. "Eat your dinner, and mind your own business."

"Whatever," Harry smiled fiendishly. He took a bite of beef and stopped mid-chew. "Uh oh."

"What?" Le Clair fretted.

"I forgot about my note from the Dark Force Defense League. What was her name again? Wickerwell."

"Quite right. After dinner, you can send her off a note."

"Would it be better if I popped over and saw her? She did say she wanted to meet with me. I don’t want her to think I’m avoiding her."

"After dinner. After dinner. And after I teach you how to shave."

"What?"

"Look at this face," Le Clair sighed, tickling Harry’s chin with one finger. "Like you’ve spent the last week face down in a drunken stupor in a house of ill-repute. We’ll clean you up so you are presentable for Madame Wickerwell."
In which Harry grills Henri while waiting to finally meet with Wartsilla Wickerwell, and where the meeting with Wickerwell has an unpredictable conclusion

"This is such torture. That is the last one of your insipid questions I’m going to answer," Le Clair huffed, shifting his feet in his uncomfortable chair. "Who doesn’t want world peace? What I’m telling you is that it is impossible to obtain."

"No need to be touchy. You said you’d help me with my Dark Arts assignment," Harry answered from his flat bench.

"Ask me something meaningful."

"What matters the most to you in the world?"

"My family. Not those I’m related to by blood, but the friends and lovers and others I have known through the years."

"Why have you been married so often if you are gay?" Harry asked.

"How much longer must we sit here?" Henri wondered, glancing first one way and then the other in the foyer where they waited.

"Avoidance behavior," Harry said in a sing-song tone like Illumina often used to annoy Le Clair.

The vampire silenced Harry when he reached over and ran one finger along the contour of Potter’s chin, testing the smoothness that he had created there. Harry had been nervous about being shaved by Le Clair for no longer than five seconds, consoling himself with the thought that the last thing Henri seemed to want was to hurt him, and who better to learn the art of shaving from than someone who had spent centuries perfecting the task. It was a bit of kinky fun, as Raffles would say.

"Mr. Potter, whether we like it or not, we are the product of our time and our environments. In my age, when it was advantageous for your family or your position or for your life to get married, one’s sexual preferences were often not of any concern or consequence. Acceptance of homosexuality is a very modern concept, and not a widely-practiced one. Marriage is so different today than it was in my time, and I’m afraid my time continues with me in some of my values and practices. I can’t help that. It’s who I am. It’s not as if I was taking advantage of innocent naive girls in order to take control of their fortunes either. My father arranged my first marriage while I was off at war. I returned home to find myself married by proxy and a father to boot."

"Um....isn’t that technically....you were not there to.... um..." Harry stammered.

"The child was not mine, clearly. My father, he meant well. It’s clear he was helping the girl out. Her father reached an agreement with my father, and Jeanne and I were, well, carried along with their decision. It was an amicable marriage– one of my best. We had two daughters, one mine and the other not. I loved them equally. Sweet creatures, if not raving beauties. I left Jeanne to her
knitting, and she left me to my soldiering. What we did beyond that neither of us asked nor told nor intruded."

"What happened to her?"

"She eventually succumbed to an illness. My parents raised my daughters with my many sisters. My father arranged their marriages as well. He was a well-meaning man, and had a good eye for judging the character of other men. When I came back from war, he had found me another wife, said it was my duty to God to keep producing children, regardless of what my other desires might be."

"He didn’t have a problem with your other desires?"

"He wasn’t thrilled about them, but I was his only surviving son. Two others had died in wars, and one went into the priesthood, only to die helping tending the sick and needy. My other desires were irrelevant to the fact I had a duty to give him a grandson, hell or high water."

"Did you give him a grandson?"

"I married again, and gave him two strapping lads and one sniveling shit."

"What became of them?"

"The two strapping lads went on to be fine soldiers and die honorable deaths in battles for the greater glory of God. I hardly saw them, to be honest, nor their mother. My memories of Helene, my second wife, are blurry and dark, because I mostly spent time with her when I was very drunk and didn’t care who I was sleeping with as long as I came. She died in childbirth at twenty four. We had been married four years, of which we spent a grand total of twenty nine days together."

"I’m guessing the sniveling shit inherited the family name?"

"Romauld. He was such an embarrassment," Henri wailed.

"So the way you act with women, it’s learned behavior?"

"Isn’t all behavior learned behavior?"

"Not according to Doctor McGonagall. What did Illumina mean when she said in her letter that you should avoid all Valkyries if possible today"

"I have no idea. I suspect she was being funny."

"You don’t like German women?"

"Nationality doesn’t figure into this. There is simply a certain type of giantess that tends to plague me, with big shoulders and large hands and heaving bosoms. These women make me nervous. They always want to dominate me. I spent the better part of my youth being terrorized by a particular nun at the abbey where we went to worship. I went on to marry a woman that could have been Sister Hilda’s offspring."

"So, the reason you are nervous around Valkyries is because you were chased around by one as a child, and then forced to marry to one as an adult?"

"Marguerite was terrifying as a spouse. She tried to kill me, repeatedly, and with much enthusiasm. It’s hard not to take that personally. I wonder what is keeping your Dark Force defender so long."
"Her house elf said she’d be along shortly," Harry replied, shuffling pages and notes. Le Clair stood and paced in the foyer. He studied the portraits on the wall, Wickerwell’s relatives Harry assumed, all of whom whispered among themselves but did not converse with the two men waiting. "Next question?" Harry asked.

"One more won’t kill me, I suppose."

"I’m out of questions. I thought you might have an idea."

"I’m surprised at you. You didn’t ask what I would presume is the first question everyone should want to ask."

"What’s that?"

"How did I become a vampire?"

"I didn’t want to pry, in case it had been an unpleasant experience."

"Not exceptionally."

"Who bit you? Was it someone you knew or a stranger?"

"Someone I knew."

"Was it a ‘bite and fly’, or were you involved with the person?"

"A bite and fly?" Le Clair stopped before Harry and raised one brow in annoyance. Potter gave him a half-smile.

"Who was it then?" Harry wondered.

"A wandering gypsy man who had been in the army camp a fortnight, telling stories and telling fortunes. Versulius was his name. I never saw him again after that evening. All I remember is how his earring swung back and forth as he drew the blood from me, and that he smelled like ancient incense and dirt."

"It wasn’t the Baron?" Harry questioned.

"Baron Romovski? No. No. No. We’ve never been involved. He prefers giggles and dimples and cunny."

"Why did Versulius bite you?"

"I suspect because he didn’t like the looks of me," Henri frowned.

"It wasn’t a...." Harry searched for the right word, and Henri waited for him but a few seconds before charging in with a correct assumption.

"No. It wasn’t attraction on his part. It was borne of anger because of my disdain for him."

"Did you know he was a vampire?"

"Do you think I would have chanced angering him if I had known?" Le Clair laughed bitterly.

"I have had ample time to learn humility and cultural sensitivity, thank you. I am not the boastful, arrogant prick I once was."

"Why did the Baron marry Marguerite?" Harry changed the subject.

"She has a vast fortune and is not without her charms."

"Homicidal tendencies can be considered charming?"

"I introduced them, hoping they would ignite like wood and fire, and they did."

"Your best friend cheated on you with your murderous wife?"

"It’s a bit more complex than that," Henri shrugged. "The Baron enjoys having a dangerous creature under his sway. He is the master of a menacing woman, and it makes him feel hairy and manly that she bows to his whims."

"Oh, brother," Harry sighed, rolling his eyes.

"She distracted him out of a two century melancholy over the deaths of his wife and daughter by keeping him on his toes. They play these games of hunter and hunted, except neither of them knows who is playing which role, it seems. They rather like it that way. It’s exciting for them."

"So, he likes having her around because she’s dangerous and exciting, and they have hot-monkey-sex?"

"For lack of a more tactful way to express the situation, yes. I would have to agree with you. He enjoys her company because she is an accomplished lover, and she should be, as much practice as she’s had at it."

"Oooh, saucer of milk please."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you sure sounded catty and jealous there for a second."

"I resented merely that she slept with half my officers and several of my recruits and not one of them bothered to tell me to my face except Romovski. He begged me to divorce her so that they might marry. Any other man who wanted another man’s wife would have put a bullet through me."

"Would that have worked?"

"No, but it’s the obvious place to start when you’re all walking around with standard issue revolvers and swords."

"You were in a Muggle army together?"

"Yes," Le Clair smiled.

"Why?"

"I was bored and wanted to have a bit of fun. Warfare can be very diverting."

"Did you and Marguerite ever sleep together?"

"Once. It was terrifying. I was afraid she was going dislocate my limbs. She’s an unbridled woman
who doesn’t know her own strength."

"Perhaps these men feared telling you about the affairs."

"Perhaps they should have had the balls to tell me to my face."

"Tell me about Constantinople."

"No. Of that, we will not speak."

"All right. Sorry."

"Not at all. I am sensitive about it."

"Can we talk about Radu? About Algiers? About Volkova?"

"Not a tale for your ears. You are too young yet."

"If I had a gold piece for every time someone has said that to me," Harry lamented. He hopped to his feet, leaving his quill and pages on the bench where he had been sitting. Le Clair snapped around as well to the sound of approaching feet.

"Have you any idea what time it is, Mr. Potter?" Wartsilla Wickerwell howled as she appeared down the stairs looking ruffled and hot in disorganized clothes. Le Clair looked suddenly thunderstruck, and remained uncharacteristically quiet. Even Harry was impressed by the sight of her, and couldn’t help but feel Wickerwell terrified Henri. Illumina must have known this meeting would take place, and that was why she had placed the warning in her letter.

"Two a.m.," Harry reported after a glance at the grandfather clock.

"Mr. Potter, I don’t take cheek well when roused from my study in the middle of the night," Wickerwell warned. "At least you’re here," she added, softening her tone. "I was afraid I was going to have to tie myself up and lie down on a train track, scream for help before you would deign to make yourself known to me."

"Pleasure to meet you," Harry said, extending his hand. She grasped it tightly, giving him a manly shake that nearly jostled his arm free of his shoulder.

"Sorry for the delay," she murmured.

"Sorry to interrupt your illicit shag with Mr. Manglebranch. Is he still upstairs?" Harry asked. "What’s that smell?"

"Harry!" Le Clair exclaimed, appalled. Wickerwell let go of Harry’s hand, and recovered her composure, testing out a smile.

"I’m sorry. Was that too much honesty?" Harry asked, putting on an innocent face that belied the great amusement he took from her expression and Le Clair’s as well. He’d really have to practice this more, this whole ‘being shocking’ thing.

"There’s no such thing as too much honesty," Wickerwell said.

"I’ve met Manglebranch before. It’s nice to know he’s capable of being illicit. It puts a human glow on him," Harry said. "It’s familiar..... it’s....musk....or some kind of.... euphoric.... something."

"Your lack of manners is simply shocking," Le Clair chided, tugging on Harry’s shoulders and
pulling him back from Wickerwell.

"No harm done," Wartsilla smiled again.

"What shall we talk about?" Harry asked, watching Le Clair pace.

"Cornelius Fudge, and why he’s trying to have you committed," Wickerwell said. "Let’s make ourselves comfortable in my den. This way."

Harry and Henri followed Wartsilla up the stairs and through the well-furnished manor house. The more stairs they climbed, the older the portraits on the center wall became; knights on horseback, ladies in splendid garb, nobles and their families; until finally they crossed paths with a tall warrior with a winged helmet, carrying a Viking shield and sword.

"Your family resemblance is uncanny," Le Clair whispered, hurrying to catch up as Harry stayed one step behind Wickerwell.

"Don’t be fooled. My father posed for twelve of those portraits himself, all in period costume. His idea of fun. History was his only passion," Wickerwell reported with a one-shoulder shrug.

The room she led them into was filled with weapons and wands and staves, some in decorative displays on the walls and others in cases and rows on shelves. Harry inhaled deeply, and nearly keeled over. Munia, he recognized. The room reeked of the dirty, sweet, illicit smoke. The windows were thrown open, and yet there were no winds strong enough to pull the scent from the room.

"What does the Dark Force Defense League do?" Harry asked.

"It should go without saying that we do our best to defend the wizarding world against Dark Forces," Wartsilla told him, showing him an overstuffed chair. He sat down on the ottoman before the chair and folded his hands in his lap, starting to feel tingling in his limbs from the influence of the drugs in the air. Wickerwell sat down in the chair and studied Harry from one side. She was beginning to smile in an easy manner, as if amused by a private joke. There was something about Potter that she liked. Le Clair stood behind the next stuffed chair, watching them both.

"You are having Manglebranch and Nimblewyck follow Fudge?" Harry said. "I sensed that when I touched your hand. Why are you having him followed? What have you learned?"

"I’ve learned that when he is not at the office, Fudge spends an inordinate amount of time with Narcissa Malfoy. He goes to Hogsmeade Village. He goes to Knockturn Alley. He has been going to your aunt’s house on a regular basis. Nimblewyck is guarding him at the moment. He’s in Knockturn Alley once more."

"Where does he go when he’s there?"

"A brothel called the Three Sheets. I have reason to believe that he’s not there for the usual reasons. It may be that he goes in there and uses the Floo to go to another location. I can’t imagine what he’d be doing in there four nights a week."

"It is a brothel," Le Clair said. "It’s been my experience that given time and money, four nights a week wouldn’t be difficult to fill there."

"Yes, normally," Wickerwell nodded. "It is possible, but not for the fact that Fudge and his wife haven’t had conjugal relations in nearly a decade."
"Maybe he’s not interested in her?" Harry thought aloud.

"He’s physically unable to perform. I’ve had his doctor questioned," Wickerwell answered bluntly.

"So what’s he doing in the Three Sheets?" Harry asked, nervous about what things she had Manglebranch and Nimblewyck asking people about when it came to him. Hermione had said they were talking to nearly every person who had ever met Harry. What had she learned about him? What conclusions had she come to?

"Fudge has a dark side that few people have witnessed. We all have secrets, Mr. Potter."

"Yes," he agreed.

"He's probably terrified that you, as a clairvoyant, will sense what he's hiding and reveal him to the world. It's a hold over him that you should be ready to exploit, if necessary."

"That hardly sounds sporting of me."

