Learning to Deceive

by WeyrWolfen

Summary

The Order of the Phoenix wants allies. The Council wants answers. The Ministry wants them both to stop rocking the boat. So what does Willow want? Mostly to make it through all of this alive.

Notes

Originally posted on Twisting the Hellmouth. Crossposting here and updating again after a long hiatus.
“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” – Sir Walter Scott

“This should be bothering me,” Buffy said bemusedly. “I should be bothered. I should be faking a Giles accent and saying something like, ‘Oh bother,’ while I hunt down some hair dye.” The subject of her attention, a newly discovered silver hair, nearly indistinguishable amongst the gold, was being inspected under high wattage in front of the slayer’s vanity. “But look, I’m bother-free. Weird.”

“Betcha there’s a box of Clairol out there with your name on it anyway,” Willow said teasingly from her perch on the corner of Buffy’s bed. She was balancing a thick file folder on her knee and listening to Buffy’s unexpected take on the effects of aging.

“True, but that’s not what I’m talking about,” the slayer said, bending closer to the mirror. “I mean, my first gray hair. That should get some kind of response, shouldn’t it? Crying? Purchasing fast cars and wearing age inappropriate clothing?”

Willow grinned impishly. “My first ones sure did, but they were white, and you know, all of them all at once…”

“So not funny,” Buffy said, but her own crooked smile took the sting away from her words.

Willow thought about Buffy’s dilemma at lacking a dilemma. For someone who spent as much time on her hair as the senior slayer of the New Council, Willow would have predicted some kind of major meltdown at this age benchmark, but Buffy always had been full of surprises. Of course, the truth was they were all getting older, if not actually, you know, old, and not to sound morbid, but…

“I think it’s because I didn’t really expect to get to see one,” Buffy said, as if reading Willow’s silent line of reasoning.

Willow’s own hair, which had become more of a color-coded barometer of her magical intentions, had in no way prepared her for this particular conversation. “Uh… huzzah for grey hairs?” The statement, meant to be supportive, came out as a sickly question instead. This whole conversation was against the unofficial Scooby rules. You didn’t date someone without at least a species check, you didn’t ask Giles about Olivia, you didn’t stare too closely at Xander’s glass eye, and you absolutely did not talk about slayers’ shelf lives. Willow was on the edges of her social map, somewhere between ‘dangerous shoals’ and ‘here be monsters.’

Buffy looked at the witch over her shoulder, odd little smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “So, ready to play grown-up?” Willow asked desperately, picking up the folder in her lap and shaking the mass of papers by way of a distraction. The myriad color-coded sticky tabs rustled loudly against one another.

She had come to Buffy’s room in order to do their usual pre-conference cramming session. Meaning, of course, that Willow read through reams of her research on whichever coven, cult, or committee they were supposed to be meeting while Buffy rendered her hard work into clever sound bites while still managing to retain enough to make them both powerful assets to Giles in his various duties as head of the New Council. The two of them found themselves fighting more
demons across a negotiation table instead of in the field lately. One of the many changes their lives had taken of late.

“Fire away, Wills,” Buffy said, turning back to the mirror and her brand new grey hair.

“Right,” Willow said, flipping open the dangerously overstuffed manila folder. “So, there’s lots of kinds of magic in the world, right? Well back a few, okay more than a few, but anyway, a bunch of centuries ago, a big chunk of the magic using world, the ones who primarily use focuses like wands and staves and stuff, all very phallic if you ask me, well they kind of banded together and sort of… I guess the best way to put it is that they stepped away from the world.”

Buffy was twisting the single grey hair around and around one of her index fingers, but there was a slight furrow between her brows that close association and long experience told Willow meant that the slayer was listening to her every word.

Willow took a deep breath, really getting into the swing of the topic. “Witches like me try to stay in balance with the natural world, and it’s a lot easier for us to just keep our heads down when the angry villagers come with torches and stuff, but wand magic is flashier, so lying low isn’t really an option for them. So they set up their own communities, right under the noses of the rest of the world. They got really good at hiding themselves, often in plain sight, under layers and layers of wards and concealment spells. They’re also super-strict about using magic in front of non-magicky types, and they’re so serious about their secrecy that they even mind-wipe people who accidentally see things.”

That stirred up enough bad memories to make Willow trail away for a moment before Buffy’s voice dragged her back into the conversation. “They sound charming,” the slayer said dryly. She had finally dropped the single silver strand and was brushing out the rest of her still-blond hair.

“Yeah,” Willow responded vaguely before shaking herself and dragging her mind back to the topic at hand. “The other magic users and groups like the Council didn’t agree. I wouldn’t call it a war, but afterwards there were treaties and geases and stuff, and now everybody pretty much tries to pretend that everybody else doesn’t exist. So uh… like I said, the wand users have this whole society, governments, schools, you name it, carefully warded and hidden from the rest of the world. They use magic for everything, and I do mean everything. They sometimes find new adepts in non-magical families, but most of them have only ever known their own little world. The majority of them have never seen a movie, or driven a car, or I don’t know, licked a stamp.”

The hair brushing had stopped and Buffy was looking at her with a mixture of disbelief and amusement.

“I know, weird huh?” Willow responded to her friend’s unspoken comments. “I mean, they’re not bad people, mostly, but they are so isolationist that they make Imperial Japan look like the county fair. They’ve even got a name for the rest of us…” she trailed off again when she noticed that Buffy’s expression had changed from stark disbelief to a blank stare.

Willow mentally backtracked and then hit the source of the problem. Right, bad example. She caught her lower lip between her teeth before coming up with some common ground. “They like public exposure about as much as the Initiative did, and their general opinion of the rest of us tends to fall somewhere between ‘interesting-oafs’ and ‘radioactive-pond-scum.’”

“Oh,” Buffy said vaguely. The hair brushing started up again.

“Which brings us to the reason for our meeting today. Some people from the ‘pond scum’ camp have been killing ones from the ‘oafs’ camp and more than a few innocent, non-magical bystanders
for fun.” Willow pulled out a bunch of newspaper clippings and stretched forward to slide them onto one of the few empty surfaces of the slayer’s cluttered vanity.

Down went the hairbrush and up came the stack of articles. Some of the pictures were pretty gruesome, and Buffy’s furrowed brow was rapidly evolving into an angry scowl. Even before her injury, she hadn’t been on regular slaying rotation for a few years now, but even so, Buffy always seemed to feel personally responsible when bad things happened to good people, no matter how far outside of her control the situation was. But a bum leg was a bum leg, and for the foreseeable future, Buffy was firmly off the front line. “So we’re only hearing about this now, why?” she asked, voice taking on the harder edge that the younger slayers jokingly referred to as her ‘general voice.’

“It looks like the Sunnydale Effect was out in full force. A bunch of their higher ups didn’t want to admit that anything was going on, even to themselves. I guess they thought if they kept covering stuff up and pretending that everything was alright, that it would just go away.” Buffy’s already dark expression started to take on even more dangerous overtones. Willow winced a little before continuing, agreeing with the slayer in principle, but still hoping to avoid a major explosion before the negotiations had even started. “But of course it didn’t, and things have been getting worse. They have treaties with the Council about stuff like this, even though it’s all been kind of ceremonial in the past. Giles is pretty incensed about them not passing along the fact that there’s a group of powerful, genocidal wizards rampaging across England.”

Buffy heaved herself to her feet, and Willow wordlessly handed over the bulky knee brace that had been sharing time with her on the slayer’s bed. The damage to her knee would have permanently crippled a regular human, but Buffy pretty much defined the term resilient. The Council’s doctors were confident that in spite of the lingering effects of the X’orcan’s toxic bite, she would regain full mobility eventually. At least she was out of the wheelchair. A partially ambulatory Buffy was significantly happier than a chair-bound one. They’d even thrown a party in celebration of her return to bipedality, much to the dismay of some of the older watchers.

After arranging the contraption over her black slacks, bolting down the straps and making sure the metal supports wouldn’t rub her leg raw, Buffy rose unsteadily and turned around, her arms raised in mock-display. “Other than the Franken-leg, how do I look?” she asked.

“Like you’re going to eat these guys alive, and not in the happy, porny way either,” Willow said, impish humor back in her green eyes.

“Ugh, after Gideon, I think I’m going off boys completely,” Buffy said over dramatically, limping towards the door. The break up had been weeks ago, and the slayer’s idea in the first place, but Willow wasn’t about to point that out. The fact that Gideon was a watcher in training, and therefore was constantly at hand to pop up at inopportune times with his new girlfriend, was making an already bad situation about a hundred times worse. Nope, Willow wasn’t touching this conversation with a ten foot long pole.

They stepped into the hallway, and made for the elevators. There was something to be said for living where you worked, and Giles had made sure that the floor plans for the new Council building included spacious apartments for all of them.

“So, the Reader’s Digest version?” she asked as Willow fell in step with her stilted gait.

She thought for a second before responding. “They wear weird clothes. They don’t know who Georgio Armani or Geraldo Rivera are, and if they call you a Muggle, just smile and nod. They don’t mean anything by it. Probably.”
Willow knew that she should be paying more attention. Giles was slowly fading from flushed to blotchy, and if his face got any more rigid, it was going to petrify. That usually meant that thing were about to go from obsessive glasses polishing to epic verbal explosion in about four point five seconds. Nevertheless, Willow was only half listening to the proceedings.

She couldn’t help it. The woman across from her was wearing a pointed hat. For the Goddess’s sake, a pointed hat! Not to mention the delicately carved cameo clasped at her throat that, unless Willow was truly losing her mind, had blinked a few moments ago.

Never mind that it turned out that their guests had revealed that they weren’t actually representing their government, which apparently had all kinds of fun implications not only for the situation, but also for Giles’ blood pressure. Never mind that the guy with the funky bionic eyepiece and the peg leg was getting twitchy with his wand whenever the security camera in the corner panned his way. Never mind that most of the discussion had thus far revolved around someone named “You Know Who,” which sounded about as second grade as it got. Unless of course ‘You Know Who’ was actually his name, which honestly wouldn’t have surprised Willow at that point.

No, Willow was entranced by a blinking portrait etched out in pinkish shell and a black, pointed hat.

A none-too-gentle elbow to the ribs dragged her back into the present with a jerk. She looked over at Buffy, who was now scooting a notepad towards her with said elbow. Willow snuck a peek at the paper out of the corner of her eye.

In loopy script, underlined three times were the words, “Are these guys serious?!?!?”

Uncomfortably aware that Buffy’s attempt at discretion had drawn more than a few eyes, which disconcertingly seemed to include the portrait on the witch’s cameo, Willow dropped a hand as casually as possible over the slayer’s words. When she brought her hand up to prop up her chin a moment later, the ink had bled into new letters.

“As a heart attack.”

This was an old game. It was a good way to pass notes in a room that tended to house both the magically inclined and the incredibly stuffy. As long as their composure held, it would simply look like Buffy was taking notes on whatever was being said. However, hiding her emotions had never been one of the slayer’s strong points. She snorted inelegantly when she read the comment, drawing even more looks. A winning, wry smile diffused the situation, and soon enough, the thin, balding man with red hair and a worn looking robe launched back into something about a kid with a scar and something that sounded like a livestock disease or some funky spell component. No, wait, it was a place, not a skin condition. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Weird.

Buffy scrawled under Willow’s comment just as soon as it looked like she could get away with it. “You mean like the one Giles is going to have any second now?”

Willow couldn’t help it. The tension in the room was too oppressive, there was a freaking piece of jewelry glaring at her, and she always had an unfortunate urge to giggle in the worst possible moments. She managed to strangle the sound into a cough, which was then drowned with a glass of water, an apologetic expression on her face the whole time.

The ensorcelled ink swirled again once Willow got a hold of herself. “Yeah, someone’s going to have to stage an intervention before he pops a few blood vessels in his eye.”
“Yes, well,” a new voice cut through the roundabout lesson on wizarding recent events. “From the expressions on some of our hosts’ faces, I believe that now might be a good time to entertain questions.”

Willow looked up from the notepad and found herself gazing straight into the speaker’s glittering eyes. He was old, with a long silver beard and a kindly face. He looked like someone’s really eccentric grandfather, dressed in blue and purple robes that shimmered oddly under the conference room’s fluorescent lights, but there was something else there. Willow could feel the power churning behind those bright, seemingly cheerful eyes. If it wasn’t crazy, she thought that his words had been in response to her note, but no… they’d started doing the ink trick in order to avoid problems with potentially telepathic guests. It would take someone with incredible power, not to mention finesse, to sneak past her magical protections without her even realizing it.

The red haired man who had been speaking - Willow had been too entranced by the winking cameo to catch his name - peered around the room until his eyes fell on Giles’ livid expression. “Oh!” he said abruptly, plopping back down in his seat. “I just thought…” he started, but trailed off under the Council head’s cold glare.

For a prolonged moment, you could have heard a pin drop, but Giles’ voice soon cut through the silence like a knife. “Let me see if I have the facts straight. One of your number has gone rogue, some time ago it would seem. Even though his actions included numerous murders of magically… ah… uninvolved people, and in direct breach of the Treaty of Carthage I might add, your Ministry has not seen fit to inform the Watcher’s Council, either fourteen years ago during his first uprising or in response to more recent events.” Giles only spoke in that smooth tone of voice when he was building up to a really impressive explosion. “How am I doing thus far?”

“Actually, there are multiple, ah… rogues, following ‘You-Know-Who,” said the woman with the blinking cameo. Her voice was calm and collected, but she avoided making eye contact with the angry watcher by resettling her green shawl across her shoulders. “They call themselves Death Eaters.”

“Death Eaters,” Giles repeated blandly. Willow winced; this was going to be bad. “Lovely. And furthermore, you are not, in fact, representatives from your Ministry of Magic. You are all members of this ‘Order of the Phoenix’ which is trying to fight a war against these dark wizards while those who should be handling the situation are only too happy to stick their heads firmly in the sand. Other than giving me the beginnings of what I am sure will be a memorable headache and a rather strong desire to mount your Minister’s head on a pike outside of this building, what precisely do you want from we mere ‘Muggles’ here at the Council of Watchers?”

Willow watched the reactions of the witches and wizards around the table. Most of them either looked indignant or embarrassed, except for the old man, who seemed wholly unperturbed, and eye-guy in the corner, who was still glaring with an alarming scowl on his scarred, craggy face at the whirring security camera.

“Well, Mr. Dumbledore?” Giles said again, his voice flinty.

The old man’s eyes faded into seriousness. “These are desperate times, Mr. Giles, and while we in the wizarding world have not always seen eye to eye with your organization, your ongoing fight against the dark powers has never gone unnoticed or unnoted,” Dumbledore’s voice was still quiet, but it seemed to command attention. “There are those among us who see this new war coming and are willing to fight, but we are few, especially without the support of our Ministry. We will need powerful allies, ones who have fought in these types of battles before,” his eyes grazed Buffy, “Who have experiences and powers that we do not.” And now he was definitely looking at Willow.
Or maybe through her.

The intensity of his gaze made her skin crawl, even as she instinctively battened down her mental defenses even more. Kindly Dumbledore might appear, but that didn’t mean she wanted her soul exposed before those alarmingly knowing eyes.

He just smiled at her sadly. “We simply cannot let Voldemort go unchecked.” There was some uncomfortable muttering at the use of that name, even a small gasp from the woman whose broach now seemed wide eyed and shocked as well.

So that’s ‘You Know Who’s’ real name, Willow mused. Sounds like one of Andrew’s D&D characters.

Dumbledore continued, unperturbed by the reactions of those around him. “I don’t expect centuries of bad blood to simply be washed away in the blink of an eye, but I had hoped that we could set our differences aside in the face of a common foe. Afterwards, who is not to say that some kind of accord cannot be reached?”

Giles looked pole axed. They probably all did. From her research Willow had expected many things, but not an open and ready offering of the olive branch. She felt something like she had last year when her mother had appeared on her doorstep for Hanukkah with presents in hand. The situation hadn’t been wholly unwelcome, but years of estrangement had made it so unexpected as to make for some impressive levels of awkwardness.

Drawing himself together firmly, Giles leaned forward, hands face down on the papers spread in front of him. “It has always been the prime directive of the Council to fight the forces of evil on all possible fronts, but I do have questions that need to be addressed before any promise of aid can be made. First, are we talking about an alliance between equals?” he stressed the last word.

“Yes,” Dumbledore agreed mildly.

“I will require full access to your information and assets. I will not send any of my people into a fight blind,” he said, edge coming back into his voice as if he was expecting at least hedging, if not a flat refusal.

“That is a sentiment that I can certainly respect,” came the easy response. “How would you feel about an exchange, Mr. Giles? Some members of the Order could stay with you, some of your people could come with us. No restrictions. A free exchange of ideas and information. Would that meet your requirements?”

Willow glanced down the length of the conference table. The watcher on Giles’ right side, William Rothschild, was nearly salivating at the idea. She couldn’t blame him. Full access to what amounted to an entirely unexplored magical world? She was surprised that she wasn’t having to wipe drool off of her own chin at the prospect.

In comparison, there were some worried faces lining the opposing side of the table, with the notable exception of the red haired man with the glasses, who seemed to be even more excited about the prospect than Rothschild. Giles turned from the watchers nodding in assent on his left and looked her way. She gave him the barest nod. Buffy did too.

There had been a thread of desperation running through all of their guests during the entire meeting. Willow had made sure to keep an ‘ear’ open to look for any signs of deceit, but even under normal circumstances she could usually sense other people’s emotions through the magic that connected her, however loosely, to every other living thing on the planet. It had been one of
the side effects of her training in Devon and her subsequent leaps in magical ability. Now, seeing
the reactions of the watchers delegation, she could sense something new: hope.

Giles leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of him, a sure sign that he was more
than seriously contemplating the offer. “I will hold you personally responsible for the safety of my
people.”

Dumbledore nodded, as if he had been expecting that statement. “There may well be casualties,
Mr. Giles, but they will have as much protection as any of us here. I can promise that. I also expect
that you will extend the same courtesy to our people?”

Giles simply nodded, index finger tapping out a slow rhythm on the hardwood of the table. “And
how should we conceal this operation from your superiors?”

Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling again. “Why, out in the open, of course. Did I not mention that
Mrs. Vance has some very high ranking connections within the Ministry?” he gestured towards
cameo-lady, who simply pursed her lips in a prim smile. “Between citing the Treaty of Carthage,
which you have already mentioned, and various other laws that Mrs. Vance has managed to collect,
I imagine that you will be able to draft a suitably disconcerting letter to Cornelius Fudge. I dare say
that if you include at least a few insulting comments about myself, I believe that your terminology
would be something along the lines of ‘disturbing the peace,’ why, he may very well welcome
your people with open arms.”

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“Willow, I need a word with you,” Giles’ quiet voice drew the witch’s attention away from the
redheaded man who seemed to be inspecting the plug on the coffee pot with something resembling
glee. Since they were already in a corner, she simply waved a hand, palm facing the rest of the
room, and briefly savored the flow of magic in her veins as the barrier leapt into existence.

When the spell was completed, the din in the room faded into silence. “What’s up, Giles?” she
asked over the brim of her cup of herbal tea.

The watcher looked back at the now quiet room filled with watchers and wizards, mingling over
drinks in the way of such meetings. Buffy was speaking animatedly with two men, one tall and
crisply dressed, with a smile that shone all the brighter against his dark skin, and the other sad-
eyed and shabbily dressed with sandy brown hair. From her hand gestures, she was probably
reenacting some battle or another. “What do you think of them?” Giles finally asked, sipping from
the steaming cup of black tea in his own hands.

“I don’t think they’re lying. This Voldemort person has seriously put a scare into these people, and
from what little I was able to scrounge on the situation, I don’t really blame them,” she replied
thoughtfully.

Giles simply nodded. “I agree, which is not to say that I fully trust them either. That is why I am
about to ask you to join the team of watchers who will be working with them.”

Willow almost choked on her tea in surprise. Giles produced a handkerchief from his coat pocket
and offered it to her with a kindly smile. Once she had herself back under control and reasonably
presentable, she handed the piece of fabric back to him and managed to find her voice again. “Why
me?” she croaked.

“A variety of reasons, my dear, not the least of which is the fact that you are by far the most
powerful witch we have, not to mention one of the smartest.” Willow’s eyes dropped in
embarrassed pride, but she couldn’t help but nod. It was the simple truth. “Shall I continue? I trust you; many of my most experienced watchers are still carrying political baggage from before our not-entirely-popular program of reforms. You have more field experience than most of them, and you have at least minor experience with the position that will be your cover during the entire affair.”

“And what’s that,” Willow asked, flattered and insanely curious.

“Teaching,” he replied with the slightest of smiles.

She blinked.

When it became obvious that she had quite possibly lost her ability to speak, Giles continued wryly. “Their leader, this Dumbledore, is a headmaster at one of their wizarding schools. Since I expect he will be in the middle of any major developments, I need someone placed with him who will be able to hold their own in the event of any magical incidents. If you agree, you would be entering the school under the cleverly accurate guise of a spy for the Council.”

“That’s kinda… Machiavellian,” Willow finally said, mind skimming through all of the implications of this development.

“Isn’t it?” Giles mused. “Dumbledore’s idea. The man is… formidable.”

They both stood in silence. Willow lost in thought and Giles waiting patiently for her answer. The red haired man was now showing the coffee pot to Dumbledore and gesturing wildly with the cord.

It was all too much. Teaching. Teaching in a wizarding school. Teaching in a wizarding school during a magical war. Too, too much, so she stuck with her instincts.

“So what am I going to teach?” she asked at length, sticking to the least intimidating of her current predicaments.

Giles smiled down at her. “Should I take that as a yes?” he asked mildly.

“Yeah,” she said with a long, apprehensive breath.

“Willow?” Giles waited until she looked away from the surreal scene of mingling people and looked straight at him. “I… thank you.”

There was so much that might have been said there. She just smiled, trying to comfort them both. “No problem. Wanna go talk to my new boss?”

Giles nodded, worried eyes telling her what he couldn’t seem to find words to express. The Scoobies had thrown themselves against hellmouths, hellgoddesses, hell, just about everything, but this was big. Maybe too big, and this time, she was probably going to be the one spear heading the attack, not Buffy. It was scary, but scary was what she had specialized in ever since a blond slayer had traipsed into her sophomore year of high school and turned her entire world upside down.

She dropped the barrier and the clamor of the room came rushing back, making them both wince. Almost immediately, Dumbledore was looking at them. He politely excused himself from the man with the plug fascination and walked their way.

“Miss Rosenberg, have you agreed to join us?” he asked politely, animated eyes solemn once again.
“I... yes, and not to sound obsessive, but what am I going to be teaching? Because you know, I guess this means I’m going to have to start thinking about lesson plans, and how not to traumatize impressionable young minds, and... stuff.” Willow clamped her mouth shut, uncomfortably aware that she was starting to babble. She grimaced into her tea, wishing that the goddess had given her something resembling tact and eloquence to go along with her magical abilities.

Thankfully, Dumbledore just smiled kindly at her. “All of our usual positions are already filled, but I believe that we might be able to squeeze something into the schedule at the last minute. Especially if you co-taught with one of our own teachers. Yes, I think that might be for the best,” he mused out loud. “Now my dear, I was thinking about something to the effect of ‘Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts.’ Considering your current profession, I thought it fitting. What are your thoughts?”

Willow blinked and had blurted out, “Applied?” before she could stop herself.

“I have reason to believe that our normal Defense Against the Dark Arts course will be of a more theoretical nature than I usually like.” There was no mistaking the dangerous flash of ire behind the wizard’s eyes, rapidly hidden under another smile though it was.

Too many questions.

“I think that sounds doable,” she said with a nervous smile of her own. She’d have time to find the answers to those questions, and probably a boatload more that she’d hadn’t even thought to ask, during this assignment.

“Excellent! Now if you will excuse me, I believe I should be on my way. I’ll leave the final arrangements in the hands of the very capable Mrs. Vance, but right now, I believe I have a faculty member to make very happy,” and then, to Willow’s discomfiture, Dumbledore winked solemnly at her, “Or to irritate immensely. It’s sometimes very difficult to predict with him.”

Well, that’s not very comforting.

With a polite nod and another smile, he returned to the group of people milling around the drink table. He shared few words with the sad-eyed man and the older guy, who in lieu of a real name, Willow decided to officially deem ‘Eye Guy,’ before exiting the room in the company of a young watcher named Eric, who would presumably escort him to whatever these people used for transportation.

“I should really go speak to our guests,” Giles said in a long suffering voice. That was what had really taken the most getting used to once the New Council had been rebuilt, the politics. With a nod of his own and a long sigh, Giles strode forward into the fray.

And so Willow was left with her rapidly cooling tea and so many things to think about that she didn’t know where to start. It was all too unreal. For someone who prided herself on her quick thinking and ability to deal with whatever slimy, scaled, or satanic curveball the world threw her way, the situation wasn’t very pleasant. In fact, it kind of felt like the walls of the board room were starting to close in around her.

Just when it looked like she may very well start to hyperventilate, someone behind her cleared his throat. Willow spun around with a squeak to find the balding, bespectacled man cradling the coffeepot in his arms.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he shifted the urn of coffee into one hand and extended the other. Willow took it without thinking, and found herself the victim of a rather vigorous
handshake. “My name is Arthur Weasley, and I was wondering if I could trouble you with a couple of questions.”

He was so open and earnest looking that Willow found herself rapidly relaxing. “Sure,” she said, wondering what kind of question he could possibly want to ask her, unless he already knew about her new ‘job.’

“Well, you see, I collect plugs,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Plugs,” she repeated stupidly. She was starting to get that strange feeling of unreality again.

He beamed. “Yes, but you see, your device here,” he hefted the coffeepot, “Has a most unusual design and there was some kind of extra plug attached to it.” The coffeepot made its way onto the table, and Mr. Weasley pulled a plug adapter out of a pocket in his voluminous robes. “And I was wondering what the significance of it might be.”

Willow balked.

This has to be some kind of joke.

But it wasn’t. Mr. Weasley just kept looking at her with a hopeful, almost childlike curiosity. She had been expecting these wizards to be somewhat out of touch with the rest of the world, but this was bordering on the ridiculous.

Okay, well you’re apparently going to be a teacher soon, Rosenberg. So? Teach!

“Well Mr. Weasley-” she started.

“Oh, please call me Arthur,” he interrupted, grinning in anticipation.

I can do this.

“Well Arthur, we have different kinds of plugs in America, and we bought that coffeepot back in Cleveland for late night research parties,” she explained. “When we moved to London, we brought it with us, for, uh, sentimental reasons I guess.” She thought the explanation sounded silly, but it was their coffeepot, darn it, and it had seen them through many a late night on their second hellmouth.

Fortunately, Arthur seemed to think that becoming emotionally attached to a household appliance was the most normal thing in the world, so Willow managed to continue without much of an embarrassed pause.

“But the plug didn’t fit over here, so we bought an adapter,” she pointed at the blocky device in his hands. “Which is basically a little electronic device with an American style socket on one side,” she pointed again, “And a British style plug on the other,” and again. “So you plug the coffeepot into the adaptor-“

“And the adaptor into the wall,” Arthur breathed. “How very clever!”

His exuberance was infectious and Willow found herself grinning back.

“I..” he started hesitantly.

Willow smiled encouragingly.

“I don’t suppose you know how airplanes fly, do you?” The question sounded like a prayer.
Willow couldn’t help it, she laughed. It felt good. *This* felt good.

*I CAN do this.*

“Actually I do, but this is going to take a little longer to explain. Have you ever heard of Bernoulli’s Principle?”
Chapter 2

Every potion was different. Different mixtures of ingredients. Different preparation methods. Different measurements, different timings, different uses. All different.

All the same.

All based in meticulous preparation and execution. All rooted in logic and order.

When all else failed and the fragile world Severus Snape had managed to scrape together around himself collapsed into miserable ruin, again, he could always count on the infinite variations of his potions to remain infinitely stable.

He always put exactly four drops of phoenix tears into his most powerful healing potion, he always stirred his sleeping potions counter clockwise, and he always used the same knife to cut all of his herbs, always cleaning it thoroughly after each use, and always storing it in the same drawer in the same corner of his office. Always.

In a summer of chaos, Severus had clung to his potion-brewing like a lifeline. When Voldemort had finally managed to clothe his accursed life force in a functional body, Severus brewed vats of Mental Morass to bolster his already impressive talents in Occclumency. When Dumbledore had started piecing together the Order of the Phoenix again, Severus had brewed Incendiary Ink, which would ensure that any of the Order’s letters which fell into the wrong hands would burst into flames before they could be read. When Voldemort had called his most loyal followers together and made a show of commending those who had kept to their posts, like Severus himself, and punishing those that had not been so openly loyal during the long years of his ‘absence,’ Severus had brewed a combination pain killer and muscle relaxant in preparation for the inevitable day that his ‘Lord’ was less pleased and decided to turn the Cruciatus curse his way. When the Order had relocated from Remus’ humble home to the Black family dwelling, he had brewed an entire pharmacopeia of medicines, elixirs, and cure-alls for any number of potential injuries to stock the shelves of their new headquarters.

Another full moon? Brew Remus more Wolfsbane Potion.

Another report that Sirius has been spotted somewhere in London? Brew him one of your more powerful obscurement potions. Use undead lamprey slime as the base. Insist coldly that the flavor is an unavoidable side effect of the magic.

Another letter from the rapidly reconsolidating Death Eaters? Brew a poison that draws so heavily on various dark magics that Dumbledore breaks into your private chambers in his red pajamas, wand in hand, convinced that the Death Eaters have finally come to finish off his Potions Master. Label it ‘For: Lucius Malfoy’ and place it prominently on the mantle above your fireplace as an unspoken promise. Look at it at least three times a day.

Perhaps that last one was not the best example.

The point was that Severus found the act of brewing potions to be relaxing, insomuch as someone like himself could ever truly relax. It calmed his mind and soothed his senses. No matter how onerous the potion, or how much the fumes burned his eyes, or how arduous the preparation, he always knew what to expect. They could be gauged, predicted, trusted to behave as they ought, assuming that he kept up his end of the bargain and was similarly consistent in his behaviors. Which, of course, he always was.
When Severus Snape needed a little excitement in his life, he experimented, combining ingredients in new and unexplored ways. Testing the concoctions on the rats that Argus’ cat, Mrs. Norris, provided in droves. Trying to turn alchemical theory into physical fact.

Severus had not performed many of those experiments since Harry Potter had first come to Hogwarts. He had enough excitement in his life without stoking the fire, thank you ever so much. His last research had yielded a short-distance teleportation tincture. He had achieved the desired effect easily enough and had been working through how to limit the side effects, mainly blinding pain and acute memory loss, before the Triwizard Tournament.

Not surprisingly, considering how that had turned out, he hadn’t touched the potion, or his copious notes on it, all summer. Argus had started diverting his supply of rats, or at least those which survived Mrs. Norris’ attentions, to Hagrid’s shack instead, where they were either being fed to the half-giant’s latest monstrosity or living the rat high life. There was really no way of predicting with Hagrid.

On this particular evening, Severus found himself brewing various concoctions of a more official sort. Poppy was restocking her supplies in the infirmary and needed extras of some of her more basic items such as Skele-Gro, a name which had always struck Severus as particularly insipid, and various pain poultices. There were four cauldrons bubbling away on the heavy lab desk which had long ago taken the place of the ornate table in his rooms’ small dining area. Why retain such a flimsy piece of furniture when he could so easily replace it with something practical? It wasn’t as if he regularly entertained guests in his private chambers, and if he was forced to partake in that particular variety of social torture, transfiguring the table into its previous state was a small matter.

He could have easily tended to twice that number of potions had he felt like relocating to the classrooms or had the space in his own chambers provided. The cauldrons he was using were rather large. He was, after all, attempting to supply an entire school of careless, accident-prone students with methods for alleviating their typically self-inflicted wounds for at least the duration of the semester. He had little hope that this would be the case. Somehow the number of accidents seemed to rise in proportion to the amount of remedy he brewed, and even he had decided against refusing to make any potions at all to test the theory that the traffic through the school’s infirmary would correspondingly drop to zero. Considering the number of times Poppy had patched up his own hide, he owed it to her to not practice his often sadistic concept of humor in such a manner as to cause her grief.

He was leaning over the largest of the four cauldrons, the one that would eventually yield a balm for minor burns, checking its color and viscosity, when a knock on his door interrupted his solitude. The taps sounded unnaturally loud against the backdrop of quietly bubbling potions. With a loud sigh, he picked up the long handled spoon from its stand next to the cauldron, placed it vertically in the thick orange liquid that smelled strongly of menthol, and tapped the end of its handle with his wand. It started to move, clockwise for this recipe, stirring the potion slowly.

On the way to the door, he picked up a white towel with absorbency charms bound into the weave and wiped his hands from fingertips to elbows. When it came away as pristine as it had started, he was satisfied that he wasn’t about to leave potentially caustic reagents on his doorknob from a carelessly unclean hand. He folded the cloth and slipped it into one of the many pockets hidden in the folds of his robes before rolling his sleeves back down to cover the Dark Mark branded there and opening the door of his chambers.

Standing at roughly knee height, with the same cringing expression of obeisance that seemed to characterize its entire race, was a house-elf. It bowed awkwardly, considering the large tray in its hands, and said rapidly, “I is bringing Albus Dumbledore’s regards, Severus Snape. He is just
returned and is sending you this.” The tiny creature hefted what looked to be the rather heavy tray over its head and towards the Potions Master.

Next to the heaping plates of food on the tray was a letter. Severus took the tray in one hand and the note in the other, scanning its contents briefly.

*Severus,*

*I have excellent news from London. Please come to my office at your earliest possible convenience.*

*Also, Mada expressed concern that you have not yet eaten today. I took the liberty of sending a sampling of tonight’s dinner down with her. The puff pastries are exceptional.*

*Albus*

Come to think of it, Severus could not remember the last time he had eaten anything that resembled a real meal. “You are Mada?” he asked abruptly.

The house elf’s expressive face and long ears perked up. “I is Mada.”

“Please inform Albus that I will be up as soon as the potions for Poppy can be left to steep on their own, and,” to this, he added the slightest of grave nods, “After I have eaten dinner.”

The etiquette felt stiff and forced on his lips, but it simply did not do to antagonize the beings that prepared your food, and even this sliver of consideration sent Mada into expressions of the kind of happy zeal that set Severus’ teeth on edge. In no time at all, the diminutive house-elf had disappeared with a promise to carry his message directly to the Headmaster, conveyed in somewhat broken English.

He then retreated back into his chamber, laden tray in hand. Despite his usual flash of ire at Dumbledore’s meddling, he did have to admit that the food smelled quite tempting. He slid it onto the small end table that flanked a black brocade couch that stood facing his currently cold fireplace.

Minutes later, each of the remaining potions were simmering away with spoons of their own to see to the stirring. Severus slid easily onto one end of the couch, a book on rare South American plants and their alchemical uses opened to his last stopping point. He would start removing the concoctions from their heat sources soon, but in the meantime, they did not require his undivided attention.

He absentmindedly picked at the food, and before he knew it, half of the plate, as well as a chapter on creeping vines, had come and gone. It was time to pull the potions off of their burners and leave them to steep.

And Albus had been correct, the pastries had been more than passable.

~*~*~*~*

Albus Dumbledore’s office was the polar opposite of Severus’ own. Whereas the Potions Master liked his workspace orderly and neat, with little thought to décor past colors and materials that might best repel or conceal the rare accidental spill, the Headmaster’s office was an explosion of colors and strange objects. Everywhere you looked there were shiny trinkets, colorful swaths of fabric, and brightly crafted whatsits.
Severus was aware of the fact that he was quite possibly the only object in the room that was completely devoid of color, which perturbed him not the least. Black was practical. It suited him. Sitting there in front of Albus’ desk, his black robes flowed around him and onto the carpet like a spreading ink stain on the vomitous riot of color. He smiled in bitter irony. That was who he was, that was what he was: a mote of corruption on the otherwise joyous canvas of the room. Better to embrace that fact and wear it as a badge of honor than try to delude himself into thinking otherwise.

“Toffee?” Albus asked, extending a dish of candies across the desk. He was either unaware, or more likely politely ignoring, Severus’ dark thoughts. Everywhere else in the world, from his bedchambers to his classroom to the bottom of the ocean, Severus kept his careful masks and mental shields buttoned up as tight as he could make them. But not here. It was a mark of his esteem for the older wizard sitting across from him that he allowed himself these brief moments of weakness.

Severus sighed. Or Albus was actively attempting to drag him out of his moody behavior, kicking and screaming if need be. He turned down the toffee, but accepted the sentiment that went with it. They couldn’t afford another one of his protracted bouts of nihilism. The situation was too dire. The Order needed him here, now, and certainly in full form.

“What news from the Council of Watchers?” he finally asked, watching as Albus placed one of the bits of candy into his own mouth before returning the dish to a less cluttered corner of his desk.

“They have agreed to an alliance, with reservations,” he finally answered, having swallowed the sticky sweet. “Their new leader is formidable, but much more reasonable than most of his predecessors, if the histories are to be believed. Remus, Alastor, Arthur, and Kingsley will be working directly with the watchers. In exchange, four of their number will be coming to stay with us. One watcher will be acting as a liaison within the Ministry itself, in contact with Mrs. Vance, of course. Another will be moving into number twelve Grimmauld Place with his slayer. The reports were correct by the way, there are multiple slayers now, not just the one. Our guest will not be their senior most one, mind. She is apparently recovering from a fight with a X’orcan matriarch. Alastor was most impressed with her.” Albus’ face took on an amused, dreamy quality that indicated that he was revisiting a particularly entertaining memory.

Severus, on the other hand, was less amused, even though the defeat of a X’orcan was nothing to scoff at. “And their final representative?” he asked, mind keying in on the glaring omission in the headmaster’s litany.

“Oh, she will be coming here,” Albus said casually. “Which reminds me, would you be willing to take up teaching another class?”

Severus just glared. “She’s coming here?” he asked in an icy voice.

“Yes.”

“As a professor?”

“Yes.”

“And what, may I ask, will she be teaching?”

“Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Severus’ glare took on an even more dangerous edge. Losing the position, again, to a Ministry
plant was galling, but this? This was not to be borne. “And what will I be teaching?” he virtually growled.

“Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts.” The elder wizard’s words were as sedate and even as ever, but his eyes. You always had to watch the eyes when dealing with Albus Dumbledore. His eyes were hawk sharp. He was waiting to see what the Potions Master’s reaction would be.

Well, he was just going to have to wait. Severus was too busy trying to wrap his mind around what he had just been told. His mind was whirling too fast for words, viewing and prodding this unexpected turn of events from every angle, looking for layers of context, shades of meaning. The labyrinthine mind of a Slytherin doing what it did best. At long length, he asked the single question that might make all of the pieces fit, “Applied?”

For some reason, that made Albus grin widely, before quickly sobering and diving into an answer. “I believe that we can both guess what the nature of Ms. Umbridge’s class will be. Having Miss Rosenberg here will give us the opportunity to make sure that our students’ education will be affected in name, but not in truth.”

“And my role?” Severus asked in a tightly controlled tone of voice, torn between curiosity over that unexplained grin and the firm knowledge that he was probably happier not knowing.

“Oh, many. As one of my professors, I thought it best to have someone with experience on hand to smooth over any issues with the different magical styles that might arise, and you have made no secret about your interest in teaching this subject.” Albus’ words were carefully bland in the face of a topic that had, in the past, caused innumerable ugly scenes.

At that, Severus scowled all the more. His desire to try his hand at teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts was a sore topic between the two of them. Severus still contended that he had more experience with the dark arts than anyone else the school might trust to hire, seeing as how he had been a dedicated practitioner for years, and he desperately wanted that expertise to count for something other than a source of grief and shame. Albus always countered by saying that while that may be the case, he knew of no other qualified person who would be able to step into the shoes of the school’s Potions Master. Add that to the fact that the Ministry would certainly look askance at a former Death Eater training classes of children in his former trade, and the official hiring on one Severus Snape as Hogwart’s official DADA professor started to look like a political nightmare for the school.

Until now, it seemed, but was this the chance Severus had been aiming for ever since becoming Albus’ pet spy, or was this the consolation prize?

Seemingly oblivious to the younger wizard’s line of reasoning once again, Albus continued. “As a member of the Order, you will be in a position to give her information about our situation. The Council knows very little about Voldemort and therefore is not entirely on board with our cause. Between the two of us, Minerva, and Hagrid, I believe that we will be able to easily win her over, and through her the Council. And,” his eyes were very sharp now, “As a spy in Voldemort’s trust, I believed that close proximity to the first magic-using muggle on our staff might prove to be a useful form of leverage.”

Used to the kind of scheming that seemed to be Albus’ bread and butter, this last statement still managed to surprise Severus the most. “You are going to use one of the representatives from our newest ally as bait?” Wizards they might not be, but making an open and very personal enemy of the entire Council of Watchers did not seem like something that would guarantee a long and healthy life.
The hard look never left the Headmaster’s eyes, but there was dark humor lurking there now as well. “Oh no, Severus, you miss my point. When you meet the girl, I believe that you will understand. She has a heart of gold, that much is obvious in spite of her impressive mental wards, but from what little I could tell, I think the best possible thing for all of us would be for Voldemort to be foolhardy enough to make a move against her.”

Well that was certainly a twist. “A trap then?”

Albus nodded. “A very dangerous, very tempting trap.”

Severus bowed his head in thought. The Dark Lord would take an inordinate amount of interest in what he would certainly consider a mere muggle teaching at the school. “Is she truly that powerful? I had always been told that the wandless were barely better than Squibs.”

“Oh yes, Severus. With the proper motivation, I believe that Miss Rosenberg could quite literally move Heaven and Earth.”

The next week’s faculty meeting turned into a fiasco. While Minerva and Hagrid had both been made aware of the entirety of the situation, as far as the rest of the staff were concerned, they were going to be saddled with not one, but now two unwelcome spies come the start of fall term.

* * * * *

Three, Severus thought with a sneer firmly in place on his angular face. The fact that he was being partnered with the Council’s interloper wasn’t setting many hearts at ease among his co-workers either. Albus had been forced to make some excuse about Potions work being one of the more universal magical disciplines, which would limit methodological clashes between the Council’s wandless witch and him. Which was, of course, a farce. They would not be teaching Potions, they would be teaching advanced offensive and defensive spells to fifth through seventh year students, a point that no one dared to voice considering the stern finality of Albus’ tone when he set forth the flimsy argument.

Not that his statement calmed things completely though.

Sibyll had kicked things off by claiming to have foreseen all of this in a dream the night before. Minerva did not quite manage to suppress her snort of disbelief, which earned muffled titters from Pomona and sent Sibyll into a real snit. It had taken some fancy verbal footwork on Albus’ part to appease the divinations professor enough to let the meeting progress.

After that, Argus had tried his usual litany of complaints, capped as usual with his desire to see Peeves evicted from the school grounds. He was promptly drowned out by Irma, who seemed to be of the opinion that Argus should be spending less time chasing ghosts and more time replacing the dry rotted bookshelves in the back of the restricted section of the library, which were so far gone that the various mending spells already on the wood were starting to fail along with the shelves they were meant to bolster. That had resulted in an amusing verbal row which again required Albus to personally step in to unruffled feathers.

Then things really went downhill.

Usually all of this would have at least evoked a smirk from Severus, childish posturing over things as banal as bookshelves would typically stroke his appreciation of human folly in its many forms, but he remained silent and distant throughout the proceedings. For once, this was all terribly, annoyingly unamusing. He could feel the beginning of a headache starting to press against the back of his eyes. Couldn’t these idiots see what they were doing? Didn’t they realize that, feeling
helpless to stop the invasion of a place that was so much more than a school to all of them, they were lashing out in the most infantile of ways at whatever target presented itself?

No one was asking the questions that were really on their minds. What was really going on between Albus and the Ministry? Why wasn’t the Board even attempting to protect them from all of this? Who were these two women to come in and disrupt their neat, orderly lives by forcing their political agendas on both teachers and students alike?

Severus could have answered all of those questions and more if he was interested in completely blowing his cover. Which of course, he was not. But still, if he was feeling so inclined, he might even have added a few pointed questions of his own. Perhaps, do we really want one of the wandless, one who, if Albus’ initial impression was correct, was unexpectedly powerful, planted in our midst? Or maybe, was it worth the trouble it would cause to simply kill this Umbridge woman, and Fudge along with her, upon their arrival in the morning?

Definitely, when in the nine hells is this thrice-cursed farce of a faculty meeting going to end, so that I might retreat to my rooms and procure a potion to take the edge off of this headache?

A muscle in his cheek, which acted up whenever he was on the verge of losing his temper, was starting to twitch. He took no pleasure in what he was hearing, and he did not trust himself to speak just then, so he decided that he might as well do something constructive. Severus resigned himself to slumping further into his seat and letting his lank hair fall across his eyes, hiding the fact that they were now closed from the others. Raising a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose completed the concealment. Severus kept an ear open for any legitimate issues that might be addressed, but otherwise retreated into a detailed mental rendering of a mandala, holding the complicated image in his mind, maintaining its careful symmetry while turning it, adding to it, sending ripples of tightly concentric movement through the dark, serpentine pattern. No bright curves or colorful whirls for this practitioner. Nevertheless, this was almost as calming to him as making potions.

Running increasingly more complicated concentration techniques was an important foundation in Occlumency. It helped build the kind of mental discipline needed to hold a void of unrelieved nothingness as a shield between the Occlumens’ true thoughts and the attention of a trained Legilimens or natural psychic.

It was also a very useful method for blocking out irritations in his surroundings and getting a hold of his notorious temper.

When the meeting finally adjourned, two hours later, Severus swept back to the relative peace of his chambers and the array of headache remedies stored there. The concentration exercise hadn’t alleviated that particular problem, and in all honesty, manipulating the patterns of the mandala while in no small amount of pain was actually quite good practice, but enough was enough.

Having taken care of that most minor of his current irritations, he retired to his couch and book once again, but found that even a particularly interesting section on the poultices that could be augmented with tropical tree saps could not distract him from what the morning would bring. Starting tomorrow, Hogwarts would be playing host to two women who were both potentially quite dangerous in their own ways.

Umbridge: soon to be the Ministry’s eyes and ears in a place where they were certainly not welcome. A hidebound, delusional thorn in their collective sides, who would take any attempt to prepare themselves or their students for the coming war as a move against her superiors. A watchdog, a babysitter, a meddlesome harpy, and most certainly an enemy.

Rosenberg: soon to be the Council of Watcher’s eyes and ears in a place where they were certainly
not welcome, save for by the few people who knew her real reason for coming to the school. A wandless, powerful scion of an organization which had once very vocally stood and fought against the status quo in the wizarding world. A lure for the Death Eaters, a reluctant ally, an unknown variable, and irritatingly, the only reason why Severus himself now seemed to have the job he had coveted for so long.

Finally conceding defeat, Severus slid the book back onto one of the shelves that lined every available stretch of wall in his living area and decided to turn in early this night. There was no way that tomorrow would not be trying for all concerned, and he had better be prepared to present the right masks at the right times if he wanted things to run even remotely smoothly.

While preparing the powerful wards that guarded his sleeping mind from infiltration, he amused himself by wondering morbidly exactly who was going to earn the dubious distinction of being the most hated professor in the school this year. It looked like he might be defending his crown against two challenging contenders: a Ministry puppet and a wandless watcher.
Rothschild had left with Cornelius Fudge a few hours ago. The Minister had seemed even fussier and more neurotic than Willow had been expecting, but then again, that was the whole reason why she was going undercover, wasn’t it? Be the Council’s super-spy since the big kahunas in the wizarding world were seriously bungling a very, very bad situation.

She cringed a little at that thought. The more she thought about this whole assignment, the more nervous she got. Okay sure, she was the Council’s official BFG when it came to magic, but being a spy seemed to have a lot in common with acting, and well, everyone in Sunnydale High could attest to exactly how well her last foray into theatrics had gone. The words ‘crash’ and ‘burn’ described the event, which she still revisited in the odd nightmare, pretty well.

And speaking of burning, she had to admit that watching Fudge and Rothschild willingly duck into a roaring fireplace had been rather alarming. She supposed it was residual M.O.O. trauma, but that still didn’t keep her from hoping that she would be traveling another way, almost any other way, than via the Immolation Superhighway.

Buffy and Willow had said their goodbyes early over café lattes and scones, and the slayer was currently off with the younger trainees, working on disarming techniques. Giles was greeting their newest guests and whoever Dumbledore had sent to bring her to the school, which left Willow to finish her packing alone. She had really expected this entire process to take a little longer. Barely a week had passed since they had met with the representatives from the Order of the Phoenix; Giles must have put some serious juice into his letter. From Minister Fudge’s response, which had arrived in hours by way of a large, rather alarming horned owl, to her own current slapdash packing, things were going incredibly fast. It was looking like this Mrs. Vance seriously knew how to grease the gears of government.

One smaller suitcase was already packed to bursting and waiting next to the door of her suite. In it, she had stuffed the various tools of her magic interspersed with some photographs and other personal knick knacks. Her spell books were there, of course, along with the contents of her altar. A few books on basic demonology which she had been eyeing as potential textbooks, two stakes, a couple other tools of the trade. It seemed like they should take up more space. Then again, the fact that she was now able to perform the vast majority of the spells in her arsenal without much other than maybe some chalk, a candle or two, and sheer force of will had probably cut down on the literal volume of her ‘professional’ necessities.

Even so, leaving behind the resources of the Council’s library was going to be a jolt to her system. The loss of her laptop, as well as any other kinds of electronics, was going to suck too. Apparently the wards around Hogwarts didn’t play nicely with anything high tech. She’d make do and probably have her hands more than full exploring Hogwarts’ various resources. It still bit the big one though, she had just found this old scroll on methods for healing major injuries that had looked really promising. Maybe Giles could send her a copy later. In the meantime, she had made sure to cram lots of notebooks, pens, and pencils into whatever room was left in the smaller bag.

As for now, Willow found herself glaring at the contents of the second suitcase. Toiletries were packed in one corner, minus her hairdryer and electric razor of course. Towels and straight edges it’d have to be, unless something better presented itself. No, it was her clothes that were giving her fits. None of it seemed, well, teachery enough. A few dresses were neatly folded in the bottom of the suitcase, buried under a smattering of nice slacks and skirts, some blue jeans and t-shirts, and a variety of blouses that ranged from the formal to what Buffy liked to call ‘earth mother chic.’ She
had the sneaking suspicion that every single other person in the school was going to be wearing robes, but she didn’t want to try wrapping her brain around the idea of fashion in the wizarding world without at least some basis of comparison. Besides, it wasn’t like she wanted to kick off her role as good will ambassador from the wild and wooly world of wandless witches by going totally native. That seemed more than a little counterproductive in the long run.

Not that having some robes wouldn’t be nice. They looked pretty comfortable, and flowy stuff was always good.

And now she was thinking too much again.

“Ugh!” Willow’s exclamation of sheer disgust was soon followed by a rain of shoes, various underthings, and socks into the offending suitcase. Two quick jerks had the thing zipped tight, and a quick cantrip took the place of a luggage lock. She grabbed a little box she had rescued from her bathroom cabinet and slipped it into her sling bag before determinedly leaving the safety of her suite behind.

The elevator ride to the New Council’s main floor felt like it took days.

She finally staggered out into the hallway that lead to Giles’ office, dragging her larger suitcase with both hands while the smaller one rolled obediently behind on a thread of magic. Now that she had handed over the reins of the building’s various wards to other witches in the Council’s employ, her magical subconscious was free to roam far and wide. She usually kept this particular talent on a tight leash, as she still sometimes got lost in the sheer magnitude of the life forces around her, but she wanted to be absolutely sure of what she was about to face. Her senses didn’t have far to go before finding something interesting.

The familiar sensations that said ‘Giles!’ to her had been joined by one other. Feeling more than a little trepidation, Willow gave it a ‘taste.’ The other person was a woman, obviously, with a strong maternal bent and a quick mind, but there was something fuzzy saturating her aura that just screamed ‘cat’ to Willow. Weird. She’d have to figure out a non-tactless way to find out what was up with that. She was still trying to figure out that mystery, feeling out the new aura from all conceivable angles, when she reached Giles’ office.

Screwing up her nerve, Willow managed to free a hand from her overstuffed suitcase and push the heavy hardwood door open.

She was greeted by the amused face of one watcher and one drawn wand being held by an alarmed older witch, dressed in greens and plaids. Willow froze for a second in shock, instinctively tossing up a defensive shield, just in case. “Um, hi?” she finally said weakly, waving a nervous hand. The wand in the woman’s hand started to droop, but not entirely.

“Willow, this is Professor McGonagall. Unless I am too much mistaken, you have already found some way with which to introduce yourself.” There was a wry note to Giles’ formality which made Willow’s heart drop a little. Her shield melted as well, the invisible wall of force flowing back into her and through her into the Earth below.

Of course this woman could feel Willow scoping her out, and the shield as well. She was too used to being around people who either couldn’t sense her magic or were too used to it to care. She flushed pink, overwhelmed by the desire to explain herself. “Sorry about that, I just wanted to test the waters a little, and your magic feels really different from anything else I’ve come across, and are you a cat?” That last bit just seemed to slip out before she could stop it. The woman, this Professor McGonagall, seemed more than a little taken aback by the question. Willow winced and found a very interesting pattern on Giles’ area rug to study.
Open mouth, insert foot. Smooth, Rosenberg. This was really starting to be embarrassing. She really thought she had left her spaz-like tendencies far behind her, perhaps some time between resurrecting Buffy and then nearly destroying the world. The stray thought earned a guilty wince, as it had at least once a day for many years.

“How did you…? How can you see…?” The older witch was sputtering in surprise, but at least her wand had finally dropped completely to her side. Finally, she huffed a little and put the wand into a deep pocket in the folds of her robe. She smoothed her long tartan skirts and gathered her dignity back around her. “Since you asked, I am an animagus,” she finally said with a definite Scottish burr, as if that word was supposed to mean something. Not that Willow couldn’t get the gist from the etymology, but still. Huh? “My name is Minerva McGonagall and I am the Transfigurations professor at Hogwarts.”

“Oh,” Willow just replied, stepping completely into the room, bags in tow. The door shut firmly behind the smaller suitcase, which trundled obediently inside after her on its little plastic wheels. Her hands were clenched in a stranglehold around the handle of her larger suitcase. “I’m Willow Rosenberg, um, soon to be Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. And sorry about that. Sometimes my mouth gets a little ahead of my brain.”

At that, the stern-looking woman finally smiled, a thin, but still kindly expression. “It’s quite alright, dear. It’s not like it’s a secret. I was just surprised that you could tell.”

“Oh, it was right there in your aura. All of you give off pretty strong vibes. Speaking of which, are the others not here yet? I thought I felt something earlier, but then, poof!” That was aimed at Giles. “I’ve got some stuff for Arthur and I was kinda looking forward to meeting another werewolf.” Professor McGonagall’s sudden gasp drew Willow’s attention back to the expression on the woman’s face, which was teetering somewhere between shock and profound worry. In a panic, Willow was off again, “Which I’m apparently also not supposed to know about, or… or talk about… or how about I just shut my mouth before I get myself in more trouble?” she finished miserably. Oh my goddess, what am I? Six? There was just something about authority figures that sometimes turned her into a gibbering idiot.

Giles looked like he was about to either lecture her sternly or burst into laughter. “Professor McGonagall, to clarify matters before this conversation degenerates further, yes, we are aware of Mr. Lupin’s condition. This will in no way affect our working with him, as we have had many successful relationships with lycanthropes in the past. Also, the nature of Willow’s magic makes her extremely sensitive to the core natures of those around her. A useful talent, if somewhat alarming to those who are not expecting it.” That was partnered with a stern look which sent Willow’s heart sinking into her sandals. “And to answer your question Willow, our guests are currently being taken to a tailor by Mrs. Montgomery. Other than Mr. Shacklebolt, their attire was not conducive to blending in well in their new positions.”

“Oh,” she said in disappointment. Considering her conversation with Mr. Weasley, she wouldn’t have been surprised if they had all shown up in orange galoshes and formal kimonos. “Could I leave some stuff with you then?” When Giles simply nodded, she walked over to his desk and started pulling things out of her sling bag. A universal adaptor, which had been collecting dust in her cabinet, came to rest next to a cheap paperback she had found on the Wright brothers. She had written a short note and placed it in the front cover of the book for Arthur. It was probably silly, but he had seemed so excited about the whole airplane thing, and the paperback had been in the bargain bin at Elliot’s Book Store.

Two letters also found their way onto the desk. One was for Dawn, who was starting her senior year at Stanford, and the other was for Xander, who was living it up in the Bahamas on his
honeymoon with Serena. Both letters had instructions on how to contact her and brief summaries of what was going on here at Slayer Central. Her hands shook a little as she arranged all of the stuff on the edge of Giles’ desk.

She hadn’t realized that the watcher had moved until she felt a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Willow, I have full faith that you will excel in this endeavor, as you have done with every other task you have truly set your mind to,” he said quietly.

She gave him a watery smile, refraining from hugging the man for all she was worth. She’d already made enough of a fool of herself in front of Professor McGonagall, without looking like a clingy child as well.

Giles even managed a smile of his own before turning back to the piles of papers and books on his desk. “Now, I have some items for you as well.” He picked up a small stack of books topped with a manila envelope, all tied together with heavy string, which had been sitting next to his phone. “I believe that these might prove useful.”

Willow could feel magic pouring from the bottom three books. Her fingers itched to open them right here, but something in Giles’ demeanor told her that discretion was the order of the day. She took the books and hugged them against her chest. “I’ll take good care of them,” she said, which earned another smile and a nod.

“Now, I think it’s time that you got on your way. Don’t you?” Giles prompted, all business again.

At his encouraging expression, Willow steeled herself and turned back to face their guest. The Hogwarts professor was standing very still with the oddest expression on her face. It wasn’t worried, or shocked, or condescending, or any of the other things that Willow had been half-way expecting. If anything, it was an odd blend of hope, and maybe guilt? No. Couldn’t be.

I can do this.

“I’m ready to go, Professor,” she said, pleased that her voice remained steady.

And then the older witch’s face changed once again, falling into a look of serene confidence. “My dear, I tend to insist that my co-workers refer to me by my first name, at least when we are not in front of students. Please call me Minerva.”

So maybe she hadn’t totally stepped in it. “Okay Minerva.” There was just enough room in her bag to stash Giles’ books. She settled the satchel against her hip and grabbed the larger of her two suitcases again. “Can we not take the fireplace, though? That was kind of oogley.”

Minerva’s eyebrows rose, but her voice remained kindly. “Is this everything you are bringing with you?” she asked, gesturing to the bags.

Willow nodded, firmly stomping down her renewed clothes worries.

“Well then, I was planning to simply Apparate to the edge of the school grounds. Mr. Giles has kindly told me that your wards should not be a problem, but Hogwarts is shielded against that kind of direct entry. I believe that you might find that the view more than makes up for the walk.” Minerva was all briskness now, taking the smaller of Willow’s bags by the handle. “Do you know how to Apparate?”

“Um, Apparate?” Willow asked dumbly. Apparate. Sounds like apart. To come apart? That doesn’t sound very pleasant. Or is the root ‘to appear?’
“Disappear from one place and appear at another,” Minerva answered evenly.

“Oh, you mean like teleportation?” Willow asked rhetorically. This whole language barrier thing might get to be a problem. “Yeah, but it helps if I’ve already been where it is I’m going. I still get nose bleeds sometimes when I do it blind.”

Apparently Willow wasn’t the only one getting lost in translation. Minerva just looked at her oddly and said, “Yes, well, I can bring you along as long as we are in contact with each other and your luggage.” She extended a hand, palm up.

“Oh, okay,” Willow stepped forward, suitcase in tow. “Like this?” she asked, tentatively sliding her fingers into the older woman’s hand.

“That will do nicely. It was a pleasure, Mr. Giles,” she said politely.

“Likewise, Professor,” he replied, still standing next to his desk, glasses in hand and being subjected to thorough polishing. “Goodbye Willow. I will keep an eye out for any errant owls in case you feel like writing.”

She grinned at that. “Will do, Giles. Just keep the slayers from, you know, slaying the messenger.”

“Indeed,” he chuckled. Buffy’s initial reaction to the Ministry’s owl had been comical to say the least.

“Are you ready?” Minerva asked, her grip on Willow’s hand tightening.

Willow took a steadying breath before nodding firmly. She felt a lurch, and suddenly here wasn’t here anymore. It was… well, she didn’t know where she was.

And at the moment, she didn’t care.

“Oh Goddess. Oh my Goddess,” she whispered, totally unprepared for what was happening to her.

The basic foundation of Willow’s magic was forming and manipulating a connection with the Earth, but she had never felt anything like this. Everything, the ground, the air, the plants, everything around her was infused with magic of one kind or another. The vast majority of it was concentrated into some kind of wall or field right in front of her. It felt like she was trapped in it, like a fly in a web, torrents of magic flowing unchecked through her body. Light, dark, all the shades in between, but mostly white magic. Enough to drench the entire world in sunlight. It kind of felt like she was holding the scythe again, or perhaps a live wire. Or the scythe and a live wire.

She probably looked the part, too.

Her hair had gone white, shot through with a few wisps of red and black, and was dancing as if on some unseen breeze. And she was glowing. Oh, this is bad. “Goddess,” she repeated, trying to wrestle herself into control. But it was hard, as hard as fighting her control of the dark magic had been, except this time the power tasted like springtime instead of anger and raw ambition.

Slowly, so very slowly, the flood slowed to a manageable trickle. Her blood was pounding in her ears. She found that she was crouched near the ground, right hand still clenched on the handle of her suitcase above her head. Her left hand was pressed, fingers spread wide, against the hard packed earth. Having regained her internal equilibrium, she now had to get rid of all of the excess magics she had inadvertently taken in. She could feel them draining out of her, through her feet, her bracing hand, like water onto the parched Earth. Red bled back into her hair, where it hung around her downturned face.
When the power was gone again, Willow managed to look up through a curtain of disheveled hair. Minerva was quite a distance away now, wand out and at the ready again. This was turning into a bad pattern.

Willow wanted to explain herself, tell the other witch that everything was okay now, but the world seemed to be tipping on its axis. “Sorry,” she managed to croak. “Too much magic… Too much. I think I need… need to sit.” And sit she did, or more like collapse, right there in the dirt, her satchel sliding from her shoulder next to her. “That was kind of intense,” she wheezed. If the world would just stop spinning for a second…

Minerva’s voice cut through the mad tilting mess that was Willow’s senses. “What precisely just happened?” The question was delivered in a taut, controlled tone of voice.

Willow put a hand to her head, trying to clear her thoughts of the residual buzz that was lingering there. Before she could form a coherent answer for the woman, another voice rang out behind her. “Yes, I would also be interested in hearing some kind of an explanation.”

The voice teased Willow with recognition. She looked over her shoulder and found Albus Dumbledore standing there, casual as can be, framed by a huge gate flanked by… flying pigs? Okay, this was getting entirely too surreal. Willow shook her head, attempting to clear it, and tried to focus on Dumbledore. His expression proved that he warranted the attention. There was a steely gleam in his eyes. This whole situation was just going from bad to worse. She managed to totter to her feet and tried to brush the worst of the dust from her skirts. This was so not the first, well technically second, impression that she had wanted to make. “Sorry, there was just so much magic,” she finally managed to say weakly, combing her hair away from her face with shaking hands. “It just took me by surprise.” She slumped to one side again, plopping down on her suitcase. Taking another deep breath to steady herself, she looked back towards the Headmaster, but then her eyes were drawn up.

And up.

And up.

And holy crap, that was a castle. With turrets and ramparts and everything. Back in the now, Rosenberg. “I’m okay now.”

The Headmaster’s demeanor softened somewhat, but not by much. “While I am glad to hear that, Miss Rosenberg, I’m afraid that the school’s wards are not.”

“What?” Willow said in alarm, vaguely registering that Minerva had just made the exact same exclamation.

“Severus is currently in my office, holding them together as best he can, but the power behind them is just gone,” he replied. “We thought this might have been the prelude to an attack.”

Willow could only gape.

“What?” Willow said in alarm, vaguely registering that Minerva had just made the exact same exclamation.

“Severus is currently in my office, holding them together as best he can, but the power behind them is just gone,” he replied. “We thought this might have been the prelude to an attack.”

Willow could only gape.

“Have any of them failed?” Minerva asked, suddenly at Albus’ side.

“No yet, but I fear it is only a matter of time unless we both can join him in bolstering the spells,” his voice was grave. “Even then, we will remain vulnerable for some time, but if they fall apart completely…” he trailed off, hinting at dire consequences.

“I can help,” Willow blurted out, standing up quickly enough to overturn her rolling suitcase and send her head spinning again. She didn’t know what exactly was going on, but she caught on just
enough to know that in old Willow fashion, she had managed to epically screw up on her very first day here.

The two looked at her in surprised, sharp appraisal.

“Look, I’m sorry that happened, and again, not explaining this really well right now, but dumping me into this kind of an energy sink? Not a good idea if I’m not prepared. And that’s so not the point, the point is the magic’s not gone,” she said desperately. “I can bring it back, just take me to this Severus guy.”

Minerva was thin-lipped in thought, but Dumbledore just nodded. “Conveniently, the situation allows for us to reach my office by much more direct means than usual.” He took Willow by the wrist. “Follow us if you can, Minerva.”

There was the odd lurching sensation again, but firm hands, gnarled by age as they were, kept her steady this time. Again, she was a little thrown by the swirl of new magics around her, but she was ready for them this time. She got the vague impression of a bright swirl of riotous colors, but all of her focus was on the magics this time, and they drew her attention to a single source.

A man was bowed over a cluttered, wooden desk, shoulders hunched in strain and concentration. One hand was firmly fisted around an ebon wand while the other held onto the edge of desk as if for dear life. She couldn’t see much of his face through its curtain of concealing black hair, but it was plain that he was pale and thin, dressed all in black robes.

And positively radiating power.

These magics were different shades of grey and much more familiar to Willow, not the blackest black of her darkest temptations, nor the pure white she had touched only a few times, but the shifting shades in between, which she had become more strongly attuned to ever since she had dabbled too hard in things that would have been best left alone. She felt her eyes shift to dark red-black, hair following suit. She staggered forward, still frazzled from the incident outside, but determined to do whatever it took to make this right.

Reaching forward, her hands clamped like vices on the man’s wrists. Suddenly she found herself looking into jet black eyes, cold with a determination to match her own, but also anger and indignation. There was perspiration on his scowling brow, an expression which did nothing to compliment the sharp planes of his face. His mind was a blank page, walled and warded powerfully against intrusion, but his aura was seething around her and that she could read that like a book. Among other things, this was not a man who welcomed physical contact of any kind.

“Well, too bad, bub,” she heard herself saying out loud. “It’ll make this a whole lot easier, and I am not getting fired on my first day. Now you steer and I’ll provide the juice.”

His eyebrows looked like they were going to crawl into his hairline, but there wasn’t time. Projecting her intentions on all psychic levels she could muster, her eyes locked with the wizard in front of her. She reached down, down into herself, and through to the Earth below. Careful to avoid any kind of magic that was already in use, she plunged into the primal core of her power, drawing it forth. She knew her eyes had to be blacker than pitch as she pulled the raw energy up, up into herself and out through her hands.

And he caught it, eyes going as onyx as her own, sending it into the intricate weave of magic that surrounded the school grounds in a perfect sphere, shielding Hogwarts from intrusion from any direction. Willow felt like a pressure valve, teeth gritting in the concentration needed to keep providing energy for the shield without blasting the wizard in front of her into a million little
He fumbled at first, probably taken as off guard by a foreign kind of magic as she had been outside, but when he growled, “More,” in her face, she gave it to him, pouring more and more magic through the connection of their hands.

An explosion of power slammed into the weave, buoying up their work briefly before moving on to other minor wards, filaments of more specialized, if weaker, spells. Another blast, less powerful than the first joined it. Dumbledore and Minerva, Willow noted dreamily. She was starting to slip, and she knew it. The magic was starting to sing in her veins, inviting, tempting.

If she kept this up much longer, there was going to be at least one chicken fried witch in the room.

Thankfully, it looked like they were nearing an end. The individual threads in the web of magic were thickening, bleeding into one another until there were no gaps to provide a weak point.

The second she felt the man relax, she severed their connection, funnelling the power away again. Her hands felt stuck to his wrists though, but when her hair settled in its normal red waves, eyes shading back into green, the man, Dumbledore had called him Severus, jerked away violently. He stumbled back, looking for all the world like he had seen a ghost.

“I left my stuff outside,” she said weakly, inanely. “And I think I might pass out,” she added as an afterthought.

And she did, slithering down until two sets of hands caught her and eased her way as the darkness overtook her completely. Her last vision was of a set of haunted eyes, still blackened from her magic, but also torn with grief and pain.
“This is interminable,” Severus snapped, pacing back and forth in front of Albus’ desk. “I have an inventory of my reagents and components to perform, five more vats of various salves and balms to brew for Poppy, and apparently some type of preliminary report on our newest faculty member to pen for the Dark Lord.”

And he was still the Dark Lord to Severus. A careless slip of tongue in front of the wrong person could prove fatal, and he had no intention of setting himself up for failure, even in the darkest recesses of his own mind.

“A new faculty member, who will be here presently,” Albus replied, cheerfully bustling around his office. The Headmaster was always cheerful when one of his schemes was going according to plan. “One who will need to discuss lesson plans with you, unless I am too much mistaken. Won’t that make an interesting anecdote in your report?”

Severus just ground his teeth.

“I do hope that she and Minerva are getting along,” Albus said with a sigh. “I’m afraid that our little subterfuge has already turned much of the staff against her.”

That definitely deserved a disbelieving snort. Only Albus could discuss selling out the watcher’s concept of an acceptable curriculum to the Dark Lord himself in one breath, and then worry about her future social life within the school in the next. No matter how many years he worked with the man, the mind of Albus Dumbledore often remained a complete cipher.

The Headmaster opened his mouth, probably to toss more pearls of wisdom onto the floor, when he froze in place, eyes wide and glazed. A second later, Severus felt something like a thousand thousand spiders crawling down his spine. “What is that?” he ground through clenched teeth.

Albus drew his wand, eyes searching wildly for something Severus could not see. “The wards are dropping,” he said darkly.

In a heartbeat, Severus’ wand was out as well. “An attack?” he asked, tense with shock. He had heard nothing. Surely he would have been informed if there was an attack planned on the school. He had been ordered to wait and watch the new wandless professor, for Merlin’s sake. ‘To collect information,’ the letter had said, just this morning. To mount an attack now made no sense. No sense at all.

Unless he had been found out.

The thought dumped ice water into his veins.

“Can you hold the shields, Severus?” Albus’ hands were raised, feeling, pressing against the air around him. His eyes slid worriedly past Fawkes’ empty stand, the Headmaster’s familiar and part-time messenger was away at the moment, probably carrying letters or some other such, before pinning Severus where he stood.

“I…” he scoured his mind for the correct incantations. The spells placed on the school were powerful, constructed by multiple wizards over the course of many days. But Albus wasn’t asking if he could cast the wards alone. He was asking if Severus could hold the tattered pieces of the spells together until… what? Until the Headmaster fought off the Death Eaters alone? Until all else was lost? Until what? “Yes,” he finally snarled, putting his trust in this man one more time.
Severus started to chant then, voice only faltering slightly when Albus Apparated away, proving exactly how weak the wards had become. Each word brought another thread of the pattern into his grasp, but the pieces of the shield were weak, brittle. It was as if something had left the framework of the spells behind, but sucked dry like fruit left too long on a dying vine.

Each word brought more and more strands of magic into his grasp. By the time he was sure he had gathered them all, he was swaying from the effort. At least whatever had triggered the magical drain had stopped, but the web-like filaments were fragile to the ‘touch.’ He was hanging onto the web by his fingernails, but he knew, even as the sweat started to break out on his forehead, that it wasn’t enough. If this really was a Death Eater attack, then having the wards in place would limit what they could do, what kind of spells they could perform, and what kind of reinforcements they could summon. Stronger wards might buy Albus the time he needed. If this was something other than an attack, then they were still left vulnerable. Some agent of the Dark Lord would be watching the school grounds, and this show of weakness would invariably draw in the predators like sharks smelling blood in the water. He knew his ‘compatriots' well enough to predict that.

Simply holding the wards together wasn’t enough. He had to put some of the energy back into the shield.

Or at least, he had to try.

Drawing on his own magics, he sent the raw power through his wand and into the weave. It was dizzying, and Severus knew he could not keep this up for long, but stopping was also out of the question.

His left hand gripped the edge of Albus’ desk. His wand hand hit the wooden surface as well, clenched tightly around the focus of his magic. The effort needed to maintain the spell was rapidly draining his strength, leaving a soul deep ache in every corner of his body. He gritted his teeth, braced himself against the desk, and soldiered on. He had sworn to Albus, years ago, that he would do anything, perform any task, undergo any indignity, suffer any injury, for just the chance to lash out at his former masters.

For the chance to make up for his innumerable sins.

Merlin help him, for Lily’s memory.

So even though the magic was starting to burn in his veins. Even though the only thing keeping him on his feet was sheer stubbornness. Even though this foolhardy attempt would more than likely end in failure, he just kept pushing more and more of himself into the shield until his head was bowed and his nerves burned at the effort.

It was then that he felt the hands on his own.

He looked up in shock, finding himself faced with the oddest of creatures. A woman, at least he thought it was a woman, had latched onto his wrists, leaning across the expanse of Albus’ desk until their faces were a scant few inches apart. Her eyes were a shade of red so dark that it appeared almost black. They had no pupils, no whites, just this solid shade of unnatural color that seemed to crackle with energy. Her hair was a shade of red only one step lighter, writhing around her face as if alive. She was pale and thin, with a hollow face that made her look like she was part fae. Albus himself was behind her, looking worried, but generally unalarmed at the woman’s presence.

Well Severus was alarmed. He was more than alarmed. He was furious. He was Severus Snape, and no one, no one who didn’t want to suffer the sharp edge of his tongue or the sharper attentions of his wand or potions, laid hands upon him without permission.
Even this eldritch creature.

Maybe especially this eldritch creature.

“Well, too bad, bub,” she said in an unnaturally deep snarl. “It’ll make this a whole lot easier, and I am not getting fired on my first day. Now you steer and I’ll provide the juice.”

Bub? Juice? The threads of the spells were starting to unravel under his fingers thanks to her distracting actions, and she was offering him juice? What was she babbling about? And Merlin, was she reading his mind? He started to retreat even further behind his mental defenses when her thoughts abruptly opened to him.

Like him, she had levels of psychic shielding, so he couldn’t see much, but there in the forefront of her mind were her intentions, spelled out in images and sensation if not words. She could channel magic into him. If he had the power to take it and funnel it into the spell, she could provide the raw energy to power the wards.

Such a thing was unheard of in wand magic. There was no sharing of power, only what an individual could take and hold for themselves. Oh, there were spells that could be performed cooperatively, but this was very, very different. This wasn’t two people channeling magic into the same goal; this was a single casting, fueled by both people, but guided by only one.

Fascinating.

And unless he was too much mistaken, he really needed to set that line of thought aside so he could brace himself for whatever this fae slip of a girl was going to send his way. Not that he was expecting much.

Merlin, was he wrong.

A blast of energy hit his wrists and shot straight to his brain. He was so surprised that more than a little spilled from his control, sending energy zinging across his skin to gather tightly around his eyes and blasting the papers on Albus’ desk into even more disarray. He gritted his teeth and bent the flood to his will, forcing it back out of his wand and into the wards.

And it was working. The power was darker that the magic it was replacing, but not in an evil way. It seemed wilder somehow, less orderly, more untamed. Severus could feel it singing in his veins, making him lightheaded with its sheer power. What was more amazing, he could tell that the girl was holding back.

That stung his pride more than a little.

“More,” he snarled, and just like that she complied.

It was amazing. The threads of magic in his grasp were soaking up the magic, taking on a life and power of their own. He heard Albus incanting in the background, Minerva quickly joining in. He had no idea when she had arrived. They were taking over the spell-specific wards, the ones that prevented the various methods of direct transportation into the grounds and certain types of large scale attacks. He dropped those spells from his grasp, letting the other two handle them. He could finish the framework in which those spells would live while they did the detail work.

He was still locked in eye contact with the woman. For the most part, her mind was still closed to him, foreign and mysterious as the magic she was wielding. Wisps of memories and emotions teased him from behind her black eyes, just out of reach. It was rare to find another person capable of that level of control.
Around the periphery of his vision, he could see that her nose was starting to bleed, a trickle of dark color against an otherwise colorless face. She didn’t seem to notice it at all. There were lines around her huge eyes, colored true black now, and her lips were pressed together in a bloodless line, which told him all he needed to know about the strain she was under. He wasn’t even the source of all of this power, but he too was starting to feel like a violently wrung rag.

Thankfully the wards were starting to melt into the unified sphere that characterized their previous form. Piece after piece, thread after thread, were falling into place, and all they needed was a little bit… More!

He released the completed ward from his grasp, sagging heavily against the desk. Almost at once, the flow of magic from the woman stopped. She didn’t release him though. Impressive magical action aside, he was about to rebuff her presumption, but then the woman underwent the most unexpected transformation.

Her black eyes faded to moss green and her dark hair lightened to a burnished copper. As the magics drained out of her, the woman’s face lost its pale hollowness and unnatural glow. So she was human, only a young human woman. In fact she was starting to look a bit like…

A drop of blood hit the back of his hand, hot and distracting. In that exact moment, the walls encasing her mind cracked a little, and Severus found himself slipping inside before he really realized what had happened.

A blond woman stood in front of him, palpable menace concealed in shadow. “Did you cut the throat?” she snarled. “Did you pat its head? The blood dried on your hands, didn’t it?”

Someone was repeating, “Oh my God, oh my God,” over and over again behind him. Still, Severus never took his eyes from the white-eyed, threatening figure.

Her voice rose furiously over the fearful mantra, “You were stained, you still are! I know what you did!”

Severus found himself looking into the wide, trusting eyes of a fawn. The sudden peace of the scene was almost as jolting as what happened next. A hand, maybe his hand, drove a long dagger into the young deer. Hot blood washed over him as the animal was stabbed again and again. Blood splattered across pale flesh and dark red hair. Her blood? The fawn’s blood? Impossible to tell.

Severus tore himself free from her mind with a jerk, wrenching his hands away from the woman’s grasp as if scalded. He stumbled away from the desk, trying with little success to rediscover his own physical and psychological equilibrium. He had no understanding of what he had just seen, only the vivid memory of the accusations and the blood spattered redhead, a memory too close in theory, if not in detail, to one of his own.

Old wounds, poorly healed, tore open and trickled their poison back into his system.

“I left my stuff outside.” Severus barely registered the content of her statement, only the fact that she had an American accent. “And I think I might pass out,” she added abruptly.

True to her words, she did, sliding down the other side of the desk until Albus and Minerva, who had finished their own spell casting, managed to catch her and keep her from hitting the floor behind the desk. Severus just watched them spirit her onto a plush chair, stamping down the unexpected and wholly unwelcome emotions that were gnawing at the edges of his mind.

He caught himself compulsively trying to clean the single droplet of blood from his hand, an action
that was only serving to smear the sticky fluid in a red streak up his wrist. He forced himself to stop, willing himself to calmly wipe the stain away with the absorbancy towel he kept in one of his pockets.

This was sheer stupidity. That had not been Lily in the vision. This woman was not Lily, she didn’t even really resemble her except in the most superficial of ways. So she had red hair and green eyes, so did millions of other women, especially in this part of Scotland. His reaction had been an act of weakness, brought on by the shock and surprise of the moment, but still inexcusable. Pretty soon he would be seeing imagined ghosts in his morning tea, just like Sybill. He had more control than that.

A sharp pain in his palm drew his attention to the fact that he was clenching his fists so hard around the rag that his short fingernails were digging into the skin of his palm. He purposefully and forcibly relaxed, folding the towel and returning it to his pocket, reining in his emotions and willing the tension from his thin frame. The situation called for cold logic and quick thinking, not emotional posturing. He was only partially successful.

Vaguely, Severus noted that Albus had produced a thick blanket from somewhere, which he was spreading across their unconscious guest. “Minerva, I believe that we are about to be flooded by the rest of the faculty,” he said quietly. “I will attempt to head them off, if you would be so kind as to pick Poppy out of the crowd. I believe that Miss Rosenberg has only overextended herself somewhat, but I want to make absolutely sure that this is nothing more serious.”

“Of course,” Minerva responded, but her voice was a far cry from its usual, calm self. Severus quirked his lips in the tiniest of ironic smiles at her discomfiture. It was perversely pleasing to know that the unflappable Minerva McGonagall was also unsettled, dare he say flustered, by the unconscious witch at her side. Still, she leaned forward and wiped away the worst of the blood on the girl’s face with a handkerchief. Practical and protective, even under fire, that was hallmark Minerva.

“Severus, I suspect that your eyes will also return to normal with rest, but I would like for Poppy to look at you as well. In the meantime, would you mind keeping an eye on Miss Rosenberg while we handle the others?” Albus asked, though it wasn’t really a question. In fact, he didn’t even wait for Severus’ confused if acquiescing nod before sweeping towards the exit to his office, Minerva close behind him.

Severus’ mind was trying to race off in a multitude of directions at once, but now that the magic and adrenaline was starting to drain out of his body, leaving behind only aching joints and fried nerves in their wake, he was going to have to stick to one mental tangent at a time. He already felt like his brains had been rendered for soup.

First things first, what was wrong with his eyes? The disconcerting hum from the strange magic was still crawling over his skin, although it was starting to dissipate. He spotted a small hand mirror on the shelf behind Dumbledore’s desk and managed to stagger his way to it without falling over, an option that was looking more and more attractive. Picking up the silver mirror, it took a serious effort of will to not drop the thing in shock at what he saw.

His eyes were solid black, like the wandless witch’s had been during their casting. No, not exactly. He could see his normal dark eyes and hints of white behind the swirling black eddies, and even as he watched, the wisps of darkness seemed to lessen somewhat, either draining out of him or soaking into his very flesh. It was hard to tell.

He retreated to the far side of the room, mirror in hand, and collapsed into the chair farthest from the witch. There he sat, alternating glaring at the mirror and glaring at the girl, trying to determine
what in the bloody hell she had done to him, until his eyes had finally returned to their normal hue.

Then, he just glared at the girl.

So this was the mysterious Miss Willow Rosenberg. Severus’ eyes narrowed into mere slits. He would give her one thing, she certainly knew how to make an entrance. Reason dictated that the timing of her arrival was simply too fortuitous if she had not also been involved in the shields’ failure somehow.

He doubted that this was some kind of stunt on the part of the Council of Watchers, though that was always a possibility. He, Albus, and Minerva had been the ones to actually cast the spells, not the watcher, so it was doubtful that she had managed to slip something new into the weave of the wards. Then again, he was not entirely certain of what she could do. That display of power, not to mention the foreign taste of the magic she had summoned and the unusual way with which she could manipulate it, led him to believe that her methods for spell casting were even more different from his own than he had been expecting. He would have to ask Albus to check and make sure that nothing out of the ordinary had crept into their defenses, just in case.

Even he couldn’t bring himself to believe that it had been a staged demonstration, a ploy to exhibit the extent of the witch’s power. Not with the streak of blood that was once again starting to trickle down towards her lip. In general, any display meant to awe the observers with a demonstration of raw power was not best capped off by passing out from exhaustion and bleeding on your rival’s furniture.

So if that ruled out intentional subterfuge that left… what? An accident? Albus had intimated that Miss Rosenberg seemed to be the best witch that the Council had to offer. It seemed unlikely that they would send an incompetent into this situation. Then again, it was true that rumors often tended to hold grains of truth, and the low opinion of wandless witches in the wizarding community had to have come from somewhere. Was the best they had to offer a loose cannon? Something to think about, but again, Severus doubted it. Maybe funneling all of that magic into him hadn’t taken finesse, but it had required an impressive amount of control.

Then again, if her magic had felt foreign to him, then theirs must have seemed equally odd to her. An accident based on unfamiliarity instead of incompetence? Slightly more excusable and definitely possible, especially considering what had just happened to his eyes. Her eyes had done the same, indicating that the change might be a normal part of her casting, no matter how unexpected the effect had been for him.

Very, very interesting.

He was still thinking on the matter, long fingers drumming slowly on his arm rest, when Minerva returned with Poppy. Both women bustled to the far side of the room where Miss Rosenberg, or as he should start referring to her, Professor Rosenberg, was still sleeping, and bleeding, on the brocaded chair.

Poppy muttered something to Minerva, who backed away to give the healer more room. Severus decided that he trusted his legs to not buckle out from underneath him and shoved himself to his feet. Poppy didn’t look up from her work, scanning the new professor for any internal injuries or ailments, either magical or mundane in nature. Minerva gave him a tight lipped nod when he turned back from returning the mirror to its place on the shelf. He walked to her side, unable to keep a tired drag out of his step. As he slowed to a halt, he unconsciously crossed his arms across his chest.

Minerva had a pinched, worried expression on her face. They might not have been close, the
rivalry between the heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor houses was only partially for show, but Severus still knew her well enough to recognize when she was truly upset. Still, offering any kind of comforting platitude was far outside of his social repertoire. Something safely neutral then. “She is younger than I was expecting,” he commented flatly.

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Minerva’s face fell even further. “I know,” she said with a sigh.

So that was her problem. If Albus did not shy away from using students as pawns on the chessboard of this war, then he would certainly tap any resources the Council of Watchers willingly sent his way, young and attractive as they might be. “Do not paint her as an innocent, Minerva. Her organization regularly deals in vampires, demons, and worse. Also, I believe that we have firmly established the kind of power she has.” All of this was delivered in a dry monotone, a clinical retelling of the facts.

Minerva huffed in exasperation. “She is barely older than a student herself, and I strongly doubt that she has any idea of what she is facing here. Have a heart, Severus.”

Have a heart. His heart was perfectly fine where it was, safely under tight lock and key, where it couldn't cause him any more trouble. Having a heart in his line of work was a quick way to end up dead. “Some of us cannot afford the luxury,” he snapped coldly.

Minerva looked as if he had struck her, and even Poppy stopped her incantation to look over her shoulder at the two of them. Severus just sneered at them both.

“Save your condescension as well as your pity for someone who cares,” he hissed before turning on his heel and storming out of the room. If Poppy wanted to waste her time checking his eyes, she could bloody well make house calls. This conversation was unequivocally over.

Albus was still outside, explaining what had just happened to the throng of confused faculty members. The wards had reacted oddly with their new professor’s magic, everything is fine now, please go away and pretend like nothing happened. Perhaps that wasn’t a direct quote, but the gist was the same. What was worse, Severus noted with disgust, was that most of them were blindly accepting the Headmaster’s comforting words, nodding their mindless acceptance.

Severus pushed his way through the crowd, nearly slamming into a prim cow dressed in nauseating pinks and scribbling on a clipboard. Umbridge, if he wasn’t mistaken, and already writing some missive for her masters. He had conveniently waited to inform Albus of his early morning letter until right before her arrival and official presentation to the faculty. He was not above twisting Order business to suit him, and he had no interest in being lined up in front of the Ministry’s spy to be studied, interpreted, and recorded for a report to Fudge.

His feelings on the subject had not changed much since morning.

Severus pushed past her as well, ignoring her indignant exclamation, and broke free of the throng of people. He didn’t even give the casual rudeness a second thought. Inside of this school, that was who he was. Professor Severus Snape, asinine Potions master and all around selfish bastard. The Death Eater who had escaped punishment. The Slytherin sadist.

The greasy git.

Oh yes, he knew all about that particular nickname. It concerned him not at all, past the vaguely pleasing knowledge that he was doing his job well. Why should he care about his appearance? He was clean in truth, if not in appearance. He knew the spells and potions to style his hair as well as
anyone else, he simply didn’t see the point of wasting the time and effort.

Severus had long ago plotted the fastest ways to get from any point in the school to any other, due in part to his own tenure as a student here as well as excessive patrolling of the hallways after curfew. It was a useful set of knowledge to have, as demonstrated by his rapid arrival at the potions classroom, deep in the dungeons of the castle.

A word sent the torches around the room flaring, lighting the dark area in a sulfurous yellow glow. He hadn’t entered the room since the end of the last term, but the house-elves had kept it free of the dust and cobwebs which would otherwise have collected in every nook and cranny. Reagent inventories were mindless work, but maybe if he brewed a few potions at the same time, he would have enough on his mind to find a little peace in the task, free of thoughts involving Dark Lords, political entanglements, blood-stained hands, and wandless witches with familiar red hair.

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“It is strange, don’t you think?”

Severus did not look up from the broken jar and strands of kelpie mane that he was carefully brushing into a dustpan. He had knocked it from its shelf earlier, shattering the leaded glass and scattering the wet locks of hair across the floor. He must have been more tired than he had imagined, to have been so careless.

Albus continued, blithely ignoring the fact that he was being ignored in turn. “There are not many people who can so rapidly unhinge both you and Minerva, a fact which seems particularly noteworthy, considering your very different temperaments.”

Severus brushed past the Headmaster, his half-filled dustpan in hand. Released from their preserving fluid, the bits of mane were already starting to dry out, rendering them useless for potions work, if not immune to the negative reaction to cleaning spells, which was the reason he found himself performing this task the Muggle way. Thankfully, he would not be needing any kelpie hair in any great quantity until the spring term. He had some in reserve in his personal stores, but properly collected and preserved hair was difficult to procure on short order. He would need to send out an order as soon as possible to replace the ruined batch.

“She is in the infirmary now. Poppy wanted to keep her for observation,” Albus commented conversationally, leaning close to look at a jar of wormwood worms. “And speaking of Poppy, she stopped by your rooms earlier to check on your eyes, but you were not there, obviously.”

The bits of glass and hair found their way into the lab’s disposal system, a bin that immolated anything placed within it upon contact. Many a failed student-made potion of dubious nature had ended up in this same bin. Severus used his wand to make sure that the dustpan was entirely emptied before returning it to its hanging hook on the wall. It wouldn’t do to have a reaction occur in an unclean pan the next time it was used.

“Considering the circumstances, I understand Minerva’s reaction, but yours is a bit more of a mystery. I was wondering if you would enlighten me?” Albus asked gently.

Severus had no interest in being coddled, and he certainly did not wish to discuss this topic. However, long experience told him that he would have to provide some kind of answer if he wanted Albus to go away. “I was simply taken by surprise by the nature and volume of her magic. Reconstructing the wards was extremely fatiguing.” His voice was cold and tightly controlled, his face a stony mask.
Albus just picked up the jar of worms and turned it around and around in his hands. “Is that all? Our newest guest has no other features that could have disturbed you?”

Red hair. Green eyes. Dark memories and power. Unbelievable power.

“No,” Severus replied frostily.

Albus met his eyes and held them, but this was Severus’ turf, his rules. His mind was carefully shielded again, and not even the Headmaster could pierce those defenses. In the end, it was Albus who broke eye contact with a weary sigh. “Do be careful, Severus,” he finally said, returning the worms to their place on the shelf, label facing out and carefully centered, just like the Potions master liked it. “My door is as open to my faculty as it is to my students, but in the meantime, I would like to see a draft of your report on Miss Rosenberg before you send it. A note on the incident with the wards might not be out of place either,” and with that, Albus nodded briefly before exiting the room as silently as he had entered it.

Severus did not move for many minutes, mulling over the Headmaster’s words, but soon the last of Poppy’s potions called his attention back to the task at hand. He had neither the time nor the patience to deal in Albus’ abstractions and riddles.

Be careful? It had been a stupid, sentimental warning. Severus was always careful.
Don't look like a tourist, don't look like a tourist, don't look like a tourist… Do not look like a tourist!

The mantra wasn’t helping.

Willow was following behind Minerva, gawking at every talking painting, moving staircase, or inquisitive ghost that crossed their path.

Hogwarts was shaping up to be a serious trip. Willow wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but it certainly wasn't this. There were so many enchantments, layered one on top of the next, creating intricate illusions, powerful wards, and the occasional unexpected side effect. The odd trick steps on the staircases were even impressive, in a funky, kind of irritating way.

It wasn't that any one spell was beyond her abilities, but there was so much here that she had never even dreamed of trying. Most were too incredibly bizarre, too amusingly frivolous, or too wholly unexpected; she never would have anticipated the sheer volume of magic here, or the varied application of it.

However, beneath her awe, there was a thread of discomfort that grew as the minutes ticked by. Willow's magic was all about working with nature, and while it could be used to create wildly unnatural effects, any transgressions of natural laws had to be undertaken with the utmost care and consideration. She had learned that lesson the hard way.

The hardest.

The thought put a pall over the end of her trek from the infirmary to her new quarters. She had once told Giles that she just wanted to be 'Willow' again after her walk on the dark side. To a large extent she was, but some scars never really faded, and some old wounds tended to act up when the winds blew the right way, even if they were of a metaphysical sort and not tied directly to bone, skin, and sinew.

"Professor Rosenberg?" Minerva's voice cut through Willow's melancholy.

The redhead jerked to a stop, only then realizing that they had apparently reached their destination. Minerva was standing next to a largish painting of a gorgon whose serpentine hair was writhing and hissing in a snaky halo around her head. Willow couldn't decide whose stare was more disconcerting: Minerva's slightly exasperated, expectant regard, or the painting's haughty, crimson glare.

"Sorry, what?" Willow asked with a little apologetic smile.

Minerva sighed and Willow got the distinct impression that the other professor had been talking for some time while she had been busy spacing out. "This is Euryale," Minerva said with an introductory hand gesture towards the painting. "Once you have arranged a password with her, she will make sure that no unauthorized people enter your quarters. Your belongings are inside. Do you remember how to get back to the Great Hall?" she asked curtly. When Willow nodded, Minerva continued briskly, "Good, well… yes, good. Dinner will be served in an hour. I'm sure you will be hungry after your, ah, incapacitation."

Incapacitation. That was one way of putting it. Dawn had once called them her cracked-out conjuration comas when she thought Willow wasn't listening. This one had lasted a little longer
than usual, pushing twenty-four hours, but it had also been a long time since she had been so completely blindsided by that kind of power. Perhaps the duration of her 'incapacitation' had not been all that surprising.

Minerva continued, oblivious to the younger witch's ironic line of thought, "If you will excuse me, then I really should be on my way." She nodded politely and then bustled off in the direction from which they had come.

Willow found herself in a dark hallway that had the kind of wet almost-smell that she associated with being underground. She was feeling overwhelmed and tired, in spite of her inadvertent nap, and very much alone. Well, maybe not technically alone. "So, um, Euryale?" she said tentatively, feeling more than a little awkward talking to a painting. "I'm sure you get this all the time, but are you, you know, the Euryale?"

Red, slitted eyes blinked slowly, inner membranes sliding transversely under scaly outer lids. "Yes," the gorgon hissed, bronze scaled hands planted firmly on her 'hips.' Could legless humanoids really have hips? Whatever, her hands were on some kind of bony expansion that seemed to occur in the lower half of her trunk region. "What is your password?" All of the 's' sounds were drawn out lazily, something like a drawl for the forked tongue set.

"Uh," Willow searched her mind for something familiar enough to remember, but funky enough to not be easily guessed. "How about 'Boca del Inferno'?"

The double lidded eyes blinked again, this time in surprise. "The mouth of hell?" the gorgon asked.

"Yeah, I, uh, used to live there. You speak Spanish?" Willow asked, equally surprised.

The gorgon's face fell into lazy lines again, but each and every snake head in her unruly mane was looking Willow's way with an air of curiosity and surprise. "I used to hang on the east wall of the library," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Oh." Willow paused for a long moment, not knowing how to respond to that. "Why did you move?"

The reptilian face altered alarmingly, bronze scales folding into a definite scowl. "There was an incident with a basilisk a few years ago. I will spare you the details, but suffice to say that moving me into a dungeon was apparently easier than dealing with the bigoted assumptions of various hysterical students and their parents."

"I… oh. I'm sorry?" This conversation was seriously getting off the beaten path, and Willow was too busy focusing on the word 'dungeon,' which when applied to her new quarters wasn't all that reassuring, to come up with a better response. Euryale only shrugged, her hair writhing once again. "So, um, Boca del Inferno?" Willow finally said weakly. The gorgon gestured with a bronze hand, and her canvas swung inwards smoothly, revealing a well-concealed doorway. Willow stepped through the portal, calling back a quick, "Thank you!" when she realized that the door was closing behind her.

She walked cautiously down the arched stone hallway until it opened into a large round room that certainly didn't look like any dungeon Willow had ever seen. It was too clean and brightly lit for one. It also kind of looked like Tim Burton had decorated it while trying to channel Walt Disney. Eccentric didn't even begin to cover it. There was a definite water theme going on with the ornate furniture and various pieces of art, and it didn't take long for her to figure out why. The ceiling was dominated by a huge, round window providing a view of what appeared to either be one of the most elaborate illusions Willow had ever seen, or the real, live bottom of a lake. Once again,
Willow's mouth dropped open in unabashed awe.

"Toto, I think we left Kansas about three dimensions back," she whispered to herself, turning around slowly under the unusual skylight.

Sunlight filtered through the water overhead, casting rippling patterns of light and shadow across the floor. There were fish swimming lazily overhead, and above them, Willow could just make out the feathered underbellies and churning webbed feet of a few ducks. There was a cluster of brightly colored snails collected to one side of the window, and some kind of freshwater kelp was drifting over them. She thought she saw a few crayfish as well, until she realized that the tiny arthropods had two sets of pinchers and a scorpion-like tail. Come to think of it, some of the fish looked pretty odd too, and did that one have another set of eyes growing on its belly?

She could, and probably would, have spent the next few hours gawking at the ceiling had she not bumped into an ornate end table and been forced to hurriedly rescue a Tiffany lamp, if Tiffany had done a bunch of LSD and started seeing fanged and flying sea turtles, from smashing on the stone floor. After that she didn't stop looking at the glass window overhead, but she did try to split her time between ogling at it and exploring the rooms.

There was a study, round again and nicely appointed with tons of empty shelves for books and whatever other teaching stuff she accumulated over the course of the school year. There was also a bedroom, of course, with closets and drawers cleverly hidden in the curving walls and a huge bed, flanked by simple wooden end tables. Another skylight was in this room, but it was made of stained glass. It portrayed a few koi swimming in a pond, quite literally, since the glass and lead had been enchanted to allow the images to move around the window, darting behind plants or watching her with their fishy glass eyes.

It was here that she found her luggage, safe, sound, and apparently un-searched, since the cantrips she had placed on the zippers were undisturbed. Seeing as how the hands on the funky un-clock in her living room were sneaking towards the word 'dinner,' she decided to be a little more proactive about exploring the bathroom. She was still in the clothes she had arrived in, and although the school's nurse, Poppy, had given her the equivalent of a magical cat bath while she was passed out on an infirmary cot, she still felt kind of funky. Willow was determined to do everything in her power to make a good first, well maybe second, impression, and that included fresh clothes and good hygiene.

New outfit and toiletries bag in hand, she made her way to the bathroom. It was as impressive (and round) as the other rooms, with a large sink and vanity across from the door and a huge freestanding bathtub sitting in the middle of the room, supported by metalwork designed to look like coral formations. For once, it wasn't the decidedly decadent, if odd, décor that grabbed her attention. It was the array of spouts lining the far side of the tub. There were ten, all identical in appearance and all sporting various knobs, toggles, and catches, but no labels.

"Okay, this might be a little more exciting than I was expecting," Willow muttered with faint amusement, although even she wasn't certain if she was referring to her impending bath or the entirety of the situation in which she found herself.

Willow did manage to find the Great Hall. Eventually. Dumbledore had found her wandering around some winding, seemingly endless corridor, trying to follow the directions a rather alarming ghost named Peeves had given her once she had finally admitted to herself that she was lost and had gone seeking help.
Having been rescued from the circular path she had been taking, Willow was advised that following any instructions provided by Peeves should be undertaken only under extreme duress, or in the event that she had many days' spare time to waste as well as an overdeveloped sense of masochistic humor. Navigating their way to the Great Hall had been basically uneventful after that, but once they arrived and the headmaster introduced her to the rest of the staff, Willow rapidly determined that Peeves wasn't the school's only owner of a conniving sense of whimsy.

Dumbledore's concept of the ideal seating arrangement for dinner defined 'trial by fire'.

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Willow knew that as a representative from the Council of Watchers, she needed to keep an open mind about the situation here at Hogwarts until she had all of the facts. She was here as a Watcher; she needed to be calm, collected, and professional.

And Goddess, if the woman sitting next to her wasn't making all of that very, very hard.

"Cornelius has asked me to help you in any way I can while you are here." Dolores Umbridge's tone, in its cloyingly sweet way, made it very clear that she thought that Willow would need a great deal of help during her stay at the school. "I know that your organization, in your own Mugglish way, deals with half-breeds and the like on a regular basis, but this must be horribly confusing."

Truth be told, Willow was discovering that being treated like a particularly slow, semi-civilized troll seemed to help her maintain an amazing amount of focus on the important things in life. Like not strangling the Ministry's agent to death with her bare hands or transmuting the woman's pumpkin juice into sulfuric acid. In fact, Willow was so focused on Professor Umbridge that she hadn't even looked at the amazing illusion that covered the Hall's ceiling once since Dumbledore had introduced the people sitting around the staff table and shown her to her new seat, right between the darkly robed and darkly scowling wizard from the day before and this beastly woman.

Willow twisted her face into what she hoped was a polite smile. Either she was successful, or the frog-faced witch was simply too clueless to figure out that Willow was in serious danger of chipping a tooth under the force of her clenched jaw.

"Yes, this must all be positively terrifying for a wandless witch such as yourself," Professor Umbridge said with one of her grating, girlish giggles, as if the idea of Willow quaking in fear was the funniest thing in the world.

The words were out of Willow's mouth before she could stop them. "You know, come to think of it, I am pretty horrified right now."

An inelegant snort drew Willow's attention to the man on her right. Dumbledore had finally put a full name, rank, and serial number (well not exactly) to that face: Professor Severus Snape, Potions master and her soon-to-be co-teacher in Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts. She glanced at him, vaguely hoping that he might rescue her from this conversational torture, but he appeared for all intents and purposes to be single-mindedly cutting his serving of roast beef into precise, bite-sized pieces.

Professor Umbridge's spoke again, making it more than plain that Willow's dry sarcasm had been totally lost on the woman. "Well of course you are, but don't worry, I will make sure to keep a close watch over you until we can send you back where you belong."

Back where she belonged. Amazing. Willow had never realized that it was in fact possible to make a simper both condescending and degrading.
And thanks for the warning, frog-face.

If Dolores Umbridge thought that it was going to be easy to 'keep a close watch' on Willow Rosenberg, she had another thing coming.

The redhead smiled again in a pinched mimicry of gratitude before turning away to hide the fact that she was trying not to laugh… or gag… or perhaps both.

She poked at the food on her own plate with her fork. It did look pretty appetizing, even though her stomach was still roiling. What was it that Dumbledore had said? Oh yeah, 'Tuck in.' Willow knew that as a California girl, especially one who had developed most of her conversation skills alongside Buffy and Xander, she really wasn't in the best of positions to cast stones, but some of these British-isms took some getting used to.

She stole a few glances down the table while she pushed her food around her plate and was uncomfortable, if unsurprised, to find that basically every other member of the staff was doing the same thing. Most of the looks were curious, some were even a little hostile. The Divination professor, what was her name, Treelawny, Trueloany, whatever, was just unabashedly staring at her through her thick glasses. Hagrid kept giving her what he seemed to think passed for discrete, encouraging looks while Dumbledore was just casting benevolent-looking smiles indiscriminately around the table.

Come to think of it, the only person who wasn't inspecting her, unless it was extremely covertly, was Professor Snape.

Willow distracted herself with the food, which was really good once she got past the fact it was being served on gold plates. Sometime between her second helping of vegetables and the dessert's abrupt appearance, Professor Umbridge interrupted their dinner with an attention grabbing faux-cough before excusing herself from the table rather wordily.

Willow half expected the conversation at the table to pick up with the pink-clad she-demon's disappearance, but it didn't take her long to realize that there was still an interloper at the table: Willow herself. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to her how her official cover story might look to the rest of the staff, which in retrospect, was kind of silly. The Scoobies hadn't responded well to the Council siccing watchdogs on them either. Somehow, Willow had become the Wesley Wyndham-Pryce of Hogwarts.

This was turning into a weird inverted revisiting of her high school days in too many ways. In addition to being a temporary teacher and fashion reject, it was looking like she was going to get to add social leper to her resume once again. Joy. If the pattern held, there'd be a pack of Cordettes on the faculty and Dumbledore would get eaten by the end of the year.

Well, there was at least one thing she could do something about. She was no Wesley and Giles was no Travers. Nothing in Dumbledore's brief comments or instructions on their way to dinner had lead Willow to believe that she needed to actively alienate the rest of the faculty.

Especially not the ones who already knew why she was really here.

Professor Snape, for example, who was currently applying his eerily precise cutlery skills to the slice of pie in front of him. All his attention seemed riveted to the actions of his fork and knife, and as far as she could tell, he had made no attempt at conversation with anyone throughout the entirety of the meal. Secure in the fact that he seemed to not be paying her the slightest attention, Willow took the opportunity to add to her initial, albeit somewhat disjointed, impression of him.
He was sitting bolt upright, which was probably all he could do considering the acres of black fabric he was wearing once again. His high, buttoned collar alone looked like it could single-handedly strangle a person into perfect posture. His face was all angles, from his hooked nose to the sharp line of his jaw. His pale face was blank in repose, but there were lines around his eyes and mouth that she very much doubted were caused by smiles.

He looked forbidding. That was as good a word for him as any, sitting there in concentrated silence, dressed in some kind of wizardy, heretical version of Puritanical preacher chic. His aura was more of the same, full of shadows, layered and secretive.

However, it was basically impossible to tap into someone else's magic without getting a pretty good 'taste' of them, and the incident the day before had been no exception. There was definitely something else going on beneath the professor's intimidating exterior. So what if he wouldn't turn any heads in the slayers' barracks. Judging a book by its cover was what had landed Kennedy in a dryad's bed.

She was going to be spending a lot of time in the coming months in this man's hip pocket, she couldn't help but be curious about him. He was a mystery wrapped in an enigma. The stray thought made her smile. She wondered what he would think of being compared to Russia.

Maybe it was time to start figuring him out.

Willow determinedly set down her fork, put on her most winning smile, and turned to face her silent neighbor. "So, when's a good time to talk about teaching plans and text books and stuff?"

Professor Snape froze, fork laden with pie pausing half way to his mouth. The woman beyond him, the Herbology professor from what Willow remembered, leaned forward and looked at the redhead, patched and pointed hat doing little to conceal her raised eyebrows. Snape was also looking at her as if she had grown a third eye.

Willow looked back and forth between the two of them, wondering what on Earth she had done now. Was there some kind of funky wizard etiquette ritual she had bungled? Should she have asked about the oh-so-visible weather, painted in vivid blues and fluffy whites across the ensorcelled ceiling? What?

She just hoped this wasn't weirdness over last night, and boy could that be taken out of context, but if she was honest with herself, that situation could be probable cause for more than a little wigging...

And now she was babbling internally, which was at least better than externally. And why in the name of the Goddess were they both still staring at her like that?

"I will be in my office after dinner," Professor Snape said after an awkwardly long pause.

Now the Herbology professor was looking at him as if he had sprouted horns. Sprouted. Sprout. That was her name: Professor Sprout. Willow was going to remember all of their names if it killed her. Come to think of it, many of them did lend themselves well to word games, even though there didn't seem to be anything sinister about Professor Sinistra.

Professor Snape was starting to develop the kind of scowl that looked fit to permanently crease his face, and Willow finally realized that she too had been dragging her response out for an uncomfortable amount of time. She gave herself a little shake and firmly stopped trying to conjure up more helpful mnemonic devices. "Tonight sounds good."
To that, the professor nodded abruptly and finally put the hovering bite of pie in his mouth. Willow waited expectantly for some kind of response, figuring that as stilted as it had been thus far, they were still sitting in the middle of a conversation.

Professor Snape seemed to have other plans though. That bite of pie was followed by another in echoing silence. And another, and then, having finished his dessert, the man wiped his hands carefully on his napkin, dropped it next to his plate, and rose from his seat.

Willow was left at the table, trying not to gawk in surprise as Professor Snape swept out of the Great Hall without so much as a nod in her direction. It didn't help matters that the Herbology professor was now nodding to herself, as if all was right again in her world.

Well that went well. Willow pushed the last bit of pie around her plate with her fork, wondering what she was supposed to do now. Then, if possible, an even worse thought occurred to her.

She had no idea where Professor Snape's office was.
The wandless witch's amusing penchant for sarcasm in the face of Umbridge's asinine behavior is somewhat countered by her deplorable inability to make an appointment in a reasonable window of time.

That was not what Severus was writing on the heavy parchment in front of him, much as he wanted to. No, the actual contents of this letter were far more important, and far less truthful, than that stray sardonic thought. He was inking out a portrait of an arrogant upstart, a wandless mudblood. Someone who was both a non-entity, far beneath the Dark Lord's contempt, and a potential rallying point for other likeminded undesirables.

A threat, but not personally.

An empty symbol of everything the Death Eaters hated.

And feared.

In short, a very good political target, but also a soft one.

The final draft Severus would pen after he actually met with the watcher, so that the report would be absolutely believable. Not that he was particularly worried. If she demonstrated even a modicum of competence, the students whose families were already predisposed to think ill of a wandless witch would tell their parents every negative thing he had already set to paper, and probably more. They would sell his report for him through every little method that trickled information from the halls of Hogwarts to the Dark Lord's ear. All he needed was to add the kind of personal touches that would evoke not only believability, but familiarity.

Assuming she ever actually made an appearance, which was becoming more and more doubtful as the minutes ticked by.

He had basically given up on their meeting when a quiet series of taps sounded on his office door. Severus could have almost believed that he had imagined it when a second trio of knocks, louder, seemingly more assured than the first, removed any doubt.

"Enter," he called, sweeping the draft of the report into one of the top drawers of his desk, a compartment that veritably hummed with warding spells.

The door cracked open and Professor Rosenberg's elfin face appeared in the void. The anxious expression on her face transformed into one of cautious relief. "Oh, thank the Goddess," she said, swinging the door fully open with her free hand. It rapidly became apparent that her other hand was occupied holding an impressive stack of books. "I thought I'd never find you. I am so sorry I took so long, but Minerva gave me directions, but I must have misheard of something, and there was this staircase, and I figured that if I waited long enough, it'd move back where I needed to go, but it wouldn't, and hey, at least I found the library for future reference, but how do you ever find your way around this place?"

Does she breathe? Despite the amused thought, he grudgingly admitted that she had a point.

Hogwarts was not the easiest structure to navigate, even if he would never admit as much to the various first years who were invariably late for their first, and often second and third, classes for that very reason. "Long experience," he replied sardonically, but he scowled to himself, even as he gestured towards one of the chairs facing his desk. She was inexcusably late, had wasted over an
hour of his precious time, and yet he wasn't apoplectic.

Strange, but there was something about her that was very disarming. She was a splash of color in his dark retreat. If anything, that set him more on his guard.

Professor Rosenberg took one of the seats across from him, settled most of the stack of books on the edge of his desk. The spines were angled away from him, so he could not read the titles, but all looked old and worn. One even had a reddish brown stain, which looked suspiciously like blood, marring the margins of the yellowed pages. Severus could almost hear Madam Pince's teeth grind when he looked at the rippled pages, warped from that long-dried dampness.

The one book that Professor Rosenberg had not surrendered, the one that was now sitting on her lap, was another matter. Black bound, starkly unlabelled, its pages were pure white and obviously new, but the book itself brushed the edges of his senses with a heavy enchantment.

His focus must have drawn her attention, because the young woman's hands came to rest on top of the book, slender fingers curling, almost possessively, around the edges.

He leaned back in his chair then, elbows resting on his armrests, fingers steepled in front of him. He made no attempt to conceal the predatory interest in his eyes, but when he shifted his gaze to Professor Rosenberg's face, he was surprised to find her smiling at him, cat-like, knowing.

Interesting.

Not one to let slip the advantage for long, Severus decided to see how the Watcher reacted to other stimuli. "Since you seem to have come armed with suggestions, might I propose that you start with your idea of what this class should be," Severus said in his flattest, most neutral tone of voice.

The transformation that overtook the young woman's face was striking. The smug gleam left her eyes, replaced by a timid embarrassment. "Well," she started slowly. "Most of the teaching I've done with the Watchers' Academy has been seminar type stuff. You know, an 'assign a topic and then let them do their own research for the discussion' kind of setup. But I've also helped out on the Slayers' Academy side of things, which tends to be more field-based, which is, you know, very practical for slayers, but I don't think many parents would sign off on a series of field trips to graveyards and demon bars and stuff."

He couldn't help it; Severus felt his eyebrows creeping upwards in surprise and more than a little horror. In his mind's eye, he was picturing himself explaining to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy why he had taken their son to a demon bar. The thought was less than pleasing.

"Not that I'm suggesting that," Professor Rosenberg amended abruptly. "I'm all about having zero mortalities in my classes. What I'm trying to say is that I taught a structured computer class once back in high school, but pretty much all of my experience since then has been more… uh… hands on. Or off. You know, depending. And since this is more of a school-y kind of school than either of our Academies, I'm going to need to get more accustomed to the middle. I mean, you know what I mean."

Not in the slightest.

"I do have some ideas though." The pall of timidity had rapidly faded under the new professor's obvious excitement. "But I guess I need to ask you something first." Well, perhaps not completely. There was the caution in her eyes again, though maybe not the same flavor that had colored her initial reaction. This time instead of embarrassed, she looked more worried, brows furrowed in concern. For someone with so guarded a mind, her face was so expressive as to be an open book.
Severus nodded for her to go on, interested to see where the next winding turn of this monologue might lead. As a general rule, people simply did not talk to him in this manner. Guarded and strictly professionally, yes. Tempered with disdain or fear, definitely. But never this open, artless flood of thoughts and emotions. It was odd, and amusing, but mostly odd. He doubted that he could even begin to guess what was going to come out of her mouth next.

She did not disappoint. "Well, I don't really know what the usual Defense Against the Dark Arts class entails, but I guess I'm asking you, the Order of the Phoenix member, not you, the Potions professor, because it seems to me like you have a kind of specific dark arts problem going on right now," she said almost apologetically, "What with this Voldemort guy and all."

He was not sure that the other members of the Order, Albus perhaps excluded, would approve of her taste in looking to him for any variety of aid in their name. However, despite that brief flash of amusement, Severus could not help but instinctively recoil from so blasé a use of the Dark Lord's name.

Professor Rosenberg continued, apparently blithely unaware of her not-so-minor faux pas, "But on the other hand, there are always vampires, and demons, and hell gods, and apocalypse cults, and all kind of other nasty things that are always gonna be here, no matter what happens with this, uh, war. And getting hexed to death gets you just as dead as a vampire bite, so I guess I was wanting to know whether you think we should design classes that focus on fighting other witches and wizards for the more immediate problem, so the students will all make it to graduation, or go for something more general, so ten years from now, they'll remember that trying to kill the B'jiklik demon that crashes their New Years dinner with a fireball will only make it stronger. And flame-y. And mad. And that's a whole 'nother story, so how about I shut up now so you can maybe get a word in edgewise." Her apologetic smile was at least half-grimace.

Severus blinked. Then blinked again, weeding through the barrage of disjointed information that had just been tossed his way. Following the threads of this conversation was something akin to falling into the floo network with badly garbled directions. The trip was in no way linear and gave you very little clue as to where it would eventually deposit you. It would have been irritating if it hadn't been so intriguing. "Was that a question?" he finally asked, droll sarcasm buying him a little more time to mull over his answer.

"I'm much better at this when there's an outline involved," Professor Rosenberg replied with another apologetic smile. "Or better yet, PowerPoint, but this place kind of puts the kibosh on computer presentations, so I guess I'll have to figure something else out for the actual classes."

All evidence to the contrary aside, he suspected that she was not actually speaking in tongues, but that did not mean that Severus understood half of what she was saying. Not that he was about to leave himself open to ridicule by asking what PowerPoint was, much less the aforementioned B'jiklik demon.

He pointedly decided to steer the conversation back onto familiar ground by addressing her previous topic of conversation. "In theory, Defense Against the Dark Arts should encompass the entire spectrum of magical threats. However, due to the obvious time constraints, previous professors have chosen to limit their focus in various ways." The dark downturn of his voice left little doubt as to what he thought of the quality of that instruction.

"Do I even want to know?" Professor Rosenberg asked in a half joking, half despairing tone of voice.

He only smiled in response, if his pinched, sour expression, which had nothing to do with pleasure and everything to do with derision, could really be described as such.
"Right, so assume that we're starting from zero. And I think I can guess what Frog-Face's class is going to be like." She started to reach for the stack of books she had deposited on his desk before freezing in place, a flush creeping over her face. "Did I really just say that out loud? I… I'm sorry. That was totally unprofessional and… and bad. Very bad. And could we just pretend that never happened?"

The corners of Severus' mouth were trying to twitch upwards, which when he realized it, was enough to make him scowl instead. However, Professor Rosenberg's unfortunate slip of the tongue was apt, and the sentiment behind it illuminating. Dolores Umbridge's condescending abuse had made for diverting dinner entertainment, it didn't take long association with the woman for him to know that she had been in rare form this evening, but he supposed that her behavior must have been less entertaining for its target.

He studied the panicked expression on Professor Rosenberg's face for a moment, she really was shockingly expressive, before realizing that he was still scowling fiercely. He snorted in vague amusement before waving her concerns away with a dismissive hand. "I am sure that Professor Umbridge will be called much worse by the end of the term, and not only by her students."

The expression on the young woman's face melted into relief, then amusement of her own. "That's probably true," she said with another of her quicksilver smiles. "So back to the class stuff," she went ahead and picked up the topmost book in her stack and looked at the cover. "I had thought that Berguerman's *Beastiary* might work, but if the students are that bad off, maybe I should have grabbed a couple volumes of Marisol's *Encyclopedium Daemonium* or even the basic *Slayer's Handbooks*."

Severus' dormant temper chose that moment to flare. The *Beastiary* was actually a very good suggestion, but the *Encyclopedium*? That was beyond ridiculous. "Oh yes, that sounds like an excellent idea," he snapped in irritation.

Green eyes flashed in defensive anger. "Excuse me?" Professor Rosenberg fired back at him, another conversational technique that was rarely lobbed his way, and rightfully so. It only served to stir his anger to even greater heights.

"Well, other than the fact that it was written in Latin, everyone knows that the last set of *The Encyclopedium Daemonium* was destroyed in the 1600s," Severus' voice dripped with sarcasm. "The Headmaster keeps the first three pages from its section on phoenixes in a display case in his office. They are considered to be priceless relics. I can just see some drooling fifth year pawing at whatever fragments of the books we can scrape together on such short notice."

"Everyone knows that, huh?" Professor Rosenberg asked dangerously. When Severus did not deign to answer such a stupid question, she again managed to do something that took him completely by surprise. The woman dropped the first tome back on the stack and lifted the black book in her lap to her lips. Before he could determine whether this was some kind of threat, she spoke across the top of the binding, "*Annotated Encyclopedium Daemonium*, original Latin and English translation, articles related to phoenixes, listed by relevance." Then, without even looking at the random page she opened the book to, she placed it, more than a little forcefully, on the desk in front of him. "Does that look familiar?"

Severus glared at her, but when he dropped his eyes to see whatever it was she had thrown in front of him, he could not help but suck in a sharp breath in surprise. Words and images were appearing on the pages of the book, as if bleeding to the surface from somewhere below. Familiar words and the bright colors of the illuminated borders that had probably prompted Albus to procure the pages in question in the first place. Sure enough, this was the same article on phoenixes, down to the last
This Template is keyed to Willow Rosenberg.

To access data with me, she must simply speak the name of a document or describe its contents across the top of my binding when I am closed.

Upon opening, I will contain the desired texts and/or images.

Only Miss Rosenberg is able to use me.

If anyone else wishes to access my files, the only way to do so is to ask Miss Rosenberg to perform the desired search.

I recommend asking nicely. If all else fails, she likes Pez, mojitos, and pedicures.
his right arm for if it could access half of what she claimed, and she threw it around with all the regard he might show week old laundry.

The thrice damned additions to the report he was to write on her were basically penning themselves.

That dumped an ice cold dose of logic back into Severus' train of thought. He had been looking for something to further honey the pot of his report, but did he dare even mention this Template? He doubted that the Council would have let it out of their sight if they were not convinced that it was completely tamper-proof, but still, should he trust in their judgment? The damage that the Dark Lord could, and would, do with all the secrets of these two Muggle organizations at his fingertips was unconscionable.

Should he impress upon Professor Rosenberg the danger inherent in the book? At this point, could he? Especially now, when her green eyes were glittering as hard and sharp as shards of emeralds. And he had basically called her an idiot at best or a liar at worst, right before ordering her around like the most imbecilic of students.

Disaster.

But why had she revealed this book to him in the first place? This much was certain, she was not stupid. She had to know the danger, the temptation, of the book he was still holding in his nerveless fingers. He suddenly remembered the tiny smile on her face when he had first noticed the Template, the smile of a complacent viper.

Young and attractive Professor Rosenberg might be, but she would not be here if all there was to her was a pretty face and an effervescent personality. Severus gently laid the Template on the table, closed and out of reach when he leaned back in his chair.

He and Albus were conspiring to use this woman as bait to bring the Dark Lord in close. Close enough to kill.

But what were her plans for them?

Severus took a deep, steadying breath, looking at Professor Rosenberg in a new light. Their plan relied on the Dark Lord underestimating this woman, but what had he just been doing? It was ironic, at first glance he would have said that she would have been a shoe-in for Gryffindor had she been entering Hogwarts as a student instead of a professor. Her actions following her disastrous mishap with the school's wards had certainly fit that mold, but now? Now he wondered if she might not have ended up in his own house.

*Be careful, Severus.* And was that not just what Albus had warned him of? He would not forget again. She was not just the bait for the Dark Lord, she was the trap as well.

And a much more worthy opponent, and ally, than he had been giving her credit for.

He needed to rein this conversation back under control, but again, how? It did not take a great deal of self awareness to know that his apologies tended to come across as slightly less sincere than the snake oil vendors in Knockturn Alley.

Luckily, it was Professor Rosenberg who offered the olive branch. "Okay, this is just dumb. Yes, we really do have a copy of *The Encyclopedium Daemonium*, three actually, but there's no reason why you would know that. By the way, no, you can't have one, but I can make photocopies. Yes, it has just occurred to me that you probably have no idea what a photocopy is. So basically, what I
guess I'm trying to say is that you and I? We're going to be working together. A lot. Like a whole lot. So we're probably going to have to work on our communication skills. Bond over brewing techniques. Maybe do some trust falls." The tension had not left her face, but there was a gentle pleading in her voice that bespoke genuine sentiment. Either the young woman was the best actress he had ever seen, or she truly did want to make peace.

With him.

How novel.

"I an not particularly skilled at…" Merlin, it took physical effort to force the words out of his mouth, "Bonding."

"I hadn't noticed," Professor Rosenberg said drolly. "And for the record, maybe cut it with the yelling. I don't do submissive well. Usually." She was blushing again, and he had no idea why. Unless of course she was referring to… But no, that was patently insane. "So we're just going to have to compromise," she stammered, looking flustered, but just as quickly there was a smile on her face again. "So not so big with touchy feely stuff, huh? I guess that rules out extra credit?"

Well, she had asked for honest communication. He might try humoring her occasionally, somewhere under all of the subterfuge. Truth tended to stitch together the lies so very well. "That depends on what you mean by extra credit."