"Love, if there's one thing I've learned when dealing with certain wizards, it's that you can either be a sport, or you can either be made a sport of, if you understand my meaning."

"No," Harry puzzled.

"If you are too kind to them, too much the gentleman, they will take advantage of you. You can be a gentleman, but you also have to make it clear upfront you're willing to take them down if you have no other choice."

"I suppose that means I'm not cut out for the political game."

"We all start off thinking that," she purred. "You might come to enjoy it in time, as I have."

"Maybe," Harry agreed.

"I have learned through Manglebranch and others that before you were attacked in December, Bellatrix Lestrange purchased all the necessary ingredients for more than enough Polyjuice potion to keep her in secret identities for months to come. I also learned where in Knockturn Alley Lucius Malfoy purchased the drug he used to disable you in order to attack you," Wickerwell told Harry, gauging his reaction to her words. Was she hoping for an explosion of tears or fury? He kept himself as calm and unreadable as he could.

"That’s helpful, of course, but we already know what’s become of Lucius, don't we?" he asked tartly.

"You could level the establishment, kill the shop keeper and his family," she tested him. "No one would blame you for taking your revenge."

"But what if I should find I need someone with his skills?" Harry murmured, carefully applying his most Slytherin smile. Wickerwell blinked at him and bobbed her head once.

"A valid point."

"We must keep Bellatrix under twenty-four-hour watch," Harry added, his voice beginning to slur. The munia in the air was seeping into his pores, getting into his brain. What a wonderful feeling!

"I know her every move. After you beat the daylights out of her at the bookshop in Hogsmeade, she was deposited in the care of Headmaster Dumbledore, and then given to Minister Fudge, who
took her back to Azkaban," Wickerwell said, wondering when this had turned into Harry questioning her instead of her questioning Harry.

"How long was she there?" Potter rambled.

"What makes you think she is no longer there?"

"Call it a hunch. She could be anywhere. She’s got enough Polyjuice, and could be masquerading as anyone. Maybe it wasn’t even Lestrange that we captured."

"I’m having Fudge watched around the clock, in case they traded places."

"Too obvious. Too obvious. She could be any one of a number of people she’s had contact with, or that Fudge has had contact with and managed to get hair from," Harry said. "She could be going around as more than one person even."

"You’re terrifying me, Mr. Potter. Do stop."

"Can you get me in to see her in Azkaban? I can tell you if she is Lestrange."

"You want to meet with her face to face? That’s much too dangerous, Mr. Potter, much too dangerous."

"You’re afraid for me? How sentimental of you," Harry teased.

"I’m afraid for her," Wickerwell replied smartly, growing more fond of Harry by the minute.

"If it’s not possible to meet with her face to face, if you could get me something from her, directly from her, I could tell from that."

"Could you? What about blocking spells? She’s been Voldemort’s right hand for longer than you’ve been alive. I’m sure he’s taught her a few tricks."

"You could be Bellatrix," Harry said, centering his gaze on Wickerwell with an animal ferocity that lit a fire of interest in her face. He heaved for breath, and drew in more munia. He was having a hard time keeping his eyes focused.

"I could be," Wartsilla conceded. "I have been around Fudge in the last month on more than one occasion. As you said, Lestrange could be masquerading as anyone. Even your aunt, for example."

"That is possible too."

"Does she dislike you enough to sign you over to Fudge?"

"Aunt Petunia or Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"Either of them."

"I suspect they have similar feelings about me. Neither would mourn my death nor lift a finger to prevent it. Have you met with my Aunt Petunia? You’ve been questioning everyone else who has ever met me. Did she seem odd to you?"

"Having no point of reference, I couldn’t tell you. She struck me as a cold woman, filled with jealousy and pain and hurt."

"We could go to see her and see if she is who she says she is, but she vowed I would never enter
her house again as long as she was alive, and so we’d have to stand on the lawn,” Harry rambled. Wickerwell’s face was crossed by several emotions, but she masked her countenance in calm clay again.

"We haven’t the time to test everyone in the world to see where Bellatrix is hiding," she sighed. "Some of us you’ll simply have to trust."

"If Remy were here, he’d be able to tell me. He knows Bellatrix by sight, by smell. He was tailing her when he vanished."

"Yes. I understood as much from Headmaster Dumbledore. I would like to find Mr. Lupin as well, if that’s possible," Wickerwell agreed. "But even my best investigators have had no luck in locating him."

"Give me your hand," Harry said, extending his towards her. "I must be sure of you before we proceed."

"You obviously aren’t the trusting sort, are you, Mr. Potter?" Wartsilla mused, giving him her fingers again. "Curious to see more of Manglebranch and I?" she asked huskily.

"Couldn’t care less," Harry whispered. "I have to know you’re not Lestrange before we go any further."

Without her consent, Harry focused his magic through and around Wickerwell. She held onto his grip for a few seconds, and studied the young man with growing admiration. Harry swayed where he sat when she let go of his hand. Sparkles of indigo light shimmered in the air around Harry.

"Very powerful," he whispered.

"There is a deep and vigorous magic in my family, one that goes back many generations. We might not be pure-bloods, but we are powerful. Nice of you to notice," Wickerwell smiled at him.

"I meant the munia," Harry clarified, ears ringing.

"Mr. Potter, are you all right?" Wickerwell worried.

Le Clair was around his chair in a second as Harry slid from the ottoman to the ground on his bum. Harry was seeing stars. He tried to steady himself. Two things happened simultaneously as Harry rose up to his knees. Wickerwell let out a scream of surprise, and Le Clair swung around, wand drawn. Harry put his hands forward, and his fingers crunched onto hot sand. A seagull called out in alarm before crashing into one of the display cases and landing in a dazed ball on the expensive carpet. The door to the den opened in a fury, and Manglebranch entered the room wearing only his dressing gown. He was animate with genuine concern.

"Wartsilla? There are palm trees in the bedroom!" he called out in the sudden rush of wind and sound that filled the den.

Warm breezes filled the air with the scent of pineapples and dead fish. Harry pulled his hands out of the sand as a crab scuttled past him. A palm frond hut had materialized. Beside the hut was a tall, bronzed man wearing torn-off shorts, no shirt, and no shoes. He had been holding a palm frond which now fluttered down before Harry’s prone form. The man’s brown-red hair was tied neatly behind his neck, bleached nearly blond from the sun. Harry stared up the bean-brown form of Remus Lupin, whose mouth was hanging open in shock.

Pasty white with alarm, Le Clair put away his wand and tried to help Harry to his feet. Harry
scrambled back from Remus, his eyes wide with fear. Wickerwell sat back in her over-stuffed chair and gazed blankly at the sand dune beach that now occupied her den and much of this floor of her house. She did not hear the shouts of alarm coming from the hallway, where a lagoon was soaking up into the carpets and floors, and hundreds of fish were flip-flopping their way to suffocation. House elves appeared, peering into the room before hurrying to pick up all the fish and shells. Remus was the first to speak.

"I'm so glad I put on my pants this morning," he said with a thin, anxious smile.
"Most irregular way to start the morning!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed.

"But it’s him?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

"Lupin, if you’ve been toasting on your ass in the French Riviera for the last several weeks while we’ve been scouring the globe for you, I for one would like an explanation," Severus Snape growled as he entered the room carrying two small vials. He shook them vigorously, held them up to the light, and nodded at the results.

"French Riviera? I wish!! I’ll have you know, Snape, I’ve been on an island in the middle of nowhere with no wand and no way to get out, having to make my way without magic, having no way home aside from building a raft, or swimming back to mainland, if I even knew where mainland was, which direction, even if I could swim! Day and night, nothing to think about but what could possibly be going on back here!" Remus exclaimed in a rush of seething words.

"Is it him?" Dumbledore asked again.

"Yes. Remus Lupin, before your very eyes," Snape confirmed.

"Can I get dressed now?" Lupin said with a bite to his words. "French Riviera, my ass," he muttered as Snape threw him a bundle of clothes. "Where is Harry? Where’s Tonks?"

"Tonks is on assignment. We need to talk before you see Harry again," Severus murmured, drawing the privacy curtain around the bed and turning his back. Remus emerged scant seconds later, zipping up his trousers and buttoning on his shirt.

"What do you mean we have to talk before I can see him? Where is he? Why is he hanging around that pervert of a vampire?"

"Severus, I believe I’ll let you handle this," Albus smiled, patting Remus on the arm. "But when you’re done, Remus, please come to my office."

"Of course, sir."

"I’d like to know more about this island of yours. Harry did manage to send the beach and lagoon back, didn't he?" Dumbledore asked with twinkling eyes.

***

Remus and Severus stepped out of the Floo at Henri’s residence, and found Le Clair waiting in the small room.

"You’ve explained the situation to him?" Le Clair asked Snape as Lupin eyed the vampire. Remus cleared his throat, sticking his hand at Henri.
"Thank you for what you’re doing for Harry," Remus said. Le Clair accepted the handshake and relaxed visibly.

"You’re welcome."

"Where is he?"

"Outside in the garden."

Remus started to rush past, but Le Clair held up one hand.

"Did he tell you everything?" Henri murmured.

"If by ‘everything’ you mean did Severus explain about Lucius Malfoy, yes," Lupin replied, his voice grating hard in his throat.

"You see, I’m worried you being around might frighten Harry," Le Clair warned. "Give him time to get used to you again, please. Because the last time he saw you in the flesh, you were tearing off his clothes and forcing him down on a bed, and even though that wasn’t really you, in his mind’s eye it was, and you’ve got to give him time. Do you understand what I’m saying? He’s never gotten over what happened, and he’s scared. He hasn’t stopped shaking since we left Wickerwell’s estate."

"Harry knows it was Lucius and not me," Remus said, appalled.

"He knows it logically, but physically is another matter," Severus interjected. "Go slowly."

"I’ll go as slowly as he needs," Remus agreed, quick-stepping up the stairs and outside into the air.

He found Harry sitting on one of the stone benches that overlooked patches of recently-tilled earth. When Lupin sat down, Harry wouldn’t meet his eyes.

"I planted wormwood for you," the young man said, motioning forward with one hand and trembling where he sat. "Henri said it grows very well here."

"Harry?" Remus said, easing one hand under Harry’s free hand. Potter trembled more, going stiff. "Severus told me what happened with Lucius."

"Hardly have to worry about it at all," Potter whispered.

"Of course I’m worried about it," Remus soothed as he felt Harry’s magic work through his arm, vines of clairvoyance trailing up into his chest and body.

"The wormwood will grow without much attention. Pinch back the growths if they get out of hand. Make sure it has plenty of water and plenty of sunlight, but not too much of either. It’s really you," Harry said when Remus squeezed his fingers gently.

"Yes. It’s really me," Lupin confirmed, a lump in his throat. Harry withdrew his magic very timidly.

"Were there plants on your island?" Harry asked as a lick at a time, the sun’s first rays expanded up over the horizon.

"Yes. If I see another coconut tree in my lifetime, it will be too soon."

"I’m learning to use herbs in cooking," Harry said, standing up from the bench and walking
nervously around Lupin’s legs towards another patch in the garden. Remus tried to steady him, grasping his hips, and Harry flinched back from the touch.

"It’s all right, Harry," Remus said, following him a pace behind. Harry stood on the opposite side of the next open patch, unable to meet his face.

"I planted rosemary and lavender here. A warming spell keeps the top level of soil warm in case of late frost."

Harry kept his eyes on the ground. Remus slowly walked around the rectangle of black earth, and reached to take Potter’s hand again.

"It’s going to be all right, Harry," he promised. "I swear, if Malfoy weren’t already dead, I’d kill him again. You don’t know how powerless I felt, trapped on that island for so long, fearing what was going on back here."

"I’m sorry I couldn’t bring you back sooner. I did try," Harry whimpered.

"I know you did. Albus told me how hard you’ve been trying," Remus soothed.

"It is difficult."

"I know it is."

"I don’t mean to be....frightened of you."

"It’s perfectly understandable," Remus whispered, moving closer. "I won’t do anything that frightens you. I won’t touch you, and I won’t jump at you. I won’t hurt you at all. I won’t even raise my voice at you."

"I asked Volkova if she’d like to stay at the house in Hogsmeade," Harry stammered.

"Your Dark Arts teacher?"

"She’s got no place to go. Her cult kicked her out– exiled her. I don’t want to go there alone, and you were gone, and the house was empty, and Severus can’t leave Hogwarts or Voldemort will kill him, and I...I thought....I thought...."

"That was very nice of you to offer the house to your professor, Harry," Remus said, giving his fingers another gentle squeeze. "She and I can share. Is she doesn’t mind werewolf hair in the tub, I won’t mind pantyhose hanging on the towel rods."

"I don’t think she wears hose," Harry whispered. "She’s not the prissy sort. She’s in the infirmary at Hogwarts at the moment. Was it a nice island?"

"As confinements go....." Remus let his voice trail away. "You may ask Professor Dumbledore his opinion. He plans to go there for a long holiday as soon as he gets the chance. May I hug you?"

"What?" Harry stammered.

"I’ve missed you terribly, and I want...I’ve been worried about you. I won’t believe it’s really you unless I can hold you for a moment."

"Did Professor Dumbledore tell you about Lestrange?"

"Yes. That she’s in Azkaban. That you nearly choked her to death with your bare hands. She had to
have a gash in her head repaired."

"She killed Sirius."

"Yes, she did, but, Harry, it’s not polite, going around choking people half to death, or banging their heads against heavy wood. What are people going to think of you?"

"That’s what Henri said," Harry laughed with a soft sniffle.

"Severus and I are headed to Azkaban to question Bellatrix, as soon as I talk again with Professor Dumbledore. But first...may I?"

Harry gulped and tensed, but he allowed Lupin to put both arms around his stock-stiff body. Remus made the hug as brief as possible, tugging on the ends of Harry’s longish lock.

"We’ll have to work on that," he said, wanting to sound light and happy. "Bit like hugging a tree trunk. Have you considered getting a haircut?"

"What all did Severus tell you?" Harry worried, caressing his frazzled hair.

"Everything," Lupin replied.

"If Professor Dumbledore tries to convince you I’m having hot-monkey sex with Severus, you aren’t going to believe him, are you?" Harry kept rambling, unable to shut himself up.