She blinked in surprise before her smile finally dissolved into a laugh. He scowled for a moment before realizing that the wry expression on her face was aimed at herself.

"This is going to be a long year, isn't it?" she asked rhetorically.

"Undoubtedly," he drawled with what, for him, indicated a reasonably good humor.

"She is dangerous, Albus."

"So are you, Severus," Dumbledore looked up at him over the rims of his spectacles. "And so, I suppose, am I. These are dangerous times, but the real question is, who is she most dangerous to?"

Damn his logic.

Albus turned his attention back to the final copy of the report on the young woman in question, reading through the lines under his breath. Seeing as how he had written the words himself, Severus felt no compunction to listen to them being recited and took the opportunity to pace the Headmaster's office and attempt to order his thoughts.

The truth was, Severus actually did agree with the Headmaster's point. He had no doubt that Professor Rosenberg, and her Council, would help fight the Dark Lord. The views she expressed in their meeting, specifically her concern for the students' wellbeing, had all but convinced him of that fact. Additionally, supporting the Order was in the Council's own best interests. It fit their worldview, their centuries old mission. Part of him wished that they had sent ten more watchers, the same as Professor Rosenberg, to throw against the Death Eaters.

So why then did he shy from the thought of her coming face to face with the Dark Lord?

There were still things about her that worried him deeply. For one, he remained convinced that she was up to something with her mysterious Template, and that hinted at agendas he could not begin
to predict. Secondly, the nature of her magic was still an unknown quantity. He doubted that her memorable entrance onto the school grounds was the last they would experience of that problem.

She had apologized profusely for the incident, somewhere in between listing books she recommended on countering black magic and asking if the classrooms had anything resembling some kind of Muggle device called an overhead projector, and had seemed particularly concerned about the role he had played in the incident. He had brushed off that incident as well, if only to defuse the panic attack brought on by his comment that a simple cleansing charm should be able to remove the blood from Albus' furniture.

Still, Professor Rosenberg's possible plans and issues with magical compatibility were variables that, while currently unknown, he was aware needed study. There was something else that was adding to his reservations surrounding the young watcher turned professor, but it was difficult to define. Something about her was simply unsettling, and even though he tended to disregard intuition in the absence of quantifiable evidence, the feeling was proving difficult to shake.

Perhaps it was simply the aftereffects of their meeting. She had not been what he had expected. Not in the slightest, and that made her the weak link in the chain of Albus' plot.

He had known that she was young, and he had already assumed that a watcher would be reasonably intelligent with at least some practical experience, but he would have expected that more of the gravity and secrecy inherent in such a position would have permeated her personality.

Instead, she was enthusiastic, open with her startling breadth of knowledge, and more than willing to share, once the truce had been called over their minor misunderstanding. In fact, the only thing she had been reticent about discussing was the Template itself. By the end of their meeting, he had learned that she hated grading reports because poor sentence structure 'bugged her,' could arrange for at least seven non-threatening demons of various species to visit the class, and had absolutely no idea that he had once been a Death Eater.

That probably explained at least part of her oddly familiar demeanor. He was sure that she would fall into more suitable behavior patterns once someone took the time to outline the public version of his past. In the meantime, he would soak in every piece of information that she would give him until she could be catalogued and explained.

"My, this almost makes me want to sack her myself," Dumbledore chuckled, breaking the Potion master's line of thought. "'Arrogant faith in the superiority of her meager magical talents?' he quoted in amusement. "Yes, I think this report alone should more than do the trick, but I must ask you, of all the details you did include, why leave out this Template that you mentioned earlier?"

Severus folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes. He was accustomed to receiving suggestions about particular phrases or pieces of information, but Albus was questioning his judgment, and that was another matter altogether. "If the book is all she says it is, I am wary of drawing undue attention to both it and the spells that created it. Both could be extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. If it is a fraud, then I worry that might come to light and undermine my credibility with the Dark Lord. I can always include mention of it in future reports, if he does not take our initial bait."

"Of course, you are right. Forgive an old man's curiosity, but I would like to see this incredible book for myself at some point, if only to see how the article on phoenixes ends." Severus was not sure who Albus thought he was kidding. Dumbledore and every other witch or wizard with eyes and a brain would want a look at that book.

And what if that was the point? The thought struck Severus like a slap to the face. What if that was
what the Council wanted? Weak they might be in terms of magical power, but there were other kinds of power. Possession of information, for example, and the influence that monopoly could bring. Something like this book screamed 'Look at this. Look at what we can offer.'

And the offer was seductive. Books long thought lost. Information gathered by centuries of researchers who had never previously opened their results to the wizarding word. New spells, new artifacts, new potions, new dimensions.

The wizarding world had existed in isolation for so long, but if it got a taste of what this book, this Template, was offering, how long would that last?

Severus found himself sitting down abruptly, head spinning with the implications. After a long moment, he looked up to find Albus watching him with deceptively passive eyes.

"You knew this would happen when you first went to the Council of Watchers to ask for aid," Severus said slowly, voice thick with disbelief, knowing that Albus was more than aware of the progression of his thoughts.

"I suspected," Dumbledore said evenly, hands folded calmly in front of him. When Severus opened his mouth to voice a complaint, a demand for an explanation, he did not know what, the Headmaster stopped him with a raised hand. "We have lived too long apart from the rest of the world. Think about it, Severus. Is it easier to turn a blind eye when a total stranger comes to harm, or when it is your friend, your neighbor, your spouse?" There was regret in Albus' voice, as if he knew the effect his words were having on Severus.

The Potions master could feel the blood completely drain from his face. Dumbledore's words were striking unerringly into the sole gap in his carefully maintained armor. They both knew what had sparked his defection from the Death Eaters. Albus would not invoke Lily's name, would not be so overtly cruel, not here, not now, but then again, he did not need to be.

In his own way, Dumbledore did not relent though, even if his voice was wet with apology. "Remember that the Council covets its secrecy, in many ways more than we do, because they can and do live straddling the worlds of Muggles and of magic. I am not saying that we will survive the transition unchanged, only that I truly believe that the benefits will far outstrip the losses."

After a very long silence, Severus finally found the will to speak. "Is the report acceptable?" he asked, voice flat and dead.

Dumbledore looked at him for a long moment, probably weighing the abrupt change of topic, before picking up the sheaf of papers in question and handing them across the table. "It is impeccable, as always, Severus."

The former Death Eater retrieved the papers with a hand that he could not keep from shaking. He avoided Dumbledore's gaze, could not stomach seeing the pity he knew he would find there, and turned, stiff backed, and fled the office with all the haste the tattered shreds of his dignity would allow.
"An’ that down there’s the Quidditch pitch. Little more excitin’ when there’s a game on, but yeh’ll get ter see that soon enough." Hagrid gestured down towards a wide expanse of open grass in the distance. It was ringed by tall viewing stands and bracketed by two sets of hoops, set vertically, which had to be some kind of goal or target.

Perversely, they reminded Willow of an aerial version of ancient Mayan ball courts, except for being larger, a lot larger, and hopefully not involved in human sacrifice. She shook herself a little, both to dislodge the morbid thought and to attempt, once again, to stave off the effects of exhaustion.

It had been a long night. She had gotten back to her new apartment late, feeling like she had sparred with Professor Snape rather than just talked with him. The man was intense, even after they had called a truce on the subject of supposedly non-existent books. While she was always up for a good natured intellectual row, she had been dead tired by the time she dragged herself back to her new apartment.

Where she had been greeted by a huge frog watching her from her skylight with a whole boatload of his little froggy cronies.

And fine. Frog fear was quite possibly the most pathetic phobia out there. But it was her phobia, darn it, and no one said that it had to be rational. At least she hadn't completely lost it and blasted out the ceiling of her rooms. Even she might have had a little problem handling an entire lake unexpectedly dropping on her head.

She had eventually passed out on the bed, but not after locking the door and spending at least an hour or two glaring upwards at the stained glass, trying to convince herself that the indistinct shadows on the other side were not more gigantic frogs… waiting… watching.

The five cups of strong black tea she had drunk during the morning's much less formal breakfast had started to take the edge off, as had the first half of her tour with Hagrid. But now, Willow was just hoping that he wouldn't suggest that they walk down to the funky stadium-thing. She just didn't think she had it in her to make that trek.

"So that’s the grounds, 'less a'course yeh’ve got any questions," Hagrid said with a big grin. Not that any kind of grin he had could be small, but the man was as cheerful as he was large, and Willow felt her mood brightening, red eyes, headache, and all.

And hey, bonus! No trekking.

"One or two," she admitted wryly, but her voice sounded rougher and weaker than the light, joking tone she had intended. She was definitely crashing from her brief caffeine high, and hard.

Hagrid's expression crumbled a little at that. "Yer sure everythin's alright, Professor Rosenberg?" he asked, for at least the twentieth time. At least he'd stop specifically asking about her meeting with Professor Snape in a tone of voice that made it seem like he was worried that she might have eaten him or something. And okay, the man had been conspicuously absent from breakfast, which had seemed to draw everyone's attention except for the Headmaster. But why was Hagrid harping on it?

Willow sighed before forcing a smile onto her face. Hagrid was probably just as worried as she was
about making a good impression. And let's face it, Professor Snape would never make it as a Wal-Mart greeter. But hey, when he wasn't acting like a total dill weed, he actually had this whole sardonic sense of humor that was working for him. Plus, he was obviously intelligent. But duh, he was a professor at a prestigious school. That was kind of expected.

But on the other hand, he apparently also had a microscopically short fuse, which was pretty irritating, and was also seriously suspicious. But honestly, that was pretty fair at this point in the game. He also tended to scowl all of the time, when he was thinking, when she was, when they had hit more of their terminology issues.

When the sky was blue.

But he'd had these moments, between the probing questions and dry humor, when he would get this surprised, almost nostalgic expression on his face. It wasn't enough to entirely soften his rough edges, but it was something. Willow just wasn't sure what.

So okay. She had managed to trip up on their least genial team player right off the bat, but he wasn't that bad. In all fairness though, she guessed she knew why Hagrid was so worried.

Unless, of course, she was totally misreading the situation, and Hagrid really was half-convinced that she had done something terrible to the school's Potions master.

"I'm fine," Willow said once again, trying this time to sound a little more convincing. "I just didn't sleep very well last night," she finally added, hoping that the admission would set the issue to rest.

Instead of reassuring the man, Hagrid looked even more concerned. "Is it yer rooms? Had to fix them up pretty quick when we heard you was comin'. Was a classroom before, you know, back when Care fer Magical Creatures covered beasts and the like who live in the water too." He stopped for a second, eyes going impossibly large. "It weren't our squid, was it?" he asked, voice full of worry.

Willow stood there blinking for a second. She wasn't about to own up to having ranidaphobia. And besides, a squid? "Um, no," she finally said. "And while we're at it, huh?"

"Shoulda called him over when we were down by the lake," Hagrid mumbled under his breath, as if berating himself. Then, meeting her eyes again, he elaborated, "Sorry, shoulda mentioned. There's a giant squid, lives in the lake. Gentle though, good fer pickin' students out of the water an' the like, but real curious. Smart, you know? Likes to check out new things, yeah?"

Despite her exhaustion, Willow brightened with interest. "You guys have an Architeuthis? But I thought they were marine."

Now it was Hagrid's turn to stand there, silent in thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know 'bout all that, but he's always seemed ter do just fine here," he finally said slowly, eyeing her speculatively before shrugging off whatever his thoughts had been and continuing. "Well, seein' as how yer feelin' a little under the weather, why don't we head back up ter the school? Dumbledore's wantin' for us to go ter London tomorrow. Official Order business," he finished in a conspiratorial tone of voice.

Order business. Well, that definitely pinged her baby spy radar, and if they were already going to London…

"Can we actually head back to the classroom I'll be using?" Willow asked hopefully. Might as well put together her supplies list before their little field trip.
"A'course," Hagrid agreed amicably, heading back to the school with long strides slowed to a stroll to accommodate her smaller steps.

Willow trudged along at Hagrid’s side, feeling more than a little guilty. The grounds really were spectacular, and the school by itself was breathtaking. She got the impression that if she hadn't felt quite so much like roadkill, she'd have spent the tour trying to convince herself that she hadn't accidentally been dropped into a fairytale.

As it was, she was fairly happy to be able to keep placing one foot in front of the next.

Honestly, the walk back to the school wasn't so bad, especially when Hagrid started asking her about the demons she had encountered over the years. For Willow, that was light enough conversation to let her go on verbal autopilot. In no time at all, she found herself standing outside of her classroom door, hastily promising Hagrid that she'd be more than happy to keep telling him all about the denizens of her previous two Hellmouths before he reluctantly left her to comb over whatever these witches and wizards deemed to be adequate teaching materials.

Right after she found somewhere to sit down and rest for just a second.

Willow woke to the feeling of cold wood against her face and a dull throb starting to inch its way up her neck. Even better, there was a smear of stickiness across her cheek that made her grumble irritably. She sat up in her chair, groggily scrubbing at her face with her hands and wiping away the small amount of drool that had been pooling at the corner of her mouth.

Lovely. With her current streak of luck, someone had probably come into… She looked around, bleary-eyed and rumpled, trying to orient herself. Oh yeah, the office attached to her soon-to-be classroom. Her office, she supposed. But yeah, with her luck, someone had probably come in here and taken pictures of the new Professor Rosenberg snoring away with her mouth hanging open.

Willow stretched out her neck, rolling her head from one side to the other to relieve the crick that had been trying to form there, and trying to tell herself that she didn't care one way or the other if anyone had seen her. No, really. That was, not until her eyes landed on her satchel, sitting on the far edge of her desk next to a tray of food, which had definitely not been there before her inadvertent nap.

She was suddenly wide awake, grabbing the bag, dragging it in front of her, and pulling it open.

The Template was still there, safely nestled between her still-empty notebook and an armory of pencils and multicolored pens, held in orderly fashion by little loops of canvas. She dragged a finger along the spine of the book, feeling the magic there and breathing a sigh of relief. She knew she was being paranoid and felt a little chagrinned, but she was still wrapping her mind around the responsibility attached to Giles’ last-second gift.

The rest of the bundle of books he had given her was safe, back in her rooms. The most innocuous of the lot, her very own, very first Diary, was sitting on her coffee table, waiting to be filled with her observations and experiences here at Hogwarts. The Sourcebook and Die were a little more worrisome, but Willow had taken precautions when she had stopped to check out the contents of Giles’ care package before continuing to her meeting with Professor Snape last night.

Willow did genuinely like Euryale, but that didn't mean she thought that a sentient painting was the most secure or trustworthy of door locks. She had spent the last few years perfecting her wards, coming up with better and better ways to protect the Council's people and assets, so it had only
taken a drop of her own blood and a dip into the darker side of her powers to come up with something suitably nasty to secure the books themselves. Her rooms themselves were also guarded, but the spell securing them didn't pack quite the same punch.

Maybe she was being overly cautious, but Willow felt like she had a good excuse. She still couldn't quite believe that Giles had trusted her with not only a Template, but the means to duplicate it and add to its archives. There was a weight behind the gift that hadn't needed to be spelled out in the Council Head's brief accompanying letter. When Giles and Buffy had flatly refused to meet with Angel after his takeover of Wolfram and Hart, and the ensuing incident in Los Angeles, it had been a similar package of books that had brought the two factions to the negotiations table. The free gift of the firm's entire archive, bound in a single, easily referenced book, had been a peace offering that was too tempting to turn down.

After working through the details of that alliance, Giles had taken his new prize and flipped it around, offering access to the Templates as a means to coax the tattered remnants of the Old Council back together under his leadership.

And now he had put that same bargaining chip into Willow's hands, telling her that she had his permission to openly use the Template, and maybe even to open wide the Council's libraries to the Order of the Phoenix, if she deemed them trustworthy.

It wasn't just a matter of sharing classifications of demonic breeds or trading pointers on vampire slaying. The Council's Templates could access information on the darkest secrets of both the Council of Watchers' and Wolfram and Hart's less than pristine pasts, on the blackest-of-black magic that either organization had ever encountered. Or used. To entrust a Template to outside parties was to expose all of the Council's strengths and successes, its weaknesses and its dirty little secrets, and to potentially give them access to dark rituals, demonic rites, and any number of other twisted roadmaps to power.

On one hand, technically Willow’s hands, the Template was a powerful asset, an easily visible way to demonstrate what she and the Council had to offer. But in the wrong hands, there was simply nothing more dangerous than the unfettered information that this book provided. Well, maybe not this book. The Template in Willow's satchel was bound to her, which made it little more than a tingly, blank book to anyone else. But similar books? Unbound books? Books that she now had the knowledge and means to duplicate and distribute, provided it seemed to her to be in the Council's best interests?

And Giles had left the decision in her hands.

So yeah, she was a little jumpy about the Template, but it was safe enough at the moment. And that still didn't tell her anything about the food that was tempting her from the edge of the desk.

Willow stood up and walked over to the tray, rubbing at the side of her neck and eying the small pile of finger sandwiches, green soup, and unidentifiable orangish drink with interest, but also with trepidation. After looking at the food pointlessly for a few seconds, Willow extended the hand that was still kneading her neck over the tray and whispered a few words in Latin. When there wasn't a reaction of any kind, she dropped her hand to her side, feeling stupid.

Of course the food wasn't poisoned. Maybe she really was being a little too paranoid.

The clock above her desk was indicating that it was well past lunch, so the best she could guess was that someone had taken pity on her and brought some leftovers. She’d have to figure out who they were from and thank them, and pray that he, she, or it (who knew in this place) had not seen her drooling.
In the meantime, she still had some plotting and planning to do. Willow picked up one of the sandwiches and nibbled on it. It had some kind of pureed… something… in it, but it was quite tasty, even if she couldn't quite place it. She snagged three more and fished her notebook and a pen out of her bag.

Time to do a little classroom inventory.

~*~*~*~

As it turned out, with classes starting in only a few days, Willow hadn't been the only one making lists of supplies. A great many of the school's professors were going shopping the next morning. So when Professor Minerva McGonagall approached Willow before dinner and pointedly invited her to go somewhere called Diagon Alley, it wasn't all that conspicuous.

Neither was Willow’s falsely regretful avoidance of Dolores Umbridge's similar invitation during the meal.

Neither, for that matter, was Willow’s rendezvous with the Transfigurations professor outside of Dumbledore's office the next morning. They were to use the fireplace there, even though the redhead still wasn't entirely happy about hopping into any kind of fire, green or otherwise.

Falling out of the grate in Diagon Alley, disheveled, shivering, and staticky from excess magic, now that was conspicuous.

But before Willow had the time to even think about collecting herself, Minerva had slipped a firm hand into the crook of her arm and spirited her into a nearby shop, away from the stares of entirely too many bystanders. Under the concealment of the shelves of trinkets and enchanted doodads, the Transfiguration professor pulled out her wand and used a few discreet gestures with it to smooth Willow's hair back into something that did not resemble a scared cat or an electrical experiment gone horribly wrong.

"Maybe I should…” Willow forced though chattering teeth, shuddering violently before starting over. "Maybe I should stick to my own spells when we travel."

Minerva huffed in exasperation, but when she spoke, there was a definite tone of apology in her voice. "That was extremely… unfortunate. May I ask what happened?"

Willow flushed with embarrassment and more than a little irritation. The sudden rush of heat to her face was doing much to counter the lingering chill she had picked up in the Floo Network, but little to improve her mood. She hadn't felt this out of control with her own magic in years. It was not a sensation she particularly enjoyed.

"What happened is I don't know what happened. One second I'm being stretched out like witch taffy, and stuff is zooming by, and I feel like all the energy is being sucked out of my toes, and then poof! Surprise! I roll out into the street looking and feeling like a one-woman Van de Graaff generator." Willow took one look at Minerva's pinched expression and instantly felt guilty about snapping at her. So her magic was on the fritz, time was when that would have been the norm. Neither of them knew what was going on, and taking it out on one of the few people at Hogwarts who seemed predisposed to be nice to her was childish and stupid. "Sorry," she mumbled miserably. "What should have happened?" Willow asked, rubbing her hands over her arms to try to shed the last of the chill and static charge that was clinging to her skin.

"Nothing resembling that, I'm afraid," Minerva replied, still looking concerned. "Do you feel quite alright now?"
Willow wiggled her fingers before waving a casual hand through the air. The gesture was trailed by twinkling motes of green and gold lights. *Pretty. Colorful. Non-lethal. Check.* "I think so."

"Well, that's a blessing." The bigger surprise was that Minerva sounded like she meant it. "I am sure that we will figure out how to better predict future issues, Willow, but for now, I believe we both actually do have a bit of shopping to get done before meeting the others. What do you need?" she asked briskly.

Willow looked around the small shop dubiously. There was a lot of neat stuff here, and it kind of reminded her of the old Magic Box, pre- Hellmouth implosion of course. Under normal circumstances, she would have dearly loved to spend hours exploring the place, but right now she very much doubted they had dry-erase markers or laser pointers.

"I was going to stop by the Academies for most of it," she admitted. "But I think I would like a robe or two, if uh… Well, if you'll give me some pointers." *Wow. Awkward,* Willow thought to herself, but she soldiered on nevertheless. "I wouldn't be able to tell a decent robe from a fashion disaster with an instruction manual."

That earned a tiny, amused smile in response. "I'm flattered that you would ask my advice, but I believe that perhaps Madam Malkin will be able to do you more justice than I."

"Um, okay. Thanks…" Willow figured that she’d find out who this Madam Malkin was soon enough, and instead concentrated on straightening her clothes and checking the contents of her bag to make sure that she had made it through the Floo Network relatively unscathed, all things considered. Once her appearance met with both of their approvals, she and Minerva ventured back into the street and Willow got her first real look at Diagon Alley.

First of all, it definitely didn’t meet her concept of an ‘alley,’ at least not in the dark, mugger-friendly way she defined the term. It struck her as kind of a ped-mall meets open air bazaar for the bizarre. Most of the stores had displays on racks and shelves outside of their buildings, sprawling into the street. Not that it mattered, because she wasn’t seeing anything resembling a car, just lots and lots of people, walking around, milling in front of particularly interesting storefronts, or simply standing around and talking.

Men and women and children, bustling around, gossiping, checking shopping lists. It was all so very normal, and yet, on closer inspection, so very not. There was a group of kids pressing their noses against a store window, but when Willow looked beyond them and into the display, she realized that the subject of their fascination was an array of brooms. Not exactly what she had been expecting, but whatever. Then there was the man leaning against an open patch of wall, reading a newspaper. When Willow passed him, the portrait of the woman on the front page caught her eye and curtsied. Everywhere she looked were people engaged in fairly mundane endeavors, but nearly all had some twist or catch that took them from the realm of normal and catapulted them into the surreal.

And then there were the stores themselves. Some of the items she spotted in the storefronts were tame enough, magically speaking. Willow recognized quite an array of dried herbs, a table display of some truly impressive crystals, and more cauldrons than she could shake a stake at. However, some of the items she saw defied easy explanation, not the least of which was a three-eyed octopus-thing in a tank, which seemed to be striking dance-like poses every few seconds.

The two witches wouldn’t have made much progress down the street with Willow trying to see, and more importantly understand, every single thing around her. Thankfully, Professor McGonagall steered her, emphatically and efficiently, through the crowds. She spared a few moments to share a nod or a quick word of greeting with people she seemed to recognize. Some
were probably students, from their age. But soon enough, Willow found herself in front of the titular madam of Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions.

“Well, hello!” the slightly heavyset storeowner greeted them in a bright, cheerful voice. “What can I do for you today?”

Minerva immediately took command of the situation, much to Willow’s secret relief. “This is Miss Rosenberg,” she said at once, gesturing towards Willow, who smiled and waved her hand slightly, feeling a little silly. “She will be teaching at Hogwarts this year and she needs a few new robes. Something appropriate for teaching, and probably also a winter over robe or cloak, and perhaps a formal robe as well.” Minerva looked pointedly at Willow as if asking for her approval to continue.

Willow shrugged and cracked a wry smile, because really, what did she know about all this? “Whatever you think I need,” she said. Perhaps that wasn’t the best thing to say after all, because Madam Malkin’s still merry eyes had taken on the kind of gleam that let Willow know that now it was all over but the screaming. Or at least the paying. Willow was suddenly very glad of the thick wallet, packed with a healthy mix of Euros and pounds, she had brought along.

“Well, my dear, let’s see what we can do for you.” Madam Malkin cocked her head to one side, looking at Willow with enough intensity to make the younger witch shift uncomfortably from foot to foot. Then, the storeowner pulled a wand out of her flowing, maroon robes and started gesturing at the racks of clothes.

Even though she could feel the humming tingle of the magic, Willow was still surprised when robes started flying out of their places and lining up on an empty rack near the shop’s counter. “Just let me know if you see anything that catches your eye,” Madam Malkin said while continuing to conduct her wand like a director’s baton. “We include a basic fitting in all our prices. If you want something special, we do have a small fee, cost of materials plus one Galleon per hour it takes to make the alterations. Of course, most things won’t take anywhere near that much time, so we scale accordingly.”

Willow cast a sideways glance at Minerva, who was standing impassively amongst the flying fabric. She leaned closer to the older woman and whispered desperately to her, “What’s a Galleon?”

Minerva turned and looked at her in surprise. Willow had to lean back abruptly when a purple robe sailed between them, but her wide, worried eyes never left Minerva’s face. The Transfiguration professor finally responded in an equally low voice, “Has no one explained our monetary system to you?”

Willow shook her head no, trying and failing to completely suppress a quick stab of irritation. Intentional or not, she was beginning to feel like she was being repeatedly tossed into a lake in order to see if she would sink or swim.

**Surprise! Let’s see what happens when we throw you into our big freaking shield spell. Won’t that be interesting?**

**Surprise! Things in the school move around a lot. Have fun finding your new co-teacher and trying to make a good impression on him. P.S. He’s prone to pissy behavior.**

**Surprise! Looks like the Floo Network makes your magic backfire. Wonder if any of the people who saw you rolling in the street with fritzed out hair were your future students and their parents?**

**Surprise! We don’t use the same money as everyone else in the freaking country, because we’re too**
Willow almost appreciated that Umbridge was an overt pain in the butt. At least she knew where she stood with the woman.

The sentiment didn’t fade much when Minerva pinched her lips in irritation as well. “I would have thought that Albus at least would have explained when he set up your payments.”

“Payments?” No one had mentioned any payments. Honestly, it hadn’t even occurred to Willow to ask, since she was getting her usual stipend from the Council, you know, seeing as how she was still a freaking watcher. “Am I even getting paid? Because that kind of seems like an important detail to mention.” She glanced back at Madam Malkin, who was thankfully still arranging clothes on her rack. *Oh, this is bad.*

“I would assume, but this is all most irregular.” Now Minerva was looking at Madam Malkin as well. “Do you have any of your kind of money with you?”

“Actually, I was going to knock over a bank somewhere between the soul-sucking fireplace of doom and this store,” Willow finally snapped, pulling out her wallet and splaying the slip for paper money open in demonstration. “What kind of idiot do you think I am? Of course I brought money.”

Apparently even Minerva’s patience had its limits, because she was drawing herself up and scowling fiercely through her wire-rimmed glasses. “While I can appreciate that this is an extremely frustrating situation for you, I am not accustomed to-“

“Well, dear. Let’s see what you think of these,” Madam Malkin interrupted, finally turning her attention from the robes and back to her customers. As oblivious as she had been earlier, she obviously wasn’t slow on the uptake, and her warm smile became fixed and awkward.

Willow and Minerva just stood there for a long, painful moment. For Willow’s part, she was too busy trying to discretely hide the wallet she had been waving around moments before to come up with something appropriate to say. ‘Sorry, I only have my kind of money? Ha, ha, aren’t I a little Philistine. Oops?’ Talk about embarrassing.

As for Minerva, she simply smiled, even if it was thin and forced, and asked, “Could you excuse us for a moment?”

Madam Malkin definitely looked worried at that, but she kept a practiced smile on her face when she responded. “Well, of course. I’ll just be in the men’s wear.”

Minerva waited until the shopkeeper was out of earshot before looking Willow sternly in the eye. “I am aware of how this looks, but please believe me when I say that we are not trying to purposefully undermine you.”

“Really?” Willow asked with an edge to her voice, “Because I can only see two options from where I’m standing.” She held up her index finger. “Either one, this is an honest mistake, and I reserve the right to pick your brains on Wizarding Culture 101, or two,” a second finger joined the first, “I’m deliberately being kept in the dark about stuff.”

They stood there for a long beat before Willow happened to glance down at her two raised fingers and had a horrible flashback of Spike making the same gesture many, many times. Oh, crap. She rapidly dropped her hand under Minerva’s dark glare. “Okay, that was an accident. For the record, not so much a rude gesture in the U.S.”

One of Minerva’s severe eyebrows crept higher above her blocky glasses.
Willow deflated, anger draining out of her and leaving her with an unwelcome side of guilt. “And I just totally made your point for you, didn’t I?”

“No,” Minerva grudgingly allowed. “You make an excellent point. Perhaps delivered a bit more forcefully than I am accustomed to entertaining, but still. Has the Headmaster really told you so little?”

Willow just sighed. “I know who’s in the Order and who’s not, but other than that, I’m pretty much clueless.”

Minerva tsked in irritation. “Well I’ll have to see what I can do about that. In the meantime, Gringott’s, ah, that would be our bank, is only a few buildings away. I can exchange your money while you talk to Madam Malkin if you like.”

“Would you?” Willow asked gratefully, feeling more than a little relieved. At least she was going to be spared an awkward apology to the shopkeeper.

“Of course, dear,” Minerva replied in a much kinder tone of voice.

Willow dug her hastily hidden wallet back out of her bag and extracted the majority of the bills. “What’re the exchange rates?” she asked when she handed the wad over. “So I don’t accidentally splurge while you’re gone.”

That prompted a pained expression from Minerva. “I am not entirely sure, but you should probably avoid making a firm decision until I return. I suggest that you continue to peruse the wares for the next few minutes.”

Willow glanced at the clothes rack, which was filled to bursting with all different kinds of robes. “I think I can do that,” she said with a quirked smile. There was a definite Halloweeny vibe to the whole situation. It had been a long time since she’d played dress up for anything other than a stake out or an infiltration. Killing time wasn’t going to be a problem.

The money earned a curious glance before it disappeared into Minerva’s voluminous robes. “Very well, I will be back shortly.” She started to turn for the door when Willow stopped her.

“Oh, and Minerva?” she said quietly, feeling a little guilty about her outburst, even though she stood by the sentiment. “Thank you.”

“You are most welcome,” the elder witch said in a benevolent tone of voice before turning on her heels and leaving the store.

Willow stood there for a second, looking around the shop. To her, the men’s wear looked a whole lot like the women’s wear, which looked a whole lot like scaled up children’s wear. Picking the most promising of areas, Willow set off into the racks, hunting for Madam Malkin. It was time to get this fashion show on the road.

She must have guessed well, or the shopkeeper had been keeping an ear trained on her potentially problematic customers, because it took Willow no time at all to find her. Willow was quickly bustled back to the overstuffed rack where the two of them sorted through the candidates Madam Malkin had selected from her wares.

Some of the color combinations were simply garish, even to someone who had once partaken in entirely too many fuzzy sweaters and brightly hued overalls, once upon a time. Willow managed to weed out the ones that really made her eyes bleed, trying to steer Madam Malkin into showing her things in a more earth-toned palette. After that, it was almost like things went too far in the
opposite direction, and suddenly the shopkeeper would only suggest clothes in shades of green. “To bring out your eyes,” the shopkeeper had kept saying. But even though Willow had moved way past her high school, eclectic, fashion victim stage, she still liked a little variety in her clothes. It had taken some trials and errors, but by the time Willow found herself standing in front of a tri-part floor mirror, trying on her final array of potential selections, there was a pretty decent variety of colors in her soon-to-be wardrobe. Some of the garments were very plain, others still leaned a little on the odd side, but each of which Madam Malkin swore was both fashionable and appropriate.

Minerva had thankfully reappeared after Willow had narrowed things down to a reasonable number of non-hideous selections, but before Madam Malkin had finished transporting all of them into a changing room. The elder professor had discreetly passed along a heavy sack of coins, which a single glance determined to be mostly made of gold. Galleons, she supposed, considering the way the prices had been listed on the store’s wares, a guess which Minerva supported with a slight nod to Willow’s whispered question.

Willow had tried each and every one on, but only ventured out in front of the other two women, not to mention the huge mirrors and whoever else happened to be in the shop at any given time, when she genuinely liked what she saw. Between the sometimes flamboyant choices that Madam Malkin seemed to be pressing, and Minerva’s obviously more conservative tastes, Willow figured that the clothes she finally settled on were reasonably nice without being on the more ridiculous fringe of modern wizarding fashion.

A quick glance at the silver to gold ratio in her new stash settled at least one matter, and Willow allowed herself to splurge on a really nice winter cloak which had silver-accented ivy embroidered in twisting patterns all over the black outer layer. When she had added it to the growing stack of clothes, there were way more than one or two new robes. Minerva complemented Willow on her taste, but looked askance at the amount of money which it all ended up costing. Willow was pretty certain that she had just spent a great deal more than she had intended, but without time to count up her remaining coins, recall the bills she had handed over to Minerva in the first place, and compute the conversion factor between the two, she was blissfully ignorant of exactly how much she had really spent.

She’d deal with the buyer’s remorse later.

Willow smiled a little to herself at that. Dawn and Buffy, and their religious dedication to the fine art of retail therapy, would be happy to know that they had finally secured another convert.

Having her new clothes fitted and hemmed had taken almost no time at all. Willow and Minerva had gone out to pick up the few things on the Transfiguration professor’s shopping list, and the garments were ready and waiting for them upon their return.

After that, it had been Willow’s turn to play tour guide. She had managed to talk Minerva into taking a taxi to the warehouse that served as surplus storage for the Watchers’ and Slayers’ Academies. Watching the normally sedate witch try to keep a calm demeanor while the cabbie had jerked his car in and out of traffic had been a guilty dollop of still-sweet revenge.

And even that tiny, remorseful edge evaporated once they left the warehouse with some conveniently shrunken classroom equipment and Minerva herself suggested that they hail a cab again to get them to some place called Grimmauld Square, where they were to meet the others.

Maybe when they got past inadvertently torturing each other with the quirks of their respective worlds, they both might just learn a thing or two.
So far, Willow now knew what Knuts, Sickles, and Galleons were, and was pretty sure she could make change between the three of them.

Minerva had figured out why they called the little handle above the inside of the car door an “Oh Shit Bar.”

It was a start.
Chapter 8

Grimmauld Square bracketed a small, unkempt park which did little to brighten the neighborhood. The area might have been green and pleasant once, but neglect and a thin veneer of rubbish had done little to maintain its dubious charms. As far as Severus was concerned, the only redeeming aspect of the place was its slightly overgrown, bedraggled trees and shrubs, which provided him with some level of concealment when he Apparated into London, even in the hazy mid-afternoon light.

He had been rousted out of his rooms early by Albus with orders to go to London. Severus would have given much to remain in his quarters, alone with his demons, but Albus seemed to have other opinions. Apparently it was time to let the others know that the Dark Lord was aware of the Council’s involvement and was demonstrating exactly the kind of interest one would expect of him. Of course, Severus was to edit the part where he was goading that very interest into full bloom.

Those were the kind of details that were better left in the shadows, with him alone. Albus did love his layers of deception, and Merlin forbid that anything soil the other Order members’ idealistic delusions about how they were going to fight the coming war. They could bond over their precious scruples whenever he wasn’t around, tainting their little get-togethers. In the meantime, he and Albus would be playing to win. Between the two of them, the Dark Lord would be ground into dust, and if that meant throwing the Council’s representative in the path of the Dark Lord, then so be it.

So be it…

But she was going to have every advantage in the coming confrontation. Severus would make sure of that, if only to soothe the odd gnawing feeling that seemed to settle in the pit of his gut whenever he thought about her facing down the Dark Lord.

It wasn’t the first time an assignment from Albus seemed poised to give Severus ulcers, but for one reason or another, his stomach acids had apparently decided to force the matter this time. The sensation was not pleasant, but it was a good motivator, even if its intensity was still something of an enigma to him.

That was why he was at number 12 Grimmauld Place, even though there were many relaxing activities that Severus ranked far above visiting the Order’s current headquarters and the full time residence of one Sirius Black. Being jabbed repeatedly in the eye, for example. Or bathing in boiling oil. Miss Rosenberg needed to know who was aiming for her, forewarned being, after all, forearmed. The others needed to know as well, so they could help her in her preparations. They needed him, and much as they were sometimes loathe to admit it, whenever the Order needed him, he came. Rarely cheerfully, often begrudgingly, but always, without fail, he came.

Even so, that did not mean that he found scaling the steps of the Black family residence pleasant in the slightest. There were too many memories tied to this place and its recent inhabitants, memories he would rather not have. There were very tangible reasons why Severus found himself standing on the front stoop of the warded, shrouded building, glaring at the ornate door knocker as if it had offended him.

It was possible that the day might be salvaged. Miss Rosenberg and at least two other members of the Council would be here. Despite himself, Severus was quite curious about them. He had heard tales of the elusive Muggle vampire slayers, he had even read the odd reference about them, but he
had never met one. Up until recently, they had been the rarest of magical individuals, but no more. Very little information on the proliferation of so many slayers had been made known to the wizarding world, a fact which had sent the Ministry into fits of apoplexy when it had happened. Yes, the sudden explosion of demon-hunting Muggles was still an intriguing little mystery, even if it was a few years stale.

Perhaps it was that curiosity that finally tipped the scales, though more than likely it was simple resignation, but Severus finally raised his wand to the serpentine door knocker and tapped it lightly. The door swung open at that gesture, revealing an empty front foyer. Black was not playing gatekeeper, as he had taken to doing since he and the Order had moved into the house. The portrait of his late, unlamented mother was silent in her canvass, hidden behind heavy curtains. The lamps were lit, the room significantly cleaner than it had been at the beginning of the summer. Severus slid his wand into a cunningly sewn pocket concealed in his sleeve and stepped inside. The door swung closed with a muffled click behind him.

Distantly, Severus could hear the quiet chatter of cheerful conversation, filtering from the direction of the kitchen. Molly Weasley’s voice stood out above the others, but Severus could hear fragments of conversation that he could safely ascribe to the various members of her brood.Clearly, Mrs. Weasley had not yet banished them upstairs to their rooms in some misguided effort to ‘protect’ them. It was a fairly pointless gesture, the little delinquents were constantly finding new and creative ways to spy on the Order’s business, but their presence served as a good indicator of the state of conversation in the kitchen.

Good, he had managed to arrive early enough to enter and exit the meeting on his own terms.

Severus took to the stairs, walking past the truly tasteless mounted heads of the building’s former house-elves, past the silent painting of Mrs. Black, past various other artworks that were still affixed to the walls with Permanent Sticking Charms. The gradual progression of emptier walls to those more covered with macabre, ostentatious décor let Severus know that he was reaching his destination. The second floor drawing room was typically avoided by the others, especially Black, which when partnered with its street-facing windows, made it an excellent retreat when Severus was interested in watching the comings and goings of the household without tedious complications, such as actual contact with other members of the Order.

Unlike the front foyer, the room was unlit, an issue which Severus addressed with a quick gesture of his hand, and in need of a good dusting. Now lit in flickering lamplight, the intricate tapestry of the extended Black family tree sprawled out like a web, marked with a smattering of embroidered embellishments and the occasional burn mark. The scorched bits of fabric always brought an ironic smirk to Severus’ face, even as he settled into the room’s lone armchair to watch the street below. Little motes of embarrassment marring a family that had loved to lord its purity over others. Burned little portraits of blood traitors. Witches and wizards who had lacked the appropriate Black family zeal for proper breeding, who had associated with various kinds of undesirables or worse, Muggles.

Among the Death Eaters, Severus’ own parentage had been something of a dirty joke. It was never mentioned aloud in polite company, but it had always been on the tips of everyone’s tongues, whispered behind hands and closed doors, brimming at the surface of their thoughts when they had forgotten themselves and made eye contact with him. No matter how high he had risen in the Dark Lord’s service, he had always been the half-blood, tainted as he was by his Muggle father.

It was truly staggering how hypocritical those blue-bloods could be. He often wondered how they would rationalize following the Dark Lord if they ever learned the truth of his heritage, as Severus had. Would it spark any kind of reaction among the lot of them to know that the Dark Lord was as
contaminated by Muggle blood as Severus himself? Or would they simply gloss over that
technicality, so long as he allowed them their positions of power and their bloody, oftentimes
literally bloody, amusements?

More than likely, the latter. As much as they had looked down their noses at him, it had not
stopped them from making falsely friendly overtures as preambles to power-plays within the Death
Eaters’ ranks. The most egregious demonstration of such had been the Malfoys’ rather unexpected
request that Severus serve as godfather to Draco.

What a farce that had turned out to be. Not that he did not take the position seriously, no matter
what had transpired afterwards. Within the year of Draco’s birth, Severus had secretly turned on
his former compatriots, the Dark Lord had fallen, and all of the plotting and posturing that had lead
to that dubious appointment had come to naught.

Even so, Severus harbored a twisted kind of deep affection for all of the students of his own house,
in his own way, and Draco was certainly at the head of that devious pack. There were times when
it tore into Severus, knowing that many of his students were set to enter the ranks of his enemies,
thinking that they were bringing honor to their family names by following in their parents’
footsteps. Worse yet, at least for Severus himself, thinking him an ally in their cause.

However, there was nothing for him to do but press forward, setting his faith in the promise that it
would all be worth the pain in the end. He would encourage his students’ ambitions so that his own
position with the Dark Lord would remain secure. He would maintain that façade so that he might
help bring down the Death Eaters from within. He would play his part in ending this war, and
maybe that would mean that his students would not end up fighting in it.

So much of his existence was wrapped up in trying to balance his life’s many contradictions. He
played so many roles, wore so many masks, that it was no large thing for him to live by a variety of
codes that would seem mutually exclusive to anyone but himself.

Take the Muggles driving their excessively loud vehicles in front of the house, for example. They
bustled around, set on whatever tasks filled their days, completely oblivious to the warded house in
which Severus sat, watching them. For all his years working with Albus, and in direct opposition to
the Headmaster’s current wild scheme to drag the wizarding community at least partway back into
the Muggle world, Severus couldn’t help but think that that their blissful ignorance was all for the
best.

Much to Albus’ continuing disappointment, Severus had never really been completely won over to
the Order’s way of thinking when it came to Muggles. Being wholeheartedly opposed to the Dark
Lord and all his works did not necessarily mean that Severus had completely abandoned the
reasons why he had become a Death Eater in the first place. It wasn’t that simple. So few things
were.

As far as Severus could tell, Albus viewed the entire Muggle world through rose tinted spectacles,
but he had never really lived among them. He had never grown up on Spinner’s End with a
drunken lout of a Muggle father who thought that beating his wife and young son was an excellent
way to pass the evenings when work was slow and bills started to accumulate. He had never been
hounded by neighborhood children for wearing mismatched, poorly fitting clothes or for the
meager contents of his pockets. He had never gone to sleep, hungry and forgotten in the wake of
his parents’ latest fight, dreaming of a place his mother had told him about, a place called
Hogwarts, where he could gain the knowledge and power to escape and never, ever come back.

So Severus had entered school with an already healthy disdain for Muggles, one reason among
many why he had come to the attention of the Dark Lord’s recruiters, but time and bitter
experience had forced him to amend that mindset. Rather than overturning it however, he had
simply broadened his opinions, determining that as a general rule, the vast majority of all human
beings, be they witch or wizard, Squib or Muggle, were simply wastes of time, space, and effort.
There were, of course, some notable exceptions, but that did little to sway Severus in favor of
Albus’ starry-eyed insistence on seeing only the best in his fellow man.

Nevertheless, he would fight to save as many people as he could, Muggle or wizard. If Albus really
thought that it would bring a final end to this war, Severus would invite the British Muggles’
bloody queen into the little house on Spinner’s End, which he never had managed to escape
completely, for afternoon tea. The why’s were the complicated parts. Quite simply, it was because
he owed it to Albus. And to Lily. Because Severus knew that the end result would truly gut the
Death Eaters and their deluded agenda of pureblood supremacy. Because maybe, just maybe, the
protective net they threw might catch an exception or two, and the world would be just a little bit
more interesting because of it.

And speaking of exceptions, Severus found his eyes drawn to the woman who had just stepped out
of one of those very Muggle vehicles and onto the sidewalk in front of the house. It was Professor
Rosenberg, arms loaded with shopping bags, coppery hair catching the sun’s rays and his full
attention.

He vaguely registered that Minerva had followed her out of the vehicle, looking more than a little
frazzled. Her hat certainly appeared to have been squished to one side and was not enjoying its
usual jaunty perch upon the Transfigurations professor’s head. After the vehicle pulled away,
leaving the two women and an impressive variety of shopping bags on the sidewalk, she made a
fuss of attempting to straighten out her attire, with only small success. Then, with a lack of
discretion that would probably send Moody into fits, Minerva handed Professor Rosenberg a tiny
slip of paper. It was more than likely Albus’ official welcome into the fold, giving her the address
to their headquarters and therefore including her under the Fidelus Charm.

Sure enough, Professor Rosenberg’s head jerked in his direction after a moment of looking at the
slip of paper. Having been made aware of its location, she would now be able to see both the
building, pressing its way into existence between the surrounding structures, and probably Severus
himself if she happened to look through this particular window.

No matter. There were better vantages within the house itself, and Minerva was already guiding the
Order’s newest member towards the front door.

Severus stood abruptly and strode from the room, gesturing again in order to make the oil lamps
fall dark. Following the corridors around to the closest stairwell, he ascended to the third floor.
Luckily for him, the Blacks had taken their penchant for looking down on others to the logical,
physical conclusion, building a balcony that overlooked their front foyer, providing an excellent
view of the tops of any visitors’ heads when they entered the building. Severus positioned himself
in a shadow to the far right side of the landing, waiting with interest to see Professor Rosenberg’s
first impression of the house.

And its nominal owner. Severus’ eyes narrowed as Sirius Black walked into view, making for the
front door. He was dressed in the same casually sloppy style that he had adopted since taking up
residence, an affectation that he had held over from his Hogwarts days. In fact, other than a new
gauntness to his features and a dusting of grey in his hair, the man had changed very little from the
insufferable prat he had been in school. The fact that the Dementors had failed to drive him mad
during his tenure in Azkaban was proof positive to Severus that there was no justice in this world.

Black grabbed the doorknob and pulled the door open, revealing Minerva, whose wand had been
raised to tap the knocker herself, and of course, Professor Rosenberg, who he could see was wearing a curious, if wary, expression on her face, even from this awkward angle.

“Hello, Minerva,” Black said jovially, probably sporting that obnoxious, lopsided smile that he used when attempting to be charming. Too bad most people took it as such. “And you must be Willow,” he said as he extended a hand in greeting. Professor Rosenberg took the proffered hand, but instead of shaking it, Black raised it to his lips and kissed it with a teasingly courtly bow. “Welcome to my humble home.”

Severus noted that Professor Rosenberg was blushing in response to the flagrant flirtation, but a distinct cracking sound drew his attention to his own hand, which had, seemingly of its own accord, decided to choke the life from the ornate wooden banister that encircled the balcony. Thankfully, the sound had drawn no further attention, but by the time he had released the offending piece of wood from its stranglehold, Black was leading the two women out of sight, talking easily about Mrs. Weasley’s excellent cooking and the potential for scavenging some leftovers for the late arrivals. Severus watched until the trio had passed from view, standing still in his concealing shadow long after the sound of their footsteps had faded.

The icy rush of hatred when encountering Black was to be expected. So was the accompanying flare of jealousy, if he was willing to consciously admit its existence. Black was a hothead and a rake. Once the truth of his imprisonment had come to light, Severus had not felt the slightest bit of pity for the man, whose narcissistic love of sycophantic hangers-on had placed Lily’s fate into Peter Pettigrew’s hands, and whose rash adventure-seeking behavior looked prone to land him back among the Dementors where he belonged.

Where Pettigrew belonged.

Where, in the depths of his soul, Severus knew he belonged.

Failures and traitors, the lot of them.

Part of Severus had always believed that he would end up in Azkaban in the end. The thought could stir fear in him when little else could. The loss of his life was one thing, but to linger on, his mind, the only part of himself that he truly valued, broken? Now that was the true horror. He knew that the Dementors would love to have him. Once they could strip away his carefully maintained walls and self-restraint, there would be enough hate and guilt inside of him to keep them fed for years.

Still, the magnitude of Severus’ current reaction was a little shocking. As the summer had progressed and he had grown less and less murderously furious at the sight of Black, Severus had finally decided that one could grow accustomed to anything, given time and even the most half-hearted of efforts. But now? Now it was as if no time had passed at all. Severus found himself standing in the shadows, engulfed in an inexplicable, cold rage and trying to force himself to remember why it was a very bad idea to simply storm downstairs and burn the Animagus into a greasy smear on the mansion’s already soiled floors. And all Black had done was walk across a room and greet two members of the Order with his typical brand of charisma.

Severus took a deep, steadying breath, trying to clear his mind and stamp down his emotions to a manageable level. He needed to get a handle on himself if he was to make it through the meeting without any major incidents. While his practice of honing his razor tongue on other Order members was so commonplace as to be verging on tradition, the Council’s representatives were the new ingredient in the brew. They could be a catalyst or a corrosive, depending on how they reacted with the others, and Severus was not interested in being the one with egg on his face if the meeting, or Merlin forbid, the entire alliance, turned sour.
Severus stood on the balcony for some time, dark robes blending in with the shadows. Even after he had achieved an acceptable level of calm, he chose to remain at the railing, watching the proceedings below. Nymphadora Tonks had arrived, looking exceptionally chipper with her nauseatingly pink hair. Arthur Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Alastor Moody, and Remus Lupin followed soon after, Arthur in particular looking extremely uncomfortable in his expensive-looking Muggle suit. They were accompanied by two other men, Muggles themselves from the look of them, who nevertheless seemed more intrigued than impressed by their current surroundings. Watchers, Severus assumed.

Black met them all at the door, ushering his guests in with some joke or another. Strangely, none of his antics triggered the same violent reaction in Severus. Mild amusement and derision, yes, but not icy rage.

It made little sense, but then again, that was becoming a common theme where his recent emotions and reactions were concerned. One thing was certain though; he needed some time to himself to clear his head. No secret missions from Albus, no dissembling in front of the other Death Eaters, no playing the Order’s messenger boy…

No students, if only for a little while.

A door slammed somewhere below him, followed by loud and boisterous complaints. The Weasleys, from the sound of it, the younger ones that was, were complaining that their mother had evicted them from the kitchen. He thought he also heard Granger’s voice among them and possibly Potter’s.

Severus scowled. Humoring such maudlin daydreams was the height of futility, a weakness that he could ill afford.

However, even if he could not lock himself away with his books and his experiments for the foreseeable future, Severus felt no compunction against stealing what little solitude he could. He would almost rather entertain Black’s company than encounter James Potter’s son at this exact moment. The Weasley clan seemed to be stampeding around the rear of the house, so Severus wound his way back to the front stairwell, footfalls muffled, robes grazing the stone floor with little more than a whisper.

If the children had been banished from the kitchen, then the others must have already started discussing things of more import than the weather and Mrs. Weasley’s culinary skills. Severus swept through the front foyer, following the path that Black had taken with the others. He only hesitated at the kitchen door for a beat before pushing the door open and stepping inside.

For a moment, all movement in the room stopped. Severus let his eyes wander the length of the long table in the kitchen. It was more crowded than usual, and there was a variety of new faces gathered around the end of the table where Professor Rosenberg sat.

“Was wondering how long you were going to skulk about,” Moody grated, breaking the silence. His false eye rotated in place one way and then the other, as if telescoping in on Severus, before spinning off in another direction.

Severus’ stiffened, his eyes narrowing at Moody’s provocation, but a flurry of motion caught his attention instead. Professor Rosenberg was shooing some of the new people into even closer quarters on the table’s long benches, opening an empty spot. Extremely close quarters, resulting in a very narrow empty spot. From the overly cheery look Professor Rosenberg turned his way once the opening seemed almost large enough to warrant the term ‘seat,’ it was apparent that she intended it to be his.
It was an unexpected gesture, even if perhaps it shouldn’t have been. Their previous encounter had ended on a fairly cordial note. Even so, it took him off guard. He hesitated to wedge himself into such close quarters with anyone, much less total strangers and a young woman with which he only had the most passing of acquaintanceship. However, he had no desire to offend the Council’s representatives, not to mention the obvious truth that he no other seating option. Still, Severus was torn, paralyzed by his indecision until he noted the look on Black’s face. Most of the others looked disinterested at best, curious at worst. For some unknown reason, Minerva was attempting to hide a small smile behind concealing fingers. But Black…

Black looked contemptuous and expectant, obviously expecting Severus to create some kind of unpleasant scene.

Severus favored his host with a derisive glance of his own. If Black expected, maybe even wanted, Severus to make an ass of himself, then the Potions master's course of action was suddenly clear.

Without a word, Severus strode around the table and slipped into the proffered seat. When Professor Rosenberg favored him with a half-smile in greeting, he nodded gravely, a forced, pleasant expression set on his face. It was taking conscious effort to not sneer at the curious, surprised expressions around the table, once again excluding Minerva’s still-amused mien, but a single glance at Black made it all worthwhile. He looked as if someone had put Blorgrath extract in his tea.

Severus felt his fixed smile widen ever so slightly into something slightly more genuine, if still razor-edged.

“Yes, well,” Arthur Weasley was looking around the room, looking a little thrown by the proceedings. “Well… I think we had gotten around to me with introductions?”

Severus folded his arms across his chest and settled into this new, amusing role which he had discovered for himself. He had every intention of being pleasant and playing this game through to the end. After all, how hard could it really be?

~*~*~*~

In hindsight, it had probably been the height of idiocy for Severus to believe that he might be the one to trigger a major diplomatic explosion with the Council. In truth, he almost certainly had the most experience in treading carefully amongst more volatile company than this.

No, it had been Moody who had finally stepped in the dragon dung.

What with all the chest thumping and arm waving that was currently occurring, Severus found it to be little trouble to temporarily retreat from the kitchen for a brief respite without drawing much notice. He could still hear them verbally tearing into one another, even in the depths of the house’s ridiculously expansive pantry.

“So, you let Grim Reaper wannabes face-suck people’s souls out; you wipe people’s memories if they see you by mistake; but you’re getting all sanctimonious on me because I asked what kind of firepower you have if the shit hits the fan?” That was Anita, the slayer who Willow had informed him in a whisper was a bit touchy about her name. Not that Severus could understand why, Anita seemed a decent enough moniker for a vampire hunter. Apparently she preferred to be called Nita, and Nita sounded like she was well on her way to attacking the next person who spoke.

“The use of any of the Unforgivable Curses is forbidden,” Moody’s rough voice grated stubbornly.
“So I can guess from the stupidly obvious name,” Nita said, a sneer evident in her voice.

Severus snorted with dark mirth at her comment as he perused the depths of the walk-in pantry, looking through the boxes and jars of tea on the shelf in front of him. She had a point. Dead was dead, whether the Killing Curse had been used or not. He pulled one of the unlabelled apothecary jars down from the shelf and raised it to his nose. Jasmine, with an underlying hint of…

That jar rapidly made its way back onto the shelf. *Ansapius major*. Its berries were a rather potent narcotic, and one that had been banned ages ago when its utility in interrogations had come to light. He was hunting tea, not a euphoric that promoted loose-lipped conversation and a certain proclivity for eating raw meat. He would have to warn Mrs. Weasley about it later so that they could dispose of it properly. Trust the Blacks to have left something like that sitting out in plain sight.

He picked another unlabelled jar and removed its lid. Much better, there was nothing unexpected hiding under the surface of this one other than a hint of mint. He sprinkled a liberal amount of the mix into the tea ball he had palmed on his way out of the kitchen and lowered it into the cup of hot water which he had obtained through the same means.

Severus watched as the tea started to steep in the half-light of the pantry. Wisps of reddish-brown pigment snaked into the hot water, trailing lazily from the tea ball. The slow bleed of color and flavor into the water was oddly calming, and he found himself breathing in the aroma of the beverage, letting its warmth soak into his hands.

His meditative fascination was shattered by the sound of the pantry door opening. Severus leaned closer to the shelves, attempting to discretely peer through the concealing jars and canisters with little luck.

A rush of voices followed whoever had entered the pantry. Moody was growling above the others, accusation plain in his voice, “You seem overly interested in getting us to participate in the Dark Arts.”

“No.” It was a man’s voice this time, one of the younger watchers who had arrived for this first, important meeting between the newly allied groups. Severus had not caught his name. “What we are interested in is whether or not you people are going to hang us out to dry like an Old Council Traversite.”

Severus was not entirely certain what a mineral, belonging to the Council or otherwise, had to do with the conversation, but there was a furious edge to the watcher’s voice that made it extremely clear that incomprehensible terminology aside, he was deadly serious.

There was a distinct sigh from the front of the pantry and a soft click as the door swung closed again. Severus could not quite see who it was; the loaded shelves still blocked his view. Torn between interest over who had joined him in his self-imposed exile and a desire to be left in peace, Severus finally let his curiosity win. He walked down the tall shelf until the figure came into view at the mouth of the aisle. If the shock of long, coppery hair wasn’t enough to identify the interloper into his temporary haven, the soft flash of white light from the figure’s eyes removed all doubt. He knew of only one person whose eyes might take on that eldritch glow when taken by surprise.

“Oh,” Professor Rosenberg said, blinking away the disconcerting luminescence and leaning back against the door, “It’s you.” The statement wasn’t laced with resignation or distaste or any of the other reactions he was used to evoking. In fact, she almost sounded… relieved? “It’s kind of a madhouse out there.”

“Indeed,” Severus agreed blandly, watching her with no small amount of interest. He was not sure
why she was here, but now that she was, he might be able to turn the situation to his advantage. The fireworks had started early in the proceedings, and he had yet to deliver his report. However, if he played this encounter the right way, he might have the opportunity to deliver Albus’ message to her here, under circumstances where he might be able to better observe her reaction. Informing the others was secondary. “Your colleagues seem very… impassioned.”

Professor Rosenberg laughed lightly at that, but it sounded forced. “And yours aren’t?” She winced a little at the sound of a loud thud, as if something had struck a solid plank of hardwood, such as a kitchen table, with a great deal of force. Severus’ eyebrows rose slightly in half-hearted concern, which earned another grimace from her. “Nita’s just blowing off steam. Of all of us here, she’s the least likely to actually hurt anyone. It’s a slayer thing.”

Severus eyed her sharply. A slayer thing. This could be important. He decided to press further, trusting in her previous forthrightness. “Is she not specifically trained to fight? To kill?”

“No,” she replied softly, “To fight demons. To kill demons. Yeah. It’s this whole instinctive thing with them, they get all jittery if they go too long without a good hunt.” She was smiling slightly to herself as she spoke, but there was a wistfulness about her expression that he did not understand. “But that’s only half of it. They fight demons in order to protect us. I know it kinda sounds like semantics, but with them, it’s all hardwired like, you know, parents doing crazy things to protect their children. That kind of stuff.”

Severus made a non-committal sound in the back of his throat while making a minor production of swirling the tea in his cup. He supposed that she had a point, assuming that ‘hardwired’ meant something like instinctual. He could well see someone like Molly Weasley tearing a demon limb-from-limb if it threatened one of her brood. Wondering whether Professor Rosenberg would continue bleeding worthwhile information in her babbling way if given the chance, he simply took a sip of his tea and watched her expectantly from beneath lowered brows, dark eyes unblinking.

“So, um…” Professor Rosenberg said brightly, her new tone making it quite obvious that she was changing the subject. “If they’re going to be fighting for the rest of the night, I’d rather do this on a non-empty stomach. There was… some stuff that happened today. Stuff that precluded lunch. And I’m no good at researching… or mediating and… stuff if I’m half-starved. Er, brain food, and all that, and those locusts out there have pretty much gone through all of the leftovers. So I figured, hey! Pantry equals easy snackage. But this seems like one of those ‘fifteen kinds of flour and way too many shallots’ kind of pantries, and not a ‘Poptarts and doughnuts’ one. So, any suggestions?”

Severus just looked at her blankly. He was wading through the verbal detritus of this new tangent, and envisioning her first lecture. It should be interesting, to say the least. “There is a cooling shelf at the end of that row,” he gestured with his left hand, cup of tea rapidly cooling in his right. “I believe that Mrs. Weasley has been building up a sizable collection of various fruits, cheeses, and meats there for just such occasions.”

“Oh. Okay. Just, um, gimme a sec.” She scampered off, there wasn’t really any other word to describe that kind of locomotion. Severus took another sip of his cooling tea, mildly amused. She really was the oddest little creature.

Professor Rosenberg appeared moments later, precariously juggling a small assortment of food items. She winced pointedly, nearly dropping her prizes, when the voices in the kitchen rose again and there was another hollow pounding of a powerful fist on a solid surface, partnered this time with the sharp crack of abused wood.

Severus took the opportunity to change the direction of their encounter, steering it where he wanted it to be. “Would your slayer discontinue her destruction of the furniture if someone was to inform
her that the Dark Lord has no interest in her at this time?” It was a dour attempt at levity, but one that sparked just the right amount of interest in Professor Rosenberg’s eyes.

“You weren’t kidding about the spy thing in our round of introductions, huh?” she said with a wry smile. Severus’ expression remained blank as he waited for her to take the bait. “Okay International Man of Mystery, spit it out. What is he after then?”

Severus looked at her for a long moment, weighing what to say next. She really did have the oddest manner of address. He sipped from his cup of tea and grimaced. It was getting bitter as it cooled. “You,” he finally said, deciding that bluntness might spark the most telling reactions.

Professor Rosenberg looked at him with obvious surprise before doing the one thing he would never have expected.

She laughed.

It was a brittle sound, but there was genuine mirth in it. “Sorry,” she finally gasped. “Sorry, I know it’s not funny, but we always tell the newbies that if they’re in our line of work and no one is trying to kill them, they aren’t doing it right.” She paused for a second, wry expression on her face. “Guess I’m doing something right, huh?”

Severus just looked at her, slightly disconcerted by her reaction. He had just informed her that the most powerful Dark Wizard of recent times was plotting her death, and she seemed almost… welcoming? Amused? She could not be this confident if she truly knew the extent of the Dark Lord’s power. Was this hubris? Ignorance? Madness?

“I know what you’re thinking,” she broke into his line of reasoning with a half-smile. As if he wasn’t already unsettled enough, she was looking at him with that piercing expression that had him wondering if his mental defenses meant anything to her at all. “And don’t get me wrong, I’m taking this whole thing seriously. I’m betting I’m going to need to learn as much about how you fight in this class of ours as the students, so I might have to hit you up for some extracurricular tutoring.” She had stepped closer to him, and was looking up at him with an assessing expression on her face. “I, uh… You are okay with that aren’t you?” She caught her lower lip between her teeth, everything about her face suddenly seeming embarrassed, almost shy.

She smelled vaguely floral and spicy. It was unforgivable to be noticing such things right now, when she was waffling between mad confidence and maddening insecurity, but the fragrance struck him, tantalizing some memory that seemed to dance just out of reach. He could not exactly place her scent either, a quandary which was consuming entirely too much of his attention. He was an expert in recognizing any number of herbs and spices, flowers and fragrances for his potion work, but this one was leaving him stumped.

And there must have been something he had not detected mixed in his tea for him to be obsessing over something so banal as a colleague’s perfume at this exact moment.

“There is a possibility that I could be persuaded,” he responded, flat delivery doing little to conceal the note of challenge in his own voice. He was quite possibly more curious about her powers than she was about his, and he could ask for no better way to learn more about her.

For his reports, of course.

“Well, okay then,” she smiled a little, looking relieved by his noncommittal response, as if she
knew that the decision was made, no matter the actual content of his words. However, her expression soon melted into a cringe again. The yelling in the kitchen was reaching new, fevered heights. “I guess we can’t hide from them forever,” she said reluctantly.

Severus’ eyebrows rose at the insinuation. He hadn’t been hiding. He had been procuring tea, which was now room temperature and all but forgotten in his hands, a realization that earned a brief scowl. However, she was right, they might be missed.

He gestured towards the door for her to precede him, which she did, even if there was a noticeable lack of her usual enthusiasm in her dragging steps.

The door opened and the two of them walked straight into bedlam. Wands were being brandished. So was at least one stake. Professor Rosenberg plunged back into the crowd with another expressive sigh that he could see, if not hear. She deposited her armload of food on the table and touched one of the watchers lightly on the shoulder, whispering something in his ear that he had no hope of hearing over the cacophony unless magic was involved. The watcher nodded and stepped aside with her, deep in a conversation that only they could hear.

Severus kept to the walls, well clear of the table, holding himself aloof from all of the angry posturing. Professor Rosenberg might hold some kind of sway over the other Council representatives, but he had no interest and little aptitude in cultivating that kind of influence among his own colleagues. Until the various tempers in the room subsided, he would not waste his time and breath on such a futile exercise in rampant emotional folly.

And he still had no idea why Professor Rosenberg’s perfume had struck him so.
“Call it selfish, but I kinda want everyone to stop yelling and start talking about how we’re going to keep me in one piece.” Willow said quietly, wrapped in a magical cocoon of silence with Colin McDermont, the senior watcher Giles had sent to meet with the Order of the Phoenix today. “I mean, I’m not really freaking out… yet, but this is still ridiculous. And I like being, you know, not dead.”

McDermont was rubbing his chin, deep in thought. Willow waited as patiently as she could while he watched the eerily silent table of bickering people. Finally, the leader of the Council’s team of watchers fixed her with a serious gaze. “Tell me honestly, how strong are they in comparison to you?”

That wasn’t what Willow had been expecting. She worried her lip with her teeth, thinking of how best to respond. “It’s not really a strength thing,” she finally admitted. “Our magics are so different that weird incompatibility issues keep cropping up. I think I’m technically stronger. Okay fine, I know I’m a lot stronger, but they have more experience actually fighting other witches and wizards, and there’s no guarantee that my spells won’t backfire, so who knows. I… I mean as long as you mean the fighting kind of strength…” She trailed off weakly, then took a deep breath and continued, “Why do you ask?”

McDermont’s bushy eyebrows dropped low in an almost-scowl. “Tell me,” he said, pinning her with dark eyes, “If I had asked any of them the same question about you, what do you think their answers might have been?”

Willow frowned slightly, realizing where he was heading with this line of reasoning. Finally she sighed, willing to concede that he had a point. Maybe using Dolores Umbridge as a litmus test was unfair, but the Ministry’s representative certainly wasn’t alone in her low estimation of practitioners of other magical styles. Willow had known that coming into the mission. “Most of them would probably say that I’m the weaker one.”

McDermont nodded, looking sour. “Because that is what they have always been told. You have not been at the Council since they arrived. I am certain that they do not realize they are doing it, especially Remus and Kingsley, who are always excruciatingly polite, but whenever the subject of magic arises, they start talking very slowly and resorting to almost childishly abbreviated explanations. It can rapidly become… tiresome.”

Willow just looked at him, feeling more than a little uncomfortable. “It can’t be that bad,” she argued weakly.

“Vi had to be reassigned after she almost slapped Arthur Weasley.”

“Oh,” she said stupidly, not knowing what else to say. Vi was such a sweetheart, Willow couldn’t even imagine her really losing her temper. And at Arthur, who was at least as nice, and was easily twice as enthusiastic about going to work for the Council, as any of that first batch of Potentials.

“I appreciate your motivations, but short of actually forcing them to stop arguing, I believe that we must let things progress in their own way. Not that you could not arrange such a thing, but I believe I know your mind on such matters, and I honestly believe that in the long run, letting things run their course will work out for the best,” McDermont explained wearily. “Mr. Giles gave us instructions to take a very hard line in these meetings, I’m afraid.”
Willow grimaced. Not that he didn’t have a point. He did. But this meant that there was no way the yelling was going to stop anytime soon. Still, she couldn’t help muttering a sarcastic, “Great.”

McDermont favored her with a long-suffering glance. “Listening to these proceedings is fairly tedious. But for now, I can see no detriment and many potential benefits to letting them fight for a while longer.”

Willow nodded in begrudging agreement and then raised an eyebrow in dark amusement. “If any one of them has half of Nita’s energy, we’ll be here all night.”

McDermont smiled, but the expression was thin and a little sour. “Nita was selected for this mission for a variety of reasons. Obviously her experience came into play, but I cannot deny, the fact that she is quite… ah… energetic did enter into the equation.”

That was a polite way to say that Nita could run a perpetual motion machine into the ground. Her watcher, Marshall Andrews, was a saint. A saint who was currently sitting to Nita’s left and looking very, very tired already. “Check, get ready for a marathon session.” Willow said. At least she had found where the food was stashed before throwing herself once more unto the breach. “Just, you know, give me a shout if you need any pyrotechnics,” she added out of a sense of duty, hoping that such a step would not become necessary.

“I doubt it will come to that, but I will keep your offer in mind.” It was a polite dismissal, but a dismissal all the same.

Willow suppressed the tiny little voice that was bristling in the back of her mind and simply nodded. So the plan was set. No backing down, but no big bangs either. Honestly, Willow was pretty okay with that, and more than just for strictly ethical reasons. Her instinctive draw of magics earlier, when Professor Snape had surprised her in the pantry, had let her in on a little secret. This house was filled to the brim with all kinds of Dark energy, tainted and tempting. Even though she had been the one to offer, Willow had to admit she was relieved when Colin hadn’t asked her to pull out some kind of improbable mojo to make it all go away.

Those kind of requests happened more often than she was comfortable with back at the Council. Ran into an insanely powerful demon? Point Willow at it. Found some kind of tear forming between dimensions? Willow can handle it. Those weren’t the ones that bothered her, because while there might be other ways to handle them, she probably was the best choice to deal with the biggies. It was the other things that got frustrating after a while. Lost a weapon while you were out patrolling? Get Willow to find it. Made a huge, public mess of slaying some big nasty? Get Willow to do a rapid cleanup.

Most of the time Willow played along. She really did want to help. That was the whole reason she had pushed herself so hard to master the craft in the first place. Oh, she had been chock-full of good intentions. You know, that stuff the road to hell was paved with.

Still, there were times when she just wanted to pull her hair out or hide under her bed. It had taken a long time and a lot of pain for her to learn it, but the fact was she couldn’t simply solve all of the world’s problems with the wave of her hand. If she tried, that way lay control freak Willow of the veiny face and bad disposition.

And speaking of hand waving, things were getting ugly back at the table. “You might want to plug your ears,” she said before dropping the shield that had been protecting them from the angry voices raised on the other side.

Logically, Willow knew that her hair wasn’t actually being blown straight back by the rush of
sound, but it didn’t take a great deal of imagination to think that it could be. She couldn’t suppress a pained grimace, catching a similar expression on McDermont’s face out of the corner of her eye.

Resigning herself to being at least temporarily benched, Willow waded through the nearly tangible noise to the table again and plumped back down in her seat. Trying every concentration technique she knew, short of an actual spell, she firmly attempted to block out the bickering around her in favor of the small pile of food she had scavenged from the pantry.

With Nita seriously working up a head of steam and the members of the Order appearing willing to indulge the hot headed slayer’s temper, Willow figured that she had time to plot out at least a few of her lesson plans. Okay, truth be told, she would probably have enough time to figure out how to get cold water fusion to work, but lesson plans were a good start.

Willow nibbled at a piece of sharp cheese, mentally drawing up all the details of her preliminary planning discussion with Professor Snape. She figured that their first class was going to be more of a meet and greet, marked by introductions, handing out syllabi, that whole thing. But after that, they were going to alternate classes, one leading with the other assisting. Willow really wanted to teach the first lecture. Okay, truth be told, she would probably have enough time to figure out how to get cold water fusion to work, but lesson plans were a good start.

But what was the best way to do that? Her lips quirked in amusement at the mental image of herself, swooping into the classroom in a swirl of smoke and bright lights. Why not toss on a billowy cape and a top hat with a rabbit in it? Okay, dumb idea. She could pull one of the practiced antics she often used in slayer training, but that would be kind of medieval and boot campy. Proving a point to a stubborn slayer with black eyes, a little lightning, and some judiciously applied telekinesis was one thing, but explaining the relative safety of her faux flares of temper to an irate parent didn’t sound like Willow’s idea of a good time. Good for convincing headstrong slayers that they weren’t immortal, but potentially traumatizing for under-aged students. Also, she usually had a watcher around to play good cop to her bad on those days, and Willow really didn’t think that Professor Snape was a good fit for that role.

She finished the cheese and started on a slice of green apple. The sound of arguments swirled around her, but Willow was too deep in thought to really pay much attention.

So maybe she couldn’t imagine that metaphorically flattening a student was a good idea, but she wasn’t totally ready to abandon the spirit of the exercise. She needed a softer way to shake up the complacency she just knew her students were going to exhibit. Because everybody knew what assumption make of you. And umption.

Willow picked up a piece of sandwich meat, popped it into her mouth, and instantly regretted it. *Ugh, gross.* She forced herself to swallow the bite of sliced… whatever it was. She thought it had been ham or something. Now she wasn’t so sure. Despite the stereotypes she had heard before moving to England, she had actually found that most British food was quite good. But whatever this cat food tasting patty thing might have been, it didn’t hold with that pattern.

Willow blew a quiet, disgruntled raspberry before realizing that the room around her had gone suddenly silent. Thankfully, no one seemed to be paying her the slightest attention. Instead, they were all gawking at Professor Snape.

“Severus, are you absolutely sure?” Remus Lupin asked, his voice low and even.

Snape gave him a narrow-eyed glance for his troubles. “Yes, I am quite sure that the Dark Lord is aware of this new alliance. Unless of course you think he was referring to some other Council of
Watchers.” His tone was coolly dismissive. “I am sure that there might be a few lying around somewhere that we might have missed.”

Note to self, Willow mused. He doesn’t like being questioned.

“Someone broke operational security,” Moody growled, face purple, his crazy eye piece spinning in agitation.

Minerva’s sharp exhalation sounded harsh and exasperated. “Alastor, this is hardly helpful,” she said.

Sirius looked at Professor Snape and said, “Maybe not, but I for one would like to know how our secrets are finding their way to Voldemort’s ears.” He wasn’t being overly accusatory or threatening, but the Potions master seemed to bristle.

“Indeed. Well if we are eliminating suspects, I think we can safely rule you out. After all, unless any of your relatives have been making house calls, you’ve been safely here, away from any trouble.” Professor Snape said in a tone like frigid silk, a response which sent Sirius Black’s face turning deeper and deeper shades of red.

Sirius started to say, “I will not have some greasy –“ but then Remus’ fingers bit deep into his shoulder. The werewolf bent close, whispering something inaudible, but obviously harsh and desperate in Black’s ear.

Willow looked around the table, taken completely by surprise by this turn of events. The Order representatives had done a complete about face from fighting with the watchers to fighting amongst themselves. There were undercurrents here that she couldn’t begin to follow. She shared a worried glance with her fellow watchers, who were obviously as concerned as she. They hadn’t been expecting such a fragmented front from their new allies.

Normally, Willow would have tried taking a little ‘taste’ of their auras to figure out what was going on, but she didn’t feel comfortable doing that here. It didn’t take a genius to know that every person in this room was way more sensitive than the people she was used to dealing with, and running the risk of rocking the boat seemed like a terrible idea at this point.

As it turn out though, trusting in Nita’s patience was a losing proposition. When even the cheery-faced Tonks had joined in on this new round of bickering, Nita loudly shoved her chair back and stood. “This is pointless, I’m going patrolling,” she said, before stomping out of the room.

Dead, awkward silence reigned once again.

Her watcher, Andrews, just cringed and rose as well. He shrugged apologetically to no one in particular. “She has a point,” he said, and followed his ward out of the room.

Willow had not seen so many pale faces since helping to clean out her last vampire nest.

McDermont sighed and pushed himself to his feet. “Perhaps we should take a recess,” he said gently. His grandfatherly appearance made the shrewd watcher quite adept as smoothing ruffled feathers when he felt like it. “I, for one, would love to stretch my legs a little before hearing the rest of Professor Snape’s report.”

Willow managed to restrain a relieved sigh when an assenting round of murmurs, some still hostile, others chagrinned or simply weary, made its way around the room. After a measured period for etiquette’s sake, she excused herself from the kitchen.
She started up the back stairs, hoping that the décor wasn’t quite as macabre as what she had seen in the front foyer upon her arrival. Faintly disgusted, Willow had asked Black about the severed, mounted heads of some creature she did not recognize, which lined the great staircase in the house’s entranceway. He had explained that they were unable to take them down due to the Permanent Sticking Charms placed upon them. She hadn’t needed to ask what kind of spell that was, obviously, but she couldn’t help thinking that the Order wasn’t thinking outside of the box. If they kept holding their meetings here, she might try to bribe someone into introducing Black to the joys of jigsaws and drywall patches.

As it turned out, the decorations in the back hallway turned out to be slightly better: coats of arms, a small portrait of a dank-looking castle, trees waving in an unseen wind like a scene from a movie on loop. There were bare patches here, darker areas of wallpaper and paint where something had obviously hung.

She had left the kitchen with the vague idea of finding a bathroom, but now that she was free of the oppressive atmosphere, her need to indulge in a momentary escape had been rapidly replaced by pure curiosity. There were things up here which she could feel humming along the edges of her mind. Bristling, sharp edges of wards. Bright, bubbling flashes of charms. Mucky, festering pools of old curses. A few things which had almost felt alive when she had momentarily opened herself to the ebb and flow of the house earlier.

She was about to step onto the first landing of the staircase when something else, potentially even more interesting, caught her attention.

“Look, it says right here that all magical entities fall under the purview of the Ministry of Magic,” a triumphant female voice announced from somewhere upstairs.

“So, what’s your point Hermione?” The voice was lower, obviously male, with the practiced, bored tones of teenagerdom.

“So,” the word was drawn out almost condescendingly, “She can’t be able to use magic, or else the Ministry would have contacted her.” That was Hermione Granger, if Willow was remembering correctly. Mrs. Weasley had run through their names at a rapid fire pace before chasing all of the children, Willow’s potential students, out of the kitchen to the sound of much grumbling and complaints.

“But isn’t she from America?” asked another boy. “Maybe they do things differently over there.”

The first boy chimed in again, “Nah, the Yanks have a similar system. Plus, I hear she's been living here for a while.”

Willow was torn between laughing and bristling. This was exactly the kind of thing she was dreading come the first day of class. She scaled the next flight of stairs before she could really think about what she was doing, soft-soled shoes making hardly a whisper.

“So either the book is wrong,” the girl, Hermione, continued with distaste in her words, as if suggestion such a thing was blasphemy, “Or she can’t do magic.”

“But Mr. and Mrs. Weasley said that she’s going to be teaching some kind of special DADA course,” boy number two said.

“Pfft, yeah,” boy number one responded. “With Snape. It’s like Dumbledore’s trying to make sure no one takes her class.”
Willow reached the next landing, ears perked with more than interest at that point. She could see an open door further down the hallway, light spilling onto the floor. If working with teenaged slayers had taught her anything, it was that dumping the right words into the rumor mill could potentially save everyone a lot of pain in the long run. In addition to gleaning a little bit more from their conversation, she might as well meet a few potential students early and get the rumors started on the right foot about her magical ability, or lack thereof. Willow turned her steps in the direction of the door, wondering if this was the best idea she had had all day, or the worst.

“And that’s another thing,” Hermione blurted. “How is she even going to get to Hogwarts? There are spells everywhere to ward off Muggles. Without magic, she shouldn’t be able to get within miles of the school.”

“So,” boy number two said in measured tones, as if thinking aloud, “Maybe she can do magic.”

“But the book says-“ Hermione argued.

Willow could appreciate a tendency towards bookishness. However, this conversation was starting to get uninteresting and repetitive, even if it did tell her a lot about the girl in question.

*Speak of the devil…* Willow reached the doorway, taking a deep breath to steady herself before stepping into the lit frame.

...And she appears.

“Mione, not everything’s in a…” Boy number one, who she could now see was the youngest Weasley boy, Ron, trailed off, bluster all but dying. He sat looking at Willow wide-eyed. “Book,” he finished lamely.

“Ron, that’s,” the girl followed Ron’s gaze, landing on Willow as well. “That’s… Oh…”

The last boy, the infamous Harry Potter, just looked at her steadily, not saying a word. She had seen that kind of look before, too cautious, too knowing, and too old, on slayer after slayer over the years. It made her heart go out to him, just a little bit.

“Um, hi,” Willow said, kicking herself for sounding so very awkward.

Dead silence. Not a good start.

One look at Hermione’s wide, wild eyes let Willow know that she needed to start talking if she wanted to salvage this meeting, and fast. “I was just looking for the bathroom,” Willow said, smiling crookedly.

The teenagers all breathed an obvious sigh of relief, obviously thinking she hadn't overheard their conversation. Willow pinched her lips together to keep from laughing. Some things never changed, in California or London, magic-using or not. “It’s down the hall,” Hermione spoke up first out of what was probably rote etiquette. “Past the curio cabinet on the left.”

“Thank you,” Willow replied, glancing in the direction indicated. “You guys aren’t much for bright lighting here are you?” she asked rhetorically, an idea sprouting in her mind. “Well anyway, I hope I might see you guys around at Hogwarts, maybe even in my class.” She extended a hand in front of herself, palm up, trying not to smirk in self-satisfaction at the dubious expression on all of their faces. Willow reached out with a tendril of energy, forming it into a glowing sphere. It was an easy enough spell, simple, but she dressed it up with swirly colors and sparking lights, which was well worth the shocked expressions on all of the kids’ faces.
First impression? Check. Faces solidly connected to names? Check. Proof that, yes, she could do magic? Check and check. Willow’s job here was done. “See you later,” she said, failing to suppress a cheery grin and an extra swirl of sparkling color.

As she turned and walked down the hallway, which honestly, really was much improved by her impromptu night light, an eruption of excited whispers followed her. She couldn’t quite make out the words this time, but she could imagine. At least these three kids would be starting the school year knowing, without a doubt, that she could perform magic of one kind or another. Maybe they’d even spread the word a little.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

The thought lifted her spirits, even when Professor Snape had finally disclosed her central part in this whole mess and things had really disintegrated. Even when she had teleported herself back to Hogwarts’ front gates to avoid any more magical fritzing, only to find herself almost instantaneously drenched to the bone in the storm which had whipped up in their absence. Even when Argus Fitch, the groundskeeper, found her in the classroom the next morning, unpacking the things she had brought from the Council and laid into her with a vengeance…

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“Argus is a Squib, I’m afraid, and very bitter about it too.” Minerva explained from the far side of the staff room as she drew water for a cup of afternoon tea. “I’m not trying to excuse his behavior, which can be deplorable, but if Albus had not taken pity on him, I’m not sure where he would have gone. Life can be… difficult for Squibs if they aren’t already familiar with the Muggle world.”

Willow looked up, hands hovering over the stacks of books and plastic sheets on the round worktable. “Squib?” she asked cautiously, pretty certain she knew what the other woman meant, but fishing to make sure.

Minerva walked over and settled into the chair opposite Willow, steaming cup in hand. “Non-magical people born into wizard families.”

She felt a twinge at being right. Squib – a faulty firearm cartridge which resulted in a misfire. The metaphor wasn’t difficult to extend. Damaged goods. A mistake. “Oh,” Willow said in a small voice, imagining that yes, life for a ‘Squib’ must be pretty terrible in a society that thought nothing of dubbing them such. A magic-using ‘Muggle’ in his hip pocket must feel like salt in a wound. “I guess I get why he hates me so much then,” she said with a sigh, referencing the incident that had sparked this entire conversation. Argus Filch had burst into her classroom a few hours before and had treated her to a prolonged rant, she couldn’t even call it a lecture, on how he was to be kept informed of any major changes made to the school’s rooms or the equipment therein.

“Argus hates everyone, including himself,” Minerva said frankly, taking a careful sip of her tea. “Albus has already spoken to him. He shouldn’t bother you about your classroom again.”

“Um, that’s…” Unnecessary. “Good.” Willow bent a bit of her concentration to the transparencies again, conjuring images of demons, magical creatures, and mystical symbols for her first lecture. Without the use of a computer, printer, or copy machine, these transparencies were the best visual aids she could think of on such short notice. A black tracing of a summoning circle started to form from the puddle of blank ink beneath her hands. It was pretty mindless work as long as she kept her hands steady. Mindless enough to allow for idle conversation. “So, uh, before we get into the Complete Idiot’s Guide to Wand Wizarding, can I ask you something about, um, last night?” she asked awkwardly, uncomfortable with the current discussion and more than willing to change the topic, even if the new one probably wasn’t going to be any better.
Minerva looked at her shrewdly before setting the cup on the table and clasping her hands in front of her. “What would you like to know about my nephew’s family?” she asked pointedly, even though they were quite alone in the faculty lounge.

And Willow thought her acting was bad. The cover story Minerva had concocted for their late arrival was pretty flimsy. They had stepped in to visit Minerva’s nephew before returning to Hogwarts after their shopping outing. One thing had lead to another and they had ended up staying for dinner with a few of her nephew’s acquaintances. Minerva and Willow had insisted on staying to help her niece and nephew clean up after the meal.

James Bond these Order people weren’t.

Oh well, no use but to play along. “So, I couldn’t help but notice that your nephew kind of flipped out when that, uh, door to door potions vendor stopped by,” she said awkwardly, knowing full well that she was pretty terrible at ad-libbing. “I was just wondering what the deal was, unless it’s something really personal, for your, er, family.”

And the Oscar goes to… not me.

Minerva looked at her from behind her blocky spectacles, odd, speculative look in her eyes. “I’m afraid that my nephew and that particular vendor knew each other in school and have a bit of a history. I am sorry that you had to witness that bit of… unpleasantness.” Stupid cover story or not, Minerva was much better at selling it than Willow.

“Oh,” Willow replied awkwardly, completely drawing a blank as to how to pry a little more information than that out of the woman. She sighed and let her eyes drop to the transparency beneath her hands. It was almost done. “No problem, I was just… curious.”

She looked up abruptly when Minerva gently continued. “I’m afraid that a lot of the details are… personal, but in short, that particular vendor has been known to exhibit a rather rotten temperament at times, and his taste in friends has not always been so savory, but those of us who know him better trust him. Except of course,” and at this Minerva quirked her lips up in a tiny, dry smile, “For my nephew.”

Willow felt a knot of anxiety, which she hadn’t even realized had been forming between her shoulder blades, melt away. Between the fighting, and the stuff she had overheard upstairs from the kids, and the fighting (and had she mentioned the fighting), she had really wanted to ask the question Minerva had just answered, but hadn’t known how. “That’s good to know,” she said in all honesty, even though the information had only whetted her curiosity on the subject.

“So, I believe that you had mentioned that you were interested in hearing about Hogwarts’ Houses?” Minerva said briskly, changing the topic with an oddly satisfied look in her eyes.

Willow perked up at that. “Yeah, and maybe some school history if you don’t mind.” She set aside the picture of the completed summoning circle to dry and shoved the rest of the mylar sheets to one side, giving Minerva her full attention.

At that, Minerva did smile. “Then you’ll have to indulge me. It is quite rare to find someone who is all that interested in such things.” And with that, the Transfigurations professor picked up her tea and launched into a story right out of a fairy tale.
Chapter 10

Severus stood in the doorway to the classroom that he and Professor Rosenberg would be sharing in the coming months, watching the petite watcher dismantle some kind of blocky, armed contraption.

Having been reprimanded by Albus the day before about… something, the groundskeeper had been somewhat reticent about explaining exactly what, Filch had thrown himself into a sullen fit which had culminated in an early morning litany of complaints on Severus’ metaphorical doorstep. Apparently, Argus felt that Severus needed to be accosted at first light because the watcher had the unmitigated gall to fill up their classroom with Muggle contraptions.

Fully awake and thoroughly irritated, Severus had dressed in his robes for the day and made his way to see what kind of damage the watcher had reaped upon the dignity of the school.

Because he had bypassed breakfast, he hadn’t actually expected to find her here, scone half-eaten and obviously forgotten on the front of the lecturer’s desk, performing some kind of mechanical dissection. Thus far, the offensive items Filch had warned him of seemed to be limited to the device in question and a pile of what appeared to be its internal components: a fan of some sort, a Muggle lighting apparatus trailing wires, and a severed plug, if he remembered the term correctly.

Professor Rosenberg straightened with a small sound of triumph, pulling free another wire from the gutted mechanical carcass of he knew not what. She dropped it into the pile and peered back into the device, absent-mindedly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear in order to keep it out of her face. Apparently satisfied, her next move was to fish a rag from behind the thing and start wiping the inside clean.

“What, precisely, is that?” he demanded, curious, but still irate enough from Filch’s early morning imposition to feel no compunction to soften the tone of his voice.

Professor Rosenberg looked up in apparent surprise for a moment before dropping her rag and dusting her hands off on her rough, blue, Muggle pants. “Good morning to you too,” she responded brightly, expression just cheerful enough to be on the false side of perky.

The mockery was palpable. Severus’ ire deepened, but a cold stab of logic held his tongue in check. Coming on the heels of their last one-on-one meeting and the Order’s disastrous conference, he had no intention of compromising the rapport he seemed to have reached with the watcher just yet. There would be time enough for that once the students arrived. Much as he might enjoy letting his temper run away with him, he could ill afford alienating this woman completely. Instead, he contented himself with a sour scowl as he descended the stairs of the small, amphitheater-style classroom.

Miss Rosenberg just sighed and answered his previous question, for all the clarity her words provided, “It’s an overhead projector.” She paused then, as if waiting for some kind of response, before plowing onward. “There’s already a screen in here,” she continued, pointing, and sure enough, there was one rolled up and hanging from brackets from the ceiling. “But the slide projector was, well, I don’t even know what’s going on with that thing. Or if it is a slide projector. Or if that’s even what you call it. And I don’t have time to make slides, so tada! Council hand-me-downs.”

When a flat, black stare did little to bestir her, Severus relented and asked the question that might make her verbal barrage decipherable. “And this device is meant to serve what purpose, exactly?”
She grinned, looking quite pleased with herself. “Here, check it out. They usually run on electricity, but since that doesn’t so much work here, I had to get creative.” She reached down on the floor, hoisting up a large satchel bag which had been hidden behind the large desk. From it, she produced a smallish quartz crystal. Cupping it in her hands, the watcher seemed only to look at it for a moment when the clear mineral burst into white, radiant light. The non-vocal casting took him a little by surprise, despite the raw power he had already seen her employ. Such spells took discipline and more than a little practice.

But then again, so did slaying demons. He really needed to stop letting her catch him off-guard with simple competence.

“So now we’ve got a non-electrical light source,” she continued, securing the crystal in the hollow casing of the ‘overhead projector’ with some kind of white putty and replacing the thing’s translucent lid, “And a diffuser.” The light, which had been uncomfortably bright before, was softened by the large lens in the lid, creating a uniform glow. A hazy rectangle of light bathed the back wall of the classroom, only resolving further when she pulled the screen down from the ceiling. She clipped a roll of clear material on one side of the lid, pulling it across the top to attach to a bare roller on the other side. “And voila!”

The exclamation seemed a little premature, seeing as how he was still only viewing a glowing rectangle of light, but she continued fiddling with it, even drawing on it with a lurid purple pen of some sort. The lines were indistinct at first, but a quick turn of the knob on the thing’s upward reaching arm brought the gash of color into focus. “I spent a few hours making these yesterday,” she added, producing a sheaf of transparent sheets from the same bag. When she slapped one on the lens, the image, a line drawing of a hulking beast of one sort or another, appeared on the screen. “I think I have enough for the first few weeks of lectures.”

Severus stepped forward, still scowling, but this time with clinical interest. The thing was a study in lenses and mirrors, utilizing no magic at all, beyond the little glowing crystal within its belly. It was impressively efficient, almost elegant, except for its oversized, blocky casing, meant to house the electrical devices which would have powered it in the Muggle world. Still, it seemed quite out of place here, among the watching stone gargoyles and stained glass windows, more for what it symbolized than for its unembellished, utilitarian design. A little Muggle ingenuity, right here in an epicenter of magical education.

No wonder Argus was in a snit.

“You heard about that, huh?” Professor Rosenberg said, grimacing.

Severus glared at her in surprise before determining that he must have inadvertently spoken aloud. He needed breakfast, and tea, and perhaps more sleep, but not necessarily in that order. He was allowing her to rattle him again, and that was unacceptable.

But at least he now had the final piece of another puzzle, the reason why Albus had felt the need to discuss matters with Argus. The groundskeeper must have tried flexing his meager metaphorical muscles by antagonizing the young watcher yesterday.

He eluded the question by picking up a few of the transparent sheets and flipped through them, covering the conversational dodge with professional curiosity. Many of the pages in his hand seemed to have to do with casting protective shields of various types and sizes. He recognized more than a few of the amulets and potions on the sheets, but there were also detailed calendars marked with astronomical cycles, tables of bones and herbs grouped by ordinal directions, and pages upon pages of indecipherable charts, graphs, diagrams, and lists, scattered with various minerals, cycles of the moon, and arcane glyphs.
This was ritual magic, old magic, made all the more jarring by the offhand references to more familiar subjects. Hints of Arithmancy and runic translations crept into pages filled with Sanskrit and religious symbolism. Basic potions and Herbology shared space with demonic physiology and descriptions of the various uses of incense.

“What d’ya think?” Professor Rosenberg said, peeking over the edge of the transparent sheets at him.

Severus looked at her for a long moment, expression blank as he contemplated his response. On one level, he was fascinated. All arrogance aside, he knew himself to be a highly competent wizard, but most of the material in these pages was completely new to him. On another, these were fundamentally different powers than those exercised in wand wizarding schools. He couldn’t help but wonder if these magics were even accessible to wand wizards. After all, a wand in the hand of a Muggle was only a fancy stick, so it seemed likely that a sage smudging stick might simply be a bundle of herbs in the hands of a wand wizard.

“What has this material been tested against wand magic?” he finally asked, flipping again through the clear pages.

Miss Rosenberg gave him an odd little smile. “Uh, yeah. But it’s been a while.” That was vague enough to evoke a flat glare, and she responded with an exasperated huff. “Fine, make me break one of the cardinal rules of diplomacy. You guys didn’t exactly drub us back when the Ministry and the Council had their little tiff.”

Stifling his little instinctive flare of indignation to a mere scowl and noncommittal grunt, Severus tapped the edges of the stack of transparencies on the table, neatly aligning them before placing the stack back on the desk.

“But, uh, I’m all for gathering more empirical data,” Professor Rosenberg added. “We’re supposed to be sparring anyway, so I don’t, you know, backfire or something in front of the students. No time like the present?” The hopeful question was plain in her voice.

Curiosity was fast overpowering his remaining ire. Still, her priorities struck him as being more than a little skewed. “I would be less concerned about a potentially embarrassing class period and more so about the threat from the Dark Lord.”

“Two birds, one stone.”

She was so flippant. Her apparent lack of concern bothered Severus deeply. Albus was gambling a great deal on this slip of a watcher, and even though she was not entirely privy to their plans, she knew enough that she should have been showing at least a small amount of concern.

Something snapped inside Severus, sending a cold pulse of anger, or was it fear, through him. She wanted a lesson in how to fight a Death Eater? So be it.

Severus folded his arms across his chest, slipping his hands into his sleeves. There were pockets sewn there, holding the various tools of his trade. “Are you certain? I am sure your Council would not want to see you… hurt.” The words were delivered in an oily, falsely concerned tone of voice. Miss Rosenberg reacted as expected to the patronizing manner. She followed a brief flash of hurt with a fiery burst of indignation.

Severus palmed his wand under the cover of his sleeve. Just a moment more.

Miss Rosenberg stepped towards him, fists clenched at her sides, eyes crackling with irritation.
“Look here, Mr. Looms-a-Lot, you don’t have to be a jerk-face about—“

Now.

Severus’ wand came out just as the watcher reached her verbal crescendo. “Stupefy!”

She sailed away from him, startled squeak bleeding suddenly into an angry hiss as she skidded, none-too-gently, into the cabinets lining the sides of the room. Eyes bleeding towards a flat red-black, she was on her feet, faster than was strictly natural.

Not fast enough though.

One of the vials from Severus’ sleeve hit the floor, releasing the potion within it. Choking fumes filled the air. “Anapneo,” he cast, clearing his own lungs, even as he heard the watcher start to cough.

Severus was on her in an instant, grabbing her from behind. His left hand pulled her tight against his chest, head twisted awkwardly to expose her neck to the point of his wand. This had been too easy. He had seen mere students, rank amateurs, put up a better fight. “How exceedingly disappointing. If I had been any other of the Dark Lord’s pets, that first spell would have been the Killing Curse,” he hissed in her ear, pressing the tip of his wand a little further into the taut line of her neck to drive home the point.

The sharp point of her elbow sank into his side with surprising force. He bent double against the sudden pain, losing his grip on the witch.

“Caught you monologuing,” she growled, voice pitched in that unearthly tone he had heard once before. She wasn’t coughing anymore. Severus forced himself up against the protest of bruised ribs to face the watcher. What he saw made his stomach drop and his heart skip a beat.

Professor Rosenberg was floating a good four feet above the floor, dark and fey in the maelstrom of her magic. Her black hair whipped wildly against a gale only it seemed to feel. The light-fixture hanging from the ceiling behind her was swinging wildly, framing her in sparks. She glared down at him, just out of arm’s reach. “If that’s how you want to play,” again that hollow, deep growl, “Then let’s play.”

That was all the warning he got.

One of the student’s desks ripped loose from the floor and sailed straight at Severus as if hurled by a giant, unseen hand. Abandoning all dignity, the Potions master threw himself to the side, bypassing a defensive spell in favor of something a little more proactive.

Blue energy shot from the tip of his wand, carrying with it a hex which would confuse and disorient his target. That is, if she had not brushed the spell away with an open hand as if swatting a bothersome gnat. Then, she thrust her hands forward as if shoving something, and a wall of force surged his way, rippling the floor like water and tossing up bits of shattered flagstone in its wake.

It was Severus’ turn to slam into the cabinets. The hastily cast shield he had thrown in the face of the assault had managed to soak up the worst of the blow, but even so, the wind was knocked from his lungs, leaving him gasping on the floor.

Luckily for him, the chandelier behind Professor Rosenberg chose that moment to abandon its frantic sparking in favor of a more emphatic explosion and ensuing gout of greenish flame. The sudden heat caught her by surprise, and the wandless witch spun to face the new, perceived threat.
Severus staggered to his feet, managing to suck down one great, welcome breath. He was furious, and loathe as he was to admit it, embarrassed to his core. He hadn’t been manhandled like that since he had been a student, and never by one of the wandless. All thoughts of delivering an object lesson fell by the wayside. This was no formalized wizard’s duel. The gloves were officially off.

Catching the gouts of flame with a quick, scooping motion of his wand, Severus encouraged them to further heights, sending them surging towards the watcher.

She threw up her left arm, braced as if supporting a shield. The torrent of flame hit whatever force she had erected around that arm, flowing away from her in green sheets. The abused flagstones, so recently torn by her magics, started to melt together. Her body bent into the effort, showing obvious strain, but not enough to prevent her from twisting catlike towards Severus and raking her right hand through the air in a clawing, grasping motion.

It felt as if the air itself had grabbed Severus by the robes and sent him flying towards the door of the classroom.

He landed at the feet of an amused-looking Albus Dumbledore.

Professor Rosenberg made a small, startled squeak as she caught sight of the Headmaster as well. Severus felt himself abruptly released from her spell, and he suffered the indignity of sliding down a few of the stairs before he managed to catch himself and stagger to his feet. Behind him, the green flames abruptly died.

“He started it!” Professor Rosenberg blurted.

Severus looked over his shoulder, expression warring between irritation and incredulity. Her hair was red again, but her wide eyes were still darkened pools. Nevertheless, he was strongly reminded of a small child caught with her hand in a cookie jar, a mental image which went far beyond ludicrous.

Albus coughed lightly over what had suspiciously sounded like the beginning of a giggle. Severus glared at him, spine stiffened with anger and embarrassment. Without a word, the Headmaster stepped lightly down the flight of stairs, passing Severus with a slight nod, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. As he walked past Professor Rosenberg, bits of shattered or melted flooring reassembled into the original forms, leaping and melting back together. The mangled desk leapt from the shattered cabinets, reforming as it sailed back to its position amongst its brethren. Even the tangled, burned wreckage of the light fixture put itself back together and rose to the ceiling, a jerky, rapid reversal of the destruction the two of them had wrought.

Albus seemed to notice none of it, stopping briefly at one of the cabinets to retrieve what looked for all the world like a silver candy dish, before turning on his heel and walking back past his two silent professors. At the door, he paused again, pinning both of them with a twinkling glance. “If you must continue working through whatever this may be, might I humbly request that you relocate to somewhere on the grounds?” Then, with a smile and another nod, Albus quit the room, shutting the door behind him.

The only sound in the classroom was Severus’ shallow, wheezing breaths. Now that the fading adrenaline wasn’t blunting his other senses, he was getting the sneaking suspicion that he might have cracked a rib. He pressed a hand against his side gingerly, and covered the ensuing grimace by glaring at the person who had caused it.

Professor Rosenberg was blushing deeply, obviously embarrassed, but she was also obviously trying to repress a growing, impish smile on her face. “So, uh… Where should we relocate to?”
Unbelievable.
Willow looked around the clearing, still a little unsure that they had managed to catch all of the fires Professor Snape had just lit. They had removed themselves to a small field in the woods beyond the grounds of Hogwarts after their little incident in the classroom. Apparently the area really was called the Forbidden Forest, Willow had been half convinced that Hagrid had been pulling her leg when he called it that back on her grand tour. Okay, maybe it did seem a little forbidding, what with the dark, overhanging trees and all, but nothing had disturbed their exchange of spell and counterspell as of yet. Well, nothing except the smoldering tree branch on the ground behind her.

“How precisely would you go about restraining an opponent without injury?” Professor Snape asked, arms crossed with wand in hand.

Willow shrugged, turning back to the task at hand. “Under what circumstances? I mean, are we talking about someone I’m already fighting with? Or did I get to prepare a trap ahead of time? How long do I want them restrained? Can they do magic?” While she was definitely learning a great deal about wand magic through this little give and take, and that was pretty exciting, there was still a little flutter in her stomach. The entire situation felt like a pop quiz, or worse yet, a pop job interview. She’d probably spend the next few days second guessing her answers, not because they had been wrong, but because they would have been more right if she had been given the chance to study and prepare. However, this was a golden opportunity that she was not willing to let ass, and she did take some comfort in the fact that Professor Snape was in the same boat she was. After this round of questions, it would be her turn to wheedle a spell or two out of the man.

The Potions master tapped his index finger on his wand, obviously considering the variables. “Minimal preparation. Your target is not magically inclined, and you wish to render him incapable of attack for at least one hour.”

“Well okay then. That’s easy. I’d wrap the guy up in air.”

“Explain.”

“Here,” she picked up a handful of twigs. “Watch this.” Willow tossed the sticks towards Professor Snape, reached out with her magic, and said, “Thicken!” The twigs slowed to a stop half way between them, hanging motionless in the air.

Professor Snape stepped forward, surveying her handiwork with a critical eye. He tried poking one of the sticks with a finger, but the attempt stopped a few millimeters short of its target, blocked by the blanket of altered air that held the sticks in place. He then tried grabbing a stick, but as he wrapped his hand around it, the coat of thickened air gave way only slightly, stopping his hand from reaching its goal. He tried pulling both air and twig from its suspended position, but to no avail.

Willow walked around the mass of floating sticks, ducking under a low-hanging tree branch, and stood next to the Potions master. “That one’s pretty good for most magic users too, if they need to speak or use their hands to cast a spell,” she explained. “But if there’s any chance that they can cast spells with just their minds, I tend to lean towards preferentially affecting the flow of time around them instead. That buys me a couple extra seconds, and once they’ve slowed to a crawl, I hit them with a sleep spell.”

“And all you’ve done is to alter the condition of the air surrounding the target?” Professor Snape
Willow nodded in response. “Yup, it bunches all of the molecules together, and let me tell you, this spell sends the theoretical physicists over at the Council’s labs into fits. They keep having me cast this spell on things inside more and more powerful microscope stages. It just makes their machines fritz out.” Snape gave her another scowl variant. She was still working on its exact meaning, but she had a sneaking suspicion that this expression tended to crop up whenever she said something he didn’t understand completely. The not knowing seemed to drive him nuts, a mindset which she could well understand, even if he was being a little extreme about it. “Our researchers aren’t having much luck figuring out how it works, especially since the people I cast it on can still breathe and all, but it does. How do you guys tend to do it?”

“Paralysis,” he replied tersely, stepping away from the mass of sticks to observe it from a slight distance.

Willow’s brow furrowed in thought. “Isn’t that kind of risky?” When her words earned only an arched eyebrow in response, she elaborated. “I mean, I can paralyze someone, but it’s all about how much, you know. If I don’t hit them with a strong enough spell, they just get Botox-face and keep coming. If the spell is too strong, I can seize up all of their muscles, including their heart, which isn’t great either.”

“The spell is very superficial,” he explained. “Its effects do not penetrate far enough into the target to cause any lasting harm.” Willow found herself the subject of a long, considering look. “I could always demonstrate it for you.”

“You mean on me,” Willow said. It wasn’t really a question.

“If you would permit me.”

The obsessive control-freak in Willow took that moment to rear her ugly head, but the knee-jerk reaction was ruthlessly stamped down. If she was going to be fighting alongside these Order wizards, there needed to be at least some foundation of trust.

At the same time, trust runs both ways. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

At the surprised expression on Professor Snape’s face, Willow made a mental note to lay off any comment that even verged on innuendo. The guy looked like his eyebrows were about to crawl into his hairline.

Funny thing was, he looked even more surprised when he answered, “I accept.”

“Okay,” she said, sounding a lot more confident than she felt. A wave of her hand released the twigs from their spell. They tumbled to the ground like oversized pick-up-sticks. Willow didn’t want to risk any weird magical resonance mucking up the works. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face off with Professor Snape. “Okay, give me thirty seconds. I want to see if I can get out of it on my own.”

“Only thirty seconds?” There was a dubious note in his voice. Obviously, Snape didn’t expect her to be able to break his spell.

Willow just smiled. She’d just see about that. “Start with thirty, and we might step it up from there. Unless something goes wrong, and then you know, cut the whole thing short.”

Professor Snape gave her a brief nod. “You may want to sit. It is not uncommon to experience
muscle spasms at the onset of this spell. You may fall.”

“Oh.” Willow dropped to the ground, legs crossed easily under her. “That makes sense.” And giving her that warning was kind of thoughtful, come to think of it. Landing face-first, or butt-first for that matter, on the ground didn’t sound like a whole lot of fun. She rested her hands on her knees and nodded. “I’m ready.”

Professor Snape said nothing. He simply flicked his wand towards her like a fencer. The first time he had done that had taken her by surprise, she hadn’t seen a wand wizard cast without words before, but at this point, the non-verbal spell was old hat. It hit her like an electric shock, tingling across her skin and crackling through her hair. Sure enough, Willow’s muscles spasmed uncomfortably and locked into place.

She couldn’t even move her eyes, which was all kinds of ooky. They remained locked somewhere above Professor Snape’s right shoulder. She had an almost compulsive need to blink.

Willow reached out with her mind, probing the extent of the spell. Sure enough, its effects only penetrated the outermost layer of her muscles. She had no problem breathing, and her heart was pounding away inside her chest, echoing the uncomfortable trapped sensation that was starting to creep into her careful calm.

Concentrate.

There didn’t seem to be a central source to this spell, the effects were spread pretty evenly over her whole body. Without a focal point, her only way to get out of this spell rapidly was to erode the whole thing.

No time like the present.

Willow started tugging at the raw energy which powered the spell, unraveling it like an old sock. It was a slow process, comparatively speaking, and she had to admit that if Professor Snape had been keeping a handle on the spell, maintaining it with more energy, she would be in a tough spot. As it was, it took her a few seconds before she could wiggle her fingers and toes, and a few more before her arms and legs relaxed out of the spell’s stranglehold. In fact, Professor Snape raised his wand for his counterspell at the end of her thirty seconds just as Willow gasped loudly and leaned forward, finally freeing her core from the effects of the paralysis.

“That’s…” she said breathlessly. “That’s kind of nasty.”

Professor Snape made a noncommittal grumble in response. Willow sat back up, brushing her hair out of her eyes and looking at him. He seemed a little disgruntled, as if he really hadn’t been expecting her to be able to free herself. She was torn between the desire to smirk in smug satisfaction and a slightly more diplomatic urge to downplay the deed in order to save the man some of his dignity. She could always admit that if he had kept control of the spell instead of letting it run its own course, she would have had a lot more trouble escaping…

The smirk won out. A girl had to keep some of her secrets. “What’s the incantation for that one?”

“Petrificus totalis.” The words were delivered with a definite glower, a scowl-variant which needed no translation. It was clear that somebody wasn’t very happy about being upstaged.

Somebody was going to have to get over it and fast.

Okay, my turn,” she said, rising to her feet. At his sour expression, she favored him with one of her sweetest smiles. Somebody was definitely going to have to get over it and fast.
To give him credit, Professor Snape schooled his features and raised his wand to the ready. “I am prepared.”

Wand magic really did remind her of fencing, come to think of it. He was going to try to parry the spell, catch it with his wand and turn it aside. Parries and ripostes, that was how it worked. She’d just have to make sure her spell hit his wand hand first and hardest. No sweat.

This time she gave him as little warning as he had. Drawing on a little extra energy, she bypassed the trigger word and simply clenched her first, linking that motion to the desired magical effect.

The spell slammed into place with ruthless speed. Professor Snape’s wand had only the time to move a fraction of an inch before grinding to a halt. Unlike Snape, Willow kept a thread on this casting, ready to pour more force into it if needed.

By the time her count had reached ten, the professor’s face had started to turn a dull red under the strain of whatever technique he was attempting. Whatever he was doing might have worked if she had left the magical weaves alone, there was a definite pressure building against the cage of air. She had to hand it to the him, the man had mental discipline to spare. She wound more bonds around his wand hand, just in case.

At twenty seconds, she caught a whiff of something under his carefully controlled emotions. Raw frustration. It only built as the time neared twenty-five seconds. As they closed in on thirty, Willow stepped forward.

“Okay, that’s time,” she said, giving Professor Snape the warning that she was about to release him. The strain in his face and the undertones of his aura didn’t change one bit. Willow braced herself against whatever it was he was still trying and raised her hands to either catch or defend. “Release,” she said, letting the spell unravel.

Sure enough, Snape’s wand abruptly finished a tight hook, sending a blast of force whistling in all directions. Willow’s hair whipped around wildly, buffeted by the delayed defensive spell. They both staggered, but Willow still managed to hold her balance long enough to brace him from falling, struggling a little under the man’s weight. He definitely had to be wearing at least twenty acres of black fabric, which did little to lighten the looming Potions master.

He jerked away from her grasp abruptly, irritation stamped plainly across his features.

“Oh, yeah. He doesn’t like to be touched.

She was about to apologize when Professor Snape sucked in a sharp breath through his nose and pressed a hand against his side. “Whoa there, are you okay?” she asked, genuinely concerned.

“It is nothing,” he snapped, dropping his hands and stiffening as if nothing had happened.

“Yeah right.” This was a noobie slayer prank, hiding an injury for no other reason than pride. “Seriously, what just happened?”

Anger darkened his features still further. “If you must know, your manhandling just reminded me that you broke a cabinet with my ribcage earlier this morning.”

_Cabinet… Ribcage… Oh crap! “Why didn’t you say something?”_ Willow demanded, irritation of her own covering for the fact that she was feeling a little blindsided by the guilt that had just hit her in the gut.

“I said it is nothing!”
It couldn’t be too bad of an injury, for him to be bellowing like that. However, this was just silly. “Look, I can fix you right up,” Willow offered, wanting to make this right.

“I said that I was fine,” he insisted from between audibly grinding teeth. “I believe that it is your turn to propose a hypothetical question for me.”

Willow was fuming. As if she was going to ask him to attack or defend anything when she now knew that he was injured. That she had injured him. “Fine then, how would you go about healing broken bones, severe bruising, and internal bleeding?” she demanded, refusing to be swayed from the topic at hand.

“I have potions in my quarters for all three, all of which I will be imbibing once we have finished with the day’s business.” His reply was terse and his black eyes looked hard as glass.

Willow put her hands on her hips and glared. “What potions? How are they made?”

“I doubt that you would remember the details if I were to recite the intricacies of brewing three separate potions.” His verbal dodge was cold and dismissive.

At that, Willow marched to her bag, which had been resting under a particularly sickly-looking oak tree, and pulled out a little notepad and a red pen. Turning on her heel, she stormed back over to the man and shoved pad and pen both in his face. “Then write it down.”

Professor Snape narrowed his eyes, which were already glittering with anger, and snatched the pen and paper from her hands. Without a word, he started writing lines of spidery text on the blank page. Despite her own irritation, Willow caught herself feeling more than a little impressed when he reached the third page and showed little sign of slowing. If he had demanded that she produce three complicated potion formulas from memory, she would probably have been left flat footed and feeling stupid. There were definitely some areas of magic which she felt deserved to be performed with references at hand.

Several more little pages of potion formulas later, Professor Snape turned the notebook around and presented it to her, face as hard-edged and angry as it had been at the onset of this little demonstration.

Willow took the pen and little notepad in hand without really looking at them and tucked both into her back pocket. “Well?” she asked. When her prompt was met with stony silence, she continued. “Now it’s your turn to ask how I would do the same thing. That’s how this game works, right?”

At this close range, Willow could see that there was a little muscle on the side of Professor Snape’s jaw that was starting to twitch under the pressure of his clenched jaw. Even so, he abjectly refused to speak.

“Well, Professor Snape,” Willow spoke, sarcasm tainting her answer to the question he was unwilling to ask. “Once I checked out the injury to see what it was, I would pull a little energy from the surrounding area, not enough from any one thing to do it any harm, and I would use that energy to ramp up your body’s own healing processes.”

For a moment, there was an interested, almost hungry, gleam in his eyes before Professor Snape’s expression settled back into its flat, disapproving stare.

She took her previous comparison back. No slayer had ever been this stubborn about dodging a free heal. “Lucky for us, I seem to have a test subject on hand. Want to see a demonstration?”

“You are not going to drop this topic are you?” he finally asked, even if his tone made the question
more of an angry declaration.

“Nope.”

That muscle in his cheek was positively jumping now. “Then do as you must, so that we might continue on to more important matters.”

It wasn’t the most gracious invitation, but Willow guessed it would have to do. Stepping a little closer, she positioned her hand over the part of Professor Snape’s side he had grasped earlier. She darted a quick glance up at his face and found that he was staring flatly at some point far beyond her right shoulder. The guilty pangs hit her again with full force. “I’m sorry I tossed you into the cabinets. I guess I’ve been sparring with slayers too long and didn’t think.”

There wasn’t one iota of change in his distant expression. Willow just sighed and turned back to the task at hand. She supposed that she would be kind of pissed too if he had broken a piece of furniture with her kidneys. A tendril of magic let her know that his ribs weren’t actually broken, but she had apparently done a real number on his intercostal muscles. True to her word, she reached down through herself and pulled enough energy from the clearing around them to heal the injury. Wisps of her hair floated in her peripheral vision, white-streaked and slightly luminous. Her senses always heightened when she performed these kinds of spells. She could taste every blade of grass, feel every turning autumn leaf on the surrounding trees whose energy she borrowed.

Snape shuddered under her hand as the spell took hold, but that was totally expected. She had healed herself this way more than once, and it kind of felt like all of the itching and aching of the whole process was condensed into one moment before fading away to nothing. Not the most pleasant of sensations, but it sure beat the old fashioned way.

Worried that there might be other injuries caused by their little row earlier, Willow delved further. No head injuries, that was good. This close, he kind of smelled like her memory of the old Magic Box, all herbs and spices and musty spell components. No more busted ribs and definitely no internal bleeding, more good news. His heart rate was high though, not that she could see a reason why. *Huh.* When she reached his left arm, it was Willow’s turn to jerk away from him as if scalded.

“What is that!?” she asked, truly horrified. There was some kind of spell there, a curse or geas pulsing with dark magic. To her sharper senses, it felt like a festering morass of anger and hate and pain. There were also powerful wards surrounding and containing it, the only excuse she could find as to why she had not sensed it before.

“What sense,” Professor Snape demanded, pulling back from her as well, crossing his arms in a manner which was both imposing and defensive.

“Your arm,” she pointed directly at the source of the dark energy. Now that she had felt the spell, no amount of warding could hide it from her again. It was literally oozing black magic. “What happened? How can you stand to-”

“I do not wish to discuss it,” he interrupted.

“But,” Willow tried again.

“This topic is closed. We will not discuss it again.” His words cracked like a whip. His aura reminded Willow of a storm cloud, dark and roiling, with thunder and lightning flashing just under the surface. There was anger in his face, but also a deeper emotion that he quickly concealed. Willow honestly could not tell if that fleeting expression had held fear or shame.
Whatever it had been, Willow was smart enough to recognize that she had stumbled across something very personal. She figured that she had been more than pushy enough for one day and decided to let the subject drop, at least for now. “Okay,” she said slowly, not that her easy capitulation seemed to make much of a dent in the man’s inner turmoil.

Flailing around for a new topic, Willow pulled the little notebook from her pocket again. Flipping through the pages, she stopped at the beginning of the second recipe, the one entitled, ‘For Deep Bruising.’ “Hey, I recognize this!” See? See me dropping the subject? She darted back to her satchel, pad in hand. “At least, I think I do,” she admitted and started rummaging through her bag, more than happy to let herself be diverted by the change of subject.

A shadow fell across her field of vision. She looked up and saw that Professor Snape had followed her and was looking over her shoulder, expression as flat and guarded as she had ever seen. “Here, hold these,” she said, shoving a pile of class notes into his hands before diving back into the bag. Dark magic? What dark magic? See, we’re on a totally new subject now. “Here it is,” she said, triumphantly, comparing the potion recipe she had outlined on one of her transparencies to the one Snape had written into her notebook. She rose to show him the two formulas just in time to see one of her papers disappear inside a fold of the Potions master’s robes.

She blinked in surprise and looked at him searchingly. Professor Snape’s face was still a flat mask, his dark eyes were even more unreadable than usual, but from what little of his emotions she could read, something about that page had seemed to set his mind at ease. Well, not exactly ease, but instead of radiating vibes that were literally screaming ‘fight or flight,’ he now seemed content to wait and watch.

Willow bit her lower lip before deciding to pretend that she hadn’t seen a thing. “The two recipes are pretty close,” she handed them over for his inspection. “Some of the measurements are a bit off, but the ingredients are all the same.” A quick scan through her bag would determine which page he had taken, and there wasn’t a single thing in there that she wasn’t already prepared to share with her co-instructor and their future students. She could see little danger in letting him keep the paper, at least temporarily, and her instincts were telling her to let whatever this was play through to the end.

“The recipe you have is the widely accepted version,” Professor Snape said at long length, voice even and smooth. Calm, covering a tense readiness, like a predator lying in wait. “My version is slightly more potent.” Despite the slickly sedate image he was currently portraying, the statement still wasn’t a boast. His words conveyed the simple truth, as if he were repeating results from a clinical trial. Which perhaps he was. Willow felt inclined to believe him.

“I might have to pick your brain for more of your improved formulas later,” she said, meaning it as a compliment. Professor Snape just looked at her, his expression weighing and assessing. Willow felt uncomfortably like a bug under a magnifying glass. Something about his dark regard made her want to bolster her mental defenses, even though she had felt no overt intrusion. “Or not,” she backpedalled, wondering what his problem was. “So I guess that was my turn, with the healing and the potions and all. Unless you have any questions?” She was getting flustered by his dark regard and continuing silence. “Right. Never mind. Uh… Your turn?”

“How do you silence someone who is babbling?” was his immediate response, sarcasm dripping from each word.

And now he was making fun of her. Willow was starting to feel like she was getting conversational whiplash here. “I stick cookies in his mouth,” she said, trying to break the intolerable tension which had overtaken their little clearing with a little joke. An admittedly bad joke. She was
rewarded with a flat, emotionless stare. *Tough crowd.* “Okay fine, I only did that once, and it’s kind of a funny story in retrospect. Way in retrospect. As for a spell, I set up a field that interrupts vibrations.”

“Explain.”

“It’s another air thing. Sound only works if there’s air, because it has to vibrate something to work. No sound in space right?” Willow settled back into the explanations, relieved to be back on a safe topic. All thoughts of the festering curse in Professor Snape’s arm and the swiped notes in his robes were safely set aside and filed for later. “I just set up a wall of energy that stops the vibrations dead. Like a mini-vacuum separating one area from another. I can soundproof a whole room, in case you want to keep people outside from overhearing, or just set it up around a single person. What about you?”

“Typically, I find that threats will suffice, though not in this particular circumstance.”

Well, that was all sorts of droll. “What exactly are you trying to say?” Willow said with a little grin.

“Only that I am considering practicing my Silencing Charm.”

Willow scowled, but there wasn’t any real anger behind the expression. “I don’t need my voice to cast spells you know.”

“I believe that you will find your own threats to be equally ineffective.”

“You would look really good with hot pink hair.”

That was followed by dead silence. Willow was grinning again.

Professor Snape just scowled ferociously. This was a new version of that expression, but Willow was about half convinced that it was no more serious than her own had been moments before. “I stand corrected.”

“Hmm, Silencing Charm huh? I’m going to run with the obvious and say that spell silences someone,” Willow mused out loud.

“Indeed.”

“What about if you wanted to have a private conversation?”

*Muffliato,* was his immediate response. “The spell creates a pocket around which a low buzzing sound fills the ears of any individual standing within a set diameter.”

“That sounds kind of neat,” Willow admitted.

That earned a thin, crooked smile. It might have even been an honest one. “It should, I invented it.”

Now that was definitely bragging. “Okay smarty pants, try it out on me.” When he raised his wand, and a lone eyebrow, to do just that, she added, “And if I could make one teensy, little suggestion?”

Down went the wand again. “Yes.”

“I broke that last spell by dissolving away the magic you put into it. If you keep pouring energy into this one, I’ll have a harder time.” Willow was already keeping enough secrets from Professor Snape, the rest of the school’s staff, and the Order’s members. And they from her. Maybe a little
more trust would go a long way.

“I see.” Snape said blandly, but there was a hard glitter in his eyes that let Willow know he had taken the advice to heart. She’d have a much harder time tossing off the effects of any of his future spells. His wand swept forward again with an emphatic flick. “Muffliato.”
Chapter 12

It was midnight, the witching hour. A misguided name, in Severus’ opinion, as he was very often the only witch or wizard up and roaming about the school at that time. This evening, for example, every other professor with one drop of sense was already abed, catching as much sleep as they could before the students descended on the school like a plague of possessed locusts, helplessly compelled to find new and creative ways to deny their instructors a moment’s true rest all semester. And yet here Severus was, sitting behind the desk of his office, losing much-needed sleep over a wandless witch.

The same wandless witch who had spent the majority of the last day dancing a circle around his own spells.

The same one who had penned the slip of paper he currently held in his hands.

It was entitled, ‘A ritual for cleansing natural poisons from beverages,’ a clear enough explanation. The directions were equally simplistic. A description of each reagent was listed in blue ink (‘One white feather, Four pinches of salt…’). The mind-numbingly simple steps of the ritual were outlined in black ink (‘Take the container holding the poisoned liquid in your left hand, Face north…’), with comments and annotations inserted between the directions in red text (‘If the feather doesn’t turn an olive green during this step, DO NOT DRINK THE BEVERAGE, start from step 3 and try again’).