"Not if that hug was any indication," Remus joked awkwardly.

"Everyone thinks we’re fornicating around. We’re not. I wish we were."

"Why does everyone think you are?"

"He’s been very nice to me."

"Yes, he has," Lupin agreed. He could almost feel Snape’s gaze on him from the dining room windows up the small terrace to the right, those dark beady eyes bearing down on the back of his neck.

"We aren’t having sex, but we are a couple though, we’ve decided."

"A couple of what?" Lupin wondered.

"Like you and Sirius were," Harry blurted. To his surprise, Remus snickered. Years fell away from Lupin’s haggard face.

"I doubt that."

"Yes, we are," Harry insisted, sticking his chin up in a stubborn way that made Remus grin and look sad at once.

"Always spoiling for a fight. Merlin, just like your father. Let’s talk about this later, hmm? I don’t want to have to choke Severus to death my first day back."

"I wanted to be honest with you before anyone else said something you might misunderstand. And you may not harm Severus. He’s been very nice to me."

"Yes, I know he has," Remus replied. "Don’t worry. I’m not going to harm him. But we are going
"Why?"

"Not to worry," Lupin whispered. "Who told you Sirius and I were a couple?"

"Illumina let it slip."

"Illumina?"

"But you can’t choke her for it, because she’s in Romania right now on business."

"I’m patient. I’ll wait. How long is she going to be in Romania?"

"I’m not supposed to know you are Sirius were a couple?" Harry gave a small, nervous laugh. "Have you been to the house yet?"

"No."

"Don’t go in the attic."

"Why not?" Remus asked.

"Lucius is there, making a nuisance of himself. He won’t go away."

"Malfoy is in the attic?"

"His ghost is. Well, and bits and pieces they couldn’t, you know, gather up."

"Ah," Lupin shuddered.

"Your things are upstairs here, everything I could get. Sirius’s things too. The wards are destroyed, and I can’t figure out how to rebuild them. The house was vandalized over and over. It’s a total a wreck. I just want you to know. Don’t be shocked when you see it."

"We’ll fix everything," Remus promised. "Don’t worry about it."

"I’m never going back there," Harry protested. "I....we'll find a new place to live. I'm not..." His voice failed him. Remus nodded.

"All right. We'll let your Dark Arts instructor let the house, if it makes you uneasy. I'm sure we'll come up with another place in Hogsmeade."

"You don't want to go there either. Someone drew moons in your room, dog bones in Sirius’s room. My walls have.....it’s a disaster," Harry rambled. "I didn’t want you to see it like that, but there was nothing I could do from here. I think it was Draco. All he knows how to draw is filth. Fancies he’s going to be an artist someday. I want to bite his fingers off."

"Harry, don’t worry," Remus soothed.

"Severus is watching us," Harry smiled, darting a glance up at the windows. Snape allowed a small smile to grace his face, ever wary of the frown that crept across Lupin’s features. Harry waved, and Severus waved back. "Why didn't he come out to see me? You’ve been instructed not to let us be alone, haven’t you?"

"Yes. The Headmaster was most specific in the request."
"How mad would you be if I knocked you out for an hour or so?"

"Exceptionally."

"Can I at least go say hello?" Harry asked. The hint of tartness in his words brought a smirk to Remus’s face.

"By all means," he growled.
Nico

Chapter Summary

In which Harry gets to meet Henri's boyfriend in the flesh

Chapter Notes

Warning for graphic, explicit sex and clairvoyant voyeurism

The next night, Harry was in the shower cleaning up when he heard the voices in the hallway outside. He soaked sore muscles under the spray and listened to the conversation.

"Where is he hiding?"

"Nico," Henri whispered tersely. "He’s getting ready for bed."

"What were you doing to him all night?"

"We were working on wandless transfigurations. I gave him an old beastiary and we were having a bit of harmless fun."

"Is that what we’re calling it these days?"

"Nico, don’t go barging in. Wait for him to come out."

"Half the wizarding world is waiting for him to come out," Nico snorted.

"Could I caution you not to bring up anything I’ve told you about him unless he mentions it?"

"I suppose. You look worried. Have you been telling tales out of school?"

"I’m quite afraid you’ll like each other far too much."

"I thought you said he was infatuated with his Potions Master."

"He is. But I know what unforeseen chemistry can bloom between two hot-blooded young men if they are put in close proximity to one another."

"I can’t wait to show him my balls."

"I can’t believe you brought them along."

Harry shook his head in puzzlement and decided he’d better cut this shower short. Dragging himself out from under the water, he dried off and dressed, trying to make himself presentable in sleeping clothes and a heavy robe. He popped open the door to his bedroom, and found the two men were twined around each other in the hallway, kissing while leaning against the decorative paneling. Harry cleared his throat, and Henri parted from the brown-eyed, blond haired young man,
leaving him gasping against the wall.

"Harry Potter, Nicolas Waggstaff," Le Clair said as Nico wiped the back of one hand rakishly across his mouth. He extended his other paw at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, such a pleasure."

"You were a Beater for the Wasps," Harry gushed. "I knew I had seen you somewhere before. Sidelined with a leg injury two years ago, weren’t you?" He accepted the powerful handshake that was offered. Henri’s boyfriend was perhaps twenty-five, a head taller than Harry, and utterly delicious.

"Good memory you have, Mr. Potter. Very nice to meet you," Nico smiled. "I’ve been dying to talk quidditch with you, if you’re not too tired?"

"He needs his rest," Le Clair said sternly. Harry ran a hand through his wet hair and acquiesced to the jealousy in Henri’s face.

"Tomorrow then," Nico decided, eyeing Harry’s sleeping clothes up and down as the teen blushed, so aware of his youth and thin size when standing next to this vibrant and masculine creature.

"What kind of transfigurations did he teach you tonight, Harry?" Waggstaff asked.

"Shape shifting in general, nothing specific. We tried a few tricks. Got stuck in one transformation for about thirty minutes before we worked our way back out," Le Clair replied. Harry nodded in time as Henri spoke. Potter’s eyes were nearly crossing with exhaustion. "Did the tail disappear?"

Henri asked, turning Harry about by the shoulders.

"Yes," Harry yawned.

"You wiped him out, didn’t you?" Nico said to Henri with a playful tease in his deep tone. "Goodnight, Mr. Potter," he added, sticking a hand at Harry again.

"Night," Harry whispered, shaking Nico’s hand and going back in his room. After he closed the door, he leaned against it, and heard Nico give a soft laugh.

"He's just adorable," Waggstaff whispered as he and Henri were walking away. "That hair! You can’t decide if you want to ruffle it up or smooth it down."


Harry put a wondering hand up into his damp locks and wandered towards the bed to go to sleep. He squinted at the shadows in his room for a few moments before he disappeared into his dreams. Voices down the hall woke him later. He wasn’t sure how long he had managed to rest. The voices were soft at first, and gradually grew louder.

"Yes...yes...Henri...oh...."

Nico was moaning passionately. Curious and half-awake, Harry took a hand out of the covers and lifted it in the general direction of the sounds. Concentrating but a fraction, he got a clear mental image of the goings-on in Le Clair’s rooms. Waggstaff was lying flat on his back on the bed, naked from the waist down, shirt dangling from one wrist. Henri was kissing and licking his way all around the athlete’s firm body. At his neck was a faint love bite. His face was red and damp with sweat. He had a suggestive tattoo of a broom and quidditch balls on one massive bicep.

Mortified, Harry started to pull away from the scene, not wanting to intrude. Henri lifted one of
Nico’s hands and kissed it tenderly before removing his shirt and casting it aside. He pulled Nico up from the bed and coaxed him onto his knees. In reality, there were at least two walls and a staircase between the three of them, but Harry felt as if he were standing in their room watching them. What’s more, he was sure Le Clair sensed his presence. The vampire was gleefully intent on drawing louder and louder cries and moans out of Nico.

Not quite able to look away, Harry watched Henri smoothing the contents of a vial down between Nico’s legs. The expression of impatient desire on Waggstaff’s face made Harry self-conscious about what kind of faces he might have made when Severus sucked him off, or with Lucius for that matter. Had that been what Malfoy was doing while hovering over Harry, gloating while watching the boy’s face? Henri eased a pillow under Nico’s hips and steadied himself between the muscular thighs spread wide for him. Harry wondered what Henri was doing until Nico’s face flushed with pleasure and annoyance.

"Use the spell, you tease."

"And miss all the fun of watching you squirm?" Le Clair purred, pushing one hand (several fingers, Harry presumed, ouch) inside Nico. Harry winced in pain. Waggstaff moaned again, pushing backwards against Le Clair. Harry wondered that he didn’t feel vulnerable, because Le Clair was fully clothed yet, even wearing his shoes. Harry remembered the scrape and bite of Lucius’s buckles and buttons against his back. The sounds Nico started making brought icy hot chills to Harry’s body, hardening his cock and chilling his spine. There was no doubt Nico wanted what Henri was doing, but Harry had to wonder if all of that, whatever it was, was pleasurable. How could that possibly be fun?

Le Clair used his wand to remove his clothes, and Harry gasped, not so much from the sudden appearance of Henri’s hard and ready phallus (a very impressive specimen if Harry were any judge) but the fact that Le Clair was covered with battle scars. No part of his body was immune. There were whip marks on his back, knife marks in his side, sword stabs, pin pricks, gun powder burns, a bullet hole. When this man talked intimately about warfare, it was clear he had first-hand knowledge. Harry would never again wonder if the vampire was bragging up his battle accomplishments.

Nico purred restlessly and arched his backside towards Henri. Henri grasped Nico’s hips with slippery hands and pushed his cock against Nico’s entrance. Harry could feel the penetration in a ghost-like way, and he buried his face in his pillows, hoping neither Le Clair nor Waggstaff could hear him. Harry bit his mouth closed to keep from moaning in time with each of Henri’s thrusts. Nico was sagging down against the bed, grinning with delight as Le Clair rammed against him. Harry’s second sight shimmered through him, delivering the pleasure that Nico and Henri were both feeling, everything from the pounding against the quidditch player's prostate to the tickle of Le Clair’s balls and body hairs between Nico’s thighs and buttocks.

Harry hid his face deeper in the pillow, preferring suffocation to the embarrassment of being overheard eavesdropping this way. He began to stroke himself in time with each jolt of the lovers’ bed. It didn’t take long for him to come. As he lay curled up in shame and searing heat, he could feel Nico and Henri still slamming away into each other. The walls of the house seemed to be shaking. Harry let his free arm sag, let his second sight fade away. He used a quick cleaning spell on himself and his covers, and burrowed down into the bed to hide away from his shame.

Harry dreamed about Lucius, of course— in the dark and misty way that Malfoy always crept into his sleep no matter what he had been dreaming before. Lucius would start out as a shadow on the perimeter of the dream, and work his way towards Harry, following him, stalking his every move, until he would manage to grab Harry and drag him away into darkness. The dreams were worse
now that Remus was back, because he would appear in them as well, sometimes as Lucius and
sometimes with Lucius. Harry fought away the nightmares, feeling heavy hands adjusting his
covers for him. A soft deep voice murmured from a figure above him, and Harry fought wildly,
disoriented by the darkness and the unfamiliarity.

"Lumos minimus viridian," Henri was saying. "Are you all right?" Harry fought away the grip on
his hands, making muted sounds of distress.

"Stop. Stop."

"I exhausted you, made you overtired?" Henri added, putting a firm hand on Potter’s shoulder to
steady him. Harry focused his eyes on the green light, and then on Henri’s red eyes.

"Henri?" Harry questioned. Le Clair patted him on the shoulder, helping him lie back down in bed.

"Dormez bien, 'teet cher," Henri mumbled as he tucked the covers around the boy. He crossed the
room on silent feet, leaving far sooner than Harry would have liked. The comfort of a familiar
presence would have been nice, Harry lamented. He even considered for a moment that he could
follow Le Clair and crawl into bed with him as he had done with Severus. At least he would feel
safe and warm for a few moments. (an #1)

"Is he all right?" a sleepy voice wondered. Was Nico also in the hallway? He must have been,
because Henri hushed someone. Harry was so embarrassed. "Why was he screaming?" Nico
persisted. Henri hushed him again. Harry flopped over onto his side and huddled against his pillow,
longing for Severus as tears dripped down his face.
"We didn’t disturb you, did we? Nico and I?"

Harry looked up from his Charms work, astounded by Le Clair’s frankness. Potter supposed that after five hundred plus years, there simply wasn’t any point to beating around the bush if you wanted to broach a delicate topic. Harry had learned too that Henri was given to being ribald in private moments.

"Um, no," Harry stammered in a small voice, hiding in his book again. Le Clair was reading a novel without a visible title, poured drowsily into an armchair with one leg over the side and one leg propped up on an ottoman before him. The vampire smiled to himself and turned a page.

"I’m sorry you were so tired last night. Your exhaustion must have given you bad dreams. Nico hopes to have dinner with us again soon. He brought a collection of quidditch souvenirs to show you last night. I told him he could bring them back next time."

"Where did he go?" Harry asked.

"Work," Henri motioned with a dismissive hand gesture.

"Is he playing for another team?" Harry asked.

"No. His injury prevented him from returning to play. You must not encourage him. Grown men should not ‘play’ for a living."

"Have you ever seen him play Quidditch? It’s not the job of a lay-about."

"He is now employed creating sports equipment. I suspect he’s hoping to persuade you to test some of the balls for him. I sensed your presence last night."

Harry lowered his eyes away from Le Clair’s penetrating gaze.

"It’s normal for a boy to be curious," Henri shrugged, unconcerned. "Luckily, your second sight allowed you to watch without being there, in order to indulge your curiosity without being intrusive. I didn't mind. When one has spent so many years in army camps, one becomes accustomed to sharing even the most private of moments."

Harry stayed quiet, not sure what he should say. Le Clair turned another page in his novel.
"Without being forward, I don’t think I’d have to twist Nico’s arm to let you watch us in person, ask questions about what you don’t understand."

Harry got so warm suddenly that he was afraid he might burst into flames.

"Or to join us, for that matter. I’m afraid he was very taken with you," Le Clair continued, his smile laced with saucy jealousy. Harry groaned soft and low, closing his Charms textbook.