It all seemed so straightforward. There had to be some kind of secret here, hidden between the color-coded lines of text. Something to explain why Professor Rosenberg had been able to counter so many of his spells in manners which defied every single law of wand magic he could care to cite. And yet, he could find nothing to tell him how she had done it.

It was infuriating.

Severus sank back into his chair, disgusted scowl set firmly on his face. Subconsciously, his hand went to the inside of his left forearm, scratching idly. When he realized what he was doing, he forced himself to relax, curving both hands around the chair’s carved armrests. Ever since Professor Rosenberg had inexplicably been able to sense the Dark Mark on him, it had been tingling in a highly uncomfortable manner. The sensation was purely psychosomatic, of that Severus was sure. The few Death Eaters who had tried to tamper with their marks, either through injudicious curiosity or a desire to remove its effects, had found a little surprise waiting for them. The Dark Lord had woven a complicated tapestry of spells into the Mark’s construct, one of which triggered a nasty reprisal in response to any attempt to alter the weave. Such was the Dark Lord’s trust in his most zealous followers.

Oh, there were ways to get around that particular effect, but none that would not also reverberate along the connection, alerting the Dark Lord to the change. Certainly none that Severus could perform that would not shatter his cover completely.

He should have never allowed Professor Rosenberg to heal him. The responsibility for that failure fell squarely upon his shoulders. Her magics were too foreign, her methods too opaque, to take such a risk. He had permitted frustration and ire to guide his actions, opening himself up to any number of unforeseen side effects. And why? Because the watcher had the uncanny ability to whip him into an irrational fury without even seeming to try.
The entire incident was an unforgivable breach on his part. What if Professor Rosenberg had accidentally altered the Mark, blundering around in its construct, full of good intentions? Or triggered its connection to the Dark Lord? What if she had simply decided to remove it, soaking the thing into herself, as she had seemed able to do with the overwhelming majority of his spells? The potential ramifications were disastrous.

What could have possibly possessed him to let her in like that? The watcher seemed to have an unconscious ability to get under his skin, twisting him up and turning him around until he found himself inadvertently laying things bare that were better left secret, not to mention being dashed into cabinetry. What was worse, it was all done with an air of completely innocent ignorance. Even her outbursts of temper seemed almost child-like, but he had felt the essence of her power, wild and untamed, that first day in the Headmaster’s office. He had seen things in her mind which meshed in no logical way with the quick humor and bubbling effervescence she had exhibited since.

If he could just understand how such a creature worked, how her mind and magic functioned, then maybe he could make sense of all of her contradictions. Maybe he could also ascertain why she had been able to defeat his spells with such effortless ease.

Severus was not blind to his own failings. He was more than self-aware enough to recognize the symptoms of a deeply bruised ego. It was not that Professor Rosenberg was stronger than him. That had been obvious from their first encounter, and he was grateful that her strength had been added to the Order’s cause. It was that even the strongest witches and wizards had their blind spots, their weaknesses, for those clever enough to know where to look. Severus had been able to sustain his position as the Order’s sole spy among the Death Eaters, powerful Dark wizards all, by understanding and exploiting those weaknesses.

And therein lay the core of his frustration.

There seemed to be no understanding Professor Rosenberg. Nothing about the wandless witch, not one single recognizable thing about her, made the slightest bit of sense to Severus. Not her magic. Not her actions. Not her light-hearted teasing and quicksilver changes in mood. Not her enthusiastic curiosity or the way her eyes sometimes seemed decades too old for her elfin face. Not the hints of memory he had been able to skim from her mind in her few unguarded moments or the way that she sometimes seemed to be able to read him like an open book in turn. Nothing.

It was absolutely maddening.

She cheerfully defied any of Severus’ attempts to categorize her. And while he was struggling to understand even the slightest aspect of her power, Professor Rosenberg, who could barely Side-Along Apparate without causing incalculable damage to any enchantment in her wake, had torn through every single spell he sent her way with seeming ease.

It was galling.

Severus just knew that if he could tease out the true nature of her magic - the core principles behind her spells, the source of their energy, the rules that guided its manipulation - then the pieces of her puzzle would start to fit together.

He had taken the paper from Professor Rosenberg’s notes in order to study it, to start unraveling her secrets. It was hours later, and he had made no discernible progress. Instead of revealing any deeper truths of wandless magic, the sheet of paper read like an arcane scavenger hunt. Severus’ search was starting to take on a rather unfortunate overtone of desperation.

If simply reading the sheet would not suffice, there was only one option that remained open to him.
Severus could attempt the ritual itself. He had the directions. The reagents were readily available, with a little bit of creativity. He had selected this particular page from among so many for the simple fact that it had seemed so very accessible. Now, having read and reread the page until he could recite it in its entirety forwards or backwards, it seemed that he was left with little choice. Not if he wanted any sleep this night.

Decision finally made, Severus rose to his feet. Obviously, if he was going to attempt to counteract a poison, then a poison was the first thing he needed. There were many possibilities hidden among the jars and stoppered vials in his private stores, one of the many reasons why he did not enjoy entertaining light fingered students in his office. However, the instructions had stipulated that the ritual would only work on ‘natural’ poisons, and that went far to limit his pool of candidates. Severus weighed his choices before settling on an infusion of hemlock. He decanted a small amount of his stores into a self-labeling vial, and slipped it into a pocket alongside a dose of the appropriate antidote.

Retrieving the page of instructions from his desk, Severus left the room, securing locks both magical and mundane behind him. The corridors were as dark as one might expect for a dungeon, but that was soon remedied. He allowed a pinprick of light to appear at the tip of his wand, illuminating the page in his hands and guiding his steps.

Salt would be easy enough to find. He had a small jar, rarely touched, among the herbs and spices in his quarter’s often neglected kitchen. The same could be said for a pitcher of water, as good a beverage as any, he supposed. Severus distinctly remembered that there was a bell of one kind or another stashed in one of the cabinets in the trophy room. He could only hope that the thing was actually made of silver, or else he would just have to Transfigure something and wait to see if the spell would respond to an altered reagent. His difficulty in obtaining the white feather would completely rely on the type of wards Filius placed on his own storeroom.

Severus refolded the piece of paper and slipped it back into one of the larger pockets of his robe. A simple Relaxing Charm would smooth away any creases or crumples before he returned the page to Professor Rosenberg’s seemingly ubiquitous satchel. Upon reaching the top of the staircase the led from the dungeons, he let the light spell on his wand fade away.

Severus was more than used to roaming the hallways of Hogwarts in relative peace and secrecy. The trick was to know where a light was needed and where it would only serve to wake an irritable painting. Or forewarn an errant student, for that matter. The ambient light in the entrance hall was more than adequate for his needs.

Severus stuck to the deepest shadows out of old habit, knowing that his dark robes and hair would be all but invisible to any casual observer. If left to his own devices, he could traverse the length and breadth of Hogwarts with far less sound than the school’s resident ghosts. Certainly with more discretion than Peeves, who had usually retired at this hour due to a lack of interesting targets.

His robes whispered against the stone floors as he wound through the corridors and ascended the stairs to the levels above, the slight sound the only sign of his passing.

The Charms classroom was unlocked and unwarded when Severus came to its doorstep. Severus entered the darkened room and relit his wand, casting the faintest of glows. From many an overhead break room conversation, Severus knew that Filius bought white feathers in bulk. His first years apparently went through them in droves, trying to learn to levitate objects. Between the ones that zipped around the room like stray arrows, crumbled to corrosive dust, or erupted into flames, the Charms professor would hardly notice a few missing feathers from amongst so many potential disasters.
Severus poked around in the room’s many cabinets, checking each for wards or alarms. Apparently Filius was far more trusting with his supplies than Severus himself, because none were in evidence. Considering the circumstances, the Potions master could not find reason to complain, it certainly made his own life easier, but that did not keep a twist of mild derision from his lips.

He found the feathers in the fourth cabinet he checked, bundled together in neat stacks with silvery thread. Severus slipped the topmost one from its ties and inspected it closely under the light of his wand. The instructions for the ritual had called for a single white feather, not a mostly white feather with one gray spot on the barbs or a brown slash on the shaft. If all went according to plan, he would only need one feather. However, Severus was not exactly known for his starry-eyed optimism, and he would need fresh reagents if the ritual failed upon his first attempt. It took a little while, but he was able to find three feathers that met the specifications for the spell. All disappeared into his robes and he returned the others to their place inside the storage cabinet.

Navigating through the dimly lit desks and chairs, Severus doused his light and quit the room as quietly as he had entered, the latch of the doorknob making the softest of clicks behind him.

The trophy room was only a short walk from Filius’ domain. It was under Argus’ purview, and as such, was kept under tight lock and key. Multiple locks, come to think of it. Some were simple mechanical devices of toggles and latches, others held minor enchantments offered by any number of reputable shops. All were easily defeated with simple cantrips. There was little point to the effort, but Argus seemed to enjoy surrounding himself with the appearance of magical aptitude, even though he actually had none of his own. He might not possess the wit to realize it, but Argus was only fooling the youngest of Hogwarts’ students. For once, Severus found no pleasure in the idea of disabusing the man of his fragile, misguided fantasy. If the Potions master had pitied anyone, it would have been the bitter Squib.

The meager light from Severus’ wand was magnified many times inside the trophy room itself. The crystal cases held cups and plaques, trophies and medals, all cleaned and polished by generations of students in detention. They glittered brightly under the half-light, flashing in shades of gold, silver, and bronze.

Severus could remember the particular award he sought, he had not been completely immune to the odd punishment of his own during his tenure as a student, but he had no idea where in the cases the bell might currently reside. The displays were shuffled periodically as new awards were added over the years. He would know his target when he saw it: a silvery bell, the size of his fist, embellished with engravings.

There were awards stored here that dated back for generations. Plaques listed each year’s Head Boy and Girl spanning beyond living memory. Trophies commemorated competitions and achievements past. Potter and Diggory’s Triwizard Cup would have ended up displayed here, had events not ended as they had. That particular award had been spirited away by Aurors, seized as evidence in the investigation of Diggory’s death. Much good it was doing them, the Ministry seemed congenitally incapable of recognizing any facet of the truth at the moment, even if events conspired to rub their collective noses in it. If the Cup ever was released back to the school, and Severus doubted that would happen any time in the foreseeable future, he highly doubted that it would see the light of day, tainted as it was by the events surrounding the competition.

It took some searching, but Severus finally found the bell stashed in an ignominious corner behind a Quidditch championship platter. A quick charm revealed that the award was not just silver-colored, but was true silver through and through. The engravings on it indicating that in 1879, Tiberius Adelaide had performed some notable deed or another. Severus cared not. It was silver, it would ring: that was all that mattered.
A tap of the wand on each catch reset the locks, but when Severus turned to leave, he found himself under the regard of Argus’ thrice-be-damned cat. Mrs. Norris swished her tatty tail back and forth before turning and sauntering away, no doubt in the direction of Argus’s quarters. Severus felt a sudden urge to kick the meddlesome beast.

Turning aside any queries of Filch’s would not be a significant challenge, but Severus had no interest in being caught in the first place. Extinguishing his wand, he slipped back into the shadows, heading towards the dungeons and his own quarters.

Severus caught sight of Filch as reached the first stairwell. The man was looking very harried, knees bare and knobby under a rumpled sleeping shirt, lantern in hand. He was muttering to his cat, as usual. “I understand, my dear, but the students are not here yet. Who would be breaking into the trophy room at this hour?”

Who indeed?

Severus left the man to his little mystery, descending into the school’s dungeon once again, leaving only sleepy mutters and the snores of various paintings in his passing. The return to his chambers met with no other interruptions.

Safely behind his own wards, Severus set to work. He cleared his table, cleaning its surface to a mirror shine. He then filled a small pitcher with water and placed it on the table, clear liquid sloshing slightly inside the green glass. He poured enough of the infusion of hemlock into the pitcher to make an adult of his height and weight gravely ill, but not fatally so. The antidote, his failsafe if the experiment did not succeed, he placed on his kitchen counter.

Severus cast a quick spell to orient himself, and traced a line on the table in chalk which indicated true north. He then arranged the rest of his reagents along the edge of the table, all within easy reach: the silver bell, the jar of salt from his stores, one of the white feathers. Anything else he found in his pockets that might exhibit even a spark of magic, from his potions, to his absorbancy cloth, to his wand, was banished to the kitchen as well, hopefully far enough away that they would not interact with so simple a wandless spell. The page from Professor Rosenberg’s notes, he placed next to the pitcher.

Everything was in readiness. Everything except Severus himself.

Professor Rosenberg had mentioned intent in passing, somewhere between philosophizing over disorientation spells and temporarily blinding him with flashing lights. She had said that intent was the key. She had meant it as another tip on how to defeat her spells, for all the apparent good it had done him. She had insisted that all other things being equal, her spells would still fail if her will did.

It made a sideways kind of sense. Magically adept children often cast spells without wands. It was one of the ways the Ministry identified potential witches and wizards from amongst Muggle families. Those first fumbling steps often came as an accident, when a child wanted something very badly or was frightened or angry. The spells were often unfocused and uncontrollable, discipline would come with their first wand and training, but all seemed to be linked to an emotional drive. With age, these accidental castings faded away, and only the most minor of spells could be cast without the use of a wand.

The link to emotion remained though. A fully trained wizard still had to believe that the spell would work, had to want it to work, to bring it to fruition. Perhaps that was the one trait that linked all types of magic.
Intent was the key.

Severus cleared his mind of anything except the ritual and his desire to rid the water in his pitcher of hemlock. Then, as prepared as was feasible, he took the pitcher in his left hand and turned to face north.

With his right hand, he sprinkled one pinch of salt across the surface of the water, moving clockwise around the lip of the pitcher. After the last grain fell, he picked up the bell, ringing it vigorously. Ruthlessly squelching the thought that he must look absolutely ridiculous, Severus replaced the bell on the table, lifted the pitcher to eye level, and said, “Purgo.” Severus felt an unexpected wave of magical energy, exhilarating and exhausting, flow from his body and into the pitcher. Wand magic required energy and focus, but not like this. It was as though some external force was drawing the very life from his body and directing it into the pitcher. He had been expecting something akin to Transfiguration, but instead, it seemed that Severus was somehow using his body’s own energy to drive the poison out of the water.

Severus took a moment to steady himself. Then, turning to the east, he repeated the process, fixing his goal in his mind like a mandala. Then to the south. Each cycle seemed to take a little bit more energy on his part. Then to the west. The pitcher was a lead weight in his hand. Only when he was facing north again did he replace the pitcher on the table. He then took a deep breath and picked up the feather. Severus dipped it into the liquid and began to stir, counterclockwise as stipulated in the instructions, for four rotations.

When he pulled the feather from the water, the parts of it which had been submerged had turned a virulent shade of olive green.

Heart pounding in his chest, Severus crossed the room to cast the tainted feather into his fireplace to be consumed. He then returned to the table for the pitcher, carrying it to the kitchen counter. Retrieving his wand, he cast every spell in his extensive repertoire for detecting poisons or enchantments. When those failed, he turned to sensing various chemicals and compounds in the water. He detected none, not even the salt. The pitcher seemed to contain nothing but pure water.

Severus pulled a clean teacup from his cabinets and poured himself a cup from the pitcher. The water was clear against the white porcelain. Eyeing the antidote, just in case, the Potions master raised the cup to his lips and took a careful sip.

It tasted slightly sweet.

He had been expecting a hint of salt at best, the bitter tang of hemlock at worst. Feeling slightly more confident, Severus took another sip, and another until he had emptied the cup.

And then he waited.

The minutes ticked by, each one seeming to take an eternity. Severus waited to feel nauseous, to become dizzy or disoriented, to be bent double by cramps, to feel any of the telltale signs of hemlock poisoning.

They never came.

Severus downed another cup from the pitcher. If anything, some of his flagging energy seemed to return as he drank. He retired to his couch, cup and pitcher in hand, to think.

By the time the clock on his wall indicated that dawn was eminent, the pitcher was empty, and Severus was overtaken with an entirely different kind of thirst.
He could learn wandless magic.

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“This is actually quite tasty,” Dumbledore said cheerfully, inspecting the teacup.

Severus had met the Headmaster at his office door, well before the school’s clocks had struck the breakfast hour, supplies for a repeat performance in hand. He had cast the purification spell once again, adding immeasurably to the already bone-deep weariness that lined his face and shadowed his eyes. The first cup from the newly cleansed pitcher he presented to Albus.

Apparently it was tasty.

Dumbledore sighed at him in what Severus might have described as a fondly amused manner. The Potions master could have struck him.

“I am not insensate to the importance of this demonstration, Severus,” Albus allowed, making a conciliatory gesture with his free hand. “But you must admit, the flavor is quite appealing. I am brought to mind honeysuckle…”

Severus made a sour sound in the back of his throat. “Headmaster…”

“Oh, by all means, please endeavor to learn all that you can on the subject,” Dumbledore interrupted. “I can envision any number of potential uses for wandless casting.” Albus paused to take another lingering sip of the purified water. “Some more useful to our allies, and our enemies too I would say, than others. I suppose that Professor Rosenberg is planning to pass this type of knowledge on to your students?” the Headmaster asked, blithely ignoring the glower on Severus’ face.

“I obtained the instructions for that spell from her class notes,” Severus said, digging the heels of his hands into his closed eyes. If it was anything, wandless magic was draining. But the possibilities…

“Well, in that case,” Dumbledore paused to fish a scroll of paper from the seeming chaos of his desk, “I suppose you will want to see which students will be gaining that knowledge.” He handed the parchment across the table.

Severus accepted the paper and unrolled it. It took a moment for his eyes to focus on the names. Of course Potter’s name was there, inked out in the scarlet of Gryffindor. It would have been too much to ask otherwise. Completing the trifecta were Granger and Weasley. Wait. There were three Weasleys listed. The twins would be joining their younger brother for the mixed year class. That would be a special flavor of hell. There were a couple other Gryffindors, and a fairly large showing from Ravenclaw, penned in blue. He had known that the lure of exotic knowledge would reel in more than a few of them. Only one Hufflepuff was listed though, yellow ink barely legible to Severus’ weary eyes. Also unsurprising.

And a sea of green ink.

That deserved a second, more focused look.

A few of the names from his own house seemed to leap off of the page: Crabbe, Goyle, Nott… …Malfoy.
There was only one logical reason why those particular students might have enrolled in a course taught by a Muggle, and it wasn’t academic curiosity. “He is spreading the word,” Severus said, almost to himself. He tossed the parchment back onto Albus’ desk and lowered his face back into his hands.

The Dark Lord had taken his seat at the chessboard, with Severus’ own students as the pawns.

It did not surprise him anymore, that the other Death Eaters felt no compunction against using their own children so. No, he was not surprised. He was just so very, very tired.

“Do try to get some sleep, Severus,” Albus’ said, tone conveying boundless empathy even as he took another sip from the teacup. “I am afraid that you are going to need it.”
Chapter 13

Willow sat cross-legged in a sea of papers and satin pillows. She had upended her satchel on her bed and spread out its contents around her. Books, transparencies, pens, and pencils were shoved to one side so that she could focus instead on sifting through her class notes.

Her introductory thoughts were all accounted for, details on the history of the Council of Watchers were clustered in a purple and green inked pile to her left. Blues and blacks and reds denoted vampiric lore, magical theory, and basic wandless spells. Nothing obvious was missing, and yet, she knew that Professor Snape had taken something from her notes. Reagent tables? Check. Star charts and sun cycles? Check. Simple rituals?

Wait…

Willow scooped up the offending stack and flipped through it to make sure. One of her rituals was definitely missing, the one on purification.

Well, that didn’t make much sense.

Willow slowly gathered the contents of her bag, tapping the papers back into neat piles, forehead wrinkled in thought. She could come up with no obvious reason why Professor Snape would have taken that particular page. The spell wasn’t terribly powerful, and she felt certain that any of its effects could easily be replicated with his wand or potions. Obviously she had meant to share it with him anyway. She was intending to teach it to their students for goodness sake.

Okay, obviously he might be experimenting with it, but if that was the case, why hadn’t he just asked for a demonstration? She’d already been showing him all kinds of other magics. Maybe he meant to use it to scry, or something. Physical stuff like hair or fingernail clippings was usually better for that, but personal belongings could be used in a pinch. She wasn’t too worried about that, the wards on her rooms would have already blocked that kind of magical spying, even before she had tweaked and bolstered them.

She finally shook her head to clear her thoughts. All this guessing without more information wasn’t going to help anyone. Her first instincts had told her to let whatever this was play out, and she still thought that was the best idea. Professor Snape was too cagey for the direct approach, and heck, she was kind of curious to know if he would repeat the little theft, if only to see what he would take. If all else failed, she could always confront him later. Much good it would probably do her. In the meantime she could wait. And watch.

And speaking of Watching, it was high time she started making entries in her journal. Willow tucked her class materials back into her bag and picked up the blank book in question. Maybe Giles would have some thoughts on the professor’s odd theft. Either way, she had more than enough fodder for her first coded, warded report for Council HQ.

Look at me, being all covert and spy-like. She quirked a little smile to herself.

The name’s Rosenberg. Willow Rosenberg.

~*_~*_~*_~*_~

“I’m new at this, so just... go easy on me, ok?” Willow asked, nervous and unsure of herself.

The tall, speckled owl just twisted its head at a geometrically improbable angle and stuck out an
impressively taloned foot impatiently.

“Okay,” Willow nodded, sidling closer to the ridiculously large bird. “Um, I need you to take these papers to Rupert Giles. Here, I’ve got his address written on this envelope if you need me to read it to you.” The last word came out in a squeak when the owl gave her a golden-eyed glare and snatched the small stack of papers right out of her hand with its foot. “Right, I’m sorry. I mean, obviously you can read. That was just… silly of me.”

The owl just arranged the bundle of letters to its liking, extended its massive wings, and sprung into the air. Willow ducked instinctively as it swept over her head with barely a rustle of feathers. In the blink of an eye, it was gone through one of the Owrler’s many open windows.

With copies of her journal entries successfully sent to London, Willow was more than happy to flee the Owler, escaping the judgment of dozens of pairs of disapproving, avian eyes.

I miss e-mail.

Willow started down the staircase from the birds’ tower, heading for breakfast. She drummed her fingers against the outside of her bag as it bounced against her hip. Now that her letters had been mailed, her satchel now contained only Willow-approved bait. She had left her journal and Template back in her room under tight ward and key. Even though she was the only person who could use the Template, she still didn’t want anyone mucking around with its powerful enchantments. She’d also decided that the journal was strictly off limits, for purely personal reasons. If she was going to be candid in her records and reports to the Council, she had to know that her thoughts would not be read by the subjects of her entries.

That left class notes, transparencies, and the couple of text books they would be using for the class. Well, there was also her usual plethora of pens, pencils, Post-Its, and other miscellaneous, school-related detritus, but those didn’t strike her as particularly theft-worthy.

She set out across the courtyard, reveling in the quiet, crisp autumn morning. Professor Snape had made it sound like the addition of students would turn the school into a madhouse. Honestly though, she wasn’t that worried. Young witches and wizards couldn’t be any worse than teenaged slayers. In any case, nothing could stop her from enjoying the peace and quiet while she could.

The Great Hall was mostly abandoned when she entered it. Obviously the long tables on the main floor were still empty. The students wouldn’t be arriving until tomorrow. However, the faculty table was all but abandoned as well. The astronomy professor, Sinistra, was absently piling various foodstuffs on a plate with one hand, and her nose was buried in a book which was supported by the other. The woman ghosted out of the room without ever showing any sign of realizing that she had company.

Willow dropped her bag next to her chair, then poured herself a cup of steaming hot water and set an herbal teabag in it to steep. She picked through the plates on the table, piled high with fruits and pastries, eggs and various breakfast meats before finally deciding on some kind of scrambled egg and herb concoction, toast, and an orange. Food in hand, she settled in to wait for Professor Snape.

Other professors came and went. Minerva appeared first with Professor Sprout. The Transfiguration professor gave Willow a bob of the head in greeting, but never broke her conversation with the other woman. Hagrid arrived soon after the pair had quit the room, relieved the table of a non-trivial amount of food, and even settled down in Umbridge’s usual chair to keep Willow company for a little while. He seemed to want to know everything and anything she could share about manticores, which admittedly, wasn’t all that much. They weren’t demons, they didn’t often terrorize the countryside, so they tended to be slightly out of her realm of expertise. Even so,
what she did know seemed to keep the man rapt while the majority of the rest of the staff filed in and out of the Hall, some staying to eat a quick breakfast, most only stopping by to pick up food on the way to complete some errand or another.

When Hagrid finally excused himself, the tables were starting to look pretty denuded of food, and there was still no sign of Professor Snape. Willow pushed the bits of orange rind around with her fork in boredom, arranging them into a circle around the margin of the plate, then into a smiley face, then into an unsteady tower.

“Ah, Professor Rosenberg, I thought I might find you here.” Dumbledore’s voice at her side, kindly and warm, nevertheless startled her into toppling her little food tower with a squeak of surprise. She had not sensed his arrival at all, which was fairly freaksome in its own right. He was fairly buzzing with a sea of minor enchantments and his own power at the moment.

She dropped her fork quickly and smiled at him as he took Professor Snape’s usual seat to her right, a little embarrassed that her new boss had just caught her playing with her food. “Um, why were you looking for me?” The Potions master must be rubbing off on her, because that was kind of rude. “I mean, good morning,” she amended, feeling ridiculous.

The Headmaster just smiled at her as he settled in the chair, seemingly unfazed. “I’m afraid that Professor Snape had a rather late night. He most likely will not being joining you for your, ah, mutual tutoring. I thought that I might save you from more tedium by letting you know.”


Dumbledore just smiled at her, but she was disconcerted to note that the twinkle in his eyes had crystallized into something much more serious. She felt like he was weighing something, maybe her, before speaking further. But just like that, the expression was gone, and she wondered if she had imagined it. “I also thought you might like to have this,” he pulled a roll of papers from his voluminous sleeve and handed it to her. “Your class roll,” he explained at her questioning look. “And a few other individuals who might show interest in your class at some point in the future.”

“Oh,” Willow said, holding the bundle of pages tightly. Her students. That was kind of cool, and kind of scary, but mostly cool. “That’s… Thanks again.”

“Well,” he clapped his hands on brightly robed knees and rose to his feet with more vigor than his elderly frame would have implied. “I must be going. So many things to do before our students arrive.” He nodded absently and turned to leave.

“Oh, wait,” Willow blurted, rising from her own chair as if to physically catch him before he left. “Sorry, but I actually have a question I need to ask you. About my class.”

He turned back to her and spread his hands as if welcoming her request.

“I have this idea for a surprise. For my students. Kind of like extra credit, I guess, but I wanted to have it ready for the first day of classes,” she said, words speeding into a rapid fire blur. “But I need an extra room for it. Not a big room, just something small, like barely a hopped up closet, and I saw that some of the rooms in the basements seem pretty empty, so I was wondering if I could…” She trailed off as Dumbledore moved his hands into a cupping gesture and a big brass key appeared in them.

He held the key near his chest for a moment and eyed her critically. “A good surprise, I hope? Our prime concern must always be the safety of our students,” he said, with the slightest hint of steel in his tone.
Willow smiled weakly, and refrained from gulping. She knew a veiled threat when she heard one. “I totally understand,” she said.

He extended the brass key to her. “I believe that you will find dungeon fourteen empty and reasonably clean. Good day, Professor Rosenberg.”

“Thanks again!” she called after his retreating form. He merely nodded and then disappeared through the door at the far end of the faculty table.

Willow looked down at the big, brass key, turning it over and over in her hands. So Professor Snape wasn’t coming, and she now had the means to start working on the idea she had meant to run past him this morning. Well, it was easier, she supposed, to ask forgiveness than permission, and it wasn’t like she had anything better to do all morning.

And if that was the case, she was going to need to do a little research.

Willow had done variations of this exercise dozens of times in the past. The Council had built its own, thriving coven over the past few years, and playing with magical puzzles was one way they had found to test one another’s skill in ways that were both fun and educational. However, that didn’t mean that she hadn’t needed to double check some of the more complicated spells.

The walk to dungeon fourteen from Willow’s rooms didn’t take long. She was starting to get the hang of the school grounds. There were dungeons of all shapes and sizes throughout the subbasements. Willow felt that she was much happier not knowing why the school had them. Even the Council tended to keep its dungeony-type stuff away from their Academies. Oh, the ones in Hogwarts weren’t still used as dungeons, per se. Most of them had been converted into classrooms or made available for storage, experiments, or other projects.

Projects like the one she had in mind.

But still... School could be tortuous enough without adding literal torture chambers. It was ooky, even if only in a historical context.

Her path took her on a few twists and turns, but soon enough, Willow had reached her destination. There was a big brass fourteen above the doorframe, and sure enough, the key Dumbledore had given her opened the door much more smoothly than the rusted lock would have implied.

Willow summoned a small globe of light and looked around the room, her dungeon, with a critical eye. The little cell was ten by ten feet, give or take, and made entirely of stone, from the floors to the walls to the ceiling. It wasn’t much to look at, and it would certainly have been an unpleasant actual dungeon, but when she reached out with her senses, the only pre-existing magic here was the ambient energy that permeated the entire school. It was perfect, and it was all hers to do with as she pleased.

Setting her little sphere of light to hover just inside the door, Willow reached into her bag and pulled out a piece of chalk, an envelope sealed with red wax, and one of her spell books. She stashed the rest of her stuff in a corner and set to work.

The first circle she drew was the most basic. She placed the envelope in the middle of the floor and wrote the runes of containment in a ring. Upon completion, the envelope floated gently upwards, coming to a stop half-way between floor and ceiling, rotating slowly on the threads of magic. A soft glow filled the circle, rising to form a glittering column of light. The spell was full of flash, but
it didn’t serve any other purpose beyond the obvious.

The next circle had a little bit more oomph. And the next one. And the next. One by one, Willow began to fill the room’s floor with concentric circles forming protective wards that repelled magical energy, physical intrusion, animated constructs, elemental attacks, and anything else Willow’s fertile mind could imagine. The spells were written in all manners of languages, from runes to hieroglyphics, from Latin to Mayan, from pictographs to Sanskrit.

The concentric rings of light made quite a spectacle. However, none of the barriers had much in the way of teeth. The worst one absorbed magical energy and returned it in the form of a tiny electrical charge. The students who bungled that spell would still have fared worse by walking across a carpeted floor and touching a doorknob. However, that did not mean that the wards weren’t strong. The weakest of them would still have kept a rampaging dragon at bay.

The trick was that each circle was also flawed. If anyone was to translate the words written into each circle, they would find clues to defeating each spell, some little magical ‘out’ which would let them progress to the next ward.

It was slow, tedious work which was made only slightly less boring by the not-so-nice anticipation Willow felt at the idea of turning over the puzzle to her students. Reaching the envelope at the center of the web was totally doable, but it would probably take weeks of extra studying for her students to figure it out. Even Professor “No-Coddling-Students” Snape had to admit that the students would benefit from the challenge. That is, whenever she got around to broaching the subject with him.

As Willow finished the last circle, her stomach made its displeasure known, growling in a hollow way to remind her that lunch had been a while ago. She was hungry.

Legs stiff from too much time sitting on the stone floor, Willow stood and dusted chalk from her skirts. At least, she tried to. She managed to apply at least as much dust to her clothing from her hands as she brushed away. For a moment, she wondered if she should come up with one last thing to add, but decided against it. For now, she was satisfied with what she had already accomplished. The floor was jam packed full of neat circles and winding text until only a narrow walkway circled the room. Large glyphs graced each of the walls as well, each one acting to enhance and reflect the chalk writing upwards into the ceiling. Willow looked at her construct critically. If there was a loopy letter or a blocky rune out of place, she could not find it. Each circle hummed against the edge of her mind with intangible power.

Willow dispelled the floating orb of light, fetched her bag from the corner, started to leave, and then tripped over a large tray, laden with food, which had been placed on the floor outside of her dungeon. There was even a little name card with W. Rosenberg written in flowing script nestled between the plate of sandwiches and the bowl of oddly colored soup, gone cold and gloopy.

After locking the door, she picked up the tray and started down the hallway before changing her mind again and backtracking to the little room’s entrance. Balancing the heavy tray awkwardly in one hand, she fished the last little nub of chalk out of her bag. On her tiptoes, she drew one last glyph above the door frame, next to the brass number fourteen. It was tiny and inconspicuous, but when the last dash was added to the little pictograph, the glyph itself faded to an even more unobtrusive grey to match the surrounding walls. A quick peek behind the door revealed that the spell had definitely gone into effect, the room beyond had been plunged into dense, impenetrable darkness. With a wicked little smile, Willow relocked the room and retreated to her quarters to clean off the rest of the chalk dust.

She was not surprised to find the hands on her clock closer the word ‘Dinner’ than ‘Lunch.’
Scrubbed, changed, and still a little bit smug, she settled on her couch in front of the tray of food. Dinner was a ways off yet, but she was positively starving. The soup had congealed into a cold, unappetizing mess, but the sandwiches were still tempting. She picked one up and took a bite. Ham and cheese with lettuce and tomato. It could have been a scoop of dirt between two roofing shingles and it still would have tasted heavenly.

Willow devoured one sandwich, reached into her bag for her class roll, and picked up another. Might as well do something productive while she ate.

As promised, the first page had a list of students. Twenty-six, all written in the colors that Minerva had explained corresponded to the school’s four Houses. The green of Slytherin, Professor Snape’s house, had the strongest showing. Red Gryffindors and blue Ravenclaws weren’t too far behind, and Willow was glad to see a few of the Weasleys, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter among the mix. They weren’t exactly familiar faces, but they were the closest thing she was going to get. Only one Hufflepuff though. Huh. Willow set the page aside, and turned her attention to Dumbledore’s list of ‘interested’ individuals.

What she saw made her sit bolt upright, food forgotten once again. The page’s header was not what she had been expecting: **Known and Suspected Death Eaters.**

Willow scanned the first page, then backtracked to read it again more closely. The left side of the page held a long list of names, organized alphabetically. A second column, labeled ‘status,’ was filled in with phrases such as ‘at large,’ ‘in Azkaban,’ or ‘unknown.’ The last column was labeled ‘associates’ and held lists of apparent friends and family members.

A couple of the names in this last column were written in green ink, a sharp contrast against the black of the rest of the writing. Willow fanned through the following sheets, spotting a few more green names, listed as family members. There wasn’t a color key or any other kind of explanation. What was that all about?

Willow snatched up the first page again, a sudden thought occurring to her. Green, like Slytherin. Green, like some of her students. Sure enough, each colored name on the pages of Death Eaters corresponded to a Slytherin student in her class.

What was it Dumbledore had said? “A few other individuals who might show interest in your class?” Sneaky. Very sneaky.

He was warning her, naming names when all she had before was ephemeral reports that this Voldemort guy was interested in her. Was he seriously telling her to beware her own students though? What was she supposed to do with this information? Dumbledore’s whole excuse for her teaching Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts was that he wanted his students ready to deal with the various supernatural and magical dangers they would encounter. Effectively, she was going to be training them to fight. But would they be using her lessons to fight demons?

Or each other?

Willow felt like she was going to be sick. Was this how she was supposed to help the Order? Teaching wandless magic to the children of 'Known and Suspected Death Eaters'? She wondered if it would be better to teach a half-hearted class. That way, she could keep her students from learning anything they could run home and share with Mommy and Daddy Death Eater, or worse, turn against the Order and their fellow students. Then again, was that even fair of her? After all, just because their parents were bad seeds, it didn’t necessarily follow that these kids had to be as well. And what about all of her other students? Could she really cripple their education just to keep a few bad apples from getting the same information? Was that really the right thing to do?
Was there a right thing to do?

Suddenly, being the Council’s spy didn’t seem like much fun anymore. The hours before dinner seemed to crawl by, mired in worry and doubt.

~*~*~*~

Food appeared on the tables, literally, just as Willow settled into her seat at the faculty table. While her heart hadn’t really been into the subterfuge anymore, she had still decided to bring her bag along with her anyway, just in case Professor Snape decided to appear. Maybe it didn’t feel like a game anymore, but she still needed to know what he was up to. She had placed it on the floor between their chairs, in easy reach for both of them.

It didn’t take much dissembling to act like she wasn’t paying any attention to her bag for the duration of the dinner. Professor Snape, who had made an appearance despite dark circles under his eyes, was as taciturn as ever while he ate, but the rest of the room was alive with conversation. Even Frog Face was bubbling away in her breathy little girl’s voice about how very much she was looking forward to “Shaping new minds properly, with respect for tradition and decorum.” Even so, the woman had a steely look in her beady little eyes and an air of hostility which Willow couldn’t quite explain away. It was just the cherry on top of all of Willow’s other concerns.

At least the food was good.

Despite Umbridge’s unpleasantness, Willow couldn’t help but be drawn into some of the infectious anticipation that dominated the rest of the room. Dumbledore’s post-entrée, pre-dessert rundown of remaining faculty concerns was surprisingly normal. Professors were bickering about access to storage, asking about the Ministry’s new testing guidelines, and working out the schedule for weekend chaperoning for the students in Hogsmeade, the town beyond the school’s wards. It was so very commonplace, the kind of stuff the watchers at the Academies argued about constantly, that it was difficult not to fall into the room’s rhythm and stop obsessing about her own worries, if only for a little while.

At least until a little screech owl dove through one of the room’s windows and dropped a letter in her lap. She managed to suppress a sharp squeak of surprise and kept her cool as the bird eyed her and helped itself to a piece of fat from her plate which she had trimmed from her pork chop. No one else seemed to think that the owl, glaring at her as it snatched yet another morsel of food, was very unusual, so Willow tried to play it off with a similar air of casual normality.

That was, until she opened the note.

It was from Giles. Runes marched their way around the paper’s border, concealing the contents from anyone who did not know their secret. Which Willow did. All watchers did, even if it was only used rarely. It was the letterhead equivalent of an ‘Eyes Only!’ stamp combined with a big fat radioactive symbol and yellow police caution tape.

To the naked eye, the letter appeared banal enough. Giles asked about the school and her coworkers, wished her the best and sent Buffy’s regards. Neutral, ordinary words, which swam into something completely different when Willow placed thumbs over two particular runes at roughly two and eight o’clock on the paper.

**Willow. Someone has tampered with your report. Your wards were unbroken, but not for lack of trying. They did not even attempt to conceal their actions. In the future, we may need to look into alternative methods of communication, but for now, your pre-existing measures seem to be holding. However, we all felt that you should be made aware of the situation. Regards. – R. Giles**
Willow carefully refolded the letter, its words swimming back into safe platitudes before her eyes.

“I hope your news from home was positive?” said a voice to Willow’s left. She looked up to find Umbridge’s face wreathed with condescendingly false concern, but the woman’s eyes were fixed hungrily on the letter in Willow’s hands.

“Yeah,” Willow heard herself reply, her voice a hollow attempt at cheerfulness. “My friends just wanted to wish me luck with the new students coming tomorrow, and the teaching, and you know, everything.” She slipped the letter under the edge of her plate. She wasn’t letting it out of her sight. Not with Umbridge eyeing her like that, and not when she was all but inviting Snape to rifle through her bag again.

“I see,” Umbridge said sweetly. “Well, a good bit of luck in your case certainly wouldn’t go awry.” She giggled breathily.

If she hadn’t had any suspicions before, Willow certainly did now. She smiled insincerely back at Frog Face. There might be an extra present woven into her letter’s wards the next time she sent a report Giles’ way.

Still, when dessert appeared on her plate some time later, the chocolate torte tasted like ashes.

And when she returned to her chambers after dinner, she emptied her bag again, only to discover that the page on the purification ritual had miraculously reappeared among her other papers without even a crease to show for its adventures. Instead, she was missing a paper describing a simple tracking spell.

*Very, very, very sneaky.*

Sleep was a long time coming.
Chapter 14

The trail of dancing, green sparks guided Severus’ footsteps around the far edge of the school’s lake. The sun would be rising soon. In a scant few hours, the students would be arriving at Hogwarts to begin their fall term. While that fact did add a certain sour undertone to Severus’ more pleasant contemplations, he was distracted enough with his second wandless experiment to remain in, what was for him, a shockingly good mood.

The sparks were luminous enough to adequately light his path in the predawn light, and they tugged at him on a subconscious level, continuing to draw power and direction from the energy of his mind. They were being generated around the contents of a heavy, glass jar which he was holding in his left hand. The vessel contained Dwarf Namazu whiskers, given to him by Hagrid every spring in increasingly large quantities. Severus had always believed that the groundskeeper had an illicit school of the fish somewhere on the school’s property, but had never bothered to confirm his suspicions, especially since drawing attention to the fish would no doubt end in their immediate collection and relocation to Japan. Idle curiosity aside, he had no interest in jeopardizing his access to such rare and expensive potion components in bulk and at no charge.

Still, just because he decided to assuage his curiosity did not necessarily mean that he must share his findings with anyone else, and so Severus had risen before dawn, donned his robes, and prepared to perform the ritual for Professor Rosenberg’s tracking spell.

Walking the full circumference of the lake would have taken hours, but it did not take a great deal of conjecture to narrow his options by a large margin. Sections of the lake closest to the school proper were obviously out of the question, as were the shores flanking the gardens. The train station’s neighboring boat dock was similarly exposed to idle observation, and that left only a small portion of lake between the gardens and dock which was bordered by the Forbidden Forest. Too small, Severus believed, to easily conceal a weir of fish known to cause minor earth tremors.

That left the west and southwest sections of the lake, which while still a large area, was not unreasonably so, especially if he resorted to casting a hastening charm on himself. The fact that the area was fairly secluded and lacked any particularly interesting features to tempt the odd student or faculty member to investigate would work to his benefit, as it theoretically had to Hagrid’s. Severus had set out early to reach the sheltered depression against the school’s encircling wall which he had selected for the ritual. A few candles, a rather long incantation in Latin, a sudden drain of his energy, and he was on his way.

The sparks were leading him in a counter clockwise fashion around the lake. Serendipity must have been on his side, because Severus was only walking for a short few minutes before he started feeling the ground shaking ever so slightly under his feet. He might not have even noticed the sensation had he not been expecting and expressly looking for it. The tremors grew in frequency and magnitude as he continued, though they never became so strong as to become hazardous to his footing or balance.

He heard the splashing before he saw his quarry. Scaling a low rise that abutted a small inlet, Severus finally laid eyes on his goal.

The weir was larger than he expected, and the water in it was churning with the motion of dozens of irate fish. Had they been their larger cousins, the true Namazu, Severus had no doubt that their current state of agitation would be resulting in a full blown earthquake. As it was, the dwarf fish were extending themselves to their limits to create the very minor tremors which were affecting their immediate area. They seemed to be reacting with alarm to the branching lines of sparks which
danced among them, picking out specific colorful, bewhiskered fish from amongst the chaos. His potion component donors, no doubt.

In the privacy of the far side of the lake, still shrouded in the semi-darkness that preceded the dawn, Severus allowed himself a small, predatory smile. Even so, he only savored his triumph for a brief moment before he relented and let the wandless spell die away. The fish, in turn, soon ceased their thrashing and the ground subsided into relative stability punctuated with the occasional, barely noticeable tremor.

He had just enough time to return to his quarters and make his morning ablutions before breakfast. The rocky shore was not the best substrate for preserving the traces of his passing, but Severus still drew his wand and cast an obscurement spell on his own footprints as he backtracked to his circle of candles. Then he gathered his spent spell components and returned to the school with none the wiser for his early morning exploits.

The Great Hall was already decked with its welcome banquet décor when Severus arrived for breakfast. He paid the floating candles and lightly fluttering banners above the Houses’ long-tables very little mind. They always seemed to raise the spirits of his fellow faculty members, but he was much too preoccupied to spare a significant amount of attention on adornments which were trotted out at various points year after year after year.

In fact, he was so fixated on reviewing his early morning wandless casting that Severus was seated and well into his morning meal before he noticed that while all of the other professors were exhibiting their typical varieties of pre-term excitement, one particular staff member was most definitely not sharing in the general anticipatory ambience of the room.

Professor Rosenberg was uncharacteristically silent during the meal. Once noted, Severus could not help but set aside his previous thoughts and observe this oddity more closely. She had been distracted and somewhat quiet at supper last evening. He had dismissed it as anxiety about their upcoming classes, stage fright if you will, and he had been much more focused on magically rifling through the contents of her bag to give her emotional state much thought. However, her current dark mood was something much more pronounced. She seemed to be staring through the table to some indefinable spot on the floor. Her face was drawn, and she was not eating, for all the poking and prodding of her food which she was performing with her fork.

She must have felt his scrutiny, because Professor Rosenberg suddenly looked up and caught his eyes. Her mind was guarded, which he found unaccountably irritating, and she gave him a small, watery smile, but her expressive face was otherwise suffused with worry.

Severus’ eyebrows started to drop into a scowl, but the watcher just shook her head ever so slightly and tossed a small, subtle glance over her right shoulder. Behind her, Umbridge was looking insufferably smug, smiling to herself as she ate.

Severus lapsed into impatient silence. He could recognize the warning for what it was easily enough, but it irked him how effortlessly Professor Rosenberg seemed to have just read him while he remained completely in the dark. It was his job to know other people’s secrets, and his lack of insight felt like a slap in the face. It made him have to stop and consider what else had he might have missed in his preoccupation. His relatively good mood eroded quickly as he sought to sift through his memories to find any clues which had previously eluded him. He finished the remainder of his meal mechanically, hardly tasting the food.

For her part, Professor Rosenberg apparently gave up all semblance of eating and pushed her plate
away, dropping her fork and napkin next to it.

Severus forced himself to go through the motions of the meal calmly until the plates finally disappeared and Albus launched into his usual round of last minute encouragement and platitudes for the staff. The speech changed little from semester to semester, and while tedious and trite, at least it was short. As soon as the Headmaster drew to a close, Severus rose and addressed Professor Rosenberg with threadbare civility that was only half-contrived. “I will be in my office if you have any last minute issues to discuss.”

Instead of being offended by his tone, he saw a tiny smile grace her drawn face as he swept out of the room. The expression was still wan, but it was also disconcertingly knowing, which unsettled him all the more.

Upon reaching his office, Severus did not have long to compose himself. Professor Rosenberg arrived a scant few minutes later, rapping lightly on the door even as she opened it, face solemn. He gestured at the chair facing him and then leaned back in his chair, schooling his features to careful blankness. If he did not know what to expect, then his only option was to steel himself against any eventuality.

Professor Rosenberg sat down, overstuffed bag settled on her lap, arms encircling it protectively. She just looked at him, brow furrowed as if considering what her words should be. Then, when the silence truly became oppressive, she said, “Tell me about your House.”

Severus was suddenly very grateful for the wards against eavesdropping which he maintained in and around his office. “What have you already heard?” His voice sounded flat and cold even to his own ears.

“Well,” she hedged for a moment, “Minerva says that Slytherins are ambitious and, uh… resourceful.”

“How very politick of her,” Severus said, knowing full well that there was no way that delicate description had evoked the expression which was currently darkening Professor Rosenberg’s face. “And?”

She took a deep breath as if steeling herself before pulling a stack of papers out of her bag. “And then Dumbledore gave me this,” she handed a paper to him which was an exact copy of the class list the headmaster had given him. He scanned it, found nothing out of place, and set it aside. “And then he gave me this,” she finished more slowly, sliding the rest of the stack across his desk.

Severus recognized this list as well. It was a different kind of roll, one detailing the lives and connections of the Dark Lord’s Death Eaters. He had helped compile it, was responsible for revealing many of the names on this list himself.

He had not added the attention-grabbing green which highlighted Vincent Crabbe’s name on the first page. Fanning through the remaining sheets revealed other Slytherin students listed in green as familial associates of their Death Eater parents. That must have been Albus’ doing.

The list was fairly comprehensive, but there was one name which was conspicuously absent. There was no mention of the Dark Lord’s personal potions brewer or Draco Malfoy’s godfather. There was no section on the Potions Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who while lacking any particular blood relations, was still inextricably linked to the most powerful Death Eaters in one way or another.

But there should have been. Severus instinctively looked for his own name where it should have
occurred, near the bottom of the second to last page. It simply was not there. Also Albus’ doing. Severus could not help but scowl at that. Why, having revealed so very much to the watcher, had the Headmaster decided to conceal that one piece of information?

Logically, Severus knew that Professor Rosenberg would not remain ignorant of his past forever. Thus far, he had not been above playing upon her naiveté when building their tentative rapport, but he had always known the situation to be temporary and had never actively attempted to conceal the facts from her.

Albus’ reason for hiding his past was a puzzle for another time, as Severus still needed to devote the majority of his attention to the potential situation brewing across the desk from him.

He tapped the stack of paper back into order, placed it back in front of Professor Rosenberg, and then returned to his previous position, hands curling loosely around his chair’s armrests. She was still watching him worriedly, clutching her bag to her chest, but now she had taken up chewing on her lower lip as well. It was a nervous, childlike expression, and he was starting to recognize it as a preamble to some variety of verbal explosion.

He was not disappointed.

“What are we supposed to do?” she said plaintively. “I mean, we just got our class schedule all worked out and then Dumbledore dumps this on me one day before the term starts. The students are going to be here in like seven hours and I’m freaking out about the ethics of training the children of genocidal maniacs.” She was picking up speed as she went, and her voice was taking on a pleading edge. “One second Dumbledore is asking me to teach this course because he’s worried their Ministry-approved class is going to bite the big one, then he’s giving me cryptic, color coded warnings about my students being… what? Mini-serial killers? But I can’t help thinking that no matter how rotten their parents are, they’re still just kids. But then I thought, they’re all in Slytherin, and you know, you’re the head of Slytherin, and you might, I don’t know, have some kind of insight… That you could share… With me.” She finally trailed off into awkward silence, but the plea was still there in her green eyes.

Severus found himself at odds with himself. The need to defend his students was a deeply ingrained response. Not only was it good politics among the Death Eaters, but in his own awkward, stilted way, he genuinely cared for them. Some of them might be unholy terrors, but they were still his. His students. His responsibility.

Members of his House.

After the Dark Lord’s initial rise to power, the fact that many of the publicly tried Death Eaters had hailed from Slytherin had not gone unnoticed by the general populace. Such a stain took a long time to fade, and there were still many people who no doubt believed that each new member of his House received a Dark Mark upon admission into the dormitories. Yes, Slytherins often held blood ties at a premium, and yes, that had played a part in who had been initially recruited by the Dark Lord. However, there were many other traits which traditionally had been associated with the House of Salazar Slytherin. Tenacity, drive, a certain fierce loyalty to one another, and yes, ambition and resourcefulness had once characterized the House. Perhaps they would again, once the ghosts of the Death Eaters had been exorcised and the wizarding world remembered that even in the darkest days of the last war, many Slytherins had not, in fact, taken up the Mark.

However, the fact remained that Severus’ House had produced far more than its fair share of dark witches and wizards in recent years. Presently, some of his students were, in fact, the children of Death Eaters and were set to become Death Eaters themselves. A single slip in his words or actions in front of the wrong person could end up in even the most innocent of letters home. Professor
Rosenberg had been clever enough to recognize the danger with only a partial grasp of the situation. For Severus, it had been a burden he had carried for years.

Whatever else Albus had intended with his list, at the moment, it was dragging Severus into a conversation which was long overdue. Part of him resented having his hand forced. The rest questioned why he had not raised the issue before.

Yes, Professor Rosenberg needed to be warned, for both their sakes, but he simply could not bring himself to turn her against his own students completely. “None of my students have taken the vows or received the Mark from the Dark Lord,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

Professor Rosenberg looked embarrassed. “I didn’t mean –”

“Yet,” Severus said, cutting coldly through her half-formed apology.

That stopped the watcher dead in her babbling, metaphorical tracks, mouth still hanging open from where he had interrupted her. “Oh,” she finally said, subsiding into troubled silence once again.

“Perhaps none of them ever will. Perhaps they will find a reason and the strength to go against the hold the Dark Lord already has over some of them through their parents. Stranger things have happened,” he said, mouth twisting bitterly even if the expression was not reflected in his tone. He knew all about the type of motivation which would lead a Death Eater to defect. Intimately and painfully. “In the meantime, unless I am alone with members of the Order and behind sufficient wards, I will behave in such a manner as befits one of the Dark Lord’s Death Eaters. To do otherwise would be to invite a slow, agonizing death for myself and others.”

“Oh,” she repeated more quietly, plucking listlessly at the strap on her bag.

When she looked miserable, she certainly did not do it by halves. Everything about her posture, her expression, and her red-rimmed eyes seemed to radiate dejection. It made Severus deeply uncomfortable in ways that he could not fully explain. He found himself speaking before he had thoroughly contemplated the ramifications of his words. “Show discretion, but teach your class, Professor Rosenberg,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “My students will not make it easy, but perhaps you will be able to reach them. Even if they despise you for it, at least you will know that you tried.”

He did not know why he was suddenly compelled to say these things, only that it seemed of vital importance that she not continue on in such obvious distress. It was a weak, sentimental reaction on his part, and he was thoroughly displeased with himself for indulging in it. Even so, the disconcerting tightness in his chest seemed to lessen somewhat when his words evoked a small, crooked smile from her.

“I wasn’t planning on going around blabbing all of my super-secret weaknesses to all of them anyway,” she said, expression becoming serious once again. “I guess I’m also freaking out about teaching anything that might give their parents even more of an edge in a fight. Like, what if I taught something that ended up getting you killed?”

She was worried about his well-being. Even if he was not deluded enough to believe her concern centered wholly upon his person, it was still a novel sentiment. He wasn’t entirely certain how best to respond to it. Then again, unbridled scorn could always be trusted to cover any number of sins. “A pureblood, sullying themselves by using wandless magic? I would count myself lucky if they suddenly became so open minded.”

Professor Rosenberg just looked at him in surprised contemplation. “I guess I hadn’t thought of it
“that way before,” she said slowly. “I probably shouldn’t find that half as comforting as I do.” True to her word, she seemed to brighten immeasurably.

He snorted inelegantly at that. No, she probably shouldn’t, but even so, she still had a point. You took whatever weaknesses your enemy offered and planned accordingly. He might have preferred crippling idiocy in his foes, but blind bigotry would have to do.

“So, do you need to start snubbing me in the hallways, or can we go look at a project I’ve been working on?” she asked, her accompanying lopsided smile a disconcerting blend of nervous anticipation and dark amusement.

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly, wary after already dealing with one almost-disaster this morning. “Do I dare ask?”

“You can, but it’ll be a lot easier to just show you,” she said, rising and shouldering her bag. “Come on, it’s pretty close.”

Determining that she couldn’t have done anything too dire within the school itself without triggering a multitude of wards, or at least alerting Albus, Severus acquiesced and rose to follow her, taking the opportunity to cast a discreet cantrip on the watcher’s ever-present satchel.

True to her word, their destination was only a scant few turns of the corridors away from his office. She fished a key out of her bag and fumbled with the brass lock of dungeon fourteen for a moment. When she swung it open, Severus was momentarily annoyed. The room seemed to be filled with a basic darkness spell. Then Professor Rosenberg moved her hand in a vague lifting gesture and he found himself struggling to not allow his eyes to open wide with surprise.

The tiny room was filled to capacity with concentric columns of light springing from lines and lines of glyphs on floor, ceiling, and walls. The few languages he recognized and could easily translate let him know that these were warding spells, intricate and layered enough to appease even the goblins of Gringotts. At their center, suspended midair, was a sealed envelope.

Professor Rosenberg must have been busy yesterday while he had been sleeping off the effects of his attempts at wandless magic. Very busy.

“And what, precisely, is this?” he asked evenly, abjectly refusing to advertise how much the breadth and scope of spells represented here impressed him.

“Yeah, so that’s the thing,” Professor Rosenberg said, sounding a little embarrassed. “You’re kind of looking at an extra credit project. There’s a passphrase in that envelope that one student can use to get out of answering one essay question on my section of our final exam. I’ll recast the room with different wards and a different passphrase each time someone gets through to the envelope.”

She paused for a moment, smiling at her handiwork. “If anyone gets through,” she added, smirking up at him.

Severus scowled into the dungeon, eyeing the magical constructs even more closely. “I distinctly remember saying that I do not believe in extra credit.”

Professor Rosenberg had the audacity to shrug at him without the slightest hint of apology. “But you do believe in punitive essay assignments,” she allowed, apparently untroubled by his deepening glower. In fact, her green eyes were positively sparkling with mischief. “How many short essay questions did we agree the students should have to answer on their final exam?”

“Five,” he answered harshly. “From each of us.”
She tilted her head to one side, her smile widening impishly. “Yeah. But the students don’t know that. So maybe my section will have six questions on it.” Her expression took on a decidedly wicked cast. “Maybe. We’ll see how many of them manage to even get to the envelope.”

Once again, she had caught Severus completely by surprise. He snorted with sudden amusement before he could stop himself. “That is underhanded. And somewhat cruel,” he finally relented, the corner of his lips quirking upwards ever so slightly. He’d never say so, but he approved.

Her smile became a playful grimace. “Maybe a little, but initiative should count for something.”

“Perhaps,” he allowed. Truth be told, he doubted that many of the students would ever get to Professor Rosenberg’s tempting envelope. Oh, there would be many half-hearted, ill-conceived attempts, but it would take weeks of intensive research for anyone to defeat all the wards present here. Even he, with all of his knowledge and experience, could only easily translate three or four of the rings. In fact, he seriously doubted that any of their students would be willing to put forth the effort necessary to reach the center Professor Rosenberg’s spells.

Possibly Granger, though he was loathe to admit it.

“Well, um, I’m glad we worked that out.” Professor Rosenberg said, shouldering her ever-present bag. “So, I’m going to go try to actually get some sleep now, since I didn’t so much last night, what with the freaking out and all. I don’t want to be a basket case for dinner. Minerva swears all I’ll have to do is sit there and eat and nod and look all professor-like for the students, but still, good first impressions and all.” She waved a hand vaguely towards the little room, dousing her rings of glowing runes with unrelieved darkness once again. “See you later,” she said, and then hurried off as if pursued. Apparently she wasn’t going to give him a chance to argue further, even if he had so desired.

Which he did not.

Severus stayed at the entrance to the little dungeon, staring absently into the thick black murk. He would allow her this little victory. After all, he could afford to be magnanimous. The directions for Professor Rosenberg’s tracking spell were safely returned to their place in her satchel amidst her other notes, and there was a new piece of paper concealed in the folds of his robes. It was crisp and white, with numerous colors of ink. ‘Artificial Sunlight’ the header said in bright green. ‘Great for Vampires!,’ the subtitle claimed in primary red.

He probably had time to gather most of the spell’s reagents before the students arrived.

It wasn’t until he returned to his office some time later in search of another beeswax candle that he found the book resting rather conspicuously in the exact center of his desk. Someone had entered his office in his absence. Had he not countered his own protective wards, moments before, he would have wondered if he had forgotten to secure the room. As it was, he strongly suspected he knew the culprit.

It was bound in an oddly utilitarian way and was obviously of Muggle design. Three hinged, metal rings held loose leaf papers together in the black, slick cover. The pages seemed to be copies of all of Professor Rosenberg’s class notes, and there was a note affixed to the cover with a strip of some variety of tacky substance.

Professor Snape,

This is getting silly.
Here’s a copy of all of my notes.
Could I have my sunshine spell back?

W.

He felt himself drop unceremoniously into his chair. He read the missive again, not that it was written with a level of subtlety which would require a second look.

She knew. She had known.

Severus cursed himself for a fool, but he still turned to the first page.
Chapter 15

“Slytherin!” the Sorting Hat yelled.

Willow clapped politely along with the other professors, eyeing the newly sorted first year as discretely as she could. The kid didn’t have horns, or cleft hooves, or anything else demonically incriminating that she could see. In fact, other than being a little on the pale side, he didn’t look different from any of the other first years who were standing at the base of the faculty dais, waiting for their turn with the freaky hat. She still didn’t quite know what to make of Slytherin House, and so far, the welcome banquet wasn’t providing much insight into her dilemma. Recognizing potential sources of trouble was much easier when they came equipped with scales and claws.

Honestly, at that moment, Willow was more disturbed by the hat itself than by the possibly kind-of-evil quarter of the student body. At least it wasn’t singing anymore. Minerva had filled her in on the whole Sorting thing, but no one had said anything about singing.

The hat obviously wasn’t just an enchanted article of clothing. It was putting off the kind of vibes that bespoke sentience, which was… unexpected. Sentient inanimate objects were a tricky kind of magic. The spells needed to create them were crazy-strong, and besides, what if you messed up and ended up with a psycho broom or something? Well, everyone had seen Fantasia. That way lay excessively cleaned laboratories and axe-wielding mice.

Not that she thought anyone was going to need an axe here. Willow was picking up all kinds of emotions from the people around her, but except for the nervous excitement of the first year students, the general theme here seemed to be that the old hat was… well… old hat.

Minerva was reading another name off of her roll. Willow wasn’t really listening. She had too much other stuff on her mind without trying to remember all two bazillion students’ names.

She had stubbornly selected a decidedly non-witchy outfit for her big first impression. Even when the robes came out later, she didn’t want anybody trying to say that she was attempting to hide who and what she was. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a little self conscious and out-of-place sitting among the other, be-robed faculty members in one of her Buffy-approved, Council business outfits.

Then there were the two little rays of sunshine flanking her.

Frog Face was exuding an oily kind of smug anticipation. Willow kind of felt like she was drowning in the woman’s nasty, negative aura.

And then there was Professor Snape.

He was being his usual, dour self, only amplified. From the flat-eyed glare he had given her when she had arrived in the Great Hall, Willow felt fairly certain that he had found her present in his office.

Her then sleep-deprived brain had decided that little stunt had been fitting and very, very funny. Her now well-rested brain was pretty much in agreement, even if she was a little concerned that he wasn’t going to take the binder in the spirit it was intended.

More than anything, Willow wanted to be able to talk openly and honestly with her co-instructor. Professor Snape knew all about the Order, and Voldemort, and her being the Council’s sort-of-spy, and for that matter, how to actually be a spy. What was more, she liked him, for all his abrasive personality and biting, black sense of humor. She had enjoyed the time they spent trading spells,
had enjoyed the challenge of stretching her mind and magical skills against his.

However, the fact was that for all his awkward little friendly overtures, he was still jerking her around at every turn. Never mind the note-swiping, which was merely irritating. After she had slept on it, Willow was more than a little irked that no one had thought to mention that some of her students were the children of Death Eaters before now. That was kind of need-to-know information, and she’d been kept in the dark until the very last second.

But part of her wondered if there was a perfectly logical reason why she had been left out of the loop. Like, maybe they wanted to feel her out first, figure out if she was the kind of person who might freak entirely over the news and run away, or worse yet, go trigger happy on a bunch of kids. Maybe someone dropped the ball and everyone thought she had already been told.

“Hufflepuff!” the hat cried over a little girl with blond pigtails. Willow smiled vaguely and clapped again, mind chugging around in tight little circles, to very little avail.

She managed to smile and applaud at appropriate intervals throughout the rest of the Sorting, even though her fixed, pleasant expression was starting to feel a little rictus there by the end. At least she wasn’t having to field any awkward small talk. Professor Snape had clapped forcefully each time a new student was assigned to his House, golf clapped half-heartedly for all the other students, and showed little other interest in interacting with anyone. Even without the binder issue between them, their previous discussion had left her expecting a snubbing anyway. His silence hadn’t been much of a surprise.

Frog Face’s on the other hand…

Willow had braced herself for Professor Umbridge’s painful brand of dinner conversation, but all for naught. The woman seemed more interested in beaming fatuously around the room. It was a mixed blessing, because while Willow wasn’t subjected to any verbal abuse, she couldn’t help but feel like it was only a short reprieve, that something was brewing under Frog Face’s falsely benevolent exterior.

It was almost a relief when Dumbledore’s brief, somewhat loony, post-Sorting address to the student body managed to snap her out of her pointless obsessing so that she could give the ridiculously sumptuous meal that sprung into existence in front of her at least some of the attention it deserved.

Dinner passed in something resembling peace. It was hard to not let some of the excitement and anticipation the students (and yes, most of the staff) were feeling affect her. Willow let herself unwind a little and try to enjoy what should have been a literally enchanted evening.

Then came the part of the evening Willow had been dreading. Dumbledore had taken to his elaborate podium, commanding voice calling for silence. Minerva had said that his general speech didn’t deviate much from year to year. The welcome. General rules and announcements, mostly aimed at the new students. Then, there came the introduction of any new staff.

“This year, we are welcoming two new professors to Hogwarts. I am sure you all received the school’s mailing about the new course we are offering. I am pleased to introduce Professor Willow Rosenberg from the Council of Watchers, who will be adding her expertise to that of Professor Snape’s in Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts.” Dumbledore turned half way towards Willow, gesturing for her to rise.

Willow steeled herself and slid to her feet. It felt like everyone in the room, every last person, was staring at her, but at least there was scattered applause as well. While her stomach might have been
doing back flips, her face was composed and relaxed. She’d logged enough hours in the Council’s boardrooms to pull that off. She even managed a natural-looking smile and wave before sitting back down. She thought she saw Minerva nod approvingly out of the corner of her eye, and Dumbledore smiled at her, which had to be a good sign, before he turned back to the student body.

“He also, Professor Dolores Umbridge has graciously agreed to take a hiatus from her position at our own Ministry to teach our traditional Defense Against the Dark Arts course,” the Headmaster continued, looking and sounding far more gracious than Willow knew he must feel.

Umbridge also rose as he extended an arm in welcome, clasping her hands primly before her. However, she stubbornly remained standing, even when Dumbledore started to continue with his speech. Willow couldn’t quite keep her eyebrows from rising when the woman interrupted him with a little, falsely-polite cough.

Fortunately, the rest of the room, Dumbledore included, seemed to be having similar reactions. The general surprise and disapproval didn’t seem to phase Umbridge. “Thank you for those kind words of welcome. It is so good to be back at Hogwarts, in front of so many eager little faces,” she said, her voice even more cloying than usual.

Willow couldn’t be certain, but ‘eager’ wasn’t how she would have described the range of expressions cropping up among the student body. ‘Affronted’ maybe, or at least ‘confused.’ She hoped that Frog Face would take the hint and sit down. No such luck.

“I am particularly pleased, Headmaster, that you used the word traditional to describe my course,” Umbridge continued with a little smile. “We at the Ministry understand the importance of properly educating young witches and wizards, and while innovation certainly has its place, tradition can be a guide when we are faced with uncertainty or unfamiliar things. It can help us by guiding us towards more productive, worthwhile fields of study and away from ideas which previous generations found to be ineffective or offensive…”

Willow didn’t hear what Umbridge had to say next, probably because her blood was starting to pound in her ears. If there had been any doubt as to what Frog Face was alluding, the superior glance the odious woman had thrown Willow’s way left little doubt.

Willow’s fingernails were digging deeply into her palms and there was a tingling tightness around her eyes that let her know that she needed to get a handle on her emotions, and fast. But the bald faced insult, leveled in front of the entire student body, had been so unexpected, had caught her so entirely off guard, that she wasn’t mentally prepared to handle the sudden surge of humiliation and anger. The little, dark voice in the back of Willow’s mind, which she had learned to ignore, but could never quite completely banish, was tugging at her now. It would be so easy, it said, so very easy to just reach out and flatten the arrogant hag. There were a thousand reasons why she shouldn’t, but the fact remained that she could. And it would be so simple.

Something hard as iron closed tightly over Willow’s wrist. She jerked slightly, startled, and the tunnel vision which had been overtaking her sight shattered abruptly. A lock of hair had escaped from her loose updo and was dancing lightly in her peripheral vision. It was fading quickly from an unnatural, dark burgundy to its usual copper as it came to rest on her shoulder. She looked at it, then to Professor Snape on her right, alarmed.

He was watching Umbridge with a bored expression on his face, but it was his hand, hidden from view under the table, which was clamped around her wrist like a vice.

Willow took an unsteady breath, shaken. This was the worst lapse she had had in a while. She
thankfully hadn’t acted upon her darker impulses, and she had to believe she wouldn’t have, even without Professor Snape’s intervention, but it was always an upsetting reminder of her own weaknesses, her past failings, whenever her self-discipline slipped like that.

It took her a minute, but when she felt centered again, Willow deliberately unclenched her fists. Professor Snape’s hand remained locked in place for a few moments more before he slowly released her. She managed to capture his retreating fingertips and gave them a brief squeeze in gratitude. During the entire exchange, he had never once looked her way, had never once allowed a flicker of a reaction to show on his face, but when her grip loosened, a muscle in his cheek twitched and he jerked his hand away from her touch.

Willow couldn’t help but quirk a tiny smile at that. Typical. She had forgotten. No touching, except apparently when it was on his terms.

She was still smiling to herself when Frog Face finished her speech and returned to her seat. That apparently wasn’t the reaction the woman had been expecting, because some of the smug confidence on her face and in her aura melted away.

“And what are you smiling so secretively about, my dear?” Umbridge asked as she arranged herself back in her chair, the edge under her cloyingly sweet tones closer to the surface than usual.

“What?” Willow said, seeing an opportunity to get some of her own back. She avoided eye-contact by looking out over the student body. Dumbledore was speaking again, but it seemed like most everyone was paying attention to their two new teachers. She thought she spotted the kids from Grimmauld Place, but they were pretty far down the Gryffindor table and she wasn’t entirely sure. “Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” she said airily.

“I said, why are you smiling?” There wasn’t a trace of sweetness in Umbridge’s tone this time.

Willow took a moment coming up with a vapid enough answer, knowing full well that the wait was making Umbridge seethe. “I was just thinking about Roald Dahl,” she finally said, relishing the blank lack of recognition on Umbridge’s face. Willow brushed a hand over her ear, sweeping the stray hair out of her face again and smiling a little more broadly. “And obviously his book wasn’t talking about my kind of witch, so I was just wondering. You do have toes, right?”

That did the trick.

Everyone was dismissed from dinner a scant few minutes later, and Umbridge spent the entire intervening time sputtering incoherently.

~*~*~*~

The Entrance Hall was utter chaos. Prefects were herding first years in the general directions of their new Houses’ dormitories. Most of the older students were milling around in the hallways, chattering animatedly.

Willow was supposed to be shooing everyone off to bed now that the welcome banquet was over, curfew and all that, but her heart wasn’t really in it. For all the hell, literal or otherwise, that she had gone through back in high school, the first day back after summer break had always been special. You had to catch up, see who had grown four inches over the last few months or traded in their glasses for contacts over the break. Who were you sharing classes with, and had anyone chopped all their hair off or dyed it green? First days of school were exciting, and nerve wracking too, but the rosy lens of nostalgia took a lot of the bite out of that part.
Besides, Willow had her own catching up to do, even if her quarry was being understandably elusive.

Professor Snape was navigating through the teeming throng, and in his wake, the crowd always seemed to thin. It was kind of like watching a shark leisurely break up a school of fish. He was definitely rocking his whole ‘Sith Lord’ persona at the moment, as he had warned. Even so, the air needed clearing between them, but she’d just have to wait until the bedlam subsided.

A few of the other professors had scaled the main staircase to better continue herding students from there. Willow could occasionally hear Minerva’s voice floating down from the next floor up, cutting through the general din. Willow had staked out an out-of-the-way spot near the head of the basement staircase to wait. It gave her a good vantage of the Entrance Hall, and still, somehow, Dumbledore managed to sneak up on her.

“Might I ask what it was you said to Professor Umbridge which garnered such an interesting response?” he asked, standing just behind her, eyes twinkling with amusement in a disproportionately serious face.

She managed to not jump. It was a little disconcerting how he had managed to do that, she really should have sensed his approach. “Uh, I asked her if she had toes,” she admitted. When his arched eyebrow prompted her to elaborate, she continued, “It’s a muggle thing.” She cringed inwardly at using the M word, but it apparently got her point across well enough. Dumbledore nodded gravely, as if she had explained everything.

“I shan’t ask you to refrain completely from defending yourself,” he said quietly. “However, in this case, restraint might be your best option.”

Willow smiled bitterly. “Don’t worry. She thinks I’m too much of an airhead to realize I’m being insulting.”

He was doing that thing where she felt like he was looking right through her. “I wasn’t referring to your question about toes,” he said.

This time, Willow really did cringe. “You don’t miss much, do you?” she said, instead of, I promise to try not to flash fry Professor Umbridge, no matter how much she deserves it.

“Very little,” he said, all smiles and good cheer again. “And speaking of which….” With a brief nod, he excused himself and walked towards a group of four older Hufflepuff students who had been huddled in the far corner of the Hall. Willow couldn’t hear what the Headmaster said to them, and wasn’t really sure what had drawn his attention in the first place, but the students quickly dispersed, chagrinned expressions on their faces.

Willow just shook her head in impressed, wry amusement. She’d give it to Dumbledore, the man was crafty.

She got a few sidelong glances from the Slytherin students, who were trickling down the basement stairs towards their common room, which she bore with equanimity. It took a little while, and she even saw a few little gemstones drop in the negative direction in each House’s point-tallying hourglass, but eventually the hallways seemed to be clear of students.

Indulging in a little curiosity while she waited, Willow left her self-imposed post to get a closer look at the hourglasses. They were impressive pieces of spell work. Casting a quick glance around the hall to make sure she was alone, she whispered, “One point to Ravenclaw.” A single sapphire dropped downwards in that House’s glass. “One point from Ravenclaw,” she hurriedly added, not
wanting to actually affect the tally with her little experiment. The same gem dutifully rose. *Neat.*

Professor Snape eventually reappeared, having apparently successfully chased his own students into their underground lair. Willow turned his way, meaning to waylay him if necessary.

It wasn’t.

Having caught sight of her, he immediately made a bee-line for her, pulling a miraculously uncrinkled paper out of the sleeve of his robes. Willow got a look at it as he neared; it was her sunshine spell.

“You seem to have misplaced this,” he said, disapproving tone making her instinctively bristle.

Willow pulled herself up short before snapping something she might regret later, because despite his outward demeanor, she sensed no real hostility coming from him. It occurred to her that he didn’t need to have returned her notes so openly. He could have just snuck the page back amongst her other notes the way he had been doing previously. Since it seemed like nobody in her immediate sphere was going to just come out and say what they were thinking, she was just going to have to learn to hear what wasn’t being said. So this little display was… what? Maybe a peace offering?

As long as she was translating already, she might as well try her hand at speaking the lingo. She took the paper, meeting Professor Snape’s deceptively flat gaze. “Thanks. I’m flaking out about all kinds of things tonight.” The embarrassment on her face wasn’t entirely feigned. *Thanks for the reality check at dinner,* she meant.

Maybe he understood what she was trying to convey, maybe he didn’t, but she suspected that she had made her point. The same little muscle as before ticked in his cheek when he nodded dismissively at her and turned to retreat once again down the stairs.

It wasn’t until she had returned to her own rooms and started to put the sunshine spell back in its proper place among her other papers that she saw the terse note, written in a spidery hand, at the bottom of the returned page.

*Old habits –*

It wasn’t signed, but then again, it didn’t need to be. Willow smiled even as the text faded and disappeared before her eyes. She might be new to the language, but she was pretty sure that was an apology, or at least as close to one as she was likely to get.

Willow was as prepared for this battle as she ever would be.

Her armor might be dress slacks and a blouse (she was still stubbornly avoiding robes) and her weapons were differently colored markers and a bag full of transparencies, but they would just have to do. The lectern and overhead projector on her desk wasn’t a very effective fort, but they were good for hiding the fact that behind them, she was drumming her fingers with nervous energy. She had spent most of the day distracting herself from the butterflies in her stomach, but now she was watching students file into her classroom and while her nerves were still there, so was the crystal clear sense of purpose she often felt right before going out with the slayers to take on a particularly powerful demon.

Professor Snape was looming in the back corner of the room, looking disgruntled and bored. The big faker. He cared, more than he wanted other people to know. ‘Teach your class,’ he had said.
'Maybe you can reach them.'

She could do that.

At least she could try.

The three kids from Grimmauld Place filed in last with one other Gryffindor student in tow. Willow watched them settle into desks in the second row, noting in passing that everyone had seemed to sort of self-segregate according to their respective Houses. By her count that was everybody. Time to get this show on the road.

“Hi everyone,” she said a little loudly, cutting through the students’ chatter. They dropped silent almost at once. Okay, already a better start than the first time I taught a class of slayers-in-training. She rested her hands on either side of the lectern, took a deep breath, and dove in.

“Welcome to Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts. In case you missed it at dinner yesterday, my name is Willow Rosenberg and I’m from the Council of Watchers. If that name doesn’t mean anything to you yet, don’t worry, I’ll be sharing more than you probably ever wanted to know just as soon as we get a few intro things out of the way. First of all,” she raised her hands where everyone could see them. “No wand,” she said, wiggling her fingers for emphasis. She reached down, pulled a stack of papers out of her bag, and flung it, frisbee-like, into the classroom. Each individual page spun out, trailing threads of magic, before landing one by one in front of each wide-eyed student. She had been practicing that spell, and okay, maybe the entirety of her lecture as well, over and over for most of the morning. From the expressions on the students’ faces, the effort had been well worth it. “Yes, I can do magic. It’s just a little different than yours. Professor Snape up there is going to help me iron out anything that doesn’t quite mesh on the days when I teach.”

She waved up at him, feeling a little more confident, like she was hitting her stride. He glowered down at her. A few of the less observant students whipped around to stare, apparently not having noticed his presence before. Willow started a list of things she might need to add to future lesson plans in the back of her mind. First entry: situational awareness.

“Now that that’s out of the way, thing two. Everybody pick up those papers.” When the shuffling died down, but before the panic started to really set in, she said, “Yeah, pop quiz, but don’t freak out too badly. It’s not for a grade. I’m just trying to get an idea of where we all stand on the basics. If everybody already knows how to kill a vampire or summon an anti-magic barrier, I don’t want to bore you to tears later in the term by rehashing old information. So I’m thinking fifteen minutes should be more than enough time to answer those ten questions. Turn them in up here on the desk when you finish.”

She ended up fudging the time limit by a few minutes. First of all, she hadn’t expected the mad dash to pull out inkwells and quills, some of which needed to be sharpened. Seriously, what was wrong with regular old pens and pencils? Secondly, she wasn’t quite sure she had the hang of translating the funky not-a-clock in the back of the classroom into normal person time. And lastly, despite her reassurances that she was looking for, like, two sentence answers to the questions, three max, Hermione Granger and most all of the Ravenclaws in the room had written furiously until Willow had started to worry that she might be forced to pry the pages out from under their feverishly scribbling quills.

Willow commiserated, she really did, but come on. At her worst, she didn’t think she would have churned out an entire essay in response to the prompt, “List three kinds of demons which cannot be killed by decapitation.” Surely not. Even so, she gave the obvious overachievers a little extra time to get all of the information they wanted off of their chests. There were also a few obviously clueless ones who seemed to hit eleventh hour pay dirt given the extra time, which was fine too.
Willow didn’t see why she couldn’t afford to be generous, given the nature of the assignment.

When the last paper was turned in, Willow turned to the next page of her lecture notes (2a, Slayers/Council of Watchers: Purpose and History, blue text with orange ink denoting key points) and kicked things off again. “Okay, so Professor Snape and I are going to be trading class days back and forth, so that’ll give me plenty of time to look through those questionnaires before my next lecture. In the meantime, I thought I’d give you a little bit of background on where I come from and what I do first, so we’re all on the same page. Who here has heard of the Council of Watchers before?” A few hands rose uncertainly. Most of the students were starting to wear the kinds of expressions that meant that they were no longer quite sure what exactly they had gotten themselves into with this class. Well that was okay. She would have hated to be exactly what they had been expecting. “Uh huh, and which of you guys wants to share a rough definition with the class?” Only one hand remained raised. At least it belonged to someone whose name Willow knew. “Yes, Hermione?”

“The Council of Watchers is a Muggle organization which was founded to train and support members of the slayer line,” the girl answered, voice taking on the cadence of route memorization. Someone had been doing a little extra curricular studying. “Good job. So what’s a slayer?” Hermione’s hand rose again, but this time it was alone. “Somebody else this time?” Ah, now they were panicking. Maybe the Socratic method wasn't a thing in wand wizarding schools. “Okay. This will be a lot less painful once I learn everybody’s names, but for right now… Third row from the front, on my far left.” She pointed towards a dark-haired, snub-nosed girl in the Slytherin section. “What’s your name?” Willow asked.

The girl looked like she might freak out for a brief second, but she hid the reaction quickly under a haughty expression. “Pansy Parkinson,” she said, sounding as bored as she now looked. Willow stifled a small smile, refrained from glancing at Professor Snape, and wondered if that talent for dissembling was a trait shared by all Slytherins. “Okay Pansy, what do you think a slayer does?”

“Kills stuff?” she replied, sarcasm palpable. Someone snickered behind Pansy. So that was how it was going to be. Instead of bristling, which is what she actually wanted to do, Willow made herself smile coolly. Okay, maybe she had kind of set herself up for that one. “Something like that, but it’s a little more complicated,” she said, letting Pansy’s jab slide... this time.

Willow flipped the switch on the overhead projector, dimmed the room’s lights with a wave of the hand, and slapped her first transparency onto the lens. “Looks like I have a little over half an hour to cover a few thousand years of Council/Slayer history. If I start going too fast for you to take notes, just raise your hand or something. Anyway, most of the time you’ll hear me just say ‘Slayers,’ but really, I should be calling them ‘Vampire Slayers.’ That’s because even though they are currently trained to fight all kinds of dangerous stuff, from demons to rogue witches and wizards, we’re pretty certain that the first slayer was specifically created by a group of shamans we now call the Shadow Men to deal with a particularly nasty outbreak of vampires somewhere in eastern Africa…”

Willow did manage to cram a great deal into just under thirty(ish) minutes, but her lecture was still really, really threadbare by anyone’s reckoning. She’d hit the high points, like the nature of the
continuity of the slayer line, the discovery of scrying spells which could identify potentials, the subsequent organization of those ancient shamans into the earliest version of the Council of Watchers in order to contact and train potentials to be slayers, the top seven or so nearest-miss apocalypses in which the Council had been involved, etc. etc. She didn’t gloss over the less-complimentary stuff either, such as the decidedly shabby treatment of many slayers through the centuries or some of the more spectacular incidents of infighting in the Council’s long history, including the most recent coup of which she had been a part.

For all her moments of frank honesty though, there were some pieces of Council history that Willow just couldn’t share with the class. The academic in her revolted against the idea of withholding information, but during her lesson planning, it was almost like she could hear Xander and Andrew going on and on and on about M5 and Q level clearance, or whatever, in the back of her mind. The thing was, some important events in the Council’s past were still classified for very good reasons. For example, she wasn’t about to tell her class that Minister of Magic Faris Spaven hadn’t died of an unexplained, unprecedentedly violent allergic reaction to the dye in his robes of state, but had instead been assassinated in 1903 when his anti-Council rhetoric had reached an alarming pitch. Or that the Council had been covertly supporting some of the subversive goblin groups off and on for the last few centuries. Passing on that kind of stuff just wasn’t going to do anyone any good at the present time. And it wasn’t as if Professor Binns or Professor Burbage were off in their classes, owning up to the two slayers (that the Council knew of) who had died at the hands of wand witches and wizards in the last century alone.

She had tried to be as fair and evenhanded and honest about the Council as she could be, and that would just have to be good enough. For now.

“So, any questions?” Willow asked, setting down the purple marker she had been using to write notes all over the margins of her transparencies. The classroom was still kind of dark, and she’d been standing, okay maybe more like hiding, behind the glow of the overhead projector for long enough to turn the students into indistinct, vaguely human-shaped blobs. At the moment, they were very quiet, vaguely human-shaped blobs.

Willow stepped out of the glow of the projector and waved the lights back up to a reasonable level. What she found was a sea of expressions ranging from consternation to mild shock. That wasn’t exactly what she had been aiming for. “So, uh… No questions then?”

A few hands rose, very tentatively.

“Uh, fifth row, fourth from my left.” Willow pointed, picking out a dark-haired girl from Ravenclaw.

“You said that there was supposed to be only one slayer at a time, but then all of the –” she glanced down at her notes for a second, then continued, “Potentials became full slayers all at once a few years ago.” Willow knew where this was going, and grimaced a little accordingly, even before the girl finished. “What exactly caused that?”

“Well,” Willow hedged for just a moment. She had kind of skimmed past that on purpose. Oh well. “I kind of did that.” Make that consternation, mild shock, and frank disbelief. “The short version is that a pretty nasty entity was exploiting a… well, we’ll call it an instability in the slayer line to try to blow the Sunnydale Hellmouth wide open. Which would have been bad. Very, very bad. Things were getting pretty desperate, and it was Buffy’s idea, but I’m the one who actually did it.”

“How?” blurted an older student from Gryffindor, sounding genuinely curious.

Willow had meant what she had said to Professor Snape, she wasn’t about to hand any potential
mini-spies roadmaps to destroying the Council, but there was now an eight hundred pound gorilla in her classroom which she now had to address on one way or another, much as she might have not wanted to. However, she couldn’t tell them about the Scythe, or any of the other slayer artifacts. If she had figured out how to tamper with the slayer line, then so could someone else.

“Answering that question fully would take up the rest of this class and most of the next one,” she said, shamelessly dodging the question, “But don’t worry, I promise we’ll discuss that kind of wandless magic later on in the term.” And she would too, but not before she had a better feel for her students and was able to settle on what she could, and what she definitely couldn’t, say.

Thankfully, no one pressed her on the subject, even though some of them looked like they sorely wanted to. The questions after that had been a little easier to handle. A couple students hadn’t known what Krakatoa was or why it was important that a cult had attempted to use the volcano to power a ritual to summon an Old One in 1833. Ernie Macmillian, her sole Hufflepuff, had wanted to know how many Hellmouths had been destroyed other than Sunnydale’s (four) and where they had been located (Alexandria, St. Petersburg, Easter Island, and Roanoke). Time had thankfully run out on Hermione’s long-winded, roundabout question about how something called Humbolt’s Third Law of Transference affected wandless magic, so Willow had promised to get back to her at the beginning of her next lecture (and after some covert research).

That left just enough time to introduce her students to the little surprise she had waiting for them in Dungeon 14.
“I kind of did that,” she had said. “I kind of did that.” Not “I helped to do that,” or “I was one of the people who did that.” Simply, “I kind of did that,” like the mysterious proliferation of slayers had been of little consequence, easily done and then shrugged away in turn.

Severus was not certain how he should react to that.

Oh, he knew how he should appear to react. His face was frozen in a disdainful mask of thinly veiled scorn and disbelief. It was the same, fixed expression he had worn throughout Professor Rosenberg’s admittedly fascinating lecture. He would have to mention it in his next report to the Dark Lord, there was no escaping that now. If he did not, then one of his students undoubtedly would, and his omission would raise dangerous questions.

After her deeply shocking admission, Professor Rosenberg had turned aside further questions and scurried off on an entirely different subject. Severus was starting to recognize this as her favored, annoyingly successful, method of misdirection. She seemed to always flit unchecked between topics, but when she veered into something she deemed dangerous, she would either lapse into reticent silence or drown out those most fascinating droplets with a veritable flood of even more frenetic babbling. He doubted he would have any better luck prying useful details out of her than their students had.

She was cheerful now, almost mischievous in her unwillingness to explain to her confused students why she was trying to herd them out of the classroom. For once, Severus did know her underlying plan, and part of him was filled with as much darkly amused anticipation as she. In this, he would not spoil her fun. He remained disdainful and aloof, responding briefly to Draco’s pointed eye roll as the students filed out of the room.

Professor Rosenberg’s little extracurricular project in dungeon fourteen was just as he had left it: pitch black and thrumming with magical energy. Some of the students were shifting uncomfortably as they crammed into the tiny hallway outside of the heavily warded room. Even the most ungifted, oblivious witch or wizard could not stand that close to that many heavy enchantments without sensing something.

Professor Rosenberg stretched to see over the milling group of students, balancing precariously on her toes. “Can everyone see me?” she asked. The watcher was quite petite and some of the older students standing in the front of the class were well into their teenaged growth spurts. Of course half of the class was unable to see her. “Right, well anyway, welcome to your standing homework assignment.” She gestured to the darkened room. “Whoever gets to the prize in there can use it to knock one of my questions off of the final exam for the class. I’ll keep casting different spells as long as you guys keep getting to the extra credit, but it’s one student to one prize. Hack your way into the middle of this puzzle more than once and I’ll be impressed, but you’ll still only get to skip one question on the exam. Got it?”

She had their attention now.

Most of the students looked intrigued, even excited at the prospect of solving Professor Rosenberg’s puzzle. Well, most of the students that weren’t members of his own House, who looked bored and dismissive. They would all soon discover that they would not have half the ease in breaking through her wards as they seemed to think.

“So, any volunteers? I’ll be sticking around for the next little bit at least,” Professor Rosenberg
said, trying and failing to hide what Severus could only describe as slightly wicked glee.

“I’ll try!” came an immediate, enthusiastic response. It was Granger. Of course it was. Their resident overachiever stepped forward at Professor Rosenberg’s gesture and readied her wand. “Accio prize!” she said, voice clear and firm. Her stance was perfect, the motion of her wand purposeful and precise.

Even so, nothing happened.

Granger tried a few other variants of the basic summoning spell, but each attempt failed. Her voice was becoming a little louder, a little more impatient with each try. She had never dealt with failure well. When other designations such as ‘award,’ ‘goal,’ 'answer,' and ‘extra credit’ didn't work, she moved on to attempts to dispel the wards instead. These failed too, especially her last, frustrated “Finite Incantatum,” which disappeared into the darkness with only in a weak, sputtering fizzle for her pains.

It took very little dissembling for Severus to feign a thin, sardonic smile at that. His students were not the only ones he felt needed lessons in humility.

If her classmates had been amused by Granger’s failure, their triumph was short lived. Some of them, those from Ravenclaw in particular, tried a large variety of counterspells ranging from simplistic to fairly advanced. The most headway any of them were able to make was a brief dissipation of the darkness spell.

Brief, but long enough to give the students a quick peek at the layers of nested spells waiting inside the dungeon. The darkness had swirled back into place to various sounds of surprise and dismay.

The Weasley twins might have fared somewhat better, had Severus not overheard them conspiring to shove their younger brother into the darkened dungeon. Not that the idea was lacking in merit, but despite the tactical advantages to using a third party to test unknown wards, as a professor, Severus was not about to let the twins dash Ron Weasley’s admittedly thick skull against Professor Rosenberg’s equally unyielding spells. Despite his storied history with dire insinuations and thinly veiled threats, actually allowing one’s students to be maimed during a class session was generally frowned upon by the rest of the faculty.

The twins had put on inches like weeds over the summer, but it took more than superior height alone to properly loom. They were dispersed with a minimum of effort.

The same could not be said of the class as a whole. A few students seemed to be taking their inability to pierce Professor Rosenberg’s veils and wards as a form of personal affront. Unfortunately, Severus could not stay to savor any more of their frustration or his co-instructor’s admittedly well-concealed air of triumph. There were only so many hours in the day, and his participation in this course did not excuse him from his Potions responsibilities. He discreetly quit the hallway, leaving Professor Rosenberg to her fun.

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“This is a nightmare,” Professor Rosenberg grumbled against the surface of the desk.

Severus was tolerating this trespass for reasons he had not yet examined in great detail, and was even taking his time about filling in the columns in his class ledger in order to prolong the invasion. Professor Rosenberg, having apparently volunteered his office for purposes of her own grading, had only made it through half of her so-called ‘pop quizzes’ before succumbing and planting her face on the remaining stack.
Tyro.

“I did warn you, if you recall,” he said without looking up from leisurely making notations onto his Potions ledger. Grades from the first day’s assignments duly entered, he moved on to demerits. Only three students had managed to melt various pieces of laboratory equipment on the first day of classes, a minor miracle by his reckoning, but each incident was still being recorded under the date in the form of neat, red X.

Professor Rosenberg looked up and brandished one of the pages at him. “This is the sixth student who has answered, ‘Name one way to recognize a vampire’ with some kind of variation of ‘Ministry law requires vampires to identify themselves as such if asked directly.’”

Severus turned the page, slowly traced a finger down the columns of his page, and located the next offender. “And?”

“And? And that is the most ludicrous thing I’ve heard since, I don’t know, ever?” She dropped the paper back on the stack with a disgusted sound.

He made a second X. “The term is still young,” he said, dipping his quill into the pot of red ink.

Severus wrote the final X, carefully wiped the tip of his quill clean and propped it on its stand to dry. He then laced his fingers together on the desk in front of him. He hadn’t expected to find her here after breakfast. She had seemed fully absorbed in a recent history book throughout the meal, thoroughly oblivious to everyone and everything around her. However, there she sat, raging at him, but not on the subject of his theft of her spells or his omission of his students’ familial connections. It was unexpected and oddly diverting.

“Why are you not reacting to this?” she asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Because years of experience have systematically lowered my expectations where students are involved,” he said, purposefully withholding one rather important fact for the moment.

“Okay,” she said, eyeing him critically. “Jaded much?”

His mouth curled into a sharp, predatory smirk. “And because you have just rather ably summarized one of the decrees in the Vampire Code of Conduct in the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans,” he said, relishing the way Professor Rosenberg seemed to deflate at his words.

“I, what?” She was looking at him with an amusing level of shock. “Is that a joke?”

“It is common knowledge that I do not possess a sense of humor,” he said at his driest.

Professor Rosenberg laughed. It was a silvery sound, full of real mirth. “Okay seriously,” she said, eyes still dancing, “Is that really a law?”

Severus snorted with equal parts amusement and disgust. “Yes.”

“But, does anyone actually think that vampires will abide by it?” she asked, aghast again.

“Few who have actually encountered a hungry vampire,” he said. “Then again, few vampires will knowingly attack a fully trained witch or wizard.”

“Pfft. Yeah, knowingly.” There was amusement in her voice, but a touch of bitterness underlay it.
Severus searched her face, but for all his skill, her eyes betrayed nothing more concrete than what he could have gleaned from the sudden, weary lines that appeared at the corners of Professor Rosenberg’s eyes and the tight, hard line of her mouth. It didn’t take a Legilimens to recognize the expression though.

He would have given much to know what had caused her this pain. For his reports, of course. As it was, he would not ask outright, that would have been far too familiar. He could bide his time for now. “I would imagine that more mistakes are made on your side of things. Your choice in attire does not differentiate you from Muggles in the same way that ours does.”

For some reason, that amused her. She shook her head and smiled to herself, bending over her stack of papers, utilitarian writing device at the ready again. Severus should have probably been offended by her reaction, he was sure there was some form of mockery hidden there somewhere. As it was, he seemed to be much more concerned with studying the entertainingly childish expression of disgust which suffused her face as she found yet another student’s answer distasteful. Which was absolutely inexcusable on his part. He had much more pressing concerns.

“As amusing as it is to listen to your illusions crumble, my third year Potions class will be starting soon,” he said, neatly slipping his own class notes into a warded drawer.

Professor Rosenberg’s green eyes were sparking, and her expression couldn’t seem to settle on amusement or annoyance. She finally gave up on both reactions and settled on an obviously feigned pout while shuffling her papers into something resembling order. “I’ll take that as an extremely subtle hint to leave,” she said, tucking the quizzes away in her bag.

Severus rose when she did, feeling unaccountably awkward, and if that was not annoying enough, he found himself ghosting after her steps, silently opening his office door.

She suddenly turned to face him in the doorway. “I almost forgot to ask, is there such a thing as a practice wand?” she asked, looking up at him.

There was a single worry line creasing her brow. She was standing uncomfortably close, within the reach of his still-outstretched arm. He looked at her blankly for moment, wondering where this tangent might lead. “What precisely do you mean by a practice wand?” he finally asked.

“You know, like a fake wand. Maybe one which can only cast a simple spell or two?” she elaborated, blithely unaware of his discomfort. “I have this plan for a class, but I’m starting to think that using real wands for it would be kind of a terrible idea. Because of, you know, accidental wand breakage, and temper tantrum-y hexing, and other potential for unpredictable collateral damage.”

Severus had to take an uncharacteristically long moment to gather his thoughts. What in Merlin’s name was she planning to inflict on their students? It did not help matter that she was so close that the scent of her hair was becoming most distracting. He never had been able to quite place it. Ylang-ylang perhaps, or some similar tropical flower, with an underlying hint of some spice or herb. “The charm you want is fairly basic,” he finally said. “If you do not wish to spend your coin on the more prurient varieties which are available in prank shops, Filius would most likely oblige you.”

“Thanks!” Professor Rosenberg said, smiling brightly up at him. People simply did not look at Severus that way, smiled at him that way.

Neither would she, once she learned who and what he truly was.
He needed to get to his classroom. To facilitate that, she needed to leave. However, some small part of him, a portion of his mind now rusty with disuse, wanted very much for her to stay exactly where she was. To prolong this moment indefinitely, responsibilities be damned. But she was already turning and starting down the hallway, leaving Severus unable to summon his usual litany of excuses and justifications for his actions.

He set the wards on his office door and started toward his Potions class, his senses filled with flowers and spices, red hair and green eyes.

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Professor Rosenberg was sitting at the far end of the faculty table in Minerva’s usual seat, deep in conversation with Filius. Severus could just see her gesturing excitedly with a fork around the obscuring mass of Hagrid’s immense girth.

They had to be discussing Professor Rosenberg’s ever-so-mysterious practice wands. Severus had not had the opportunity to question her as to their intended use, having missed the midday meal due to complaints of a particularly vile odor permeating the Slytherin boys’ dormitories. This prank was more innocuous than most, his students were as prone to needling one another as they were the rest of the student body, but Severus had avowed that whoever was responsible for this particular stunt would be serving detention with Argus for a week. Reaping petty revenge on a housemate was one thing. Wasting an hour of the Head of House’s time was less forgivable. He had finally found the rotting, ensorcelled halibut cleverly concealed in a nook in the stonework above Zabini’s bed.

Severus slowly drummed the fingers of his left hand with annoyance.

He disliked being thwarted, especially when circumstances conspired to rob him of even a target for his ire. The instigator of the halibut incident was as yet anonymous, and if he was honest with himself, would probably remain so unless he or she was foolish enough to gloat indiscriminately. His classes had been surprisingly uneventful. Or perhaps he had simply been too distracted to notice his students’ usual antics as they occurred, which was also possible, though irritating for entirely separate reasons. Even Professor Rosenberg was doing only as he had suggested, sitting with Filius and discussing her infernal wands.

There was no need for such impatience. It was undisciplined, beneath him. His first lecture in the Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts class was not until tomorrow, and Professor Rosenberg’s next two days after that. At a minimum, that gave him three days to ask his disarmingly forthright co-instructor why real wands would not suffice for her mysterious lesson plan.

He was not behaving rationally, which irked him all the more. The lingering scent of halibut which stubbornly clung to his clothes was not helping his mood either.

“Please pass the peas,” said Minerva, who had taken Professor Rosenberg’s usual seat.

Umbridge, robbed of her usual target, had been attempting to draw the Transfiguration professor into a rather passive aggressive battle of wits all evening. Professor Rosenberg would have been good for an amusing rejoinder or two, but Minerva was steadfastly refusing to rise to Umbridge’s bait. However, cordiality could only be stretched so far, and the fixed, polite expression on the Gryffindor Head’s face looked brittle enough to shatter.

Severus ceased drumming his fingers and handed her the requested dish of vegetables in silence. He had no interest in being drawn into their one-sided spat. Truth be told, he had no interest in being drawn into any kind of social intercourse at the moment. There was little danger of that to his
right, where Pomona, as usual, was wholly engrossed in her chatter with Septima. Minerva however…

“And how is your new class shaping up, Severus?” she asked, Merlin burn her. At least Umbridge seemed to be distracted with glaring at some offense occurring in the student body.

He refrained from glowering and instead answered, “Tolerably.”

“Coming from you, I will choose to take that as high praise,” Minerva said dryly, which made him scowl in irritation. “And Professor Rosenberg, how was her first class?”

Fascinating. Distracting. “The same,” he said instead, taking the opportunity to send another glance down the table under the guise of reaching for the platter of fruit. Hagrid was hunched over his plate, completely blocking Severus’ view. “Her classroom delivery needs polishing, but her practical experience is, granted, somewhat impressive.”

When he looked back at her, Minerva’s eyebrows had risen sharply. “High praise, indeed!” she said, small smile tugging at the corner of her thin lips. Severus immediately regretted his candor. “Well, I shall cease my worrying then. The last professor I recall being described that way turned out well enough.” Her pointed look, leveled over the brims of her spectacles, made the subject of her comparison plain.

He glowered at her in earnest then. Severus had been hired to teach at Hogwarts a scant few years out of school himself, embarrassingly green, no matter his natural intelligence and aptitude for potion brewing. Fresh from his defection from the Dark Lord, he had been uncomfortably aware that his position had more to do with Albus wanting his newest asset kept close at hand than any particular faith the Headmaster had in Severus’ teaching abilities. The other professors, unaware of the situation surrounding his employment and only remembering him as a studious, if standoffish, teenager with an unfortunate affinity for the Dark Arts, had looked upon his hiring with doubt, if not open hostility. When his old Transfiguration professor had started sitting in on the odd Potions class, it was obvious that the notes she was taking had little to do with tinctures and decoctions.

He had not foreseen her speaking on his behalf to the rest of the faculty. Perhaps Albus had dropped a discreet word in her ear, as a member of the Order as much as his employee, but perhaps not. Minerva had always been fiercely protective of all of her students, no matter their House.

“I fail to see the parallels,” he said, tone frigid. He disliked being reminded of this old debt between them, one which she was no doubt too noble and too insufferably Gryffindor in her motivations to even recognize.

“No?” she asked, obviously meaning it rhetorically. “Well, in either case, it is nice to see you interacting with someone you find… tolerable.”

Severus gave her a noncommittal, sour look and lapsed into silence. Her insinuation was unwelcome and uncomfortably on point, not that Severus would give her the satisfaction of responding further to her blatant fishing. However, something in his actions seemed to cheer Minerva, and when Umbridge picked up her goading where she had left off, her attempts met with even less success than they had previously.

It was almost a relief when Argus gave him an excuse to leave early by informing him that a pair of owls had deposited a rather large package outside of his storeroom. It was only ‘almost,’ because it turned out to be his overdue shipment of grave grass, which smelled almost as bad as the rotting halibut.
Reagents secured in stasis casks, Severus decided that having already missed the flurry of post-dinner activity, he could leave the remainder of the evening’s student-herding to the rest of the staff. If he started now, he could finish a preliminary draft of his latest report for the Dark Lord before his (albeit self-imposed) curfew-to-midnight hallway patrol was slated to start.

He could not omit Professor Rosenberg’s confession with regards to the recent spread of slayers, not when so many students had also been privy to her words. The key would be to find believable ways to cast doubt on her honesty in his report. There had been other notable events she had mentioned in her first lecture which had stretched even his credulity. Krakatoa, Tunguska, the Sunnydale anomaly, it had all been quite a lot to accept. Additionally, Severus had found her explanations superficial and far too brief, which was to be expected in such a broad overview of thousands of years of history. He was determined to research the incidents further in order to determine which of her claims could be corroborated, but in the meantime, she had provided him with more than enough fodder to allow him to cast a reasonably high degree of doubt on her words.

His progress was slow, his words had to be selected with extreme care. Inadvertent shades of meaning could have unfortunate repercussions, which was why it was his job to craft a report that would convey a version of the truth that would be interpreted exactly, and only, as he intended. His first draft was extremely rough, but after shuffling his phrasing, inserting a word here, removing one there, it took on a form which could reasonably be presented to Albus for final alterations and approval.

Severus walked to the Headmaster’s office. The few students he encountered in the hallways scattered in the general direction of their disparate common rooms at his passing. He would deal with them later, if they had the incredibly poor judgment to still be roaming the hallways once he concluded his evening’s other business.

The entrance to Albus’ office opened at Severus’ approach. Ignoring the Headmaster’s minor theatrics, Severus scaled the spiral staircase and found Albus waiting, gnarled fingers laced patiently over a neat stack of papers. He was wearing a neutrally pleasant, slightly quizzical expression.

Severus produced his report from a voluminous sleeve and held it aloft between index and middle finger. “I believe you will want to read this.”

“Your next report?” Albus asked. The paper whisked out of Severus’ hand and into the Headmaster’s. “Hmm,” Albus said, leaning back in his chair and settling his half-moon spectacles more firmly on the tip of his nose. Severus sat in the chair across from the desk, waiting while the report was read. “Ah good, I had wondered if you would decide to volunteer this information,” Albus commented absentlly, still reading.

His wording struck Severus as subtly wrong. “I had little choice in the matter;” he said, scowling in instinctive defense. “She volunteered the information in front of the entire class.”

Albus looked up from the report and gazed at Severus for a long moment. “I had worried that…” he started, but his voice trailed off and he seemed to think better of whatever words he had started to say. “Well, no matter. If you don’t mind, I would like to sleep on this. In the meantime, curfew is fast approaching, and I believe you will find three of your students outside of Professor Rosenberg’s dungeon.”

Severus suppressed his annoyance with a sigh and asked, “Which ones?”
“Mr. Malfoy,” Albus said, carefully laying the report next to his tower ing stack of other papers. “With Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle, of course.”

Severus felt a flicker of curiosity. “I will send them on their way,” he said, mind already analyzing this development. Draco would have been the impetus behind attempting Professor Rosenberg’s puzzle. His two shadows had neither the wit nor the motivation for such an endeavor. Then again, Draco’s academic curiosity often seemed to extend only so far as he needed to meet his own ends and keep his parents appeased.

Albus nodded absently. It was a dismissal, but Severus only made it half way to the door when he stopped and turned back to face Albus. “Why did you not include my name on the list of Death Eaters you presented to Professor Rosenberg?” he asked, giving sudden voice to a question which had been simmering in the back of his mind all day.

Albus looked up from his work again, face lined. He looked sad and older than ever, a fact which Severus found extremely disquieting. “I have not thought of you as a Death Eater in some time Severus. You have more than earned that distinction, at the very least,” Albus said, measured words quiet and careful.

The skin on the inside of Severus’ left arm prickled as if daring Albus to deny the presence of the Dark Mark there as well. Sentimental drivel aside, some things could never be undone. Severus refrained from reaching for it, even though the futile desire to scratch at the magical brand, to dig nails under the living ink and tear it from his flesh, was strong.

Albus smiled then, just a small, wistful expression, but it softened his disconcerting air of age and frailty. “Also, despite certain reservations on my part, I would have thought it obvious that you should be the one to inform Professor Rosenberg of the details of your history.”

Severus found that he had no response to that. He left the room without another word, going in search of his wayward students. Once Draco and his followers were dispersed, Severus would have hours of solitude to pace the school’s hallways and think.
Chapter 17

The letter arrived at the end of breakfast on the same, Council-encrypted stationary. The unwarded script hadn’t had much worthwhile to say, except that Xander and Serena were headed back to Cleveland. She was sorry to have missed them, but there would be time for visits after she was done with this mission, and in the meantime, letters would just have to do. The hidden message had been much more immediately interesting.

‘Willow. We received your warning and have taken the necessary precautions. I look forward to your report on the matter with more interest than is, perhaps, professional. –R. Giles’

That took care of Willow’s lack of solid morning plans. The next book on Minerva’s magical history reading list would just have to wait.

Willow didn’t have a problem with doing stuff like grading and making class notes around the school. After Professor Snape had booted her out of his office yesterday, she had finished with her pop quizzes in the staff break room. However, Council business was different, so she had decided that all of it would be done in her own quarters, behind her own wards. So after breakfast, she retreated to her rooms, dropped her bag on the couch, plopped down next to it, and got to work.

She obtained a stack of blank paper from her little office area and fished a pink pen out of her bag. Placing the papers on the coffee table, she kept the pen for a moment, holding it to her lips and saying, “Imatari,” over the tip. The rest of the papers, stacked beneath her other hand, glowed for a second, and her fingers tingled at the simple spell. Satisfied, she then took the topmost sheet of paper and folded the corner down to eyeball a rough square. The pink line she traced to denote the excess appeared on the stack of paper as well. A quick wave of her hand sent the excess falling away, leaving roughly square pages behind, and another sent the paper scraps into the fireplace.

Now that the pages were all reasonably square, she pulled the Template out of her bag, spoke the names of the requisite spells over the binding, and opened the book to reveal the text she needed. After that, it was simply a matter of writing lines and lines of spells, imbuing them with energy to weaken, entrap, and bind. It was time consuming, but would have been even more so without the copying spell. The cramped lines of text, squeezed onto every available surface of the paper, were being replicated on the rest of the pages as she wrote. Once she finished, she took a moment to wiggle her fingers and shake her hand, chasing off the beginnings of writer’s cramp. She scanned the original page for any mistakes, and when she didn’t find any, said, “Finitum,” over the pen and set it aside.

Then it was just a matter of folding the pieces of paper into little origami links, like a gum chain. A mean, nasty, purposeful gum chain. By the time the hands on her funky clock were sneaking up on ‘Lunch,’ she had a pretty decent length of paper links, folded as flat as possible, stuffed into a large envelope, and addressed with pink ink, as she had warned Giles. This time, the protective wards on the envelope were the weakest, most easily broken ones she knew.

Now there was nothing to do except hand the trap over to a freaky owl and wait to see if Frog Face, or whoever, would spring it.

~*~*~*~

The afternoon was turning out to be disappointingly uneventful. No triumphant revelation of her mail thief had interrupted Willow’s lunch.
For some reason, Professor Umbridge had been unusually smug and self-satisfied all day, but instead of taking the opportunity to be an exceptional pain through the course of the meal, she had instead seemed content to read her newspaper in relative peace. Honestly though, Willow had no complaints on that front.

Just like at breakfast, Professor Snape had arrived late to lunch, eaten mechanically, and left without so much as a word to anyone. While that wasn’t exactly out of character, Willow was still a little worried about him. She couldn’t really explain it, but he had just felt off to her, like maybe, for once, he definitely wasn’t being withdrawn and hostile just for show. Then again, his first lecture was coming up later that day, and maybe he was distracted with the extra work. That could have been it. Maybe.

She had caught Professor Flitwick on their way out of the Great Hall. He had assured her that he was working on her practice wands and would have them ready for experimentation by the coming weekend, before bustling away to his own class.

After lunch, Willow had gone up to the library to drop off Incidents of Magical Warfare: 1242 to the Present and pick up The Ministry of Magic: A History. With nothing better to do, she had staked out a desk in the back where she could read and watch the students come and go for class assignments and study hall.

By the time she had packed up and started downstairs, Willow was thoroughly bored and dejected. Not only had nothing apparently come from her mail trap, but her latest book had turned out to be a seriously dry read. Oh, and most of the students who wandered into her end of the library spent more time staring at her and whispering than studying. Suckiness all around, really.

She stopped off in her rooms to pick up a pendant she often used for divination and continued on to the Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It was empty. No surprise there, since she was kind of early, so she picked a desk in the back corner where she wouldn’t be in the way and started spreading out pens and paper for notes. Professor Snape had said that he would be covering nonverbal casting during his first class. With no formal magical instruction of her own, Willow had been forced to learn silent casting the hard way, through trial and error. She was curious to see how he would teach it.

The students started trickling in shortly after she got settled. Most of them noticed Willow, and she smiled whenever she caught one looking her way. There were a few unfamiliar faces in the crowd too. The Gryffindor with dreadlocks, who was sitting with the Weasley twins, was definitely new. So were the pretty brunette girl and the skinny, blonde boy sitting amidst the other Ravenclaws.

Still no Professor Snape though, which was kind of odd. Class was supposed to start just any second now, and he had really seemed like the hyper-punctual type.

The classroom door flew open with a bang, and Professor Snape swept in, robes billowing out behind him.

*Never mind.*

Willow discreetly hid a smile behind her hand. She tried to school her expression, but seriously, who made that kind of entrance into a classroom?

She seemed to be alone in her reaction though. Yeah, the Slytherin students were sharing some covert smirks amongst themselves, but those had an edge of mean spiritedness to them. It didn’t take Willow long to figure out why. Even from her steep angle, she could tell that most everyone else wasn’t nearly so amused. The buck-toothed boy from Gryffindor looked particularly terrified.
The remnants of her smile melted away, replaced by a small, worried frown.

Professor Snape stopped at the lectern, looking out over the class for a long moment before snapping, “Roberts, Miller, Jordan.”

The three new students Willow had noticed stiffened, and chorused ‘Yes sirs’ in response.

“Why, precisely, are you attending a class for which you are not enrolled?” Professor Snape asked, voice cold and flat.

The two Ravenclaws looked at each other, shifting uncomfortably in their seats. It was the student from Gryffindor who took a deep breath and spoke up. “We thought we might be able to sign up for the course,” he said, sounding a lot more confident than he looked.

Well, that was pretty cool. Willow doubted that anyone would have shown up to add a class that their classmates had told them sucked.

Professor Snape turned his gaze to the two Ravenclaws, who managed to keep their composure as they nodded. He tapped an index finger on the edge of the lectern, letting the silence stretch out long enough to become uncomfortable. “Since it was her lecture you missed, you will make your case to Professor Rosenberg after class,” he finally said, dismissively.

Willow could literally see the tension go out of the students’ shoulders. The new boy from Gryffindor and the Weasley twins turned and looked up at her. Willow gave them an encouraging grin and a shooing gesture, hoping they would take the hint and go back to paying attention to an increasingly irritated-looking Professor Snape. One of the twins, she had no way of telling if it was Fred or George, gave her a thumbs up and a wink before turning back to the front. She managed to keep an even expression on her face instead of giggling unprofessionally, but only just. Those three were going to be trouble.

Professor Snape was less amused, that little muscle in his cheek was twitching again, but he seemed more interested in ignoring her presence than commenting on the minor interruption which was, in all fairness, his own fault. “Your previous instruction in Defense Against the Dark Arts has been inconsistent. So much so that the Ministry has felt the need to take a more active hand in your education.” He never raised his voice and his expression was as flat and emotionless as ever. Had Willow not already heard his opinions on the subject, at length, it would have been impossible to say if he was expressing approval of the Ministry’s intervention or reproof. “However, I have taken the opportunity to read the texts assigned by Professor Umbridge. There will be little overlap between our classes.”

And now she was having to stifle a laugh again. What a massive understatement. Frog Face’s text books were still on Willow’s to-read list, but the quick skims she had wasted on them had pretty much sealed her opinion of the Ministry’s approved course material. She wrote a reminder to actually read the useless things in her notes anyway. She couldn’t let Professor Snape get the one up on her, could she?

“In this course, you will learn basic techniques for protecting yourself from dark entities and spells. Once these basics have been mastered, you will be expected to experiment with variations on the proscribed forms. Rote memorization of standard spells will not be enough to earn you top grades in this class.” He paused for a moment while the students mulled that over. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, but no less forceful. “The Dark Arts are powerful, ever changing, and above all, unpredictable. To counter them, you must be equally flexible, able to quickly recognize and adapt to threats. Raw power does, of course, have its uses, but in this course, you will find mental discipline much more useful. Now, as for today’s lesson, who can explain the tactical advantages
Hermione’s hand was up like a shot, and a few of the Ravenclaws followed a little less enthusiastically. Professor Snape looked at the volunteers with a faint scowl, and then, for some reason, glared up at Willow herself. Before she could figure out what she had done to deserve that, he turned back to the students and said, “Mr. Carmichael.”

Carmichael turned out to be the skinny, tow-headed boy from Ravenclaw. Willow would figure out their names eventually. He hesitated for a second, as if he hadn’t really been expecting to be called upon, but a dark lowering of Professor Snape’s eyebrows snapped him out of his paralysis. “Since nonverbal spells aren’t spoken out loud, your opponent will have even less time to figure out what you are casting and how best to counter it. It might only give you an extra fraction of a second’s surprise, but every little bit counts.”

“Simplistic, but basically accurate,” Professor Snape replied, but even that back handed compliment sounded grudging to Willow’s ears. “Now, unless your previous classes have been even more deficient than I have been lead to believe, seventh years should already be somewhat familiar with nonverbal casting. Therefore, each seventh year student will work with two younger students. As the count is imperfect, there will be two groups of four. You will establish a rotation for each group which allows its members to attempt both minor jinxes and defensive spells. Have I made these instructions clear?” he asked, but continued without actually waiting for a response. “Then proceed.”

Willow stopped writing and stared for a second, amused. She had been expecting some great new method for teaching nonverbal casting, and here it was: trial and error. Okay yeah, there would be older students helping out and two professors making sure nothing went extraordinarily wrong, but still. It made her feel weirdly vindicated.

Willow stuffed her pen and notes back into her bag and fished her divination crystal out of one of the satchel’s pockets. She managed to wind her way through the initial chaos, making for the front of the classroom. Try as they might, it was impossible for the students to arrange themselves into groups that split perfectly along House lines. This was apparently super serious business, but they all got themselves sorted out eventually.

Professor Snape was steadfastly ignoring her, as expected. He seemed much more interested in a group of three younger Slytherin students who had ended up grouped with the class’ newest addition from Gryffindor. None of the four seemed terribly happy about the situation, but under Professor Snape’s baleful gaze, they were all behaving.

Keeping a metaphorical ear open for any trouble, Willow started on her own class mission. She wrapped the chain of her pendant around her left wrist and secured it, leaving a generous length hanging free and sending a small tendril of energy trickling down the chain to pool in the crystal. The spell was simple to cast and self-sustaining, just a little call of like-to-like. She held up the point of quartz and brought it close to her other hand. As expected, it glowed white, with wisps of red and black.

With her first test successful, Willow surreptitiously angled herself so that she could discreetly dangle the crystal closer to Professor Snape’s back. She knew he had been at least attempting her wandless spells, but she didn’t actually have any idea about how successful he had been or what kind of potential he had.

The quartz lit up with her answer. He wasn’t as strong as she, but he would still have put most of the Council’s other recruits to shame. The bright white light was heavily streaked with black, grays, and pinks.
When she moved away again, Professor Snape gave her a flat, questioning glance which she answered with an apologetic smile and a small shrug. She planned on telling him all of her results and more after class. For now, she needed to know which of their students had the spark.

Willow started wandering the aisles of the classroom. Most of the students were too busy attempting to cast their nonverbal spells to pay attention to the softly glowing crystal she had hung around her wrist like a bracelet. Each and every one of them evoked some kind of reaction from the quartz. The buck-toothed boy, she had overheard Hermione call him Neville, had gotten a particularly strong reading, full of greens and browns. Of the trio of Slytherins Professor Snape had seemed so interested in, the blond one also had a lot of potential, glowing in copper and greens. His two friends, on the other hand, evoked barely a glimmer from her spell.

Most of the rest of the students fell somewhere in between. Hermione Granger and the lone Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan, were at the top of the spectrum. Little Miss Sarcasm from the first lecture, Pansy Parkinson, was near the bottom. Willow wasn’t quite sure what to make of the crystal’s reaction to Harry Potter though. Oh, there was potential there, but it was hard to say how much. Instead of glowing, the quartz had turned a solid, flat pink, shot through with veins of black and silver, which was just weird. She’d have to do some research later.

Her own, personal homework assignment accomplished, Willow set about offering what help she could. A few of the seventh year students had an okay grasp of the technique. That didn’t mean that they were necessarily communicating that knowledge to the younger students very well. In fact, Hermione seemed to be making progress in spite, rather than because, of the antics of Fred Weasley. Or was it George? Either way, both of the twins seemed to be better at getting their younger compatriots to laugh than to cast nonverbal spells. Harry and Ron were nearly choking themselves in the attempt to not laugh with their twin and draw Professor Snape’s ire. Hermione just looked exasperated and Neville, sitting next to her, looked like he might burst into laughter or tears at any second.

Willow took pity on them. Fred (and it was Fred) was sufficiently cowed by her addition to the group that she was able to get them back on track. George took one look at his twin’s predicament and immediately got back with the program as well. It took a little coaxing, and a little more convincing that no, concentrating on the words was not as important as concentrating on the intent of the spell, but eventually, Hermione was able to produce a semi-respectable shield and Neville had managed… something. It had kind of sparkled and sputtered with a wheeze at takeoff, but the point was, he had managed it without saying a word. He seemed at least as shocked by his minor success as Hermione and Fred.

Willow left them with a few words of encouragement and moved on to the next group, a trio of Ravenclaws. She had more luck with learning their names than she had with getting a nonverbal spell out of them. All three seemed reasonably smart, but Cho in particular was so distracted and nervous that she was having trouble concentrating at all. Willow finally suggested that they find time to practice in the evenings somewhere they could be alone and free of other distractions.

As she made her way around to other groups, Willow started noticing that Professor Snape wasn’t exactly following suit. Oh, he would swoop in and berate students from time to time, but beyond that, he was a fairly silent, disconcerting presence in the classroom. It made her uncomfortable. Oh, not his actual behavior. It was just that she was in on his game, she knew that at least some of his behavior was an act, which was why it hadn’t been bothering her directly.

But their students didn’t know the score. They probably thought Professor Snape’s constant, caustic needling was deadly serious. Some of the students, particularly among the Slytherins and Gryffindors, grew more determined in the aftermath of his barbs. They seemed to be reacting more
out of stung pride and spite than anything else.

Others just withered.

The tough love tactic didn’t work for everyone, and Willow thought that Professor Snape’s version was coming across more like tough indifference anyway. Well, if he was that dead set on being the stick, Willow could be the carrot.

She started purposefully shadowing his progress around the classroom. If she found frayed nerves and near tears in his aftermath, she was all encouragement and smiles. If she found anger and determination, she tried to help focus that energy into concentration and spell work instead of griping. If she found smug superiority, well, that was most often from one of the Slytherins, and she was okay with being the stick sometimes too.

All in all, it ended up being a pretty productive class. By the time the students filed out of the classroom, around half of them had managed some kind of nonverbal magic. Most of it had fizzled pretty quickly, and almost none of it would have been useful in a real fight, but hey, everybody had to start somewhere.

And speaking of a real fight, Professor Snape had the most amazing scowl on his face.

Whatever he wanted to say took an abrupt backseat though, because Dumbledore walked into the classroom just as the last student left, looking mildly irritated.

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“I thank you both for accompanying me,” Dumbledore said, walking briskly through the crowded hallways. Willow and Professor Snape were following close behind, in his wake. “There is a situation in my offices which may require both of your... expertise.”

He was definitely annoyed. Willow had an unpleasant, sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She had a terrible premonition of what she was about to find in the Headmaster’s office.

Unfortunately, her guess was one hundred percent correct.

Well, maybe seventy-five percent. It wasn’t Argus Filch she had been expecting to find sitting uncomfortably in an easy chair, arms contorted at odd angles and bound around his head with a chain of folded paper links, and an angry gray cat sitting at his feet, yowling.

Willow stopped in her tracks. “You!” she blurted, remembered annoyance temporarily washing away her bout of second guessing and guilty nerves.

Filch looked at her with the one eye that wasn’t covered by loops of paper chain and made a high-pitched, gurgling whine. One arm was strapped tightly across his mouth, making more coherent speech impossible.

“You!” she repeated, storming up to the caretaker and glaring. The cat hissed at her. A lock of dark burgundy hair floated in Willow’s peripheral vision, but she didn’t much care. “I thought it was... I should just leave you like this.” Now that she was closer, she could see the torn remnants of her envelope, Giles’ address still legible, crushed in Filch’s left hand. In his right was a large, silver letter opener with the words ‘Wards-B-Gone’ engraved elaborately on the blade.

She was about to give him a real piece of her mind for stealing her mail when Dumbledore interrupted her train of thought. “Professor Rosenberg, if you would be so kind as to release Argus.” His voice was even and polite, but it brooked no arguments.
That took some of the wind out of her sails, but Willow wasn’t in the mood to be curbed. She fumed a second longer. “He’s been trying to read my mail,” she said.