"I’m afraid I wouldn’t measure up to his expectations. I’m not sure that joining you two would be proper," Harry said politely. His cock couldn’t help but disagree with him. His mind began to conjure all sorts of ways he and Henri and Nico could be most improper together.

"No, I doubt it would be at all proper," Le Clair confirmed, turning another page. "As to the worry about not measuring up, I doubt you’ll disappoint. As my military comrades were fond of saying, it’s not the cannon you bring to battle but your skill at aiming the weapon."

"I’ll keep that in mind," Harry tried out a weak laugh.

"I’m sure your Headmaster would rip my head off if he knew what I had offered to you, but I doubt every student in the school discusses their sex life with Professor Dumbledore. You wouldn’t have to tell him, would you? I’m sure it’s not covered in the contract."

Harry wondered if Henri was looking at pictures in a novel. He turned the book sideways, cocked his head to one side, and turned another page.

"It’s a standing offer," Le Clair whispered seconds later. "No pressure involved. I thought perhaps that you might be able to work past some of your fears if you could see that sex doesn’t have to involve violence and pain."

"That’s very kind of you."

"I hope you’re not offended to learn we discussed you at length," Le Clair admitted. Harry mumbled unintelligible words, crimson with horror. "I mean, sex with pain can be had if that’s your fancy, but generally speaking, everyone I’ve ever known that went for pain and sex together has had a traumatic experience in their past, one they never got over. Somewhere along the way, pleasure and pain got linked together in their brains, and it’s hard to break away from that once the bond has solidified. Please don’t be embarrassed. You don’t have to say a word."

Harry probably couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. His tongue was frozen in place behind his teeth, his entire body mortified beyond words.

"You have no reason to blame yourself, petit chèr. You cannot control this consciously. The mind is impressionable, and the body is functional. If you associate red with the roses, it’s because that’s the only color you’ve seen them come in. If you associate pain with sex, it’s because that’s the only sex you’ve been experienced. It might be a gross generalization, but that doesn’t make it any less true in my own experiences."

Le Clair turned another page, and pulled his leg off the side of the chair.

"It goes without saying that there are wingnuts out there who think that wanting pain and sex together makes them avant-garde, makes them daring, makes them somehow above the boring, pedestrian people who prefer pleasure for pleasure’s sake alone. How quaint of us!"

Harry remained quiet, not sure what he could offer to this conversation. Le Clair seemed to have been storing it up for a rainy day. He was saying things he’d wanted to say to someone for a long
"Having had pain and sex together far too often for my liking, I can’t help but feel they’re doing it to impress each other. Shoving small animals or large objects into body orifices does not make you avant-garde. It makes you self-dangerous. At some point a distinction must be made between what is daring and what is perversion."

"Have you had much experience with perversion?" Harry laughed nervously.

"Ah, Mon Dieu! The problem is, no matter how much you hurt yourself, if you tell everyone about it, there’s going to be someone out there willing to up the standards, so to speak. Someone will always want to out perform whatever creative atrocity you rendered upon yourself or someone else."

"I understand."

"I could write a book about all the perversions I seen. My point is that there’s too much pain in this world as it is. If people want to hurt each other, it’s their prerogative. But don’t expect me to join in. I’m of the opinion that sex should be about pleasure. Giving pleasure. Receiving pleasure. Finding new pleasures."

"I’m not sure I’m..." Harry didn’t know what to say. Henri must have read something in his face. The vampire’s expression went from teasing to kind.

"Trust me when I tell you, having a rough first experience doesn’t lock you into a life of having to accept violence and sex together. When you find someone you trust, someone who you know loves you and will be gentle with you, all you have to do is give yourself up to them, and I promise everything will be all right. Not everyone is going to want to hurt you. Most will only want to please you, as I do."

Harry wasn’t aware he was crying until two tears splashed down on the table. He drew in a wet noisy snivel. Le Clair closed his novel and glided over to Harry. A soothing hand went through his hair, and a cold arm hugged his neck.

"I’m sorry, petit chèr. Desolé. My mouth and mind need to come to an agreement about what I should say before I say it. My words have upset you. I did not mean for it to be so awkward, but I’ve wanted to say this to you for a long time. You did nothing wrong, and you have every right to go on with your life. Your Mr. Snape would know what to say to you. Lulu said he was always very tender it came to soothing hurt feelings."

Harry spilled tears everywhere, like a water sprinkler on high.

"I know how you feel, petit chèr," Le Clair soothed, his voice in Harry’s ear. Potter shook his head no, gasping for breath.

"You have.... no idea...." he cried.

"Venice," Le Clair murmured. "That’s why I don’t like Venice."

Harry took a deep breath, dripping more tears.

"I told Illumina it was because of a battle I lost there, but I didn’t want her to know the truth. Of course, she probably knows, read the truth off of something I own, but is too polite to tell me she read right through me. Do you understand what I’m saying?"
Harry nodded. Henri sensed Potter was uncomfortable being hugged, and released his waist and shoulder. Le Clair brushed away Harry’s tears and straightened himself upright, but his eyes remained awkward and downcast.

"If it will help you, you can talk to me about what you’re feeling," Henri offered. "We don’t even have to talk about what is wrong. We can talk about nothing at all. I will talk at you until you’re bored to death and can’t worry. All my friends will tell you what wicked gossip I am, and my enemies will tell you much the same. I’ll talk and talk and talk to soothe you. I have a very soothing voice. Most people think so."

Harry wanted to say yes, and wanted to lash out at Henri for intruding where he hadn’t been invited. Somehow, Le Clair understood that too.

"I’ve interrupted your studies. I do apologize," he said, lowering his eyes to the work on the table.

Harry shrugged, clearing his throat, embarrassed for his emotional outburst.

"Your schoolwork is very important. More important than you realize. The way I see it, you can either spend your life standing around waiting for Mr. Dark Wizard to come find you and kill you, or you can devise a way to hunt him down and kill him instead. The choice is entirely yours, but I suspect you haven’t much time to decide."

"No," Harry agreed.

"Whatever you decide, I am at your service."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled.

"If you finish your Charms work before dinner, I will let you read my book after dinner," Le Clair tempted him. "If you like it, I have a room full of them down the hall. Lurid, tawdry, slippery with sex. Some are charmed to let you interact with the characters, have the characters do certain things for you, let you feel what the characters are feeling. I’ve got books that will do everything but clean your laundry when you’re done. If you’re curious, the room will be open for you. But you must finish your homework first. Hmm?"

Harry agreed weakly, unable to meet Le Clair’s eyes.

"We were supposed to get a letter from the ladies tonight. I hope they are enjoying themselves. I’m going to check in the foyer for letters. You continue your work. There’s a dear boy. I did not mean to embarrass myself or you either one," Le Clair said, leaving his novel with no title on the table with Harry’s school books.
"Harry, I’m so happy to see you," Doctor McGonagall said, ushering him into her office. Le Clair lingered in the hallway, cloaked in his body-concealing black clothes and mask. He waved at Harry and gave the Doctor a small bow before vanishing into the shadows. She closed the door. "This is our fourth meeting this month. It’s nearly May! I’m so excited to have summer so close. I’m so glad you’re here! Have a seat. Have a seat!"

Harry crawled into his preferred chair, the one that reminded him of the huge seat in Severus’s personal quarters. He picked up the pillow from the side of the seat and held it to his chest and lap. He folded one leg under himself and watched Doctor McGonagall as she sat down at her desk. Could she tell by looking at him that he had spent the better part of this week, this month actually, lying naked in bed, reading nearly every illicit book that Le Clair’s personal library had to offer? Was it evident in his freshly-shaved but tired face or in his drooping eyes? Could she tell he’d nearly wanked himself into a hospital ward?

"What shall we talk about?" she smiled at him, scratching under her auburn bun with the end of a quill. She had noticed Harry had started shaving, but didn’t say anything about it. Wasn't she curious who had taught him this new skill?

"I want to talk about sex," Harry said plainly. Doctor McGonagall’s bun stopped moving back and forth, and she blinked at him. "If that doesn’t make you uncomfortable," Harry added, almost smiling. It was becoming more and more fun to catch people off guard by saying things they didn’t expect from him.

"No. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable," she lied, somehow managing to smile. "What in particular do you want to know? Do you have mechanical questions or psychological questions? Moral questions? Spiritual questions? Rhetorical questions?"

"Why do wizards believe that remaining a virgin increases a wizard’s powers?"

"To be honest, it’s part social training and part mythology. Are you worried that you won’t be able to defeat the Dark Lord because of what happened with Mr. Malfoy?"

"No, not any more. I think I know why I absorbed his magic too."

"Do you?"

"His conduit spell collapsed back in on me when I killed him because my magic overpowered his."

"How do you know this?"

"I can’t prove it, but it’s what I suspect. I’ve been reading all I can get my hands on about conduit spells. Also, I was reading a book Mr. Le Clair had, and there was a story in it about two sorcerers who went around stealing people’s magic. They seduced other wizards and witches and stole their
"Is that really the sort of book you ought to be reading?" the doctor questioned, worry on her face. "It doesn’t sound very moral or age appropriate."

"It had a very moral ending. The two lost their magic when they were outsmarted by a younger, more powerful sorcerer. He seduced them in turn and stole their magic by collapsing their conduit spells and absorbing their powers when they were at low ebb, after he had sexually exhausted them."

"How curious."

"Does it mean I’m a more powerful wizard than Mr. Malfoy was, because I could collapse his conduit spell and take his magic?"

"As you are still alive and he is not, I would have to say yes," she smiled at him with a motherly fondness. Far from being soothed, Potter looked very worried again.

"Oh, fuck. Does this mean I’m going to have to seduce Voldemort to be able to destroy him?" he mumbled.

"No, Harry, I don’t believe that would be the best approach to the situation, no."

"Thank Merlin," Harry sighed, relaxing.

"I've heard he's rather homophobic, actually."

"That's a relief."

"Anything else on your mind?"

"I didn’t know how I was going to ask Professor Dumbledore that question, and I wasn’t entirely sure he’d tell me the truth."

"Glad I could help," Artemis murmured. "Other than introducing you to questionable literature, how have things been between you and Mr. Le Clair this week?"

"We’ve been doing a lot of transfigurations homework."

"Minerva will be thrilled."

"We finished remodeling the office at Illuminations. I’ve been answering phones for him while Illumina and Raffles are away in Venice."

"What kind of transfigurations are you doing?"

"Animagus spells," Harry smiled cryptically. "Le Clair has the beautiful, old beastiary, and I've been picking out animals from there."

"Minerva will be doubly thrilled. You’re a year ahead of time. Did you start out with small creatures and go from there?"

"I've done large and small. I kind of jumped in head-first and went large to begin with, but the small animals are much easier," Harry smiled. It was something Henri would never have been allowed to do with Harry if Illumina had been at home, and they both knew it. Harry remembered the look of awe on Le Clair’s face when confronted with Potter’s first animal attempt. Harry
sucked up all the earth magic he could feel in the garden at Le Clair’s estate and let his spell fly. From two stories down, Henri wasn’t as tall as he seemed before. Harry remembered the detail of his scales with wicked pleasure. He had thrashed his pointed tail about with unbounded delight. Wings! He’d always wondered what wings would feel like!

"What were you?" McGonagall asked.

"I don’t know, exactly," Harry replied with a coy smile. "I couldn’t see all of me in the mirror, and Le Clair wouldn’t tell me."

Henri couldn’t tell Harry, because the vampire had taken one look at what Harry became and fainted away on the moonlit grass in the garden. Fanning his wings over his guardian, Harry had finally brought Le Clair around. Good thing, because Harry wasn’t sure he would have fit back in the house in the animagus form, and he needed help turning into a human again. Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough magic in the garden to turn him back. He had had to waddle into the forest with Le Clair’s help and use the magic there to change back.

"You’ll have to write an essay for Minerva. She’ll be speechless with glee. What else have you been doing?"

"I met Henri’s boyfriend," Harry tested her. She didn’t even blink.

"Do you like him?"

"He has dinner with us twice a week. He’s a former quidditch player. Very nice bloke. I’m starting to believe he’s part Veela. He seems to be able to wrap Henri around his finger very easily. Either he’s a Veela or he’s exceptionally skilled at manipulation."

If Doctor McGonagall understood Harry’s double-entendre, she didn’t reveal her shock. Darn it.

"Has Mr. Le Clair been helping you with your homework?" she asked.

"He’s not doing it for me, but he’s helping me, yes."

"Your teachers have all remarked that your work is improving."

"It amuses Le Clair to help me with the work. He likes the idea that he is shaping me in some small fashion."

"How has he been treating you?"

"In what sense?" Harry frowned.

"Whatever sense you like."

"He showed me spells from his first grimoire."

"What sort of spells?"

"Gruesome stuff," Harry’s smile returned. "Bad breath, foaming at the mouth, hanging by your feet upside down, bread from rocks, water from wind, fire from water, turning chairs into lions."

"Things that might appeal to teenage boys," she smiled at him.

"But the best part is, it’s wandless magic."
"He’s teaching you wandless magic?" Artemis gasped.

"He said I’m pretty good at it," Harry continued, his soft voice growing deep. "Can I show you something?" he asked, scooping an orange out of the bowl of fruit on the coffee table in front of his chair.

"Of course. While you do, I’d like to talk to you about Professor Snape, if I might?" Doctor McGonagall said as Harry lifted the orange up from his palm. "You haven't mentioned him, and I feel it's important that we discuss that situation as well."

The orange in Harry's grip was levitating, and turning inside out around itself. Sections of fruit expanded, and ripe juice dripped into Harry’s outstretched hand.

"Yes, let’s talk about Severus," Harry agreed, taking a bite of orange and leveling his eyes at her. "Are you the one encouraging Headmaster Dumbledore to not allow me to speak with, or see, or write to Severus? Because if you are, we really should talk about how you need to mind your own business."

"Yes, sister? I’m here!" the doctor called back.

"Avoidance behavior," Harry whispered, having a difficult time containing his fury.

"Is Harry there with you?" Professor McGonagall called from the fireplace.

"Yes."

"I’m coming over straight away!"