“So I gathered from the envelope,” Dumbledore said softly, but the flinty, irritable glint was back in his eyes. It seemed to be aimed at Argus, and not at Willow, though. “Be that as it may, it will be difficult to ask him why so long as he is bound like this.”

Willow refrained from indulging in a very unprofessional, childish pout. He had a point. Admitting defeat, she glared into Filch’s one visible eye before grabbing the nearest loop of chain and letting the energy she had worked into the links drain away. The folded paper let loose its stranglehold on Filch, who took the opportunity to start struggling frantically. Willow pulled the chain away, trying to gather it neatly into loose coils.

Her movements sent her piece of quartz, still dangling from her wrist, swinging close to the caretaker. Much to her surprise, the little crystal reacted, glowing white and brown.

Willow didn’t have time to process that unexpected reaction, because once his mouth was free, Filch immediately put it to effective, loud use. “You had no right! Attacking me with your sneaky wandless traps!”

“Argus.” Dumbledore’s quiet word cut the tirade as short as effectively as if he had shouted. Filch sank further into the chair and cowered away from Willow, pale eyes darting back and forth between her and Dumbledore. “Why were you attempting to read Professor Rosenberg’s private mail?” he asked, the word ‘private’ stressed just enough to make the caretaker flinch.

The cat finally stopped hissing and leapt into Filch’s lap. He dropped the letter opener in the chair next to him and hugged the beast tightly to his chest. His darting glances finally settled on Professor Snape, who had hung to the back in silence during the entire confrontation. Finding no support there either, Filch’s shoulders suddenly sagged, and he stroked the cat’s grayish fur nervously.

“It was Professor Umbridge,” he finally admitted, avoiding eye contact. “She told me it was a Ministry matter. Said that someone had to keep an eye on the wandless... On Professor Rosenberg.”

Willow had assumed from the beginning that Umbridge was behind all this, but whatever validation she might have found in Filch’s words suddenly felt hollow. He just looked pathetic and broken. She remembered what Minerva had told her, about Filch being a Squib and what that meant.

This man had been born into a wizarding family, growing up with everyone around him performing magic, fully expecting that he would one day do the same. But then the talent had never manifested. Maybe his family had shuffled him off to avoid the shame of having a Squib in the bloodline, or maybe they had been some of the nicer ones, who had simply not known what to do with a non-magical child. In either case, without a Muggle education or practical knowledge of the non-magical world, he had ended up in a menial position at the very magic school he hadn’t been able to attend, hating the student body and playing at magic with cheap, enchanted trinkets.

Willow looked at the chain of paper in her hands, and suddenly, it didn’t seem like it had been such a great idea. That letter opener with the chintzy decorations and weak charm was the closest thing to performing wand magic that Argus could manage. It was sad, and pathetic, and she had just swatted him like a fly for it.

Umbridge was the one who should have been the target of Willow’s trap, not Filch. Not a pawn, especially not one who couldn’t even fight back. She clumsily tucked the large bundle of links into
her bag, out of sight.

Dumbledore reached out as if to pat the caretaker on the shoulder, but when his hand neared Filch, both the man and his cat slipped into a sudden, deep sleep. “What are we going to do with you?” he asked the slumbering Filch quietly.

Willow chewed on her lower lip. What were they going to do with him?

Dumbledore turned and looked at Willow. “We should be able to salvage the situation without too much difficulty. In the interim, I see that you are unsurprised by Argus’ admission of Dolores’ involvement,” he said. “Why did you not bring your suspicions to our attention?”

Willow hesitated, mouth open to speak, but she couldn’t seem to find the right words. There just wasn’t a diplomatic way to say it.

Professor Snape, who was still standing apart from the rest of them, cut in before Willow could frame a reasonable answer. “While Professor Umbridge was the most likely culprit, she could not fully exclude either of us from suspicion.”

And then there was always the direct route. Willow closed her mouth again, heat rising in her cheeks. “Well, you were stealing things out of my bags,” she finally said, meaning it as an apology or at least an excuse, but her voice wavered, making it come out like more of an accusation.

Something indefinable flickered across Professor Snape’s features, and he looked away from her. Willow suddenly wished that she hadn’t said that.

“Indeed?” Dumbledore asked. Willow just shrugged sheepishly. He turned his gaze to Professor Snape, whose face had returned to its usual stony mask. “Well, trust is a funny thing. So difficult to build and so easy to break. We shall have to work on that.”

There was a brief, subtle narrowing of Professor Snape’s eyes at Dumbledore’s comment. Willow thought that on anyone else, the expression would have probably been a wince. She wondered at this rare reaction when Dumbledore continued.

“In the meantime, we cannot have Argus carrying tales back to Dolores. She has enough sway within the Ministry that she could cause us untold difficulties. However, we may yet turn this situation to our favor,” Dumbledore said, eyes unfocused on some point above his bookshelf. “Willow, if you are willing to collude with us, this seems a golden opportunity to slip Professor Umbridge false information using your letters. Now, you said ‘tried’ before. Today’s events aside, has Argus ever managed to read any of your previous letters?”

“What? No,” Willow said, taken off guard. “Definitely not. My wards were always intact when they reached the Council.”

“And the reason why he could pierce your defenses today?” Dumbledore continued, musing.

Willow eyed the Headmaster. “Because I used weaker wards,” she said slowly.

“And your plan if this trap of yours had captured Dolores? And if she had been able to free herself and report your actions to the Ministry before we could reach her?” he pressed, voice still light and conversational.

Now it was Willow’s turn to wince. She hadn’t really gotten that far. Mostly, she’d just been mad that someone was mucking with her reports and wanted to make them stop. In this light, her whole plan suddenly seemed like a very bad idea.
“Discretion, Willow. You clearly do not lack the talent, since you were able to enact this plan without alerting either Severus or myself.” And okay, Willow’s embarrassment was now officially dialed up to eleven. Dumbledore continued, “However, I sense that your instincts are to react, to attack, not to feign passivity while turning an opponent’s own actions against them.”

Okay, that was fair. A little humiliating, but fair. She never had been much of the spy girl back at the Council. Her talents had usually been tapped for missions that were more along the lines of ‘Kill it with fire.’

“I shall remember that tendency in the future. Now, can we count on your cooperation?” Dumbledore asked, still annoyingly unruffled by the entire situation.

Willow looked at Professor Snape, who was scrutinizing her with unreadable, black eyes. “Yes, of course,” she said, as if it hadn’t been a foregone conclusion, “But how are you going to convince him?” She pointed at Filch.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose slightly. “I have already altered his memories of the event,” he said. Willow sucked in a harsh breath. She had known coming into this assignment that wand witches and wizards saw nothing wrong in using memory spells to cover their tracks. However, faced with that reality, something in the pit of Willow’s stomach curdled. Her distress must have shown on her face, because Dumbledore frowned ever so slightly, a small scowl creasing his brow. “What…” she paused, taking another steadying breath. “What does he remember happening instead?”

“He believes he was unsuccessful in opening your latest letter,” Dumbledore said, eyes piercing. “The effects of your binding spell were, unfortunately, witnessed by a small number of students. However, he will remember the incident as a prank, perpetrated by some unknown student.”

Willow flinched.

Filch. No, Argus. Argus was a Squib. He was also, in truth, a bit of a jerk, but he was also a Squib and therefore an easy target. Student pranks at his expense probably weren’t uncommon. Willow looked at the caretaker who was still sleeping, blithely unaware that anything was wrong, that his memories had been altered, and that she was the cause. She couldn’t even be mad at Dumbledore over the whole mess. Not really. It wasn’t as if she had left him much of a choice.

“Severus, if the matter arises in conversation, you were the one to release the binding spell,” Dumbledore said, eyes still boring through her. “He will wake soon. Willow, unless you can concoct a reasonable excuse for your presence, it might be best if you leave before he does so.”

Willow didn’t immediately respond, wrapping the trailing length of her quartz amulet’s chain around her hand and letting the crystal roll around her palm. Its light pulsed brightly in her hand at the physical contact, warm and inviting. It had glowed when she had been pulling her folded links away from Argus too. White and brown and…

“He can learn wandless magic,” she said quietly.

The silence was deafening.

“So can you, obviously,” she said, looking at Professor Snape, whose dark eyes were a little wider, a little less guarded than she could remember ever seeing them. She let the chain hang again and held it closer to Dumbledore, who looked at it sharply, but did not move away. The crystal glowed, sparkling with oranges and grays. “And you. So can our whole class, to one extent or another. Probably the whole rest of the school too, but definitely him,” she gestured towards where Argus
still sat, snoring lightly.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Professor Snape asked harshly, his eyes searching her face. There were undercurrents here that Willow didn’t fully understand, but she was almost getting used to that. She would catch up eventually. For the time being, she simply nodded yes.

“I do not know if teaching him would be prudent,” Dumbledore said, making a placating gesture when both Willow and Professor Snape started to protest. “But if he will accept the offer, it would be a kindness. In either case, we shall make the best of it.”

The twisting knots in Willow’s stomach unwound just a little bit.

They all fell silent when Argus stirred in his chair, muttering to himself in his sleep. The cat woke first, red eyes bleary and confused. Argus followed soon after, shaking his head as if to clear out the cobwebs of the spell. When his eyes focused on Willow, he froze, gaze sharpening. “What is she doing here?” he muttered angrily, looking fuzzily at Dumbledore, obviously still a little disoriented from the spell.

“Professor Rosenberg happened by my office with some interesting news for you,” the Headmaster replied placidly, the lie easy and convincing. Everything in his manner conveyed that nothing was amiss here. Willow envied his easy composure.

Professor Snape had backed even further away, removing himself completely from the proceedings.

Argus looked up at her, sullen and hostile, which was oddly comforting to Willow. She could tell herself that it meant that Dumbledore hadn’t messed with his mind enough to affect his core personality.

“Um… Hi,” Willow said, licking her lips nervously. The cat was staring at her with its creepy, red gaze. Argus’ pale eyes were filled with bitterness and poorly concealed jealousy. Neither made the right words come to Willow’s mind any faster. Finally, she gave up, unclasped the pendant from around her wrist, and offered it to him. “Here,” she said, holding it out to him.

Argus looked at her suspiciously, but he still reached out and grabbed the crystal. It immediately burst into brilliant, pulsing light.

At his sudden awestruck expression, Willow relaxed just a little, back on mostly familiar ground. “It glows like that when it’s near people who can do wandless magic,” she said, smiling faintly. She couldn’t take back the paper link snare, and she couldn’t give Argus his memories back, but she could at least give him this. “If I told you that you could be taught my kind of magic, would you want to learn?”

Argus looked up at her in unguarded surprise. The cat eyed Willow inscrutably from his lap. “I can do magic?” he asked, voice hoarse.

Willow nodded. “It’ll take a lot of work, but-“

“I can do magic?” he interrupted in a harsh whisper.

“Yes,” Willow said, for once biting her tongue.

Argus’ hand closed around the little crystal, but the light still beamed out between his fingers. He just looked at it, making the weirdest, twisted face. It took Willow a second to realize that it was a supposed to be a smile. Somebody was out of practice.
“You can come to my lectures,” Willow said. “I’m starting on wandless spells Friday. Or if that’s not doable, we could work something else out…” she trailed off under Argus’ unsettling gaze. He had started laughing quietly, a dry, wheezing sound. Somebody also wasn’t dealing well.

“An excellent suggestion,” Dumbledore interjected, stepping forward and coaxing Argus to his feet. “And one which we can discuss at length, after dinner,” he said, shepherding Argus towards the exit, her pendant still tangled up in the caretaker’s hand, crystal shining brightly. The gray cat followed them out, tail swishing.

Willow’s stomach had stopped churning, but she still felt vaguely ill. She had promised herself that she would never mess with someone else’s memories again. She had promised Tara. As soon as Argus and Dumbledore were out of sight, she dropped leadenly into the chair Argus had just left. “Tabula rasa,” she said to herself, very quietly.

A slight rustling sound, robes on plush carpeting, made Willow turned around in the chair, startled. Professor Snape was looking at her, the corners of his lips pulled down in the smallest of frowns. She had forgotten he was there. People usually gave off an awful lot of energy. Especially magically inclined people with festering curses embedded in their arms. They didn’t just fade into her mental landscape unless…

Unless she was used to them. Unless she trusted them enough to let down her guard.

“Blank slate?” Professor Snape asked.

_Not really._
Chapter 18

Professor Rosenberg was distressed, and had been since Albus had admitted to altering Argus’ memories. Her skills in dissimulation and deceit were inconsistent at best. She was putting up a marginally successful front of bravery while Albus and Argus were still in the room, but as soon as she and Severus were alone, she collapsed into one of the office’s chairs, a stricken expression on her face.

“Tabula rasa,” she said under her breath, so quietly that Severus almost did not hear her.

The words were Latin. Severus shifted uncomfortably, unsure of how to react to her emotional display and frustrated by his lack of further insight. She turned around to look at him, eyes haunted, but revealing nothing more concrete. He wished again that she was not quite so skilled at her wandless version of Occlumency. He would have to resort to more mundane methods of information gathering.

“Blank slate?” he asked.

She looked sad and very, very weary. “Bad memories,” she finally answered. It seemed that she might elaborate for a moment, but instead the thin façade of composure slid back into place and she instead said, “So, I guess we need to get ready for dinner.”

Severus suppressed a scowl. Her mask might have fooled a less observant person, but to him, the ghost of her discomfort was plain to see. Still, even in her brittle state, he suspected that he would find Professor Rosenberg’s stubborn tendency towards intransigence intact.

He would admit defeat in this instance. When Professor Rosenberg stood and moved to leave, he fell in step beside her. She seemed as uninterested in breaking their silence as he during their walk to the Great Hall. She was clearly taking the opportunity to come to terms with her upset regarding Albus’ memory spell. Severus left her to it, needing to think as well.

Their association, this occasionally easy, often unsettling, dynamic between them, was becoming more and more problematic. The watcher was cordial with most everyone, and was obviously fond of Minerva. But for reasons Severus could not begin to explain, she treated him in a particularly friendly manner. He suspected that it was only a matter of their being thrown together for the duration of teaching Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts. He was not so deluded as to think that her odd partiality had anything to do with his appearance or disposition. That had not stopped him from taking advantage of the situation by gleaning as much information from her as he could. He had always seen their relationship as temporary in nature, but facing its eventual end was becoming more and more unpalatable as the time neared.

Albus had all but ordered Severus to reveal at least the public details of his past to Professor Rosenberg. His seemingly innocent comment about building trust was only the latest in the Headmaster’s recent litany of less-than-subtle nudges. It did little to soothe his increasingly ambivalent feelings about Professor Rosenberg that the only reason he had not gone ahead and related more portions of his past to her was that, unlike Albus, Severus did not believe that their tenuous rapport would survive the encounter. While it would make certain things significantly simpler if she were to distance herself from him, an increasingly vocal part of Severus, one he was loathe to put a name to, recoiled.

Besides, he absolutely despised having his hand forced.
Dinner had offered no solace. Umbridge lacked any semblance of empathy under normal circumstances, but she could sense weakness like a bloodhound. She had spent the evening verbally savaging Professor Rosenberg under veils of falsely polite inquiries.

Severus arrived at Professor Rosenberg’s office the following morning, having spent the duration of the previous evening sequestered in his rooms, deliberating on the wisdom of his current course of action. There were many potential problems with giving the watcher the book he was carrying under his arm, variables which had to be weighed and counted, but in the end, he was in no mood to plumb the depths of masochism it would take to employ any of the other avenues open to him.

He was aware that she was seldom in her office, apparently preferring to roam the school grounds instead, stopping to read or work wherever the mood struck her. He had chosen to stop by their classroom very briefly on the way to his first Potions session, on the extreme off chance that she would be present. To his surprise, his knock resulted in an answering “Come in!”

Severus opened the door to find Professor Rosenberg, paintbrush in hand, standing in front of a large, half-completed whirl of coppery arcane glyphs painted directly onto her office wall. The air was humming slightly with power. The expression on her face was a blend of uncertainty and defiance. Argus was going to have a fit of apoplexy. On second thought, no, most likely he would not. Severus suspected that Professor Rosenberg would be able to perform any acts of vandalism she liked without incurring the caretaker’s wrath, so long as she had been correct about Argus’ wandless potential.

“I got Dumbledore’s okay on this before I started,” she said a little defensively. Severus stopped staring at the faintly shimmering glyphs and looked back at her. “He even gave me the paint.”

“Shockingly enough, I did not come to critique your choice in office décor,” he said testily. Truly he had not expected to find her here. He had the time. He could have delayed this, indefinitely if possible. Merlin blast Albus anyway. The man was not as omniscient as he would have the rest of the world believe.

“Oh,” Professor Rosenberg said, setting down the brush and pot of paint on her desk and wiping her hands needlessly on her slacks. Then she smiled lopsidedly. “So, what did you come to critique me about then?”

She had clearly recovered from the previous evening’s shock enough to rediscover her dubious sense of humor. He was in no mood to suffer her teasing with equanimity this morning. “You are bolstering your wards, are you not? The preexisting spells on faculty offices are severely lacking.”

“That was the first thing I did,” Professor Rosenberg said, pointing to a spot above and beyond Severus’ head. When he turned to look, he found the doorway rimmed with dense rows of runes, glimmering with more than just the metallic pigment of the paint. They were… impressive. He doubted his own protections were any better. “This one is more of… well, a focus, I guess,” she had continued. “To meditate. And bonus, I won’t have to stare at bare white walls anymore.”

She should not have been here, and yet here she was, babbling in her fragmented way over a half-completed Occlumency aid, which seemed not all that dissimilar from the techniques Severus used. Normally, he would have wanted very much to question her on wandless meditation styles, but not today. Today, the faster Severus could complete this errand, the better.

He stepped forward and placed the black-bound book on her desk. “You will keep the existence of this book to yourself,” he said, voice harsh and well beyond the point of rudeness. “If you do not,
your colleagues at the Ministry would surely take the blame.”

She was irritated now, her green eyes sparking. “Okay mister, I can deal with garden variety you-rude, but I don’t do as well with threats. What is your deal, anyway?”

“Those reports were lifted from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement’s offices by a member of the Order. They represent years of information on every Death Eater captured, killed, or brought to trial since the first war.” He did not owe her an explanation, and besides, as soon as she read the chapter he had marked, anything he said now would mean less than nothing. Why, then, was he defending himself? “If it is found in the hands of an agent of the Council, blame for its theft would naturally fall on your organization,” he said stiffly, angry with himself. Her annoying tendency towards babbling must be catching.

She was looking at him oddly. “Oh.” She seemed confused and unsure of how to react to his admission.

Severus’ Potions class would be starting very soon. He needed to leave, not extend this tortuous social call further. “I have marked a section you may find of particular note,” he said, a sense of finality hardening his tone to ice. Severus had been given this copy of the files to utilize as he saw fit. Currently, he saw fit to leave it where it sat, a tasseled ribbon marking the first page of his own, highly annotated file, and quit the room without waiting for Professor Rosenberg’s response.

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There was an art to brewing advanced potions, it was true.

However, a boiling base was not an advanced potion. It was not even a potion at all, only a common solvent used to create a variety of other elixirs. It consisted of three ingredients: water, felvine extract, and Tears of Bree. All of which Severus had measured before class and provided for the students in labeled vials. His instructions for brewing the base had been simplistic in the extreme.

Try as he might, Severus could find no rational reason why there should be a purplish, stinking mass is the bottom of Aaron Burton’s cauldron. No combination of the provided ingredients, mixed or mishandled in any imaginable manner should have resulted in that product. It defied explanation. Then again, applying logic to first years’ behavior was a fool’s game.

Burton was looking up at him, smiling hopefully, as if he believed his supposed charm would somehow counteract his abominably poor performance. Either the usual advice for new students was taking an inordinately long time to get around the Hufflepuff common room, or Burton was just exceptionally slow on the uptake.

“Mr. Burton, I assume you are literate,” Severus said, looking up from the gelatinous mess.

The boy’s face fell a little. “Uh… what?”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “You are able to read?” he asked, enunciating the words slowly and distinctly. One of the Ravenclaw students giggled, but it was smothered quickly, before he could identify the guilty party.

The young Hufflepuff flushed bright red. “Yes, sir,” he answered.

“Excellent. Read the instructions on the chalkboard for the class,” Severus commanded, turning on his heel and walking briskly to his podium.
After balking for a moment, Burton managed to stutter through the instructions: boil the water, stir in the extract (counter clockwise), add the Tears, simmer until clear and colorless.

“And how, exactly, did you deviate from those directions?” Severus asked. When Burton mumbled a reply, he pressed further. “Louder, Mr. Burton.”

“I sneezed in it,” the boy said, voice trembling.

Severus glared at him for a long moment. The rest of the class was silent. Yes, he supposed that a significant quantity of mucus or phlegm could have produced the results he had witnessed. Disgusting, on multiple levels. “You will write twelve inches on the subject of side effects relating to the use of potions contaminated with bodily excretions and present it to me at the start of class on Tuesday, at which point I shall decide whether or not to affix it to-” Severus cut short his threat, noticing that his class had gained an extra member.

Professor Rosenberg had slipped into the back of the room, her demeanor nervous and uncomfortable. She must have read his report, then. It was done.

Picking up his shattered line of thought, Severus continued with a scowl, pretending that nothing was amiss. “As for the rest of you, you will identify and describe five potions which utilize a boiling base by the next class. Now, deposit your bases on my desk for evaluation and leave.” He felt unaccountably ill, but it did not show on his face or sound in his voice. There were some benefits to being an accomplished liar.

The students hastened to obey, decanting the contents of their cauldrons into vials and attaching name tags on the containers, but Severus’ attention was fixed wholly on Professor Rosenberg. She was being unobtrusive, hanging quietly to the back and studying her surroundings with curiosity. She did arrest Burton’s attempt to flee the classroom and said something to him which Severus could not quite hear at this distance. Whatever her words were, they seemed to brighten the brat.

She had done that in their previous class together as well, intervening with his disciplining of students. It was meddlesome and presumptuous, but even in his current state of mind, he recognized that her methods yielded palpable results. More students than he had expected had succeeded in casting nonverbal spells under her gentler prodding. She had even managed to coax a successful spell out of Longbottom, which was absolutely unaccountable.

When the last student quit the room, she walked forward, a small, wry smile growing on her face. “Well, at least now I know you’re an equal-opportunity butt-chewer.”

Her mockery, gentle as it may have been, cut Severus. “You coddle them,” he retorted harshly. “Have you any idea what might have happened to any unfortunate who drank a potion made using that as a base?” He pointed at Burton’s vial of purple ooze.

“Grape-flavored death?” she asked with feigned innocence. “C’mon, it’s not like anyone was going to drink that stuff. It’s school, you’re supposed to get your mess ups out of the way here instead of out in the real world.”

“That is not the point. Anyone with sense would have discarded this abomination and started anew,” he snapped. The fact that there had not been enough time for the brewing of two boiling bases during one class period was immaterial.

Professor Rosenberg shrugged. “They’re not supposed to have sense. They’re kids.”

She was refusing to rise to his bait, and he was having none of it. “Kids, as you say, who are
empowered with abilities which could easily maim and kill if left unchecked.”

“Sounds like dealing with slayers,” she said dryly, shrugging again. “And speaking of high stress work environments, what are you doing after dinner tonight?”

Severus glared at her. “My fourth years will be arriving shortly.”

“I was wanting some input on my lesson plan for tomorrow, and I thought maybe I could barter with some wandless magic pointers you won’t find in my notes,” she said, seemingly unmoved by his hostility.

That drew him up short. Had she read the blasted reports, or not? Why would she be making this offer if she had? She was entirely too adept at rattling his wits.

Unfortunately for him, she took his sudden, sullen silence for acquiescence. “Good, see you then,” she said with a smile.

He wanted to protest, but she was already walking away, and he could not quite seem to find the words.

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Severus’ wand floated gently above his hand, tip pointing towards his palm, rotating slowly around its long axis. The sensation was intriguing. The wand hummed with its long familiar magic, but there was an extra current dancing along his fingertips, warm and tantalizing, which he was starting to associate with wandless spells.

The experience was fascinating, but not so much so that it could completely distract him from his other concerns. He had seen the black, unmarked spine of the aurors’ reports when she had been sifting through the contents of her ever-present bag. He still had no way of knowing if she had read it or not, and her behavior was as opaque and unpredictable as ever. The uncertainty gnawed at him.

“That’s all you,” Professor Rosenberg said, sitting crossed legged on the opposite corner of his desk from her bag. His scowls had not been sufficient to displace her once she had deposited herself on his previously clean workspace. Truth be told though, he had not fought her all that strenuously once she had mentioned that proximity made casting easier. “Looks like the two types of magic still aren’t clashing.”

Severus made a noncommittal sound, sending the still spinning wand rotating like a pinwheel. Maintaining the controlled motions was taking a deceptively large amount of concentration, especially now that she was not inexplicably hitching her own energy to his in order to demonstrate how to cast the spell. He was sure that at least one of their students would manage to pull off a minor disaster during her lesson covering it. “I would still suggest teaching them with something which will be less likely to put out an eye,” he said flatly, “Or explode into expensive, magically charged splinters.”

“Well, Filius said he would be done with my practice wands by tomorrow morning,” she said with a small frown. “But if it wouldn’t work with a real wand, then what’s the point? I thought this would be really useful for you guys to know if you ever got disarmed. De-wanded. Whatever you call it.”

An interesting insight, from all angles. Most witches and wizards, unless they were Aurors or otherwise directly involved in magical law enforcement, spent very little time considering the
tactical limitations of wand magic. Severus did, which was why he always kept a selection of potions on his person as defenses of last resort. Apparently, so did Professor Rosenberg. And she was correct, being able to summon a lost wand in the midst of a duel could be highly useful.

Severus leaned back in his chair and slowed his wand’s gyrations to a stop before plucking it from the air and his spell. “Perhaps a test?” he prompted, pointing his wand at her, as if to cast.

Professor Rosenberg made a sharp, flicking gesture with her hand, and Severus’ wand was knocked free from his grip. He attempted to replicate the wandless spell as the length of ebony wood clattered across the floor. There was no incantation, it was an exercise of concentration, energy manipulation, and will. He reached out with hand and mind, feeling for the wand’s familiar energy as she had demonstrated. There. The wand shuddered to an abrupt halt. He struggled for a moment, attempting to emulate the spell just as Professor Rosenberg had performed it. Her method of energy manipulation was foreign enough to make things difficult, but something eventually clicked into place and his wand abruptly reversed its trajectory and flew into his hand so quickly that he had to fumble to catch it.

Clumsy, in need of polishing, and yet the entire incident had still taken less time than it would have to physically chase after the wand. “Again,” he said, pointing the wand back at Professor Rosenberg.

She gave him an amused, exasperated look, but obliged him anyway. This time he managed to arrest the wand mid-bounce, catching it a little less clumsily.

When he started to point his wand at her a third time, Professor Rosenberg raised her hands in mock surrender. “Hey, fine tune on your own time,” she said with a little laugh.

Severus’ frowned at being thwarted, but he still relented and slipped the wand back into his sleeve. “So, that was pretty much the exercise I was planning for class tomorrow. What do you think?” she asked, uncrossing one of her legs and letting it swing free over the edge of his desk.

“You will need extra space,” he said, eyeing her foot, which was transgressing dangerously on his arm. She was no longer helping him cast. Why then was she still insisting on sitting on his desk, so uncomfortably close to him? He pointedly moved his chair slightly away from her, and her unseemly, swinging leg.

“Yeah,” she conceded. “They’ll spend half of the period crawling under the desks to find wands if we use the classroom. The weather is supposed to be good though, so what if we go outside?”

He much preferred to confine his classes to the castle proper, but the suggestion still had merit. “The courtyard will be overrun during our class period. We will have to select somewhere on the grounds,” he said, scowling to himself in thought. “The field adjacent the Quidditch pitch may suffice.”

Professor Rosenberg seemed to consider for a moment, still swinging her leg. “Sounds good. Uh, and the students definitely already know a disarming spell?” she asked.

He snorted dismissively. “I will remind any who have forgotten.”

“Right.” She tucked her leg back under her skirts. “So, that’s all I needed class-wise. That leaves the rest of the evening for Q and A.” When he glared at her for using Muggle colloquialisms, she rolled her eyes and elaborated, “Question and answer. I know you’ve been experimenting with wandless spells. So, got any questions?”
Severus hesitated. She could not have read the book, and remained this informal with him. Could she? He cleared his throat and asked, “Why do wandless spells result in fatigue?”

“The human body only has so much energy in it, and until you learn how to draw from other sources, you’re draining your own energy to cast anything.” She canted her head to one side and looked at him questioningly. “Doesn’t wand magic work that way?”

“Not to the same extent, no,” he said.

“Huh, I had thought your wands were basically just super spiffy focuses.” Her brow wrinkled with curiosity. “So what do they actually do? Gather ambient energy? Amplify your own?”

The question required a far more complicated answer than she was obviously expecting. There were numerous competing theories of wand selection, composition, and compatibility. Severus sealed his continuing doubts away for future attention and leaned back in his chair. Steepling his fingers, he settled into an explanation.

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Okay, you better be ready to catch that,” Professor Rosenberg said, hands hovering a few inches above Lee Jordan’s shoulders. Sure enough, the wand zipped from the grass and into the Gryffindor’s outstretched hand.

“Wicked,” Jordan said, looking at the wand in his hand with a grin.

She just smiled. “Okay, now you try without the training wheels,” she said, moving on to the next student and starting the process all over again.

Severus was standing in the shade cast by the Quidditch stadium with Argus’ cat, watching Professor Rosenberg’s progress in silence. She was in her element now, teaching her wandless spells out in the grass and the sunlight. The class, increased today by two more Hufflepuffs and one caretaker, was arranged in a loose circle in the field, everyone sitting on the ground except for her.

The quiet brush of robes over grass drew his attention away from their students and toward Albus, who was approaching from the direction of the school. Severus nodded in acknowledgement.

“Ah, yes,” Albus stepped into the shade as well, “Hello Severus. I see now why your students are not in their classroom.”

Severus crossed his arms and looked at the Headmaster out of the corner of his eye. “Is there a problem?”

“No. I simply wanted to see how Argus was settling in.” Albus shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across the class. “And I see that Miss Abbott and Mr. Finch-Fletchley have also joined the class. At this rate, you will need a larger classroom by Halloween.” At Severus’ flat, unamused glare, Albus just smiled. “I jest, Severus. Christmas, at the very latest.”

Severus did not deign to respond. Something had put Albus in an uncommonly good mood, and it was most likely not the class’ current enrollment. “Argus is performing as well as can be expected.”

Truth be told, Argus had shown up for class, cat in tow, looking sullen and irritable, and to anyone who had actually bothered to become acquainted with the man, skittish and terrified. The students had whispered and stared, and once Professor Rosenberg had herded them all down to their current
location, had left conspicuous spaces on either side of the caretaker in their loose circle. Argus had only relaxed when Professor Rosenberg had produced one of her new practice wands and showed him how to levitate it. He had raised a hand to his chest when she had moved on to the next student. It had been a curiously reverent motion, and it drew Severus’s attention to the vaguely familiar chain around Argus’ throat. It was tucked into Argus’ shirt, but the faint glow of a certain quartz crystal was still slightly visible through the layers of threadbare cloth.

“An interesting teaching technique,” Albus commented, watching Professor Rosenberg hover behind an obviously disconcerted Marietta Edgecombe.

“She calls it ‘piggy-backing,’” Severus said, lingering disapprovingly over the frivolous name. “She is able to use another person’s energy while casting. It allows the students to experience a successful spell before attempting it.” He smiled thinly at Albus’ surprised expression. It was a rare day when he could truly catch the Headmaster flat footed.

“A useful talent,” Albus finally said.

Severus snorted. Useful. Intriguing. Alarming. Even before her demonstration the previous evening, he should have predicted this skill. It was, after all, a logical extension of the strange joined casting she had performed through him upon their first meeting. “Indeed.”

Professor Rosenberg was starting to work her way through his Slytherins. Draco looked stubborn and mutinous when she told him to relax, but his demeanor changed completely when she placed her hands over his shoulders and his wand leapt from the ground into his grudgingly outstretched hand. His shocked expression was still firmly in place when she moved on to go through the same ritual with Goyle.

After the last student had been shown the spell, Professor Rosenberg set them to practicing on their own. With a few last words of instruction, she exited the circle and walked to where Severus and Albus were observing.

Perhaps they had misjudged her abilities to dissemble, because the moment she was outside of the ring and beyond their students’ range of vision, her face fell into decidedly less pleasant lines. When she neared, there was a slight shimmer in the air as one of her incomprehensible barriers sprung into life. “You want me to bring my concerns to you guys?” she asked quietly, “Fine. Anyone want to tell me why Harry Potter is soaked up to his eyeballs in blood magic?”

Severus could not react. There were students watching. He had to be still and calm as stone. He succeeded, but his jaw was clenched hard enough to ache.

“Ah,” Albus said, but his voice lacked some of its usual composure. “I had wondered if you would be able to sense that. Unfortunately, I do not think this is the stuff of public discussions…”

It was a clever evasion, but the continued, subtle rippling of the air between the three of them and the students let Severus know that this time, it would not succeed. “Nobody can hear but the three of us.”

“I will see to the students,” Severus said, stalking away abruptly. He knew whose blood Potter was covered in and why. He saw no reason to subject himself to Albus’ clinical explanation of Lily’s sacrifice.

Professor Rosenberg’s barrier slid over his skin, eerie and cold, just as she was saying, “Or you know, the two of–“
The silence closed in behind him like a heavy curtain.

Severus distracted himself by making note of which students were making progress on the wandless spell and which were not. There seemed to be little correlation to relative power in wand magic. In fact, Argus was having the most success of anyone in the group. If intent and desire were of the upmost importance to wandless magic, Severus doubted that anyone else in the class wanted their spells to work more than Argus Filch.

He had very little to add to Professor Rosenberg’s standing instructions other than to keep everyone focused on the task at hand. If left to their own devices, most of the students would gawk at the Headmaster or gossip and fritter the course period away. If he could concentrate on attempting to determine predictive patterns to wandless success while reining in the students’ larger lapses in concentration, then that left only so much of his mind which could be consumed with the conversation he was pointedly not hearing at the moment.

He was standing behind the cluster of Hufflepuffs when Professor Rosenberg reappeared at his side. He glanced at her, and then back to his previous post just in time to see Albus rapidly disappear around the curvature of the stadium.

“He said to tell you he needs to talk to you after class,” she said, looking out over the students. She looked worried and confused, a small scowl marring her expression. Her apparent concern was quickly suppressed though, and she was soon splitting their students into pairs and handing out her practice wands from the large box she had toted down from their classroom. Filius had charmed them to only cast the disarming spell, *Expelliarmus*. In the event that something went wildly awry during the interaction of wand and wandless spells, Professor Rosenberg was hoping that using the practice wands would keep any collateral damage to a minimum.

At her prompting, he explained the technique for disarming opponents tersely. It should have been remedial magic for students of this age. When his short part in this lesson came to a close, Professor Rosenberg smiled and thanked him.

He was almost completely certain she had not yet read the reports.

~*~*~*~

Albus was pacing the floors furiously enough to give Severus pause when he entered the Headmaster’s office. “Severus,” Albus said, pausing briefly before resuming his pacing, “Enter please.”

Severus continued into the room more slowly, cautious in the face of this unexpected reception.

“I have dispatched an owl to Arabella, instructing her to present herself at Council headquarters for testing,” Albus said. “I regret the possibility that I am falsely raising her hopes, but we must know if Argus is the exception or the rule in this instance. If she proves capable of performing wandless magic, there are many other Squibs we can contact as well. Willow assures me that other members of the Council can train them.”

Severus stopped a short distance away, giving Albus more than ample room to pace. Unsure if a response was required of him, he simply said, “That seems wise.”

“Does it?” Albus asked, more of himself than of Severus. “It will certainly bolster our forces on the short term. Also, it would be cruel to deny any Squib this opportunity. However, I wonder where their final allegiances will fall, if we send them all to the Council for training. I continue to hope for a closer, long-term relationship between our world and the Council of Watchers, but we cannot
build plans on hopes alone.” He stopped pacing and shook his head, gaze unfocused. “This requires further thought.”

These reservations were not unreasonable, and whatever tactical edge the inclusion of wandless-trained Squibs could provide would invariably be short-lived. However, Severus could ask for no better sabotage for much of the Dark Lord’s propaganda than to continue giving reasonably free rein to a powerful wandless witch whose main talent seemed to be innocently and indiscriminately wrecking commonly held ‘truths’ about the nature of magic.

Albus finally stopped his pacing, coming to a stop in front of his Pensieve. “Professor Rosenberg does stir up considerable chaos, does she not?” he said, echoing Severus’ thoughts. “I am afraid you missed the more interesting part of our discussion this afternoon. When I explained the nature of the protection spell on Harry Potter, she indicated that there was also a second spell on him, one which is not quite so beneficent.”

Severus suppressed the desire to scowl and instead asked, “Did she disclose the nature of this second spell?”

Albus considered the silvery fluid in his Pensieve for a long time before answering. “There is a fragment of dark energy lodged in Harry’s being. She described it as a shard of soul, so twisted and soaked in black magic and blood that it was almost unrecognizable,” he said. “There was some discussion of brain anatomy which, I must admit, rather escaped me, but one thing was very clear. Originally it may have been confined to Harry’s scar, but it has since put down roots.”

Severus paled. There was a terrible, elegant symmetry to it. “The Dark Lord cannot know,” Severus finally said. “If he did, he would not be attempting to kill the boy.”

Tampering with a soul was a dangerous proposition. Accidental destruction or complete loss of the soul resulted in the same vegetative shells produced by the Dementors’ kiss. Even the partial destruction of a witch or wizard’s soul could be crippling to both the power and the psyche. To place a portion of soul into a living host was patently insane. To then attempt to kill the vessel, even more so. And while insanity was certainly one of the Dark Lord’s traits, so was a keen intellect and a powerful instinct for self-preservation.

“Too true,” Albus said, turning to look at Severus. “And we must ensure that he never learns.”
Willow was sitting cross-legged on the end of her couch, twirling her pen slowly between her index and middle fingers as she re-read the latest entry in her journal. She had already stayed up way too late writing it, but it looked to her like she had hit all the important points from the day. This whole Harry Potter thing was beyond messed up; the kid had a chunk of their current Big Bad growing roots in his frontal lobe. The ramifications of that were potentially very, very bad, but she wasn’t sure exactly how. On the physical side of things, he might have personality or memory issues. As it grew, he might have problems with impulse control or any other number of things. Or he might not be affected at all. A shard of soul wasn’t the same thing as a head injury or a tumor.

Magically, she had even less of an idea. It could be causing anything really. It could be magnifying his power, or draining it. It could be inserting other powers or hindering some of his natural talents. Heck, for all she knew, it might go all *Army of Darkness* on him and eventually spit out an evil clone. The watchers back in the Council’s research division might have some better theories, but Willow hadn’t been able to come up with any other recorded example of something exactly like this happening, even with the help of the Template. She had already written a letter to Giles, asking him to sic some Council librarians on the topic.

And if the malevolent soul-tumor-thing wasn’t enough, the poor kid was also walking around with his mom’s life essence driven into every cell of his body. Dumbledore had said that Harry’s mother had somehow managed to wing an enduring protection spell, using her own blood as the sacrifice, while she was in the process of being murdered. In theory, that was crazy-impressive, but in practice was just all sorts of disturbing. It had to be doing a number on a kid.

And it also probably explained why her scrying quartz had turned all opaque and weird when she had tried to get a read on him. Powerful protection spells, especially those based on blood sacrifice, weren’t known for being picky about which spells they would try to block. That mystery, at least, was solved, although admittedly, it was nowhere near as important as the fact that the kid who everyone thought was going to somehow defeat this Voldemort guy was probably dealing with some serious emotional trauma in addition to playing host to a magical parasite. And he was her student. Willow was pretty certain that made her contractually obligated to care about Harry’s wellbeing. Article six seventy-two, section D of the Teachers’ Code.

Willow closed her journal, leaving it in her lap, and let her head settle on the back of the couch. Thinking of her scrying quartz reminded her that Argus had been wearing it under his shirt when he had shown up for class. She still hadn’t decided what she thought of that. It was kind of touching and vaguely creepy all at the same time. Plus, if he was going to keep it, then she would need another crystal to test all the new students who were joining Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts. (She should really start calling it ADADA. like the students did. It was much less of a mouthful that way.) Then again, she was still feeling guilty and conflicted about the whole memory wiping, paper trap incident, so she felt pretty inclined to give Argus the benefit of the doubt.

Other than that, Willow’s first wandless lesson had gone well. Really well. Surprisingly well. As in, ‘Everybody managed to get the wand levitation thing to work more than once, and no one lost an eye,’ well. She should have been ecstatic. And yet here she was, sitting on her overly ornate couch in her loaner living room under the lake next to Hogwarts, being very *un-*ecstatic.

Maybe she was just a little homesick. Without a cell phone, or even e-mail, the rest of the world seemed a long way away. The owl-grams had been slow and pretty limiting even before she had started having to worry about Frog Face and her unwelcome nosiness. Willow would have given a
lot to have some girl time with Buffy, or a long phone conversation with Xander, or an afternoon in the Council’s libraries with Giles.

Willow sighed, sat back up, and stretched. Her neck was starting to ache a little from leaning over the journal and writing for what felt like hours, but probably wasn’t. Stupid, incomprehensible clock. It had been stubbornly pointing at ‘Bed Time’ since before she had even picked up her pen. Once things settled down into a reasonable rhythm here, maybe she could head back to London for a weekend to blow off some steam. To do that though, she needed to keep a lid on her responsibilities here.

*No time like the present.*

Willow slid the journal onto her coffee table and fished from her bag the black book Professor Snape had given her. She hadn’t been able to find the time to crack it yet, but in spite of the clock’s insistence, she still wasn’t sleepy. Besides, a little straightforward, know-thy-enemy type reading might be just what she needed to wind down. She’d read the whole thing eventually, and then send a covert copy back to the Council, but for now, Professor Snape had been so weirdly adamantly about the section he had marked, she felt obligated to start there. Plus, she figured that one Death Eater case report would probably look much like any other: typical ‘bad guys doing bad things’ type stuff.

Willow opened the heavy book to the marked page and then slowly lowered it into her lap. The Death Eater whose report Professor Snape had been so insistent that she read?

It was his own.

*So much for straightforward and uncomplicated.*

Her co-teacher was looking out of one of those weird, moving photographs at her. He was younger, probably twenty or so. His hair was a little shorter, his robes of a slightly different style, but the glower was the same. Willow just stared, still a little too shocked to entirely process what she was seeing. The image was unnerving. The Professor Snape she knew kept his emotions under such rigid control that she still sometimes had to resort to observing his aura just to get a read on him, and even then she wasn’t always sure of what she saw. Here, even in stark black and white, he looked obviously exhausted and very, very bitter.

*‘DISMISSED,’* was stamped in blocky, red letters across the image. The photographic figure, apparently growing tired of Willow’s stare, sneered and pointedly looked away, somewhere out of the frame. It was an eerie echo of an irritated, defensive gesture she had seen from its living, breathing counterpart. It was too weird. No photograph should react like a real person, and Willow shook her head slightly to clear the feeling of bizarre unreality, finally turning her attention to the text on the page. She needed to read this critically, and not just because she was trying to be a responsible watcher.

Severus Snape had been recruited by the Death Eaters right out of school. That would have made him eighteen years old or so. Something about him had caught Voldemort’s personal attention, and Severus had risen through the ranks quickly. He had excelled in potion brewing and mind magic even then, and the Death Eaters had taken every advantage of those skills. Teasing out the meaning behind the dry, clinical terminology which was apparently common to magical and non-magical cops alike, Willow got the impression that Professor Snape had not been, as Xander would have said, a wet works guy. Instead, it sounded like he had learned how to be a spy long before he joined the Order of the Phoenix.

It also sounded like he filled the role of interrogator from time to time as well. Magical truth serum,
the reports called it Veritaserum, apparently worked only so well. However, its results could be improved if used in tandem with other methods. Telepathy. Torture. Specifics were few and far between, for which a part of Willow was guiltily relieved. Even the captured Death Eaters, who had spilled their guts to the Aurors when threatened with a lifetime in Azkaban or the Dementors’ Kiss, had known very few details about Voldemort’s personal Potions master and inquisitor.

But I already know the mechanics of torture, don’t I? The bullet had burrowed slowly through Warren’s flesh. I had sewed his lips closed, because it hadn’t been about getting information, it had been about revenge. His skin had made a wet, tearing sound when I peeled it away. ‘Bored now…’

Willow’s stomach churned as she continued to read. Severus had been among the highest ranking Death Eaters, feared by those less in Voldemort’s favor, but also quietly scorned for being a half-blood, an oddity in a movement based on pure-blood supremacy. Very quietly outside of the innermost circle, after a couple of low-level enforcer types had gotten a little too public about criticizing his blood status and had mysteriously disappeared. Nothing had ever been proven, but since Voldemort had seemed indifferent to the matter, none of the other Death Eaters had ever really bothered to try.

Everyone remembered Warren, but who even mentioned Rack anymore? Rack, who I killed, not because he was a pusher and a dark wizard in his own right, but because it had been convenient. Because I needed his power. And I almost did the same thing to Giles. And Dawn. ‘Mom, Buffy, Tara, Wah…’

The testimony in the Aurors’ reports was still pretty comprehensively damning. Severus’ trial itself only rated a short paragraph at the end of the sixth page. He had refused to say anything in his own defense, had actually refused to say anything at all during the entire trial. It had been Albus Dumbledore who had stood before the Wizengamot and recounted how Severus had come forward and voluntarily turned informant. It was all very prettily phrased, but even Dumbledore had been forced to accede that Severus had spent two years as a loyal Death Eater before defecting. Especially since neither man would divulge the reason for this seeming change of heart, the court had been very conflicted about forgiving and forgetting all of the crimes which had preceded it. By all rights, Severus should have been wasting away in Azkaban, if Dumbledore had not taken unofficial custody of him.

If Giles hadn’t taken responsibility for me, the Devon Coven would have put me down like a rabid dog. I visited Kingman’s Bluff after I came back from England, before the Hellmouth swallowed the cliffs and the Temple of Proserpexa whole. There was a dead spot up there which animals avoided and where nothing would grow. ‘Oh, you poor bastards…’

Willow felt vaguely ill, but if she was being honest with herself, part of her had suspected something like this. No matter what Hollywood said, she’d learned since taking a more active role in the Council of Watchers that infiltrating cults, or covert cells, or whatever, was hard. Council agents had a bad habit of ending up dead on those kinds of assignments, which was why they rarely tried. And even when they were successful, it was even harder to get that person into a position of power. Now, flipping someone who was already on the inside? Still really hard, but way more doable than the alternative. Plus, Minerva had plainly said that Severus had used to keep less-than-savory friends, and there had been all the innuendos and fighting and nastiness at the meeting with the Order. The writing had been on the wall.

But Minerva had also said that Severus could be trusted, and Willow had taken the words at face value. She hadn’t thought about it much since then. Really, she hadn’t wanted to think about it. She and Severus were supposed to work together, and they had managed to cobble together a
friendly rapport. Why rock the boat?

Well, the boat was good and rocked now. Willow couldn’t simply unread the report. What she really didn’t know was why she had been given it in the first place. Severus had to have known that any reasonably-minded person would recoil from these details about his past. It was probably why he had been so hostile and touchy lately. Well, more so than usual. He was probably just bracing for the fallout. She could understand that. The thought of calling up Giles’ journal entries about her own turn on the dark side and having anyone here read them made Willow cringe. She had lost her right to sit comfortably on the moral high ground a long time ago.

Simply presenting her with this report had to be the harshest, most unflattering way he could have possibly chosen to let Willow know about his past. It was almost as if he was actively trying to drive her away. Then again, he hadn’t defended himself in front of the Wizengamot, and he apparently wasn’t looking to now. That had to mean something. So did some of the other details of the report. If Dumbledore had been telling the truth (and Willow had seen him lie as easy as breathing at least once, so that was a potentially big ‘if’) then Severus hadn’t been flipped. He hadn’t been bribed, or coerced, or paid, or tricked into helping the Order. He’d volunteered, which as far as Willow could tell, was either really brave or really suicidal.

She just didn’t know the whys, and until she understood them, Willow was finding it a little difficult to pass final judgment.

There was a kettle and a free-standing, Bunsen burner-looking thingy she had found stashed in the office off of her living room. Willow got up to go fetch it. It was a good thing she didn’t have anywhere specific to be the next morning. Willow suspected that she had a lot of thinking and not much sleep ahead of her. Some strong, black tea might help.

~*~*~*~*~

The students were out in force in the courtyard, enjoying the sunny Saturday afternoon. Willow had fallen asleep on her couch sometime after her weird clock had tolled ‘Far Too Late To Work,’ and had slept all the way through breakfast and into lunch. There had been another tray of food waiting for her on the other side of her door when her rumbling stomach dragged her from bed. This time, the food on the tray was accompanied by a small earthenware vase filled with assorted wildflowers. Sooner or later, she was going to get to the bottom of these visits from the Food Fairy. However, these little, seemingly benign mysteries were just going to have to take a back seat for the moment. Willow had retreated back into her room, eaten the food, taken a bath (thank the Goddess), and changed into a blessedly clean outfit before heading out into the world.

She found Severus in one of the open air hallways surrounding the courtyard. He was standing in one of the archways, apparently enforcing a strict no-fun-zone within a twenty foot radius around him. He seemed to have not yet noticed Willow’s presence, so she stopped and took a moment to get her thoughts in order.

Quid pro quo.

That was how Willow and Severus worked. They traded things. Spells, theories, information. Like for like. Severus had broken their tacit contract once by stealing her notes. Maybe that had been the real reason why his thefts had thrown her so badly.

He didn’t look any different than yesterday. Reading his report changed things, just probably not in the way he had expected. His current scowl was the ‘bored’ variant of the expression. His arms were crossed in a purposefully intimidating pose, and he was standing right in the center of the wide, arched door, seemingly indifferent to, or at least unaware of, the fact that he was blocking
foot traffic and inconveniencing the few students who had ventured into his corner of the courtyard.

“Severus?” she finally said. Calling him ‘Professor Snape’ at this point seemed wrong somehow. If knowing that much about the skeletons in his closet wasn’t enough to put them on a first name basis, she didn’t know what was.

He continued to stare out over the courtyard, but his scowl deepened slightly into something darker. He didn’t respond.

Willow hesitated, but this wasn’t something she could chicken out of or postpone. “Could we go talk somewhere?” she asked. “Um, about your book?” When he still didn’t answer, she sent a quick, sideways glance at the packed courtyard and continued, “Somewhere not in front of students?”

For a moment, it seemed like he was just going to stand there, ignoring her, but abruptly, Severus turned on his heel and walked past her down the hallway, pausing only to turn and glare when she apparently didn’t step to fast enough to suit him.

The walk down to his office was interminable. Whatever Severus was thinking or expecting, it was bad enough that he was starting to leak wisps of emotions through his usually meticulously maintained shields. Despite the rigid, mask-like expression he was wearing now, anger and bitterness were following him like eddies in water. It made Willow twitchy.

When they finally arrived in the little dungeon that served as his office, Severus swept inside ahead of her, held the door open until she had barely made it through the threshold, and then slammed it closed behind her with a resounding boom, which made the rows and rows of bottles containing his potion ingredients rattle. He then swept around her, coming to a stop in front of his chair, and lowering himself into it in a jerky, violent motion. Everything in his expression told Willow he was expecting a fight. “The wards in this room are more than adequate for you to speak your mind,” he said, voice a harsh grate. “But try not to waste too much of my time. I assure you that I have already heard innumerable variations on the theme.”

Willow’s hair stirred slightly in response to her instinctive rush of magic at his open display of anger. She was suddenly on the defensive. She had been expecting some hostility from him, just nothing quite of this magnitude. All her carefully prepared words scattered. “I don’t think you act like a jerk-face because it’s for your cover or whatever,” she blurted.

“And I suppose you are going to tell me that I behave as a… What was your term?” His face twisted mockingly. “A ‘jerk-face,’ because it is actually my core nature. An astute and unoriginal conclusion. Get out.”

“No, I won’t get out!” Willow said, hands clenching angrily at her sides. Well, here goes nothing. The two of them always seemed to make more progress when they were yelling anyway. “And no, I don’t think you really are as much of a jerk as you want me to think. I think you act like one because you want people to hate you. Because you think you deserve to be hated.”

Severus’ face, which had been turning a very dangerous shade of blotchy red, abruptly drained of all color. He was suddenly very still. She took that as a sign that she had hit a nerve.

“And do you want to know why I think that?” Willow pressed, as she picked up one of the chairs he reserved for students. No cross-desk, weird power dynamics this time. She carried the chair around to Severus’s side of the desk. “Because I’ve been there.” She dropped the chair next to him and sat in it. “Because I spend at least part of every day being there. You’re not the only person in
the world who has done terrible, unforgivable things.” Her voice was getting shaky there at the end, but she was not going to cry. Absolutely not. Because that would be pathetic and embarrassing.

Severus’ face was as haunted now as it had been at their first meeting. He was still facing the door, staring at nothing. Willow thought that he looked thoroughly broken. That hadn’t been her intent, making his silence even more unbearable. At least now that he wasn’t raging at her, she could remember the more reasonable, mature stuff she had meant to say originally. “Look I’m not saying things won’t be weird for a bit, because yeah, the stuff in that report was, you know, kind of unexpected,” Willow said in a much more even tone of voice. “But that’s not you anymore. I get that.”

“What could you have possibly done that could even compare?” Severus finally said, finally turning in his chair to face her, the self-loathing obvious in his voice.

Willow hesitated. It was the obvious question. She had known he would ask it, but it still hurt. “That’s fair. It’s just… quid pro quo,” Willow said, taking a deep breath and stamping down her instinctive desire to flee. “It wasn’t exactly the same. I wasn’t in a cult or group or anything like that. It was just me, back when there was only the one slayer, and the stuff we were up against was just so big, so I kept trying to get stronger and stronger to help fight it.” She looked at Severus, and then down at her hands in her lap, face bleak. She could finish this story, just not if she had to make eye contact at the same time. “But somewhere along the way, it got all twisted up. I got all twisted up. I had all this power, and I started doing things just because I could. Making things how I wanted them. Making people how I wanted them.” Willow closed her eyes, taking a moment to gather her composure.

Light fingers brushed the back of her hand. Willow looked up, realizing that Severus had leaned forward in his chair. He was so close, left hand hovering uncertainly above hers, barely touching. “You do not have to tell me this,” he said, voice uncharacteristically gentle.

“But I do,” she said, acting on impulse and grabbing his hand. Surprisingly, he didn’t pull away from her this time. “Because that’s what we do, right? We share information. And you’re sitting there, thinking I hate you because of your past, not knowing that there was a time when I went so far over the deep end that I tried to kill… everything.”

Severus was studying her face, probably wondering if she was arrogant, or just crazy. “You believe you could do such a thing?” He wasn’t being derisive, surprisingly enough. It was an honest question.

“I almost did,” Willow said, trying to figure out how best to explain. “Archimedes, you know, the Greek mathematician? Right, not important. Anyway, the point is, he used to say that with a big enough lever and a place to stand, he could move the world. I found a big enough lever.” She shrugged helplessly, running her thumb across the back of his hand. The contact was warm, comforting. “The only thing that stopped me was a good friend, who had great timing, who loved me enough to come and try to talk me down.”

‘Hey black-eyed girl…’

He was looking at her in the weirdest way, dark eyes glittering dangerously, like he was angry, but not at her. His grip on her hand tightened. “Whatever you have done, it makes no difference to me.”

That made some of the twisting knots in her stomach uncoil, but Willow still smiled bitterly up at him. “I bet the rest of the Order would feel differently, not to mention the professors. And the
“You are worth ten of any one of them,” Severus said in a voice that was low and almost hypnotic, taking her completely by surprise.

Willow sat there wide-eyed, transfixed by his gaze as if he was one of the snakes his House favored. Was he going to kiss her? She hadn’t exactly been as active on the dating scene lately, but she didn’t think she was so rusty as to misinterpret the sudden possessive, hungry look on Severus’ face.

This hadn’t seemed like a kissing-type conversation to her. In fact, it was probably the most non kiss-promoting conversation she could think of at the moment. Here they were, comparing notches on their dark magic bedposts, and suddenly he was looking at her like that, and dear Goddess, he was a he, and shouldn’t that be setting off more warning bells somewhere in the back of her mind?

It wasn’t, which possibly freaked her out more than anything else.

Fortunately, or possibly unfortunately, her mouth took the opportunity to leap way out ahead of her brain. “What brought you back?” she asked, silently mortified at how breathless her voice sounded.

And just like that, the moment was over. As if suddenly remembering his usual no-touching rule, Severus released her hand abruptly and leaned back in his chair, deliberately folding his hands tightly around the armrests as if to ensure he kept better track of them in the future. His eyes were unreadable again, his expression blank. Willow felt weird, like she was relieved, but not, and really, really confused.

Severus looked away from her, studying the rows of bottles and canisters surrounding the office’s small fireplace. For a moment, Willow was convinced he wasn’t going to answer her. Then, woodenly, he said, “I drove away the only person who might have had a chance to ‘talk me down.’ Two years after I took the Mark, the Dark Lord killed her.”

The words, delivered in a numb monotone, were terrible to hear. “I’m so sorry.” The platitude was stupid and pointless, ‘sorry’ never helped anybody, but it slipped out of her mouth, and she sincerely meant every word.

Severus cut her off though. “The specifics of this conversation will never leave this room,” he said. Willow wasn’t sure if his words were a threat, or a request, or a promise, or what. He just said it in a tone devoid of any emotion, stating it as fact.

Willow wasn’t sure if he required a response, but she replied anyway. “I won’t tell anybody. And, thank you for, you know, the same.”

Severus just nodded and continued staring fixedly at the wall across from them. “I have work to do,” he finally said in the same, dead tone.

There was stuff that still needed saying, obviously, but Willow was in wholehearted agreement that now was not the time. Now was the time to run away and think. And hide. Hiding was at least as good as thinking right now. She mumbled a goodbye and fled.

Albus Dumbledore was standing in the hallway across from Severus’ door when Willow left the room. She got the distinct impression that he had been standing there for some time. The light from a nearby torch was reflecting brightly off of his spectacles, hiding his eyes from view. They stared at each other for a long moment. Despite the sudden deer-in-headlights sensation rising in Willow’s chest, she still managed to slam tight mental shields into place, tilting up her chin in
subconscious challenge. The anti-eavesdropping wards on Severus’ office were good, as good as
her own, and besides, she had done nothing wrong.

The Headmaster just sighed, and said, “I assume that I will find Severus within?”

“Um, yeah,” Willow said lamely, unsure if she had just won some kind of skirmish or arrived fully
armed on an empty battlefield. She stepped aside and out of the doorway. “He’s inside.”

Dumbledore just nodded in thanks and stepped past her, opening the door to Severus’ office and
stepping inside.

Willow stood there for a moment in indecision. She couldn’t help feeling like something had just
been let out of the bag. She just wasn’t sure what.

Finally, she did the only thing she could think of to do in this kind of situation. She walked back to
her rooms, retrieved some paper and a purple gel pen from her bag and sat down in front of the
coffee table. She had promised not to talk about her conversation with Severus with anyone else,
ever. But there were other things that definitely hadn’t been discussed in his office, which really
needed to be. With someone friendly, subjective, and not prone to judge. She put her pen to the
paper and started to write.

*Hey Buffy,*

*I think I might have a problem…*
Chapter 20

Severus continued to stare blankly at the fireplace in his office, even as Professor Rosenberg made her hasty retreat. What had he been thinking? Had he been thinking? And yet, she had not initially seemed wholly adverse to… What? In truth, he had done nothing to cause her to react with aversion. But his thoughts had been unforgivable. Unacceptable. And yet…

As rattled as Severus was, certain things suddenly seemed a great deal clearer.

Willow Rosenberg was far more intelligent, powerful, and yes, dangerous than anyone, including Albus, had expected. She was also mercurial, overly sentimental, prone to annoying tangents about frivolous minutiae, and trusting to a fault.

And Severus would kill anyone who attempted to harm her.

He distinctly remembered feeling this all-encompassing protective, possessive instinct exactly once previously in his life. He had been an idiot to not recognize it before now.

Lily.

It felt like a betrayal, even thinking about her in the past tense. At a young and bitter twenty, the pain still fresh from her death, his self-imposed punishment of dying alone, preferably as miserable and universally reviled as possible, had seemed a fitting penance. At thirty-five, the last part of that plan had seemed well in hand; most everyone disliked him to one extent or another. However, when Professor Rosenberg had asked why he had abruptly switched sides during the last war, the searing edge of the memory had not come. It still ached with loss and guilt, he was sure it always would, but now it was the dull pull of an old wound.

Severus had been brutally honest before, he could not have cared even one drop less what Professor Rosenberg’s past sins were. It was not that he doubted their severity. The coldly murderous expression on her face, for example, the evening Umbridge had attempted to humiliate her at the welcome banquet, had certainly taken on greater shades of meaning. To say that he was not curious about her past would have been a flagrant lie, but Severus could think of no scenario which would truly sway him now. And he had an excellent imagination. No one offered second chances without caveat or price, at least not to Severus Snape. No one except a wandless Council witch who insisted on wearing Muggle clothes when she lectured and who apparently understood the darker side of magic better than he would have guessed.

However, she was supposed to be 

bait. An ally for the Order and a source of valuable information, yes, those as well, but first and foremost she was a lure for the Dark Lord.

She was supposed to hate Severus.

How was he supposed to calmly dangle her before the wolves when the mere idea of it made him want to kill things with his bare hands?

“Might I ask why you are so thoroughly inspecting your mantelpiece?”