Professor McGonagall popped out of the grate in a blinding flash of green. She dusted herself off and pulled her hat upright. Harry gave her a nervous stare. This was the first time he had seen her in person in months. Was she still angry with him? Was Artemis going to tell Minerva that Harry was reading questionable fiction? Was Minerva the one trying to keep Severus from contacting Harry in any way? Professor McGonagall rushed at Harry, taking his juice-covered hands into her own.

"You’re all right. What a relief!" Minerva stammered, pulling him to his feet and planting a kiss on each cheek before smashing him with a hug.

"We were having a session," Artemis explained, amused with her sister.

"Where is Mr. Le Clair?" Minerva asked, releasing Harry and letting him breathe again. He focused his magic through her for less than a second, only long enough to learn that she was not here about Severus at all.

"In the hallway," Harry motioned with orange-scented hands.

"We have to talk to him at once."
"What’s wrong?" Artemis asked.

"Vernon is home from the hospital."

"Aunt Petunia must be on the war-path," Harry murmured.
Dear Hermione–

How are things at Hogwarts today? Sorry I’ve been remiss about writing letters, but I think once you read the blue book, you’ll know what I’ve been doing with my free time. Henri has this extensive library that you simply have to see in person someday.

I’m sure you’ve heard by now that Aunt Petunia is no longer concerned with Uncle Vernon being in the hospital. He is home at last, and she has turned her full attention (and fury) on me. Professor McGonagall escorted me back to Le Clair’s house after my appointment with Doctor McGonagall yesterday. I am now officially a ward of the wizard state, or so the very nervous Percy Weasley informed me when he appeared on Le Clair’s doorstep this morning to deliver the news about the change in my status. Hemlock, Hollyhock and Honeydew are appealing the decision of the court on my behalf, but they are up against Arch Hawkins, who made it clear before just how much he hates me.

I invited Percy in, and made him comfortable with a spot of tea, and let him know that he could not leave the house now unless he left without me. He said that his orders were to not return to Minister Fudge unless he had me along. Poor Percy. Fudge sent him because he knew I’d never ever harm Ron’s brother, prat or not. It appears Percy will be staying for a while. Let Ron know his brother is all right and will not be harmed. I sent a message to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and let them know that Percy is here and he is safe. I showed Percy the extensive library I mentioned before, and I haven’t seen him for several hours. I cooked lunch and left a tray by the door, and when I returned, the tray was entirely clean. I’m sure Le Clair is going to wonder who the red-head in the porn library is, but when he wakes up tonight, I’ll explain everything to him.

Anyhow, not sure what else to say on the matter. We both knew Aunt Petunia was going to stick it to me, and she certainly has. No surprise there. I’m three months from my birthday, and hope to remain as low to the ground as possible in order to avoid being kidnapped by Fudge before I’m officially an adult in the eyes of the wizard world. After that, my guardianship is a mute point. My magic becomes the central issue. He has to prove I’m unable to control my magic before he can have me committed. That’s going to be a bigger challenge than he might imagine. Le Clair has been working my magic to the bone lately. I can do things I can’t even explain to you.

Give my love to everyone. I hope that you and Ron are speaking again. He must be angry still. He hasn’t written to me. Is Professor Volkova any better? Has she come out of her trance yet?
kind of poison was on the blade Bellatrix used? Have you talked to Remy? Are he and Severus getting along all right? I’ve been meaning to ask if Professor Dumbledore still has the cloak Fred and George took from Bellatrix on the rooftop before Christmas? I should very much like to see it, if he does have it. I wish you knew who was keeping my letters from arriving in Severus’s rooms. I have tried repeatedly to send them to him, but they pop back at me and burst into flames. Of course, if you knew, you’d tell me, I’m sure, but I wouldn’t pressure you to learn this for me, for fear perhaps you do not approve of us either.

Goodbye for today. I will write again tomorrow, or as soon as I get the chance.

Love,
Harry

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"You can’t pretend you’re surprised she’s done this," Severus was saying. He drank slowly from the cup of tea that Dumbledore had handed him. They were having a quiet talk in the staff lounge, with Minerva and Remus and Hagrid gathered around as well.

"No, I won’t pretend that I thought Petunia would come to Harry’s rescue," Albus said sadly.

"Has anyone explained the consequences to her?" Minerva asked.

"No. She won’t let us near enough to talk," Remus said.

"Without Harry in her house, the magic that was there to protect him will disappear," Minerva went on.

"Yes, yes, we know," Dumbledore sighed.

"They’ll be vulnerable to the Dark Lord, and no one will protect them," McGonagall whispered. "Did you try to tell her?" she pressed Remus. "She’s as good as signed their death warrants."

"Oh, yes. I tried. That huge husband of hers fired a gun at me."

"Vernon fired a gun at you?!!" Minerva gasped.

"A shotgun, actually," Remus clarified.

"They’re animals," Snape hissed. "Let them die. After the way they treated Harry, I’m of half a mind to kill them all myself."

"That’s unfair," Hagrid interjected. Snape stared at him. The giant cracked a crooked smile. "To compare them to animals is an insult to animals everywhere," he added. Snape smirked.

"Petunia knows the consequences of what she’s done, and frankly, we haven’t the manpower to protect them if Voldemort decides they are on his wish list," Dumbledore said. "I’m afraid it’s out of my hands."

"We have a responsibility," Minerva frowned, "whether we like them or not."

"I say let the Dursleys protect themselves. Our first responsibility is to protect Harry," Snape growled.

"What did you learn from your visit with Bellatrix last night?" Dumbledore asked Remus and Severus. They exchanged a conspiratorial glance, and Remus had to wipe a half smile off his face.
"She really is in Azkaban?" McGonagall asked.

"You’re certain it’s her?" Dumbledore questioned.

"It’s her," Snape confirmed.

"A DNA database? Is that what you called it?" Remus asked. Severus nodded. "You should have seen it. He snatched out one of her hairs, and put it in this solution," Remus tried to explain, but the others stared at him as if he were babbling, which he was actually.

"She wouldn’t talk about the Dark Lord’s plans, but it’s safe to say that things are going to come to a head soon," Snape added.

"What makes you say that?" Albus wanted to know.

"She was trying to claw her way out of the cell, promised us anything we wanted if we could release her," Snape answered Dumbledore’s question.

"Power, money, sex," Remus listed. "I was tempted."

"Were you?" Severus murmured.

"Do you realize how long I was on that island? I missed power," Remus mused.

"The point being, she’s anxious to be out and take part in what is going to happen," Severus continued to Albus.

"Can the Dark Lord do whatever he’s planned to do without Bellatrix at his side?" Minerva asked.

The door opened, and Flitwick stood there, shocked at the closely-knit gathering around the table.

"Good afternoon," he smiled, striding in and putting books and pages down in the chair. He reached for a snack off the biscuit tray, and Hagrid poured him a cup of tea. "Sorry for the delay. I’d’ve hurried along if I’d known the meeting was so very urgent meeting. Are Hooch and Sinistra coming soon?"

"We were discussing Bellatrix Lestrange and Petunia Dursley," Minerva murmured.

"Oh, yes," Flitwick sighed. "You know, it’s sad, really."

"Very sad," Minerva agreed.

"Not having Bellatrix at his side will slow the Dark Lord down, but I doubt it will derail his plans altogether," Snape said, sitting back in his seat with a forlorn expression on his face.

"The guards at Azkaban have a round-the-clock guard on Bellatrix, don’t they?" Hagrid asked.

"Why would they?" Flitwick asked. "She’s not there."

"What?!"

Five people whirled on the tiny Charms professor, and Hagrid lifted him up off the ground.

"I thought you knew! You said you were discussing her!" Flitwick wailed, dropping his cup of tea and staring wide-eyed at Hagrid.

"She escaped again?!" McGonagall howled.
"Escaped? Hardly. Fudge probably held the cell door open for her on the way out," Snape muttered.

"Bellatrix’s guard found Petunia Dursley in the cell not two hours ago," Flitwick responded. "It’s all over the radio broadcasts. Turn on the wireless."


"He became suspicious when Bellatrix wasn’t throwing her water cup at him when he made his rounds, and he went in her cell to investigate. He’s still being questioned by authorities, in case he was involved," Flitwick said.

"Petunia was masquerading as Bellatrix? But that’s not possible! It makes no sense!" Snape exclaimed. "We confirmed it was Bellatrix not twelve hours ago."

"This doesn’t make any sense," Remus echoed.

"Fudge knew we were coming and probably helped her escape after we left," Snape moaned. "How could we be so stupid?"

"How did Petunia Dursley get there?" Hagrid asked.

"We should question her and find out," Dumbledore decided.

"That might prove difficult," Flitwick flinched.

"Why?"

"Turn on the broadcasts! Mrs. Dursley is dead! The curious part, the reports said, is that Petunia appears to have been dead for some time. There were traces of dirt on the body. One might even suspect she had been buried, exhumed, and placed in the cell when the time was right," Flitwick shivered. "One thing for certain. You won’t be able to question her without Professor Trelawney’s help. Can you put me down now?" he asked Hagrid. The giant obliged, patting his shoulder.

"Sorry," Hagrid boomed.

"Could your DNA test have been fooled?" Remus asked Severus.

"No."

"Then we did see Bellatrix in her cell, and she has been loose for less than twelve hours. That gives us a limited search area," Remus resolved.

"It’s pointless. Pointless!" Severus replied.

"What about your map?" Dumbledore asked Snape.

"Map?" Remus and Severus asked in one voice.

"At least Mr. Mooney might be able to answer some of your questions about how it operates," Albus added. Snape grasped Lupin’s arm and tugged him from the room in a rush.

"Why didn't they think of that before?" Minerva asked.

"Been too occupied discussing Harry, I imagine," Dumbledore sighed.
"Headmaster, how should we break the news to Harry?" McGonagall asked.

"I believe I should be the one to do it," Albus replied. The rest of the faculty sagged with relief. "My only hope is that he isn't too shocked."
Tantrum

Chapter Summary

In which Ron Weasley comes mighty close to death

Chapter Notes

Warning for harsh and repetitive use of certain four-letter words

"My office hours do not begin until noon on Saturday, Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape murmured with half a glance up from the potion bubbling away in front of him on the table. "If there’s something you need to discuss, I’ll be more than happy to talk with you at that time."

"Ron? What’s the matter?" Lupin asked, rotating the enlarged map-globe around, impatiently reading the names the appeared.

Weasley gave no reply but a deadly snarl. He threw a small blue velvet book down onto the table with enough force that it skated straight over and onto the floor on the other side. Severus continued stirring his potion, and levitated the book off the floor. Lupin watched the book and Snape, staring wide-eyed at Ron.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked, recognizing that this was Harry’s book of illicit fiction, his Christmas gift from Miss Granger. The pages which had once been tight and clean where rippled and dog-eared from use.

"I want you to explain to me what’s in that!!" Ron seethed, drawing his wand and pointing it at Snape. Severus calmly stopped stirring his potion and took the beaker off the flames to let it cool. After the morning Snape had had, Weasley didn’t realize how close to death he had actually come when drawing his wand.

"How nice. A tantrum. I believe I shall deduct two points for every second your wand is pointed at me, Mr. Weasley. Start explaining what it is I’m supposed to be reading," Severus drawled. Remus knew he should step between the two of them, but felt compelled to glance over the top of the book and try to read whatever had so incensed Harry’s friend.

"That trash in that book! How can you claim you haven’t slept with Harry!? He as much as admits you have. Talks about it in detail! I’m taking you to the Headmaster. I’m going to the Board of Governors today over this if I have to!"

Severus turned pages, not reading but catching a word or two as the handwriting turned from Hermione’s neat print (some ghastly piece about ferret underwear) to the first entry done in Harry’s slightly-gangly print. Lurid passages went by, detailing the misadventures of a naughty school boy caught up in a private language lesson with his stern, severe Latin Master. It was all Severus could do to not burst into laughter and tears, reading about the careful, correct conjugation of certain innocent verbs being swapped for increasingly-more intimate touches and caresses. By
the time the naughty school boy had reached orgasm, he was speaking nearly perfect Latin under
the careful hand of his language teacher. Hell, if it were that easy to get students to perform
correctly, Severus would have his hands in every pair of trousers in the school.

For his part, Lupin squinted at the words, and finally grasped the book from Snape in order to have
a better look.

"MERLIN IN GARTERS!" Remus howled, closing the book, dabbing the surprise off his face,
and giving the tome back to Severus.

"You do know, Mr. Weasley, that to be in possession of such fiction in this school is punishable
with a mandatory minimum of ten detentions. Being as you’ve had the incredibly bad judgment to
come to me with this, I will be the one to decide where and when those detentions will be served.
The potions storeroom has been needing a good cleaning for some time. How kind of you to
volunteer yourself. Are you still pointing that thing at me?"

"You’re fucking Harry, and I’m going to kill you if you don’t stop it!" Ron warned, seething with
fury.

"Language, Mr. Weasley. Professor Snape is not fucking anybody," Lupin corrected sharply,
pausing long enough to give Snape a look that indicated he’d better not be defending a guilty man.

"Shall we bring Mr. Potter here and you can ask him if these are but the works of his wishful
imagination, or if they are in fact details of actual encounters? I assure you that I would not be at all
adverse to such a confrontation, because I have nothing to hide, certainly not from the likes of you.
Are you sure your friendship would survive such a detailed interrogation of Harry and his
nocturnal habits?" Severus asked.

"We’ll bring Harry here and ask him exactly what you’ve been doing to him. Where’s the
Veritaserum??" Ron snarled.

"Mr. Weasley, you are on my very last nerve. Lower your wand, if you please, and get out of my
sight before I lose my patience with you."

There was a knock on classroom. Ron spun around as Hermione marched into the room, fury in her
eyes and an opened letter in her hand.

"Thank goodness," Remus sighed. "Someone who will be able to talk sense to him at last."

"Is everything all right, Professors?" Hermione asked, taking Ron’s wand away from him and
pinning his ears back with a nasty glare.

"Perfectly, I assure you, Miss Granger," Snape replied.

"Ronald Weasley, if you ever open my letters from Harry again, that’ll be the end of it. The end of
everything. Do you understand me?" Hermione growled, shaking the letter at him.

"That man is fucking Harry! Aren’t you going to stop him!?" Ron pointed his hand at Snape,
making a fist and shaking it.

"Don’t be ridiculous!" Hermione screamed.

"I read that bloody book! I know what’s in it!"

"It’s fiction, you idiot! Fiction!"
"Where in the world did he...." Remus muttered to himself but at Severus. He left the thought unfinished as Weasley continued to shriek.

"I don’t care what you call it! He’s fucking Harry, and I’m going to stop him!"

"Come on! We’re going to Hogsmeade, and we’re going to talk about this," Hermione ordered.

"I’m not going to Hogsmeade. I’m taking Snape to Dumbledore!"

"No. You’re coming with me right now, and you’re going to stop making an ass of yourself," Hermione said, dragging him by one arm as he kicked and screamed his way out of the classroom. Snape closed the door with a sigh and locked it. Remus glanced down at the book on the table and back up at Snape.

"It had better be fiction," he rumbled.

"We agreed we weren’t going to keep having this talk, didn’t we?" Severus growled. "I promise you I am not fucking Harry. You don’t know how I wish I were."

"I don’t ever want to hear you use the words "hairy" and "fuck" in the same sentence again, unless you’re talking about Hagrid," Lupin growled back. Snape was tense for a moment, until Remus tested out a slight smile.

"I am not indulging in sexual intercourse with your god-child. Is that better?"

"All I have to say is this: if you make him cry, I’ll make you cry," Lupin frowned again, narrowing his eyes at the book once more, wanting to snatch it up and take it away and destroy it as quickly as possible.

"Some people cry with pleasure, you know," Severus offered.

Remus had all but decided he’d better study this dirty little blue velvet book in detail, in case anyone else wanted to confront Snape about its contents. However, Severus snatched it up off the table before he could get his hands around it.

"Where are you going?" Remus demanded of Snape.

"I’m taking this to the Headmaster. I suspect he’ll want to read it, and then he’ll want to scream at me as well. No point in delaying the inevitable or the unpleasant, particularly when they are one in the same. You keep searching for Bellatrix on that map. And don’t forget to drink your potion."
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

In which Ron again comes mighty close to death

Chapter Notes

Warning for inappropriate language and slurs

Harry sat next to the hospital ward bed, holding Ron’s hand. Weasley breathed shallowly in and out, lost in the deep sleep spell that had been cast on him in an attempt to keep his life-force in his wounded body. Close by, Snape was turning pages in a medical manual, hard at work in spite of the heavy silence in the gloomy room. He was taking note of how well Harry was holding in his emotions over Ron's condition, putting all his thoughts away for discussion at a later date. Harry must have known what was going to happen, because he and Le Clair had arrived at Hogwarts not two minutes before Ginny Weasley had come tearing in across the fields on her broom with the news that her brother and Miss Granger had been attacked in Hogsmeade.

Severus was trying to be near Harry while at the same time wanting to appear as if Harry being here at Hogwarts was immaterial and everyday. Madam Pomfrey fluttered around close at hand, and Professor McGonagall was with Molly and Arthur at the far end of the ward. Several of Ron’s brothers walked around bristling with anger, ready to be off in search of the assailants that had nearly killed their youngest brother. Ginny was moving around Ron’s bed, oblivious to anything but the expression of anger and pain on Ron’s battered face.

"We were in Hogsmeade,” Hermione was stammering, sitting across from Harry. She toyed absently with the rips in her sweater and the mangled remains of her once-long hair. She was going to have to visit a skilled stylist and consider wearing hats for a while, Harry decided. Her lack of hair made him self-conscious of his own over-abundance of locks.

"I understand," Potter soothed.

"They came out of nowhere and grabbed us.” Professor Snape questioned.

"It was Bellatrix. I know it was," Hermione sobbed. "Draco too."  

"I’m going to kill him," Ginny muttered.

"They attacked you and fled the scene before they could be captured?” Harry asked Hermione.

"Ron was protecting me from Draco. One minute we were screaming at each other about him being such a pig, and then the next thing I knew, he was throwing himself in front of me and fending off those animals."
"You’ll be happy to know chivalry is not dead, Miss Granger," Snape soothed.

"Look where chivalry put him!" she howled, covering her face with both hands. Snape had known of course that Hermione had done a lot more than stand by and shriek for help as Ron Weasley was attacked. She had blasted so many holes in the buildings on either side of the attack scene that both would have to be demolished and rebuilt.

"Do you know where they went?" Harry whispered to Hermione.

"No," Hermione sobbed, drying her face and stiffening up in her chair. "But he’s got it."

"Who has what?" Harry asked.

"Draco has Ron’s emergency portkey."

"I wasn’t aware Ron had an emergency portkey," Harry puzzled. Ginny blushed in embarrassment and hid her face from Harry.

"My emergency portkey, I assume?" Snape asked Granger. Ginny was nodding.

"I don’t know where Ron got it, but he’s had it since before Christmas," Hermione said.

"Now Mr. Malfoy has it," Snape said, raising a brow. "Auntie Bellatrix has escaped Azkaban, again, and Mr. Malfoy is running around loose with a portkey that will take him anywhere he asks to be taken once he figures out how the thing works. Wonderful. Any other good news you’d like to impart, Miss Granger?"

"I’m sorry. I’m so sorry," Hermione cried. Harry took her hand and squeezed it, trying to be comforting while not letting go of the trace of life he felt down inside Ron somewhere. "How can I help? What can I do?" Hermione offered.

"You will not leave Ron’s side. You will be his protector. No matter what else happens, if anyone comes near Ron, I want you to curse them to smithereens," Harry ordered her.

"We both will," Ginny promised.

"I can’t protect anyone. Malfoy took my wand!" Hermione cried. Potter stood up from the side of Weasley’s bed. He handed Hermione his wand, and bent to kiss her on the cheek.

"Take mine. But watch out. Rover’s got a history with women," Harry smiled.

"All right," Hermione smiled back, drying her face again.

"If Draco figures out how to work that portkey, there won’t any place safe for you to hide," Severus said to Harry as he stood up straight again.

"I have no intention of hiding from that simpering purebred," Harry answered.

"Le Clair is over that way," Snape motioned around the screen. Harry glanced the indicated direction, and gave a small smile when he saw huge, boyish green eyes watching him around the corner of the privacy curtain.

"She’s ticklish, you know," Le Clair was saying, his voice muffled by his mask and cloak. The green eyes disappeared.

"Is she really?" Sergei Volkov replied to the vampire.
"Can you find her feet down there somewhere?"

"Probably."

"Do you have a few moments we can talk in private?" Harry asked Severus, hoping Le Clair wasn’t over there undoing any healing spells on Volkova’s injuries.

"I’m not sure I’m allowed to be alone with you," Snape conjured a darting smirk, "especially because the Headmaster finished reading that book Mr. Weasley threw at me in my office."

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione and Harry moaned at once.

"You read it?" Harry whined.

"You let Professor Dumbledore read it?" Hermione echoed.

"Personally, I’m holding out for a sequel to ‘Conjugation’," Severus smiled slyly.

"All right then. We can talk here," Harry decided. He walked Snape two feet to the side, put both arms around Severus and planted a long, slow deep kiss on the Potions Master. Hermione lifted her head from Ron’s hand, gaping at them in surprise. Ginny echoed Hermione’s astonishment. Snape staggered for a second after Harry released him. By now, everyone in the ward was gaping at them.

"What was that?" Snape whispered.

"Hello, and goodbye if it comes to that," Harry said seriously. "How can I get a message to Malfoy Fils?" he added.

"Hmm? Who?" Snape replied. Harry steadied the tome Snape was holding for fear it was going to crash down on their feet.

"No matter. I’ll hire someone to write my message in the sky if I have to. I really must go, but if you’ll be around later, I’d like to continue our conversation."

"Yes, please," Severus whispered.

"Adieu," Harry bowed to Snape before striding away. He heard a soft giggle from Hermione as Severus steadied himself. Ginny, for her part, was glaring poisoned daggers at Snape. As Harry passed the privacy curtain which Sergei Volkov had been peering around, he paused on one foot.

"You tickle her at your own peril," he warned the pale boy. Sergei gave a small smile, nodding. "Has she improved at all?"

"Madam Pomfrey says she’s improving slowly," Severus called out as he moved to stand beside Harry.

"Any luck identifying the poison?"

"She had the secret to that with her all the time, without even knowing it," Snape explained. "It was in a book from Mr. Malfoy on the construction of poison darts."

"He gave it to her for Christmas," Harry explained.

"There appear to be several other copies in print," the Potions Master smirked.

"The antidote?"
"Child’s play. Even you could have brewed it. I believe Lestrange’s intent was not to kill but to annoy. Salt in the wound. Her voice is raspy."

"Volkova’s?" Harry questioned.

"Lestrange," Severus replied. Harry coughed up a wicked chuckle.

"Good to know," he whispered, squeezing Snape’s hand before hurrying away again. Le Clair followed shortly behind, his measured step drawing him to catch up to Potter’s determined stride.

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"Let’s see," the rail-thin wizard with a scruffy beard said as he moved a quill end over the page before him on the desk. "That’s seven words, twenty seven letters in all. At four sickles a letter, plus flight time...it’s roughly....are you sure you want to write this up there, Mr. Potter?"

"Very sure," Harry replied, digging in his pocket for the pouch of money he had secured from his Gringotts vault not an hour ago. His "dragon hoard" had been gobbled up because of agreeing to finance the rebuilding of much of Hogsmeade Village. At least Voldemort hadn't torched it again. Yet. There was more than enough gold left from his parents to afford a few indulgences such as this. Harry had the vague feeling he had misinterpreted how Le Clair meant for him to rebuild Hogsmeade, but the news of Harry’s generosity had spread like fire through the small village, and people were inordinately grateful for his offer.

"It’s your third message this week, Mr. Potter. It’ll have to be done at night, owing to the delicate nature of the words."

"I’ll be ever so grateful," Harry begged.

"No response yet?" the wizard asked.

"Surprisingly, no," Harry laughed. The wizard studied the words, and Harry could see him mentally deciding which swoops and turns would best design the letters in his smoke spell in the sky. Harry had considered firework spells to create the words, but decided they would fade too quickly. He considered writing the words up there himself, but Le Clair and Remus had both nixed that idea from the start as absolutely begging for trouble. So, at last, Harry had turned to a fly-by-night advertising agent who didn’t ask too many questions. He found there was something altogether rough about Mr. Fairborne, something that reminded Harry of Sirius. Fairborne read the words, and coughed up a rude smirk.

"Anyone said this about my dad, they’d have to be fit for a mort cloth."

"Is this enough money?" Harry asked, spilling coins into his hand. He shuddered at the thought of a shroud, and wondered if Aunt Petunia would have one. He had pushed her death out of his mind for the time being, having too many other things to be concerned with, but still in yet, it seemed oddly less satisfying than he once imagined it might, knowing that she was dead.

"More than enough. If this doesn’t get you noticed, nothing will."

"I sure hope so. I’m running out of euphemisms for pink, poofy piss-queen."
Whee! Mayhem!

Chapter Summary

In which there is, as the title would suggest, mayhem

Chapter Notes

Warning for character death, questionable eating habits, irresponsible consumption of alcohol, repetitive use of four-letter language, and cannibalism

The blast of magic that lit Henri’s sitting room in the still of the night was followed by intense breathing. Raspine, one might even say. Someone perfectly incandescent with rage was heaving for breath, bathed in a halo of furious red and gold magic. Small flames were licking the priceless carpet beneath his feet.

"POTTER? POTTER!! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?!!"

A sleepy voice from the armchair near him made Draco whirl in that direction. An empty shot glass tumbled to the ground and rolled away. Harry was tossing Volkova’s orb up in the air and catching it first with one hand and then with the other. He had forgotten the empty glass was in his lap.

"Malfoy? What kept you?" Harry grinned, standing up unsteadily and stretching. He levitated the orb before himself with a palm upheld.

"I’M GOING TO KILL YOU! I’M GOING TO RIP YOUR NUTS OFF!"

"Yes, I believe we already covered your long term goals, Malfoy. Are you going to stand there all night howling at the moon, or can we go? Your master is waiting."

Draco stalked over to Harry, pouring a vial over his left palm as he pounded across the floor. As Harry turned to pull on a cloak, Draco grabbed Harry’s left forearm, and Harry felt the familiar sting of Lentus Rapidus sinking into his flesh.

"You think that’s such a good idea, purebred?" Potter grinned over his shoulder at Draco, straightening his cloak. "Till death do us part?"

"Do you need help, Mr. Potter?"

Draco whirled when he heard the second voice in the room, and almost knocked Harry off his feet. Le Clair was lounging in the armchair next to the door. Draco had been so blinded by his hateful rage that he hadn't even considered the possibility of someone else being in the room with them.

"I don’t need help, but if Draco can’t get the portkey spell to work, you might have to apparate us,” Harry said, tossing the orb up and catching it, tossing and catching it again.
"It’s about time he showed up. I was getting nervous sitting around with the wards down. Who knows who might have stumbled in here?"

"I'm sure he was trying to figure out how the portkey works."

"Do you expect mayhem?"

"Possibly."

"Can I go too?" Le Clair pleaded.

"If you’ve nothing planned, you're more than welcome to join us."

"So kind of you," Henri whispered, closing his book and standing up. Draco fumbled with the metallic stick in his right hand, trying to straighten it or bend it, Harry couldn’t decide. "What’s he doing?" Henri asked.

"I dunno," Harry shrugged, giggling when Draco kept shaking his right hand back and forth, seething with anger.

"How much O'Bannon’s did you drink, Harry?" Le Clair asked as he came closer. Harry shrugged to indicate he wasn’t sure. Nervously, Draco pushed at Le Clair with the stick, hoping to keep him back.

"You’re a pathetic, useless puffball, Malfoy," Harry slurred, taking the stick away from him and giving him the orb. "Hold this. Severus said you take the portkey, subtract six, and tell it where you want to go."

"Shut up!" Draco screamed, shoving the orb back at Harry. Potter reached for it, and it fell through his hand, crashing to the floor into a thousand-thousand small shards. Harry and Draco were both so stunned that all they could do was stare at the mess.

"How did that happen?" Harry asked.

"I don’t know! It doesn't matter!" Draco screamed at him. He stepped away, his shoes crunching on the glittering glass. Harry glared at Draco, and puffed a smoke ring into the air. It drifted to the ceiling.

"Don’t make him angry. He might explode," Le Clair cautioned Malfoy.

"Stop moving, you stupid clot," Harry snapped at Draco, yanking his arm away as far as Draco’s reach would allow. Because they were now glued together, it became a battle of elbows and shoulders. Harry straightened the portkey out, clicked it back into place, and then bent it again to achieve the desired 7 shape.

"That would seem to be your starting point," Le Clair said.

"Thank goodness. I was worried this would take all night," Harry mused. "I think you may have to put a hand on me if you wish to go along," he said Le Clair.

"Where shall I grab you?"

"You could grab Malfoy if you’d prefer," Harry suggested. Draco gave a high-pitched squeal and tried to dodge aside as the vampire nestled up to him and breathed down his neck.

"Get your hands off my ass!" Draco hissed.
"Was that your ass?" Le Clair worried.

"If we’re ready??" Harry sighed.

"Aren’t you forgetting something?" Le Clair asked.

"Yes, how rude of me. Percy? You there?"

"Um, yes," Percy replied from the far side of the room, his chair facing the wall.

"You’ll tell anyone where we’ve gone if they come calling?"

"Where are you going?"

"To kill Voldemort," Harry replied.

"Sure, right, yeah. I’m trying to read here. Do you mind?" Percy answered impatiently, going back to his book. Harry let the stick snap out straight with a flourish, and the portkey activated.

"Whee! Mayhem!" Harry cackled with glee.

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"It was a dark and stormy night," Harry began in a thunderous, theatrical voice before he interrupted himself with soft giggles.

"Where in Hecate’s hole are we?" Henri asked.

"Just outside of Hogsmeade Village, I believe," Harry replied. "There’s Hogwarts in the distance, and the main tower at M and M is going up right over that way."

"I have brought him, Master!" Draco called out, his voice echoing among the towering trees.

"Come out and face me, you big ugly bastard!" Harry howled to the night. Le Clair snapped a hand over Harry’s mouth to quiet him.

"Manners, Mr. Potter. Manners."

"I’ll say please. I’ll even say thank you," Harry promised. "Please die, sniveling worm. Thank you."

"Master?!" Draco called out again.

"Mr. Malfoy, there’s no need to shout. The sniveling worm is here."

Draco turned, and Harry had no choice but to follow. Le Clair spun as well, drawing his wand. Voldemort seemed to materialize out of the darkness of the low-hanging tree limbs themselves.

"You can officiate. But you may not interfere," Harry warned Henri, trying out a frown before snorts and giggles overtook him again.

"As you command, Master. I will not interfere." Le Clair bowed to Harry and withdrew two or three feet.

"How amusing, Mr. Potter. You brought a friend with you," Lord Voldemort hissed, drawing himself up to his full height and stepping forth out of the gaggle of Death Eaters that surrounded
him. They flanked him five fold on each side. "I went to the trouble of bringing someone all this way to see you for this special occasion. I hope you won’t mind."

A black-clothed figure was thrown down beside Harry, barely conscious but apparently alive. Dazed and confused, Severus gazed up at Harry from behind eyes glassy with pain. Potter tipped his head to one side and smiled happily down at him.

"You all right, Sev’rus?" Harry asked.

"Peachy," Snape mumbled, spitting out blood.

"You seem a bit banged-up."

"I’m all right," Snape whispered.

"Can I get you anything?" Harry asked.

"No," Severus whispered.

"Will you be okay for a few minutes?" Potter worried.

"Oh, yes, fine," Snape growled.

"He was so very easy to draw out of the protective fold at Hogwarts," Voldemort chided. "All I had to do was raze Ravensrood to the ground, and he came running. I should have done it years ago."

"Ever’body all right, Sev?" Harry asked Snape.

"No," Severus whispered, tears in his eyes.

"Don’t worry. I’ll make it all better," Harry promised. Severus almost smiled at him. "Bad form, Tom. Very bad form," Harry tisked. "Beating up on old sorcerers and small children. Oh, what a terror you are. You need to learn to pick fights with people your own size." Harry hiccupped a smelly belch and a cloud of noxious fumes that fairly colored the air. "Pardon me."

Voldemort stared at Potter with distaste marking his malformed face. The Death Eaters were smirking among themselves, already sure this would be a quick, non-glamorous end for the Boy Who Lived.

"You’ve done well, Mr. Malfoy. Very well," the Dark Lord complimented. "If you’ll bring Mr. Potter this way?"

Draco hauled on Harry, pulling their steps around Severus Snape’s prone form. Snape grasped at Harry’s ankle as he passed, and Harry smiled serenely down at him.

"Be careful, Harry," Snape whispered.

"Don’t worry, Severus. I’ve got this all under control," he slurred.

"I love you," Snape gasped.

"You bet you do," Harry grinned, skipping to keep up with the fast clip of Draco’s feet.

"Once I’m done with you, Potter, I’ll be able to turn my full attention to Mr. Snape and what remains of his family," Voldemort promised as he edged Harry over to the pit that waited in the cold, dark ground. "Then, I’m going to level that cursed castle you call home and smash every
brick to powder. I will decimate Hogwarts, eliminate the very memory of the place, and of everyone who ever lived there."

"Oh, who are you kidding?" Harry muttered. "You couldn’t dump a piss pot unless the directions were written on the bottom."

Voldemort paused on one foot and spun to glare at Harry. Potter taunted him with a wide wicked grin, showing rows and rows of pointy teeth. For a moment, Voldemort blinked at him, unsure of what he was seeing.

"Tom, have you taken up gardening?" Potter questioned. Le Clair hovered close by Harry and Draco, examining the hole in the earth before them.

"I believe he means to bury you there," Henri warned Potter.

"Does he?" Harry laughed. "Ooooh. Shiver, shiver."

"Do you know how long you’ll survive once we cover you over with six feet of dirt?" Voldemort asked.

"Are you waiting for me to beg for my life?? Okay. You win. I give up. Please, please, please, Mr. Dark Wizard, don’t put me in the hole," Harry snorted giggles, giving another loud burp.

"Aren’t we going to kill him first?" Draco asked, grinning ear to ear. Voldemort circled around to the other side of the enormous hole, giving Malfoy a patronizing smile as the Death Eaters moved to surround the two boys. Le Clair remained close, hissing at the Volde-groupies.

"No. We’re going to bury him alive, Draco, so we can imagine the torment he will endure until he dies a slow, agonizing death," the Dark Lord answered.

"Alive?" Draco savored the thought.

"Wait for it. Wait for it," Harry whispered to Draco. Malfoy glanced him up and down and tried to get a step away from him. Harry slithered back within reach of Draco thanks to their attached limbs. He laced his arm over Draco’s shoulders, so that Draco had to hold his own arm up over his chest because of the connection.

"Mr. Potter, do you know why I treasure servants like Mr. Malfoy so highly?" Voldemort asked, taking out his wand.

"Because every wicked witch needs winged monkeys?" Harry teased out the words, savoring the fury that boiled up in Voldemort’s face for a second.

"This display of public drunkenness lowers my opinion of you, Mr. Potter. Here I had hoped I would be meeting a worthy opponent, a wizard I could be proud of killing."

"Proud of killing? Oh, like how proud you were to slaughter my parents?"

"Moments I will always treasure."

"Nearly as much fun as attacking an ancient wizard and his grandchildren?"

"Almost, but not nearly."

"You’re a coward, Tom. A coward," Harry mused. "You can’t even face me now by yourself, can you? You have to have your other winged monkeys by your side."
"Why should I need to face you alone when there are so many other people willing to help me rid the world of upstart rubbish like you?" Voldemort sneered.

"Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. There's safety in numbers. You're hoping I'll be so distracted killing all of them that you will be able to escape. Not this time, Tom. Not this time. Besides, you did have to have someone around who would dig the hole for you, didn't you?" Harry laughed.

Voldemort frowned at him, narrowing his eyes. "So that’s it? A big hole in the ground? That’s your big scare? I’m supposed to be impressed?"

"Potter, don’t toy with me," Voldemort warned.

"It denotes a certain lack of planning on your part, Tom. You’ve had years to work on this, and all I get is a hole in the ground? What? No box?" Harry taunted. "I don’t ever merit a coffin?"

Voldemort’s face fell from noblesse oblige to positive rage.

"Demanding little fuck."

"Well, it would be sporting of you," Potter frowned, miffed. "I’d give you a box if I were in your place. A special box."

"Too bad, Mr. Potter, that you will have to enter the afterlife so disappointed. I didn’t have time to get a coffin. You’ll have to settle for cold, dark earth, such as it is. It’s all you’re getting."

"Fine. No coffin, you miserable prick. Can we move this along, because you’re burning moonlight, Mr. Vampire hasn’t eaten, and I really need to take a piss," Harry drawled, feigning boredom. He caught himself doing an impression of Draco, and caught his breath. Malfoy understood perfectly what was happening, and caught his breath in the same instant. The connection was making them bleed over into each other, as much as their blood mingled, and their magic mingled, and their thoughts and their fears.

"Mr. Vampire?" Le Clair laughed.

"Are you ready, Master?" Narcissa Malfoy asked from the crowd of Death Eaters that were circling about like vultures, waiting for crumbs to fill their maws.

"Wait for it. Wait for it," Harry said to Draco, who couldn’t take his eyes off of Potter right at the moment.

"You’re going to separate us first, right?" Malfoy asked the Dark Lord, licking his lips nervously as he eyed Potter, then Voldemort, then Potter again.

"No! I am not!" Voldemort snapped. Potter loosened another drunken laugh.

"You’re so stupid, Malfoy," he taunted.

"Shall I interfere, Master?" Le Clair asked.

"No. No. No. We’re perfectly all right. Draco is going to have a small panic attack. This shouldn’t take any time at all," Harry assured Henri.

"You’re not going to separate us?!" Draco screamed at Voldemort.

"No, he’s not. He never meant to," Harry told him.

"You ungrateful bastard!" Malfoy screamed at Voldemort. "I brought him to you! I could have
taken him anywhere!"

"What are you mad at him for?" Harry asked. "It was her idea."

Harry pointed at Narcissa, who was lurking to Draco’s other side. Draco spun to face his mother, and nearly caused Harry to stagger into the gaping hole in the earth.

"Mother? Is that true?"

"Yes. Get over it," Harry said. "With you gone, she gets the Malfoy money, the Malfoy mansion, and a fresh start in life. You’re more valuable to her dead than alive. Confidentially, Draco, she’s never liked you."

"Your sacrifice will always be remembered among the Dark Lord’s followers," Narcissa said to Draco, smiling ever so coldly. Draco rasped for breath, and started to sob shamelessly.

"Oh, great," Harry sighed.

"But I trusted you," Draco sobbed. "I trusted both of you. I attacked Weasley. I got the portkey. I even cut off Granger’s hair so you..."

"Could Polyjuice into her and kill me later if this stunt didn’t work," Harry said. "I can read your every thought, Draco, while we’re attached like thus. There’s no point in shutting up now. I know your every dirty deed, your every snivel, your every sin. You did everything you could to pave the way for them, and what do you get for your troubles? You get to spend eternity with me. Sucks, doesn’t it? Makes you mad, doesn’t it?"

"I trusted you," Draco sobbed, reaching for his mother’s ankles. She kicked him away, her face curling up with hatred and distaste.

"Don’t worry, Draco," Harry soothed, patting Malfoy’s shoulder. "I won’t turn on you. In our current predicament, you would only turn with me."

Malfoy sank to the ground and remained huddled up, crying into his knees. Harry stood as tall as he could with one arm attached to Draco’s, staring over at Voldemort across the big hole in the earth.

"Happy now? You made him cry."

"So noble to sacrifice himself for the cause, so like his father."

"Your very favorite winged monkey," Harry smirked. "Do you miss Lucius terribly, Tom? I know you must miss how he would bend and scrape for you."

"You were to be my gift to Lucius for all the years of faithful service he rendered unto me," Voldemort lamented, forcing a horrific scene through Harry’s mind that made Draco cry out in alarm. Lucius was raising his knife above Harry, and Potter was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Don’t worry, Tom. You’ll be seeing Lucius again soon enough," Harry growled, pushing the scene out of his mind. In its place appeared Le Clair’s hand mirror, and a fractional section of beautifully-formed, delicately-detailed scales, followed by a yellow-green eye.

"So sure you are, whelp?" Voldemort replied, eyes clouded with maniacal glee as Harry’s mental images drifted away from him.

"Oh, very sure," Harry replied. "I’m going to take your magic the same way you planned to take
mine," he whispered, leaning his face forward and sneering. "I do draw the line at having to fuck you though. There are some things even I won’t do."

Voldemort threw a bolt of fury towards Harry and Draco, but it was glanced aside at the last second. A halo of green light was visible for a moment before it faded.

"Merci," Harry said towards Le Clair.

"C’est rien," Le Clair replied with a one-shoulder shrug. "I am officiating, after all, and that would have been a strike in anger outside the rules of engagement. We will be civilized about this, after all."

"You’re one step away from eternity, Potter. I suggest you pay attention to me instead of your dubious friend," Voldemort growled.

"Dubious?" Le Clair flared, sniffing.

"He's insulting you," Harry said to Henri.

"Luckily I have very thick skin," Le Clair growled.

"Not as thick as I have," Harry laughed.

"Potter! Pay attention!" Voldemort bellowed.

"Now he's all pissed, isn't he?" Potter smirked. "Oh, what a powerful wizard you are. Shall we bow to you in all your glory?"

"Don’t fuck with me, Potter," Voldemort snarled. "I’m in no mood."

"Let’s get on with it then," Harry growled.

"I could make you beg for me to kill you," the Dark Lord warned. Harry echoed another loud burp into the air. Draco stopped crying, his sobs drying up into snivels as his eyes grew wide.

"You could try," Harry grinned. "Keep your mouth shut, Malfoy."

"LOOK OUT!" Draco screamed in warning.

Le Clair threw up a shield of twilight darkness around himself and Snape. A whiplash circuit of indigo energy raised itself out of the ground. Harry absorbed it into his body up both legs. Flames lit the forest, and Harry stepped across the pit in one large crash, planting his scaly leg with enough force to dent the earth beyond the hole Voldemort had ordered dug. Potter yanked Draco airborne as Malfoy wailed in terror.

Severus gasped in pain and disbelief as a juvenile Chinese fireball dragon materialized where Harry had been standing a second before. The dragon was attacking the Dark Lord with venom and fury. It eventually dawned on Snape that the beast hadn’t taken Harry’s place, but it was Harry, transformed!

Fire enveloped Voldemort, his cloak, his wand, his outstretched arms. The evil sorcerer expelled ice around himself, and Harry-dragon sent another flaming blast in his direction. Draco bounced and dangled around from the dragon’s forearm as the Chinese fireball whipped its tail back and forth, knocking Death Eaters around like chess pieces. Harry and Voldemort continued to battle, fire and ice cascading and crackling around one another. Draco screamed when shots of magic
began to turn away from Harry and pepper him instead.

Another circuit of indigo energy raised up out of the ground and was absorbed by Harry. The juvenile fireball soared another ten feet skyward in height, and its fire-stream grew more incandescent with heat. Draco finally stopped screaming and decided to act. He lifted his other arm, wand in hand. Two shots of flame hit Voldemort this time, and his cold blue ice did not emerge from within the inferno. While Draco kept a steady flame on the Dark Lord, Harry whipped himself around and dropped a torch-line at the Death Eaters gouging and stunning him with wands and spells from behind. Several of them went up in flames, and the others withdrew far enough back to be out of danger, only to find Le Clair at their backs, mesmerizing them into a stupor one by one.

"Potter!" Malfoy screamed. Harry felt the grasp of ice on his ankle, and kicked himself around to face Voldemort once more. Scarred, scorched, and still flaming, the sorcerer was struggling to his feet. With his free hand, Harry scooped downward, and lifted Voldemort off the ground, ignoring the fire that was heating up his scales. Malfoy was screaming again in terror, dodging left and right as the Dark Lord peppered him with more spells. How much longer would the two boys be able to hold out against this kind of assault?

Le Clair helped Snape to his feet and the two of them made their way forward in order to help corral the remaining Death Eaters. It was with great pleasure that Snape crucio’d several of the same people who had similarly tortured his grandfather, his cousin, and himself. He spared a glance at Harry to see what was going on.

Harry-dragon’s teeth gleamed brightly in the flames as he opened his mouth wide and lunged downward. Harry-dragon snapped off Voldemort’s head with a violent twist of his neck. The crunching, burning, sizzling sounds silenced everyone around yet able to move. Chewing carefully to make sure each delicious morsel was freed of its lovely juices, Harry-dragon finally spit the mangled, lifeless skull out onto the ground minutes later. He sucked up the blood that was jutting out of the headless torso, savoring the meaty flavor. He ripped off the corpse’s left arm next, chewed and chewed, happily thinking of the many pieces of fireplace roasted toast he and Ron had shared over the years. Bacon crisps and pork rinds also danced through his mind, and Mrs. Weasley’s fabulous roasted pork recipe with potatoes and carrots. He could hear Malfoy throwing up, and remembered again that he was sharing his thoughts with Draco. Harry let his left arm dangle so that Draco could lie against his scaly side near to the ground. Harry spit out the mangled bits of left arm, and snapped off the right next.

"Master....Master...." Narcissa was moaning. Harry grinned at her, wiggling Voldemort’s lifeless fingers in her direction before slurping the limb inside his jaws like limp spaghetti. Narcissa buried her face in the dirt and lay still.
"Are you sure you have found enough of him?" Professor McGonagall asked as she and other members of the Order of the Phoenix lit the shattered forest by night and searched about for ashes and fragments of the once-powerful Voldemort.

"Everything there is to have, I hope. From what I can see, we're missing a thigh, a rib, several fingers, a shoulder," Remus reported, poking a smoldering pile of half-charred bones and a ragged, torched black cloak.

"Have you searched for the chewed pieces?" McGonagall asked. "He’s been dragging them all over the forest."

"Yes," Tonks replied, poking the pile with her wand.

"Harry Potter!" McGonagall called out, stalking over to the juvenile Chinese fireball who was sitting before a great hole in the earth, munching in a furtive manner. "March yourself over there and spit out whatever is in your mouth. This minute!"

She pointed, and the dragon growled at her, folding back his ears.

"Make him stop, make him stop," Draco pleaded, drying his dripping mouth and looking greener than the Slytherin crest. Harry-dragon laughed between closed teeth.

"Potter, go over there and spit out what’s in your mouth," McGonagall ordered again. Harry-dragon waddled to his feet, sniffing along Draco’s belly and chortling. He puffed through pursed lips, and smoke rings rose around his nemesis’s body. Potter made his way to the pile of bones, left arm drooping down as far as he could reach, dragging Draco along the ground until Malfoy got up and walked along side the dragon.

"Come on, Harry. Spit it out," Remus coaxed.

"Spit it out. Spit it out," McGonagall ordered. Harry-dragon opened his red hot maw and expelled one globby, well-chewed rib with a trail of soft flesh remaining around the edges. Poisonous, yellow saliva followed. Even Tonks turned away in revulsion as it dripped down onto the waiting pile and extinguished the smoldering. Remus cringed, his face pale with horror.

"I'm sorry, but it’s not enough of him," Shacklebolt pronounced.

"Are you sure?" McGonagall sighed.

"We’ve got to have better than half of him in order for the spell to work," Remus answered. "What about those finger bones? Any luck?"

"Here! I have it," Dumbledore said, digging around in his cloak and withdrawing a vial. Harry-
dragon drew back, his ears pinned down in mistrust.

"What’s that?” Draco asked.

"Nauseam,” the Headmaster replied. Draco and Harry-dragon both moaned.

"You either have to throw up what you’ve chewed up, or we have to wait for the inevitable end result of your unsavory repast, Mr. Potter. It could take a week for you to digest all of that you’ve eaten. We don’t have that kind of time,” McGonagall scolded. Harry-dragon moaned again. Draco gave a hint of a smirk, and Harry-dragon narrowed venomous eyes at him. The smirk vanished at once.

"You wouldn’t dare,” Malfoy hissed. Harry-dragon lifted his arm and began to shake Draco violently.

"Harry! HARRY! Stop it!” Lupin ordered. Draco came to a rest against the dragon’s side, and disgorged the very last bit of bile in his stomach. Harry-dragon laughed wickedly and imitated Draco by sticking out his long, forked tongue.

"I’ll bring Hagrid. Maybe he’ll have better luck,” Dumbledore said, vanishing in a blink. Harry-dragon wandered around the pile of bones that comprised Voldemort’s mortal remains, sniffing around with great hope in his eyes. Tonks was the quickest as Harry-dragon tried to secret a femur from the pile.

"Give me that. What’s the matter with you?” she chided, giving him a poke in the nose with her wand. Harry-dragon sniffed at her, and she poked him again. "Don’t you even think it, Potter,” she warned.

"It’s going to be dawn soon,” Le Clair said, putting a hand up the side of the Harry-dragon and patting his well-filled stomach. "Will you be able to draw enough strength without me here?”

Potter nodded, turning around and searching the dark forest. He gave Le Clair a pleading stare. If a dragon could be said to frown, this one clearly was doing so.

"Severus will be all right. I took him to the hospital. When you’re yourself again, we’ll see what we can do for his family. I’m going to get the octonarium and a heavy cloak. I expect you to be yourself again when I get back,” Le Clair promised.

Henri took flight as a bat, winging away into the moonlight. The Headmaster reappeared with Hagrid in tow. The giant was carrying a huge tankard, which he nearly dropped to the ground when he saw what was before him.

"Harry! Is that you?” Hagrid gulped. He came forward as Dumbledore hauled the tankard into place and poured the foul-smelling vial into it the brew that was already inside. Hagrid admired Harry-dragon’s scales and tail, dodging around Draco as Malfoy kicked at him in annoyance and frustration.

"Isn’t anyone going to get me off of this maniac?” Malfoy asked.

"Hopefully Severus has a potion that will take you apart without ripping any flesh or bones,” Remus said.

"As soon as we turn him human again, we’ll try our very best to separate you,” McGonagall promised. "I don't know if Severus is going to be able to help us.”
"We can whack them apart at that junction there," Tonks pointed.

"The hell you will!" Draco protested.

"Those are grand, Harry, simply grand," Hagrid praised, examining scales and wings. "Come on over now and tip the cup. There’s a good dragon."

Harry-dragon followed Hagrid and lapped up the foul contents of the tankard, splashing liquid everywhere.

"How long will it take?" McGonagall asked.

"Not long," Dumbledore answered. Harry-dragon was already looking far more green than usual. Draco moaned in pain and put a hand over his mouth.

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"I missed it?" Ron asked groggily as he hauled himself up in bed. Hermione handed him the morning paper, and grinned tearfully at him. "I don’t believe it!"

"Believe it or not," Hermione smiled, giving him a cup of tea.

"Unnamed sources at the Ministry of Magic can confirm this morning that Harry Potter has indeed finally defeated Mr. Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as Lord Voldemort. A great confrontation took place last night in the forests near Hogsmeade Village. Witnesses report that a fiery display of magic lit the night from the wee hours until dawn. When all was finally said and done, half the forest had been demolished, several ancient trees burned to the ground, and Voldemort lay defeated, dead in several pieces. Witnesses to the aftermath claim to have seen a great Chinese fireball dragon at the scene, as well as veritable legions of vampires battling what remained of the dreaded Death Eaters. Those Death Eaters who survived the battle have been rounded up and placed in Azkaban Prison, where they will remain under a vigilant and watchful guard until the situation can be sorted out to the satisfaction of the Ministry of Magic’."

Ron lowered the paper with a dismal frown, which did nothing to improve the expression of his battered face.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, worried.

"Harry went and had another adventure without me," Ron complained. Hermione rolled her eyes and sipped from her own tea.

"There’ll be other adventures, Ron, once you’ve healed."

"Where did he get a Chinese fireball?" Weasley wanted to know. "What did they do with Voldemort?"

"I don’t know. The article doesn’t say," Hermione answered.

"Octonarium."

"What?" Hermione asked, whirling around. She pulled back the privacy curtain to find that Professor Volkova was pulling herself upright in bed. "Professor?"

"Octonarium," she repeated, holding her ribcage and swinging her feet over the side of the bed. Volkova remained upright for a moment or two before lying back down on the bed and smiling
peacefully to herself.
Chapter Summary

In which there is a party for Harry’s birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"'It has to be love when it goes straight through; no bone can stop it, no barb impede its journey'."

"What was that, Headmaster?"

"A poem someone gave me once, Severus."

"Ah. Any hidden meaning?"

"Yes, and you bloody well know it," Albus growled.

"Punch?" Severus murmured innocently as he handed Dumbledore a fragile crystal cup.

"Don't tempt me," the Headmaster snapped, snatching the cup and downing the punch in one gulp.

"You have no scruples."

"But I do have qualms," Snape managed an ill-advised, weak smile.

"I distinctly recall forbidding a relationship between you and...."

"I distinctly recall when you forbade it and why. But Mr. Potter is finally seventeen, and I am no longer in a position of power over him."

"You could have at least let the sun set on his birthday before trying something like this."

"I brought you some tarts," Harry whispered breathlessly, scurrying under the crook of Snape's arm and thrusting a plate full of tiny tidbits into his grip. He insinuated himself against Snape's side like a second skin, hiding under the wing of Severus's ebony dress cloak. Harry was purposefully placing his person between Snape and Dumbledore in order to bear the brunt of the Headmaster's wrath, and all three of them understood the gesture perfectly well, as did most of the other people in the room. A trickle of honey was visible on the right side of Harry's chin. Severus reached over with one finger and pulled the drop away, wishing for all the world that he had had the nerve to lick it away instead. Potter realized what the matter was, and blushed even while restraining a small, nervous laugh.

"You both will be in my office tomorrow morning at eight o'clock sharp. Appropriate living arrangements must be made for the rest of this summer," Dumbledore rumbled.

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed at once.

"Of course, sir," Severus added grimly.

"Until eight o'clock tomorrow morning, you two will not be found anywhere near the worktable in
the lab in the dungeon, or any spares crocks of honey for that matter. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry squealed, biting his mouth together and bowing his head.

"I only hope Mr. Weasley recovers from the shock of what he saw long enough to make an appearance at tonight's festivities," Dumbledore continued.

Potter stuffed a cherry tart in his mouth and chewed restlessly, daring to meet Severus's burning eyes for a second only. Images flashed through Harry's mind-- the heavy table; a small cauldron; the scent of warm honey, of essence of rue, and of rose water. He and Severus had stirred the low-flame love potion together with their fingers before feeding it to each other. Severus had planned to take the honeyed concoction and spread it around Harry's body, and finally make love to Harry -- the one shining point of happiness in his life at this dark moment. They had no idea they were being observed until they started kissing, and Severus began to undress Harry. Ron screamed out and fainted dead away next to the open door. Harry's invisibility cloak fluttered away on the floor. Harry had sat on the worktable, shirt open, fingers and mouth dripping with honey. Severus stopped kissing Harry long enough to glance over one shoulder and find out who had screamed and what had caused the shocked expression on the young man's face. Both Snape and Potter stared in surprise at Ron's unconscious form before Potter burst into gales of wicked laughter that even now threatened to make a reappearance.

"Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. "It is your celebration. Learn to be a gracious host. You have guests to tend, hands to shake, babies to kiss, women to dance with. I expect you to make decent headway into the demolition of that three-story cake over there as well."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Please don't forget that you have to be ready to leave the festivities before midnight, because you and Mr. Le Clair have to deliver yourselves promptly to the chosen time and place if you wish the Order of Merlin to be properly bestowed upon yourselves."

"Yes, sir."

"In the meantime, I plan to drag Severus into a dark corner and reprimand him."

"Honestly, sir, if anyone here is going to drag Severus into a dark corner, I'd prefer it was me," Potter replied with a charming smile.

"That's enough of your cheek, Harry," Dumbledore chided in a paternal tone. "Mingle, before I turn you over one knee."

"Honestly, sir, if anyone here is going to turn Potter over one knee...." Severus interjected, tongue firmly in cheek. Potter's squeals of mirth lit up their section of the great hall with sound, in spite of all the other loud celebratory noises that filled the immense room.

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