Severus started badly, jerking to face the door of his office. He had not heard Albus enter, so preoccupied he had been with his thoughts. “I will grant you that the stonework is impressive, if a bit grim for my tastes,” the Headmaster continued, pleasantly neutral voice blatantly fishing.

“The stonework suits me,” Severus replied mulishly, still deeply unsettled and angry at himself for
letting Albus catch him unaware.

“So it does,” Albus agreed in the same tone of voice. “I will take the direct route then. Why is it that when I happened across Professor Rosenberg leaving your office, she responded to my presence with a similar level of defiant belligerence to that which you are currently displaying?”

“You did not simply ‘happen across’ her,” Severus accused, eyes narrow. He was convinced that at least half of the Headmaster’s meddling and prying had less to do with gathering tactically crucial information and more to do with amassing fodder for gossip.

“Now Severus-” Albus started to say placatingly, but Severus interrupted.

“I only rarely grasp inklings of what goes through that woman’s head. Why not ask her?” he snapped.

“One does not reach my venerable age by lacking a certain instinct for self-preservation,” Albus said with a small smile. “She looked fit to duel me in the hallways if I had asked her of anything more pressing than the state of the weather.”

Severus’ expression took on a nasty cast. “Are you concerned that you might have lost?” he asked, snidely attempting to derail the conversation by being as obnoxious as possible.

“My, that would be embarrassing,” Albus said. He looked critically at the chair which Professor Rosenberg had dragged around the desk, then gestured towards it. The piece of furniture danced about and scooted into its former position, at which point Albus sat it in, fastidiously arranging his robes around him. “They might even suspend printing of my Chocolate Frog card if that were to happen.”

The message was quite clear. Albus was not going to leave until he had some form of answer which appeased him. “I gave her my copy of the Aurors’ reports,” Severus finally said, relenting somewhat in the face of a fight he was not going to win.

Albus’ eyes sharpened with interest. “And?” he prompted, leaning forward and lacing his bony fingers together.

“And she indicated that it will not affect her ability to work alongside me,” Severus said, selectively sampling the truth. Still, it was not a lie, and he had told Professor Rosenberg he would keep her secret. As for the other aspects of their latest meeting, he needed time to think, to dissect the event, and to monitor its aftereffects.

And frankly, some matters simply were none of the Headmaster’s bloody business.

Albus nodded, a small, insufferably smug smile on his face. “You see?” he said. “Nothing has changed.” Despite his obvious complacency, a hint of a question remained in his voice.

Something had changed, on a very fundamental level. Still, Severus persisted in thin-lipped reticence. “That remains to be seen.”

Albus’ eyebrows crept slightly upward. “Well, give her a chance to make good on her words. You seem to rather enjoy bickering with her. I do hope things work out.”

The words struck Severus as subtly out of place, placing him abruptly on the defensive. “What are you implying?” his voice cracked like a whip.

“Why, nothing,” Albus said, imperturbably. “Should I be?” He could suspect and insinuate
whatever he liked, he would get no solid confirmation from Severus. For once, Albus let the matter
delay and changed the subject. “I actually stopped by to inform you that Argus came to my office
this morning. Apparently he was feeling rather guilty, because Professor Umbridge has enlisted his
help to spy on Professor Rosenberg.”

Of course he had, Argus had spent their class period trailing along behind her like a puppy. And,
ah yes, Severus felt the sharp rise of one of his previously inexplicable flares of jealous anger. Over
Argus Filch. How deeply pathetic, Merlin burn it all.

Severus sighed, tamping down his irritation and filing away his other troubles for later
consideration. Left unaddressed, the Headmaster would resort to increasingly tedious teasing and
word games in order to drive Severus back to the matter at hand. And Albus would be correct to do
so. They did, after all, need to keep their complex web of truths, half-truths, and outright lies in
order. “Tell me what I need to know…”

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“So, uh… Thanks for the tea ball,” Professor Rosenberg said, loitering around the shelves to the
right of Severus’ office door. “I’ll get it back to you this evening.”

Severus, who had remained seated behind his desk throughout this latest interruption, briefly
looked up from his grade ledger. “Do not bother. I keep several for brewing decoctions and
infusions,” he said, turning back to his notations with an even hand, even though the trajectory of
his thoughts kept leading him further and further onto unsteady ground.

Professor Rosenberg was behaving differently towards him, though not in any of the ways he had
come to expect. She was not overtly fearful or disdainful of him. She still made badly concealed
faces at him over Umbridge’s behavior during meals. She still visited his office uninvited and
unannounced to borrow reagents and discuss class matters with him. To outsiders, it would seem
that their interactions had not changed in the slightest.

They would be wrong.

Professor Rosenberg made a slight face. “What was the last thing you made with it? It wasn’t, you
know, anything particularly nasty?” she asked, eyeing the tea infuser critically.

Severus continued to write, but his lips thinned as he smothered a brief flare of irate indignation.
He had carefully selected the infuser in her hand, taking a number of variables into account,
including past use. “I assure you that it is immaculately clean.”

She was surreptitiously testing the waters between them, that much had become plain. She had
seemed so careful of him at first that he had initially assumed it was the first stages of distancing
herself from him. However, as the day had dragged on, it had become apparent that she was not
-going to leave him be for two consecutive hours. She was constantly poking her nose into his office
or the Potions classroom, seeking him out in the hallways, with thinly veiled excuses to check in on
him.

First it had been the quartz crystal she needed to borrow. (Hers was apparently still hanging around
Argus’ throat.) Then she had wanted to show him a list of students she thought gifted enough to
benefit from more advanced wandless magic lessons. When he had noted that Draco would most
likely balk at such a suggestion, she had not shied away from wheedling a promise out of him that
he would say something to the boy. (He had not the faintest idea what. However, he had until the
following evening to find something suitably tailored to meet his multiple obligations.) Then it had
been to tell him that, due to a personal matter, her slayer friend now wanted to give her guest
lecture in their class much earlier than expected. (Wednesday, not that it mattered one whit to Severus. Professor Rosenberg could do with her lecture days as she pleased.) Then, she had requested a copy of his first year Potions textbook. Then, she had returned it, saying she had found a copy in the library. Then she wanted to know if the tea in the staff lounge was communal. Now she needed a tea infuser. The litany of interruptions seemed unending.

“I just… Okay, so I get that dirty equipment equals contaminated potions,” Professor Rosenberg said, looking and sounding slightly embarrassed. “Which can lead to explosions, and trippy hallucinations, and bad, stinky fumes. So, no duh, your stuff is spotless. It’s just, well, the thought of it…” she trailed off, expression warring between apologetic and still faintly disgusted.

Severus dipped his quill in his inkpot, and continued writing for a moment before responding. His first compulsion was to tell her that the infuser in her hand had last been used to create a distillation of ghoul lymph. “I typically use that one for Darjeeling,” he said, instead settling on the truth.

He was as guilty as her. Any day previous, he would have snapped at her for constantly disturbing his work. Instead, the lines of worry and confusion which seemed to constantly crease her forehead convinced him to hold his tongue. She was being solicitous, if roundabout and hesitant about it. He was ruthlessly curbing his temper, as if the slightest of sharp words from him would shatter her.

They were both being ridiculous.

He was not so fragile, and neither, apparently, was she.

“Oh,” Professor Rosenberg said sheepishly. “So, this is your actual ‘tea’ tea ball?”

Severus looked up from his ledger long enough to raise a single eyebrow before turning the page and making another quick notation. “Yes.”

“And I’m the rudest person in the history of ever for even asking?” she said, a small, teasing smile growing on her face.

“It is a distinct possibility,” Severus said, the urge to needle her temporarily overriding the even neutrality he had been attempting to cultivate.

Even without the use of his Legilimency to provide more concrete proof, Severus was no fool. It was obvious that his… slip had not gone unnoticed by Professor Rosenberg. Her feelings on the matter were less easy to ascertain. The only reasonable course of action Severus could see was to watch, and wait, and attempt to not further unbalance the situation with sarcasm, rash demonstrations of temper, or other messy emotions. Better to see where the rune stones fell.

Additionally, maintaining a detached, aloof mien was giving him the opportunity to mend the tattered edges of his dignity. It also enabled him to react with equanimity whenever Professor Rosenberg invariably succumbed to whatever internal struggle she was having and descended into flustered babbling.

Currently, for example.

“So… tea,” Professor Rosenberg said. “With Minerva. In the staff lounge.” Severus looked up to find her staring at him oddly. If pressed to speculate, he would have said that she seemed more confused than anything, which made next-to-no sense.

Unwilling to press the matter, Severus offered her an easy escape. “She particularly detests tardiness,” he said, tone once again even and neutral.

“Right,” she said, looking down at the tea infuser in her hands. “And, thanks. You know, again.”
She slipped out of the door, leaving Severus alone once again. He had the most irrational desire to chase after her. To do what, he could not have said.

Still, Severus had long practiced maintaining focus and restraint under significantly more trying conditions, and at the moment, he had no time for such nonsense. There was grading to complete, an afternoon’s worth of students who were not going to police themselves, and by his calculations, at least two more interruptions from Professor Rosenberg before dinner.

In the end, she managed three.

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The students were starting to arrive for Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Rosenberg was already inside the classroom, spreading out her chaos in the back row of desks. Her need for so much paper and so many differently hued writing implements defied rational explanation. Severus himself was lurking outside of the doorway, waiting for one student in particular.

He did not have long to wait. “Mr. Malfoy, a word,” Severus said, as Draco and his two hulking shadows turned the corner and came into view.

The hierarchy among his students would have been amusing, if not for the way it often echoed the politics among their parents. Draco ordered Vincent and Gregory into the classroom with a casually dismissive word, and the two hastened to obey. Like fathers, like sons.

If Draco was surprised or alarmed by the summons, he did not show it, even when Severus turned and walked a short distance down the hallway, giving it all an air of secrecy. Considering that Severus thought he had caught a glimpse of Draco placing something in Longbottom’s cauldron prior to the… incident during fifth year Potions that morning, the convincing mask of nonchalance was somewhat impressive.

Severus eyed Draco critically for a moment when they reached an acceptable distance from the main corridor. “Professor Rosenberg is going to invite you to take wandless magic lessons with a select group of other students,” he finally said, watching closely to gauge the reaction his words invoked.

Unfortunately, he had been correct in all his predictions. Draco’s angular features twisted in haughty disdain. “As if I would want to learn Muggle tricks from her,” he said, but the initial, venomous hatred in his voice tapered away in uncertainty at Severus’ scowl of disapproval.

Salazar had to be rolling in his grave. Ravenclaws might amass knowledge for its own sake, but any Slytherin worth his wand should know that knowledge was also power. “Have you forgotten already why you enrolled in this class in the first place?” Severus asked coldly.

Draco’s feigned innocence was less convincing this time, given that the tips of his ears were turning slightly pink. “I’m taking it because you’re one of the teachers.”

Defensive flattery. At least the boy was not completely devoid of guile. “No, you enrolled because your father suggested that you might use the opportunity to gather information on Professor Rosenberg for him. In order to curry favor with a certain individual of great political power.”

And now Draco was turning a bit grey. His eyes darted around, no doubt attempting to determine if anyone had overheard them. In truth, Severus would have almost preferred that this conversation be overheard, if only to add a little more fabricated grist to the rumor mill, but at least the façade of
appearances had to be maintained. “And what of it?” Draco asked, belligerence covering his rising fear. That was most interesting; Severus would have predicted defensive boasting at this point in the conversation. Fear, however, was far more sensible, and perhaps Draco was not as blindly dedicated to Lucius’ beliefs as Severus had assumed.

“Nothing. All I am suggesting is that your father would surely be pleased with your… initiative, if you were to accept her offer,” Severus said, slightly annoyed that he needed to spell it all out like this.

Draco at least appeared to be considering the words. That was the best Severus could do. He had dispensed with his promise to Professor Rosenberg, and in a manner which he could spin into a beneficial report to the Dark Lord. With any luck, she would manage to beat something worthwhile into the boy’s narrow skull. A seed of doubt might be too much to ask, but anything not perfectly aligned with the Death Eaters’ worldview would be useful.

“What do you get out of it?” Draco asked, showing more insight that Severus would have previously credited to him. Then again, Malfoy Manor had always been a pit of intrigue – socially, politically, or otherwise. It would have been nigh on impossible for him to have learned nothing in that kind of environment.

Severus’ thin smile was anything but pleasant. “I take care of my own,” he said, and dear Merlin, he did try, impossible as the situation was. With a slight nod, he left Draco to his thoughts.

When Severus neared the classroom door, he found Potter, Weasley-the-younger, and Granger huddled together in a side hallway, trying to look like the very embodiment of inconspicuousness. So he had been overheard. The loathing and suspicion in Potter’s eyes was particularly ill-concealed. Good. Despite Professor Rosenberg’s uncomfortably on-point attempts to persuade him otherwise, Severus knew he deserved every ounce of Potter’s hate at the very least, even if the boy could never know the specifics of why. Directly or indirectly, the Potters’ blood was on Severus’ hands, and it often seemed like that blood was all Severus could see when he looked at The Boy Who Lived – a walking, talking reminder of his failure and betrayal.

“I believe the three of you have class,” Severus said, eyes narrowing.

Draco took that moment to scurry behind Severus with a hate-filled glance of his own for the trio from Gryffindor. That brief byplay, more than Severus’ glare, seemed to galvanize them to follow suit and head into the classroom as well. Severus fell in behind, slamming the door upon entering in lieu of grinding his teeth.

“Today’s lesson will cover protective shields and barriers,” he said, stalking to the front of the classroom while the students shuffled desperately to produce paper and quills for notes. “Reactive shields are typically cast in direct response to a specific, immediate threat. Proactive shields are usually cast as a preventative measure against some predicted threat. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?”

Granger, who still was not quite settled, still managed to raise one hand, even as she awkwardly decanted the contents of her bag with the other. Severus knew that many of the other students were perfectly capable of answering his question, particularly the older ones. They simply preferred to avoid his attention whenever possible. Such cowardice irked him profoundly. His immediate instinct was to snap at them.

However, Professor Rosenberg was sitting up in her corner, scribbling away in her myriad inks. The students’ opinions of him mattered not in the slightest, but hers? Cursing himself for that weakness, Severus said, begrudgingly, “Yes, Miss Granger?”
Granger, who had finally settled in her desk, launched into a response. “Well, reactive shields are
typically small, which makes them more mobile, but they are also weaker than proactive ones…”

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The assignment had been fairly straightforward. Shield a folded piece of paper against a physical
and a fire-based attack. Most all of the students seemed quite capable of protecting their paper
pyramids from a dropped textbook. However, half of their shields melted under even the weakest
of fire charms. Even the threat of Professor Rosenberg’s potential disapproval could rein in
Severus only so much.

“You will write twelve inches on the modes of and methodology behind fireproofing spells, to be
handed in at the start of class this Friday,” Severus said, glaring at the smoldering piles of ashes
scattered on desks around the room. “You will also practice said spells on your reports. If they can
survive for ten minutes in my fireplace, I will deign to grade them.” He swept the room with a
disgusted scowl, almost daring anyone to voice a complaint. None dared. “Now, I believe that
Professor Rosenberg has a number of announcements to make.”

She had left her pile of note-taking detritus in the back of the room and had once again been
offering guidance to the students during the class. He had also noted her covertly testing their new
additions (they had gained one Ravenclaw and lost one groundskeeper today) with his loaned
crystal. He wondered absently, as she rose from her new perch on the front row to address the
class, if there would be any last second additions to the list she had shown him previously.

“So, my friend Buffy is coming in tomorrow night, and she and I will be tag-teaming class on
Wednesday,” Professor Rosenberg said. She seemed to become more comfortable and confident
with each passing class. “She’s a slayer, so come prepared with questions about that and expect
that we might be getting physical during class. That means wear something you won’t mind getting
grass stains on. Oh, and skirts? Probably not the best idea. Just saying.”

That earned a few scattered snickers, which prompted a narrow-eyed glare from Severus even
though Professor Rosenberg just smiled and did not seem to mind.

“Okay, thing two,” she said, once everyone settled back down. “Could the following students stay
after class for just a second? Before anyone freaks out, no one is in trouble. I just want to get some
feedback on something. Okay,” she produced a scrap of paper from somewhere in her long,
clinging skirt and read from it, “Davies, Granger, Longbottom, Macmillan, Malfoy, Miller, Potter.
That’s it, see the rest of you Wednesday.”

No new prospects then. It was still to be an interesting, if volatile, mix: three Gryffindors, two
Ravenclaws, one Hufflepuff, one Slytherin, and, presumably, one currently absent Squib. Severus
wondered if Professor Rosenberg really knew what she was getting into.

The rest of the class was starting to file out, leaving the small group Professor Rosenberg had
named. She waved them down to gather around her on the front row. Draco looked pale and grim,
as if he had just been summoned to his own execution. Granger and Potter were exchanging
conspiratorial glances, while Longbottom just looked terrified. Miller, Davies, and Macmillan were
just curious, if a little confused. Severus hung to one side of the classroom, close enough to
overhear, but far enough away to provide some semblance of privacy.

“Right, so, you guys probably saw me wandering around with this?” she held up Severus’ crystal,
which was glowing brightly between her thumb and index finger. “It’s one of the ways I can figure
out when people have the potential to learn wandless magic. Obviously from my last lesson,
everybody in class can learn the basics, but I wanted to talk to you guys because you all really have
the gift.” Even Draco, who had been made privy to this offer beforehand, looked a little surprised by her candid compliment. “I can teach you, but before I start bothering the Headmaster about times and classrooms and stuff, I wanted to see if you guys were actually interested.”

Severus noted that she was biting her lip, a definitive sign that she was nervous they were going to reject her offer. She cared far too much about others’ opinions.

He was a fine one to criticize.

“I’m in,” Draco said, sounding as unenthusiastic as was humanly possible. Still, he had taken Severus’ advice.

Potter and Granger exchanged glances. “Us too,” she said, and he nodded.

“Okay,” Professor Rosenberg said, smiling. Severus suppressed a sigh. She seemed so heartened, but he felt obligated to tell her the real reason why those three had agreed so quickly.

Longbottom was fidgeting nervously, but eventually asked, “Will it be hard?”

Professor Rosenberg gave him her most encouraging look and said, “It shouldn’t be any harder than wand magic, just a little different.”

After more hand wringing, Longbottom seemed to surprise even himself by saying, “Okay, I’ll try it.”

Davies expressed cautious interest as well, once Professor Rosenberg explained that this would be strictly extracurricular, and would not affect his grade in any way.

Macmillan spoke quite a bit, but all his hot air condensed into the fact that he felt he should ask his parents’ opinion before deciding. Miller’s answer was the same in spirit, if not in duration.

If any of those responses disappointed Professor Rosenberg, she hid it well. “No, that’s fine. I totally understand. Just let me know when you decide, one way or the other, and I’ll get to work finding us somewhere to meet,” she said, cheerfully. “And I’ll need schedules, so we can figure out a time that works for everybody.” And with that, she shooed them out, leaving the classroom to Severus and her.

After the noise in the hallway died down, Professor Rosenberg looked at him, wide smile settling into a smaller, more sardonic slant. “Wow, so I know I asked you to talk to Draco, but what on Earth did you say to him?”

Severus should have known. With her uncanny knack for reading even him, it would have been impossible for her to miss Draco’s true feelings on the subject. “It was something along the lines of ‘Know your enemy,’” Severus said, pausing a moment to weigh her reaction before continuing. She seemed unperturbed. “Also, I suspect Potter, Granger, and Weasley overheard the conversation.”

Professor Rosenberg did not seem terribly upset by his subterfuge. She did grimace slightly, but her smile returned quickly. “Well, whatever works. I’ll just have to win them over for real with my wiley wandless ways. You’ve read Sun Tzu?” she asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Severus looked at her blankly. “No.”

She looked slightly confused. “The Art of War?” she asked, apparently elaborating on her previous question. Severus just glowered at the insinuation that he should have heard of such a thing. “Sorry, it’s just that you semi-quoted it there. I guess it’s only about non-magical military tactics,
so I shouldn’t have assumed,” she said with a shrug. “We make all the older slayers read it.”

Once he decided that she was not poking fun of him somehow, Severus considered her words with passing interest. The title, assuming it was a true reflection of the book’s contents, was certainly evocative.

“Not that you need to, I think you’ve got the whole misdirection and adaptation thing down,” she said with another lopsided smile. Severus looked at her cautiously out of the corner of his eye. That was possibly a compliment, and a very Slytherin one at that. “Speaking of which, do you actually plan assignments for your classes, or do you just wait until someone pisses you off and then wing it?”

And that was most certainly teasing. “Both,” he finally said, biting back a sharper retort. Perish the thought that flagrant incompetence should result in punitive class assignments.

Professor Rosenberg’s quiet sniff was somewhere between a snicker and a snort, but her amused expression faded slightly and the worry-lines reappeared on her brow. “So, I guess I’m done with this,” she said, holding up his quartz crystal and offering it back to him. It glowed brightly.

Severus hesitated. “Additional students may yet join the class,” he said, folding his arms and concealing his hands in the sleeves of his robes. “And I have more.”

“I feel like I’m running off with all your stuff,” she said, half-jokingly, dropping her proffered hand.

Severus gave her a slightly sardonic look. “A device for brewing tea and a piece of common crystal hardly constitute ‘all’ of my belongings.” It was a calculated jab, evenly stated and said without the slightest hint of malice.

She just smiled, a little sheepishly perhaps, but at least this time his cautious verbal sparring was not met with an awkward prelude to flight. “So, dinner?”

The small fraction of the brittle coldness Severus had been maintaining like a shield thawed. He allowed himself the faintest of smiles in return and gestured for her to precede him up the stairs, waiting patiently while she packed her myriad belongings into her bag. For once, the sour expression he wore on their walk to the Great Hall was completely fabricated.

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The full weight of Severus’ current predicament settled back onto his shoulders when he returned to his office after the evening meal. He needed to write a letter to Lucius, explaining Draco’s inclusion in Professor Rosenberg’s wandless class and Severus’ own suggestion that her invitation be accepted. To do otherwise would seem out of character and would raise unwelcome suspicions. Additionally, a similar report needed to be made to the Dark Lord, lest Lucius seize on the opportunity and attempt to claim credit first. It would not do to allow that either. Not now, when the Dark Lord was only months returned, and jockeying for his favor and rank among the Death Eaters’ depleted ranks was as high as it ever had been. Severus could not afford to allow any chance to solidify his position pass. He knew he was valuable to the Death Eaters, his placement at Albus’ side guaranteed that, but he was not directly under the Dark Lord’s nose, bowing and scraping at every opportunity. He had to remain vigilant, and maintain his reputation for providing seemingly accurate information to the Dark Lord, so that when Albus required a particularly important piece of misinformation to be sent along, it would be accepted without question.
And yet, the two pieces of parchment he had placed on his desk remained damningly pristine, and his quill still hovered near his inkpot, dry and unused.

Finally, Severus carefully placed his quill back on its stand and rose to obtain a potion to quell the acid which was burning the back of his throat. His hand shook when he unlatched the cabinet door and reached for the phial, anger and the first stirrings of desperation eroding his carefully maintained control. The cool, blue elixir temporarily soothed his rebelling stomach, if not his mind.

It did not take deep levels of introspection to determine the source of his paralysis. The situation felt all too familiar, as if history was attempting to repeat itself.

The present circumstances were different though. Professor Rosenberg was here at Hogwarts, under Albus’ direct protection, not in a family home guarded by an untrustworthy secret keeper. She had direct and extensive training in fighting all varieties of dark forces, and the power to back up that expertise, not simply natural talent supported by a standard student’s education and a scant few years of desperate experience.

Severus was not about to write the report which would lead to Professor Rosenberg’s death. He was not. He would not allow such failure to happen twice.

The empty phial smashed against the door of his office, sending shards of leaded glass in all directions. Severus ground his teeth, forcing his shallow, ragged breaths back into a more even tempo. He had to write those letters. He had to. He had no other choice.

It took a supreme effort of will to return to his chair instead of grabbing another jar and dashing it into the door as well. He loathed feeling cornered. Apparently he particularly loathed feeling cornered where Professor Rosenberg’s safety was concerned.

Severus sat and placed both hands, palm down, on the surface of his desk. He had to maintain at least a semblance of calm to write these letters. A scattered, unfocused report would be nearly as bad as no report at all. He needed to concentrate.

Severus picked up his quill a few minutes later. His hand was steady, and his words carefully chosen, even though the mere sound of his quill scratching out the letters felt like nails down a chalkboard. He had performed worse tasks in the Order’s name before, had continued to function even when the words leaving his mouth and the spells from his wand made what must pass for the remnants of his conscience shrivel. He had the discipline to write two simple letters.

Professor Rosenberg is not Lily Evans.

When the second letter was complete, Severus signed his name to it, dried the nib of his quill, and returned it to its stand. Severus allowed a moment more for the ink to dry thoroughly, and then he rose stiffly and left his office, parchment in hand.

This time, things will be different.

Albus would be awake for hours yet. Assuming the time it would take for him to review the letters, Severus could still have them warded and up to the Owlery well before midnight.

I will make sure of it.
Chapter 21

The first time Willow had been in Dumbledore’s office, she hadn’t exactly been in a good position to explore, what with the failing defensive barriers, fainting, and all. The second time had been over the Argus debacle, so again, not much room for poking around then either, logistically or emotionally. This time, Willow was stuck in the office, waiting for Buffy and Minerva to arrive, with nothing better to do. Dumbledore was busy working on a huge stack of papers. Severus was staring at a fixed point on the floor. The silence was way, way too oppressive to just sit through, especially when there were magical doodads and gadgets and trinketty things to explore.

Willow stuck to strictly looking and not touching, since she didn’t want to accidentally turn herself into a toad or something. There was a big, ornate water clock, which took up half of one of the huge bookcases. It was so heavily enchanted, she wasn’t sure why the trapped liquid wasn’t boiling. A silver orrery sat on a table nearby, little gemstone planets rotating slowly in their orbits. There were lots of books too: histories, magical theory, and, oddly, an entire shelf of knitting patterns. Only a couple of titles were familiar, and even then, she recognized each as a very rare, very valuable text. Her fingers itched to grab one off the shelves at random and start reading. Well, maybe not entirely at random. The knitting patterns could stay.

A particular shelf caught and held Willow’s eye. *A Treatise on the Treaty of Carthage* was leaning next to *Those Who Watch* and a tattered, old copy of *The Slayer’s Handbook*. The books here were pretty basic fare, anyone in the know could lay hands on them, but…

“Of course we gathered information on your organization, Professor Rosenberg,” Dumbledore said. Willow looked over her shoulder at him, but he was still sitting with his back to her, writing away with an enormous red quill.

There was one book, *The Lost Arts*, on the Council-related shelf with which she wasn’t familiar. The title, in silver, seemed to shimmer slightly against the dark blue binding. Curious, she slid it off the shelf, careful of the slightly tattered cover, and flipped to the Introduction. The words were archaic and way too flowery, but it was still obvious that she was looking at a study on wandless magic by a wand wizard.

*Neat.*

She opened her mouth, but before the words could come out, Dumbledore was already answering her thoughts. “Of course you may borrow it, though you may wish to visit Irma about recasting the spells which maintain the binding,” he said, still not looking up from his paperwork.

Without thinking, Willow looked over at Severus with a half-smile and a wry look. Whatever response she was expecting, it didn’t come. He was still angled away from her, absorbed in thought. Willow hugged the book to her chest. Something was wrong. Things had been confusing and weird between them ever since the soul-baring-confessions followed by the maybe-almost-kiss, but they had been getting along. Talking. This was different.

The fireplace took that moment to flare a bright, virulent green. Willow was immediately, and guiltily, relieved by the distraction.

Minerva stepped out of the freaky fire, followed by a coughing, slightly soot-covered Buffy.

Willow was across the room in moments, book slid unceremoniously on one of the little end tables near the chairs.
Buffy had let go of the handle of her little travel suitcase, had taken the hem of her blouse in hand instead, and was scowling down at the smears of soot on it. That didn’t slow Willow down though, she just went ahead and hugged Buffy with all of her might. It was such a relief to see a familiar, friendly face.

“Oof,” Buffy said, probably faking. It would take more than Willow’ strength to actually hurt a slayer via hugging. “I’m covered in ashes,” Buffy said, gingerly returning the embrace.

Willow let go and stepped back, looking down at her own clothes. “Oops. Now I am too,” she said, not really caring.

A loud, fake cough interrupted them both. Willow turned around, feeling heat rise a little in her cheeks. Dumbledore, who obviously had been the throat clearer, was standing right behind her along with the rest of the Order welcome party, smiling. “Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Miss Summers,” he said, extending a wizened hand.

“Thanks,” Buffy said, automatically taking Dumbledore’s hand and shaking it.

“Sorry,” Willow said. “Uh, Buffy Summers, this is Albus Dumbledore,” she launched into the introductions and gestured towards him. Dumbledore nodded. “You met when the Order people first came to the Council, but he’s also the Headmaster here. So, he’s like a principal. And this is Severus Snape,” she said, her voice faltering a little awkwardly.

Buffy was eyeing him with more interest now. Willow really shouldn’t have mentioned him by name in her letter.

“He teaches Potions, and Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts with me. Also, he’s the Order’s superspy,” Willow continued in a rush. Severus, who was now standing just behind and to the right of Dumbledore, crossed his arms and stared back at Buffy with a flat, assessing look. “And you met Minerva McGonagall, who teaches Transfigurations, uh… turning something into something else. And, actually, I don’t know what exactly you do for the Order,” Willow finished lamely.

“Oh, this and that,” Minerva said with a small, thin smile. “It was lovely meeting you, dear,” she said to Buffy, “But I really must be getting to my classroom. My second years will be arriving presently.”

“My fourth years as well,” Severus said. “We will be seeing each other later.” It wasn’t said as a goodbye, more as a statement of fact. He then nodded slightly, flicked the briefest of unreadable glances at Willow, and then fell in step next to Minerva.

“The house-elves should have made the necessary adjustments to your quarters, Professor Rosenberg, if Miss Summers would like to unpack her belongings and freshen up,” Dumbledore said, his smile still kindly, if a little on the neutral, diplomatic side of things.

Willow’s brow creased, suddenly a little worried. She had just assumed she’d be sleeping on the couch while Buffy was visiting. *What’s a house elf, and how did one get in my rooms?* With her wards in place, she hadn’t thought anything about leaving her Journal sitting around from time to time.

“That’d be good,” Buffy said, looking back down at her shirt and grimacing again, oblivious to Willow’s sudden concern.

They excused themselves, and Willow scooped up the blue book on the way to the door.
Thankfully, Buffy waited until they had left Dumbledore’s office to give Willow a look. “So, that was Severus, huh?” she asked, little, crooked smile warning of impending teasing.

“Shh,” Willow said, blushing in embarrassment. “Some of the paintings are really terrible gossips, and the ghosts are even worse.” She hooked a hand around Buffy’s elbow and attempted to tug her further down the hall.

Buffy looked around the mostly empty hallway dubiously, allowing herself to be pulled towards the nearest staircase. “Seriously?” she asked, dragging her rolling suitcase behind her.

“You’ll see,” Willow said, dropping Buffy’s arm. The slayer was still limping, but only just a little. The bulky leg brace was still in place, but it was currently partnered with a pair of strappy low heels. Willow doubted the physical therapists at the Council would approve. “Like, half of the things here which you’d think shouldn’t talk or move, do. It’s a little freaky at first.”

“Like stone staircases,” Buffy said, looking back where the big gargoyle was once again blocking the entrance to Dumbledore’s office.

“And paintings, and books, and statues, and plants,” Willow said, rolling her eyes a little and smiling.

“Check, no juicy gossip until we get to your room,” Buffy said with an exaggerated sigh. “How about totally non-gossip-worthy Council stuff, then?”

“Sure,” Willow said, trying to not sound too excited. Who would have thought she’d be missing all of the annoying, bureaucratic stuff?

“Hmm,” Buffy said, thinking for a moment. “Well, Xander and Serena are back in Cleveland. I’ve got a present for you from them in my bag.”

Willow grinned. So, not exactly the bureaucratic stuff. That was fine too. “Is it terrible?” she asked. Xander had taken to sending them the most awful touristy stuff he could find whenever he travelled.

“So bad,” Buffy agreed, grabbing the banister for a little extra stability when they reached the big staircase down all the way to the ground floor. Willow winced a little; she should have thought of that. Accessibility didn’t seem to be a big priority around here, but if Buffy wasn’t complaining, Willow wasn’t going to bring it up either. “It’s a glittery blob of seashells with googly eyes and a little top hat.”

That did sound pretty bad. Maybe not as terrible as the creepy, voodoo doll keychain from New Orleans, but at least as bad as the Forbidden City Starbucks mug. Willow couldn’t wait to see it.

“Shaena and Abby are in the clinic,” Buffy continued. “They’ll be fine, but they accidentally stumbled across a really huge nest of vamps in Darwin. Giles has some of the watchers researching to see if it might have been something more dire than an undead family reunion. Uh, Avery is finally retiring. No idea who’s gonna replace him running Lab 4. Andrew wants to, but yeah… No. And wow, those paintings really are moving,” she said, craning her head around to get a better look at the portrait of an old woman sitting in a wing backed chair, scratching a fluffy lapdog behind the ears.

“Uh huh,” Willow said, waving a little at the portrait. Mrs. Manners didn’t exactly cover proper etiquette around sentient works of art, so she had taken to erring on the side of caution.

Buffy just stared, a little wide-eyed, at the paintings lining the great staircase. It took her two whole
flights to shake that off, which was still better than Willow had managed on her first tour of the school’s interior. “So, this place is crazy huge. Where are your rooms?” she asked.

“One more floor,” Willow said, looking over the banister, “And then down into the dungeons.”

“They put you in a dungeon?” Buffy asked, sounding deeply unimpressed and maybe a little angry.

“It’s a lot cozier than it sounds,” Willow said. “I don’t even know why they call them dungeons, other than the fact that they’re underground.”

“Oh huh,” Buffy said, a dubious expression still on her face.

The massive hourglasses, full of gemstones in the Entrance Hall received another round of ogling, but pretty soon, they reached Euryale’s portrait and Willow’s rooms. Buffy seemed more than appeased once they got inside and she saw that there weren’t any shackles or hot pokers to be found anywhere.

While Buffy admired the fishbowl ceiling, Willow stuck her head in her bedroom and discovered that not only had the room itself apparently grown, there were now two matching beds on either side of it. Weird, and a little worrisome. Anything that could pop past her wards and muck with her stuff, no matter how blasé Dumbledore had sounded when he mentioned ‘house-elves,’ made Willow twitchy. She grabbed her Journal off of her nightstand and put it next to the Template, Sourcebook, and Die in the more heavily warded nook in her wall. Better to not take any chances.

When she came back into the main living area, she found Buffy standing there, hands on her hips. “So, spill,” she said, mock seriousness mostly ruined by the humor glinting in her eyes.

Willow knew what Buffy was actually asking, but she still hedged for a minute. “They put a bed in there for you,” she said in a rush. “And if you want to change, you can put your clothes and shoes and stuff in the hamper. They’ll show back up sans soot.” Which also gave her a moment’s pause. She had assumed the hamper itself was enchanted, but now…

Buffy just gave her a semi-joking, impatient look, tapping her toe for emphasis.

Willow set aside thoughts of house-elves handling her underwear, and twisted her hands together. “I don’t know!” she finally blurted. “One second I was spilling my guts about black-eyed, scary Willow. The next he was looking like he was going to… And his voice got all husky. And eyes. There were definitely eyes being made. And my stomach got flippy. Which is totally not supposed to happen, because hello? I’ve been in the girls-only camp since college. And don’t you dare laugh at me.”

The corners of Buffy’s mouth were trying to take a sharp turn upwards, and while her eyes were sparkling with suppressed mirth, she managed to solemnly say, “Wouldn’t dream of it. So what happened then?”

“And nothing. I stuck my foot in my mouth, and he got all distant,” And no mentions of the secret dead friend. You promised. “So I ran away, called in the relationship cavalry, and things have been awkward ever since,” Willow finished with an exaggerated grimace.

Buffy plopped down on the couch and took a second to prop her bun leg up on the coffee table. “First things first, he is human, right?” she asked lightly. When Willow huffed a little surprised laugh, she continued, “Hey, I have to ask.”

“I know,” Willow said, with a roll of her eyes. She walked over and sat on the couch next to Buffy. “No worries there. Physiology says: definitely human.”
“Willow!” Buffy managed to pack an essay’s worth of scandalous accusations into that exclamation and the faux-shocked expression on her face.

“Not like that!” Willow said, heat rising in her cheeks. “I had to cast a healing spell on him a little after I got here. I think I would have noticed then if he didn’t have a pulse, or had extra organs, or whatever.”

Buffy just looked at her in mock seriousness and repeated, very slowly. “Extra organs?”

“Oh my Goddess!” Willow said, snatching up the couch’s decorative pillows one by one and chucking them at Buffy, who blocked them easily, even through sudden gales of laughter. “I meant spleens, or lungs, or... This is serious!” Willow tried to put on an indignant face, but gave up when the effort made no apparent impression. “Ugh. Okay, there are a couple professors here who clearly aren’t one hundred percent human, but they’ve all been really nice so far, and Severus isn’t one of them.”

“If you say so,” Buffy finally said, trying to smother out the last of her giggles and look suitably contrite. “So, tall, dark, and potentially evil. Isn’t that usually my M.O.?”

“Tell me about it,” Willow said, pulling her feet up under her on the couch. “And he’s not evil. It’s just, he understands.” Willow didn’t elaborate, but from the arm that snaked around her shoulder and gave her a tight squeeze, she guessed that Buffy got the idea anyway. Willow couldn’t even remember the last time that discussing her whole veiny, evil meltdown with anyone beside the former Sunnydale contingent hadn’t resulted in at least a little fear, or pity, or scorn. It sucked, and hurt, but she had learned to live with it. Besides, the people she cared about the most – Xander, Buffy, Giles, Dawn – still loved her. And if she caught them handling her with kid gloves from time to time, especially after she had to work the kinds of magic that made her hair shade back into scary black, she couldn’t really blame them.

Not only had Severus said that he didn’t care after her, admittedly abbreviated, confession, he had apparently not cared so much that he’d tried to kiss her. Sort of. Maybe. And some part of Willow had been totally on board with it, despite his own disturbing revelations about his past. Which all felt like some kind of a betrayal. Why did everything have to be so confusing?

“So basically, the problem is that he’s a guy.” When Willow finally nodded, because yeah, that was a big part of it, Buffy continued, “You know, voting on movie night selections are still stuck on Liam Neeson.”

Oh. Oooooh. “Are you seriously trying to make me feel better by citing human behavioral research?” Willow asked, the teasing disbelief in her voice not completely faked. “Who are you, and what have you done with Buffy Summers?”

“Hey, I know stuff,” Buffy said, picking at the hem of her shirt again. “You said something about a magical laundry service?”

“Yeah, just toss your clothes in the hamper in the bathroom,” Willow said, suddenly reminded of her own sooty top. “They’ll be back after dinner.” She pointedly decided to stick with her enchanted hamper theory for the time being. She had enough stuff to worry about without psyching herself out over hypothetical elf-things digging around in her dirty undies.
Buffy gave an impressed little nod and said, “Sure beats the laundry room back at the Council,” before heading off in the direction of the bathroom. And wasn’t that the truth? Demon blood and vampire dust didn’t do washing machines any favors, and it wasn’t exactly easy to find a reliable handyman who was also in the know.

“Oh, and you might want to read the Post-It notes I put on all the spigots and dials,” Willow called out right before Buffy disappeared through the bathroom door. When that earned a curiously raised eyebrow, she continued, “Trust me, it’ll make life easier.” She made a shooing gesture with her hands. “And afterwards, I’ll show you some of those fancy robes I still haven’t worked up the guts to wear in public.”

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Buffy had been absolutely tickled by Willow’s witchy fashion show. Willow herself had still felt a little silly in the unfamiliar clothes, but at Buffy’s insistence, she had promised to finally wear one of them sometime soon. Maybe tomorrow. They were awfully fun in a swishy kind of way. Besides, she was pretty certain her normal clothes had made their point.

Dinner was going well. Dumbledore’s introduction had been a little over the top, Willow hadn’t ever actually heard a slayer called a “keeper of the unseen gates” outside of a 14th century manuscript, but since Buffy seemed to find it funny and flattering, Willow figured she didn’t really have room to complain.

Seating assignments had been shuffled as well, and a new chair had been added to the staff table. Poor Filius, who must have lost some kind of bet with the rest of the staff, sat in Willow’s usual spot next to Umbridge. Willow and Buffy were sitting together, between Minerva and Hagrid. The groundskeeper was beside himself at the idea of sharing a meal with a real, live vampire slayer. Minerva seemed genuinely interested in discussing Willow’s classes. The food was unusually good. It was nice.

Even so, Willow kept catching herself shooting glances down the table. Apparently she wasn’t being as covert about it as she thought either, because about half way through dinner Minerva huffed a little laugh and said, “He’s not going anywhere, dear.”

“What? No, I’m not… Who?” Willow topped off that smooth, subtle evasion with a slightly rictus smile.

Minerva pointedly looked at her over the rims of her spectacles. Willow was almost grateful for the sudden, alarmingly strong elbow jab in the ribs, which served as more than ample distraction from that disconcertingly knowing look.

“Ow,” she said, wincing a little and giving Buffy a reproving glare.

Buffy shrugged, not looking particularly penitent. “What’s up with the color-coded animal motif?” she asked.

Willow jumped on that conversational distraction like a lifeline. “They’re House symbols, which at first I thought was a wand wizard thing, but as it turns out, is really just a British thing. Or maybe a Commonwealth thing? Anyway, students get sorted into their Houses on their first day by a freaky singing hat…”

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Buffy pivoted on her good heel, sending George Weasley flopping onto the grass with an
undignified squawk. His arm was twisted behind his back at an awkward angle, and Buffy stripped his wand from his hand with practiced ease.

Willow was sitting on the ground with their students ranging round her in a loose semi-circle. While everyone else seemed pretty riveted by Buffy’s demonstration, Willow was taking the opportunity to think. She had plenty to think about.

Severus was standing opposite the class with his arms crossed, tapping a finger against the crook of his elbow. The tapping had paused for a moment when George had hit the ground, then had resumed when the tall Gryffindor had started laughing and Buffy had given him a hand back up.

Without his usual top robe, Severus was wearing maybe five acres of black fabric instead of his usual ten. He must have taken her at face value when she suggested that everyone come prepared for non-magical sparring. He had even tied back his hair, which was looking a lot more, well, kempt than usual. Softer.

Willow snapped back to the here and now when Buffy started herding everyone to their feet and telling them to split into pairs. Argus was tied up with some maintenance issue in the library, or was simply avoiding being manhandled by students, which left an odd number of students. Luckily Buffy’s pre-class suggestion to Willow that Severus could serve as her victim du jour if no one else volunteered had been nipped in the bud by the Weasley twins apparently both deciding that being tossed about by a slayer sounded like a good time. So now George was paired with Buffy, Fred seemed vaguely jealous, and Willow never had to find out if Buffy had been joking.

Willow picked up her box of practice wands and started handing them out. None of the other teachers seemed to be all that worried in their own classes, but real wands were apparently expensive, occasionally explosive, and not designed with physical disarming techniques in mind. Better safe than sorry.

“Remember, you guys are trained with your wands. That’s where you’re strongest. So this is absolute worst case scenario stuff I’m talking about here,” Buffy said, once everybody had pretty much paired off and all their real wands were tucked away safely. “You’ve lost your wand, the bad guy is right on top of you, and you can’t just summon your wand back, or run away, or hide.” She looked around the circle of students before gesturing with her arms and saying, “Scoot over. You guys aren’t going to be able to see.” After much shuffling of feet, Buffy turned back to George, who was standing only a few feet away. “Ready?”

George raised his wand, a look of unholy glee on his face. “Ready.”

Fake wand or not, George certainly kicked off his ‘attack’ with believable gusto. Despite her leg brace, Buffy still managed to step quickly to the side, left hand shooting out to intercept his right wrist as his wand flicked forward in casting position. Willow had seen her run through the same demonstration dozens of times before. Granted, she had been working with younger slayers and knife attacks at the time, but it was familiar enough and comfortable in a déjà vu-y kind of way. “Step one, get out of the way of the business end of your opponents wand.” Buffy said. “If you can grab their wrist at this point, great. As long as I have a hold on his wrist like this, it’s going to be a lot harder for him to get it pointed back in my direction.”

George obligingly tried to twist his hand around, to little avail, and grinned like a madman. Willow couldn’t help but smile a little and shake her head slightly.

“If you can’t, at least try to knock their hand away. Not ideal, but still better than getting a face full of bad mojo. Anyway, from here, I can do all kinds of things,” Buffy said conversationally to the rest of the class, whose expressions ranged from fascinated to disbelieving. “Like if I hit his wand
hand like this,” she slowly demonstrated an open-handed strike, which forced Fred’s wrist to fold inward. “Look, the tendons are all stretched tight, and his grip on the wand can’t help but loosen up. Then I can just continue this motion so his wrist stays flexed, and,” still holding onto his wrist with her left hand, she moved her right hand forward and down, again stripping the wand from George’s nerveless hand, “Now I have his wand.” Buffy let go of George’s wrist, twirled the practice wand around her fingers in a move that was pure show, and handed it back to him, grip first. “So, questions?”

Willow peeked around the class out of the corner of her eye. None of them were looking terribly intrepid now, not even the Gryffindors. There was some hemming, and hawing, a request to see the disarm again, and a few promises from Buffy that the technique didn’t require slayer strength to perform, but soon she had fifteen pairs of students practicing on one another under threat of being made her replacement partner if everyone didn’t play nice and take the moves slowly and carefully.

Severus continued to hang to the back, but Willow noticed with amusement that he was wearing his scowl variant that seemed to mean that he was paying close attention and filing everything away for future reference. She wondered if he would have actually joined in, if not for the disdainful anti-Muggles-and-all-their-works front he maintained for his cover. He’d probably be good at it. Thanks to their classroom-thrashing faux-fight, she knew he had quick reflexes and strong hands.

Willow took a screeching mental U-turn back on topic when she heard one of the students gasp sharply in pain. From the hand wringing, she pinpointed the source: Harry Potter. Buffy, who was on the far end of the double line of students, caught her eye questioningly. Willow just gave her a tiny nod and walked over to Harry and Ron, who were whispering back and forth as she approached. All she caught at the end was “…could do something,” from Ron.

Well that was weird. “Everything okay?” Willow asked, trying not to sound too severe. Yet. Joint locks were super-effective things to know, but she’d helped mend enough tweaked wrists at the Academies to not appreciate it when people got a little too rough in practice.

Harry started a little, and tucked his left hand behind his back as he turned around to face her. If Willow hadn’t thought something odd was up before, she certainly did now. She gave him a questioning look, and, when faced with a stubborn half-scowl, raised an eyebrow at Ron. “Well?” she asked a little accusatorially.

Ron balked, and Harry suddenly spoke up. “He didn’t do anything, professor.” When Willow looked back at him, he continued, “I have a… cut on my hand and just bumped it wrong.” He hesitantly produced his left hand from behind his back, and sure enough, it was wrapped up in what looked like a handkerchief.

Willow frowned a little, feeling like a heel. “Why didn’t you say something?” she asked. “We would have excused you to go to the infirmary. Or I could have healed it myself.” She started to extend a hand, but retracted it immediately when the kid took a defensive little half-step backwards.

“Okay,” he said. “Really.” The look he was giving her was mutinous.

Hello to the weird hostility. Willow raised her hands slightly in mock surrender. “Okay, just be extra careful then,” she said, looking back and forth between the two students. Bullying Severus into letting her heal him was one thing. Bullying a kid who she knew for a fact had a bucket load of issues? Ookie. “And for the record, I still think you should go to the infirmary,” she tried one last time.
Harry shrugged and mumbled something noncommittal. Ron gave him a pointed, but otherwise unreadable glare. Willow thought that it might be best to beat a retreat. Maybe the kid had cut himself pulling some dumb stunt and didn’t want to get caught. But still, weird. She made a mental note to mention the incident to Minerva, who apparently served as the Gryffindors’ mom-away-from-mom, after class and filed the whole incident away under ‘Things to keep an eye on in the future.’

The rest of the class was fairly uneventful. Well, except for the part where a couple of the older male students figured out that if they could convince their partners to fake wrist injuries, they would get to work with Buffy. So much for using the threat of a slayer to keep the class in line. Teenagers...

And if Buffy had sidled up next to Severus near the end of class, and said something that had made the Potions master stand up ramrod straight, his initially affronted scowl melting into narrow-eyed speculation, well, that could just get filed away for future reference too.

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“What did you say to him?” Willow asked for what felt like the eighty-second time.

“Dawn would go nuts over this room,” Buffy said, from where she was stretched out on Willow’s couch. “Is it really thick glass, or another illusion like the sky one upstairs?”

“I think it’s glass, but I haven’t tried poking at it to make sure,” Willow replied. “What did you say to him?”

“It’s gotta be like a one-way mirror or something then, right? We aren’t scaring off the fish,” Buffy said, blithely ignoring Willow’s question yet again. She waved both hands at the fish in questions. The sudden motion didn’t seem to phase them at all.

“Buffy, what did you say to him?”

“I mean, what if a student went swimming up there, and saw you in your pajamas?” Buffy continued, as if Willow hadn’t spoken at all. “And those fish look way too calm. So it has to be magicked so we can see out, but they can’t see in.”

Thoroughly exasperated, Willow flung herself back in the overstuffed chair, pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, and made a strangled sound of pure frustration.

“Unless they just can’t see us from this angle. Their eyes are kind of pointed up there, and we’re kind of down here. What do you think?” Buffy kept looking at the fish bubble ceiling for a moment longer, and then turned her head to look at Willow when an answer wasn’t forthcoming. “I might have implied that I could break all the bones in his hands.”

Willow dropped her hands and stared at Buffy in horror. “You did what?”

“But that I wouldn’t have to,” Buffy elaborated, as if that made everything okay. “Because if he hurt you, you could burn him to a crisp.”

“You didn’t!” Willow felt like all of the blood had drained out of her face, and then rushed back up to throw a party on her cheeks. “He’s not stupid. That’s like a… a… an embossed invitation to freaking court me in slayerese.”

“Who even says ‘court’ anymore?”
“He would, and I don’t even know if I…”

“Oh please,” Buffy said, pushing herself back up into a sitting position. “You should get coffee with him.”

“He prefers tea,” Willow said, without thinking.

Buffy’s lips curled up into a little smile. “Really, what kind?” she asked innocently.

“Darjeeling.” Willow was silent for a long moment. “Shush up, you.”

Buffy’s expression turned suddenly serious. “Life’s too short, and you think too much. Just… be happy.” And then the mischievous smile was back in full force. “Worry about extra organs later.”

Willow cringed. “Can we just forget that entire conversation ever happened?”

“Nope,” Buffy said, popping the p sound and grinning. “Any other major life crises I can help you with before they zip me back to London?”

Willow chewed on her lip for a second. *Just be happy.* It wasn’t exactly a nuanced take on the situation, but Buffy, really all of the slayers, had a pronounced tendency to live in the now. Kind of made sense, when you realized they risked their lives basically every single day. ‘Now’ got to be pretty important when part of you wasn’t really sure about how many ‘tomorrows’ you might have. Fielding teams of slayers, instead of just the one, had definitely improved things, but even so, bad stuff happened. “Well, I already wrote you guys that the local Big Bad wants to kill me, but that’s, you know…”

“Normal,” Buffy finished for her.

“Yeah, normal,” said Willow. “Any news on that?”

“Not yet,” Buffy shrugged. “We’ve got a bunch of people working on researching this Voldy-whoever guy for you. The Order people are in on it too. Giles is thinking about offering one or two of them jobs as watchers. You know, after.”

“After,” Willow repeated with a weird sinking feeling in her stomach. She’d been so wrapped up in the day-to-day stuff that she really hadn’t been thinking much about after. After they defeated Voldemort and his stooges? After this school year, maybe? Sooner or later, she’d head back to the Council and leave all of this behind. Hogwarts. Her students. Minerva and Filius and Hagrid and Dumbledore.

Severus.

*Life’s too short, and you think too much. Just be happy.*

Maybe coffee (or tea) wasn’t such a terrible idea.
Severus did not relish the thought of being manhandled in front of the Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts students. However, he was also perfectly aware that Miss Summers’ visit had more to do with taking the Order’s measure than their students’ education. That most of her frankly speculative stares had been concentrated upon his person had added another layer of meaning to her presence, one that he hesitated to consider in too much detail. And so, when faced with the prospect of being called upon to demonstrate magical and mundane dueling techniques in front of such a critical audience, Severus made a point to stop by his rooms on his way between classes and prepare.

He emptied single doses of various potions from his many hidden pockets onto a small table in the entrance of his quarters. Some he left for later, and others he reorganized, trading out small flasks and ampoules until he was reasonably satisfied with his remaining pharmacopeia. He doubted he would need any of them, but he traveled nowhere without a selection of his most critical elixirs.

That task complete, Severus continued further into his rooms, removing his over robe as he walked, and draping it neatly over the armrest of his couch. The trailing fabric, while warm, could be a liability in a physical altercation, in which it could serve as an easy handhold for an opponent. His underlying frock coat and slacks were more closely tailored and would have to serve.

His hair, on which he usually spent such little time and attention, could also prove a complication, and for the same reason as his over robe. It took a bit of searching, but Severus did eventually find a long-disused hair tie, tucked in the back corner of a bathroom drawer. He raked his fingers through his hair, gathering it into a tail at the nape of his neck and halfheartedly smoothing down the most egregious of stray strands. Then he tied the silver tipped length of black cord in place and felt it snug down securely as its minor enchantment took hold.

Severus tugged the sleeves of his frock coat down a final time, checked to make sure his wand was snuggly housed in its dedicated pocket against his forearm, and then quit his rooms. He turned to reset the wards on his door, thinking himself reasonably well-prepared for whatever trials and tribulations Miss Summers had planned, when someone collided with him so forcefully that he staggered.

Vastly annoyed, Severus straightened as he turned around, glaring up and down the hallways to determine whether the undignified incident had been witnessed. He got a brief glimpse of an empty corridor before he shifted his glower to his assailant, a distinctly out-of-place Minerva McGonagall. She was already fussing over him, wand out. “How clumsy of me,” she murmured to herself, hands fluttering over the collar of his robes, subtle brush of magic dancing in the periphery of his senses and stirring his hair.

He took a step backwards, bumping into his own door in an attempt to escape her grasp. “Do stop dithering, I am fine,” he said in clipped tones, put off by the physical contact, and suddenly wary of the thin lipped look of appraisal that Minerva was directing his way. What was she doing outside of his quarters, in the depths of the dungeons, in the first place?

She smiled cryptically. “You’ll do.”

Suspicious that he was being made the butt of some unknown joke, Severus stiffened. “Is there something you require?” he asked coldly, when her scrutiny continued.

“Oh, no,” Minerva said mildly. “I was just stretching my legs.” With a small nod, she turned and
started to walk down the corridor. “Have a good day, Severus,” she said over her shoulder with a hint of mirth in her voice, disappearing around a corner.

Severus stood in his doorway for a long moment, scowling after her. The whole interlude set him on edge. He could almost have sworn that Minerva had run into him on purpose, but when he straightened his clothing to his own liking once again, he noticed nothing out of place.

As if he did not have enough concerns to occupy his mind. Attempting to dismiss the interaction with a scowl, he headed in the direction of the classroom he shared with Professor Rosenberg, still unconsciously brushing suspicious fingers over pockets and seams, to no avail.

~*~*~*~

Miss Summers’ class had been enlightening. Instead of relying on brute strength, as Severus had initially assumed, the methods she presented were all rooted in a detailed understanding of anatomy. Whoever had invented those techniques, whether it was the senior slayer herself or some long-ago martial theorist, had clearly understood the manipulation of the human body in order to produce the maximum amount of pain with the minimum amount of effort.

It was an oddly spare, Mugglish demonstration of a topic with which Severus was intimately, horribly familiar. Compress the space between bones just so, twist the angle of the joint a shade beyond its normal range, apply the slightest pressure to the correct cluster of nerves, and then wait. It was more subtle than the Crucius Curse, the pain more localized, but it could be sustained longer without losing the subject to madness. Granted, Miss Summers had been demonstrating how to rapidly disarm an opponent during close-quarters combat, not prying secrets from an unwilling ‘guest’ over the course of several hours in the dungeons under the Lestrange estate, but the similarities were there.

Severus closed his eyes briefly and breathed in slowly through his nose, allowing the familiar scents of his office to soothe away the acidic bite the unwelcome memories had stirred in the back of his throat.

A sudden series of raps on his office door interrupted Severus’ preoccupation. He opened his eyes narrowly in irritation. “Enter,” he said, pitched so as to be heard through the solid, wooden door and anti-eavesdropping spells.

The interloper turned out to be Albus, who greeted Severus with a cryptic smile and a brisk, “Minerva has returned Miss Summers to London,” as the office door swung shut behind him.

Severus just stared at him tiredly, willing him to leave. Albus blithely ignored Severus’ overtly unwelcoming demeanor, and instead took the eye contact as an invitation to fully enter the room. Severus saw little point in arguing the matter, as he knew perfectly well that he would lose. “She seemed favorably disposed towards all of us,” Albus continued in the same vein, settling himself into the chair in front of Severus’ desk.

“She threatened to mutilate my hands,” Severus replied drily.

“Slayers are unusual Muggles,” Albus said, seemingly unperturbed. “Perhaps you misunderstood her meaning.”

Oh, no. Severus was fairly certain he had understood her intended message perfectly well. Miss Summers’ disturbingly detailed, cheerfully delivered threat had conveyed a wealth of concern for her friend, as well as her suspicions regarding his feelings for Professor Rosenberg. Insane as it seemed, he did not think that she had been warding him away though. Quite the opposite.
“Perhaps,” he allowed.

Perhaps he was delusional, and Miss Summers had meant every word exactly as stated. Severus unconsciously flexed his hands before lacing his fingers together on the top of his desk.

“Be that as it may, Minerva also returned with this,” Albus produced a neatly folded piece of paper, nestled in a Muggle envelope, from within his robes and handed it to Severus.

Removing and unfolding the paper, Severus noted the crest of the Council of Watchers decorated the top of the page. He read its contents carefully. The letter was a very brief, if formally worded, request for a potion sample and, if possible, a demonstration of its brewing. “Why Wolfsbane?” he asked.

“I suspect it has something to do with the large Tibetan pack with whom they are allied,” Albus said. “Naturally, I am passing the request on to you.”

Naturally.

Severus raised a hand, hooking his chin with his thumb and draping his index finger across his lips in thought. “They must have something resembling adequate facilities,” he said at length. “Especially with Remus in residence, it may be simpler to brew a large batch there, so as to avoid the complications of concealing several watchers here.” Which was all true, but Severus also found that he was… curious. He glanced at his timepiece. The hand was creeping toward ‘supper,’ but he was more interested in the moon calendar, worked into its face in mutable silver. “The next full moon is two weeks from Sunday,” he said. “I had already planned to take the majority of the preceding Saturday and Sunday to brew a batch.”

Albus nodded, seemingly satisfied. “I will send an owl suggesting just that this evening,” he said, rising to his feet. “And perhaps you can ask after Arabella while you are there.” And with that, the Headmaster made his goodbyes and quit the room.

Severus also rose from his desk. The evening meal was fast approaching, and he had yet to retrieve his over robe from his quarters. The walk to his rooms was short. He took a brief detour to avoid the majority of the students who were, themselves, headed in the direction of the Great Hall. His path took him past dungeon fourteen, where Professor Rosenberg’s warded labyrinth was still shrouded in darkness and thrumming with energy.

His over robe was just where he had left it, folded over the armrest of his couch. Once it was settled comfortably about his person, he reached back to release his hair from its tie. As it had turned out, he had not needed to take the trouble. Not that he was disappointed to avoid being tossed about in front of his students. At his touch, the cord unwound itself into his waiting hand. He walked to his small bathroom, intent on returning it to its drawer, most likely to be forgotten again in short order.

Upon entering, he caught sight of himself in the small mirror, hanging on the wall above his washbasin. What he saw there made him stop and stare.

Minerva…

Severus ran a hand through his uncharacteristically smooth, even hair, irritated scowl set firmly on his face. He distinctly remembered Minerva fussing over him with her wand that morning. She must have cast a styling charm on him while he was distracted in the aftereffects of their, now obviously intentional, collision.
That meddling, insufferable…

There was no help for it now. At least this explained the handful of odd glances he had noticed from various students throughout the course of the afternoon. Minerva was forever twitting him about one thing or another, but this level of interference was not to be borne.

He exited his chambers. The boom of his door slamming behind him punctuated his mood quite nicely.

The few stragglers left in the hallways scattered in his wake. He had every intention of giving Minerva a piece of his mind, but upon arriving in the Great Hall, he found her seat empty. For that matter, so were Albus’ and Umbridge’s. Thwarted, Severus stormed down the rows between the tables and took his own seat, half-heartedly attempting to rein in his ill temper for the time being.

Professor Rosenberg had been reading a new book when he arrived. It was her current method for subtly deflecting Umbridge’s attentions, though it only worked on occasion. While it did create an air of preoccupation that people with even the smallest amount of social grace would respect, the plan hinged on the assumption that Umbridge cared about the basic rules of etiquette. Which she did not.

Upon noticing his approach, Professor Rosenberg had immediately marked her place in her current book with a slip of paper. By the time he was settled in his chair, she had already slipped it back into the bag at her side and was waiting with a nervous expression on her face.

“Hi,” she said to Severus, far from her usual, ebullient self. She seemed resolved to something though. He dared not guess what.

Severus gave a measured nod in greeting, wary now, and still irate and self-conscious about Minerva’s little stunt. As he sat, he could not help but notice Professor Rosenberg’s scrutiny. It wasn’t paranoia this time, she was most certainly looking at his hair, where it fell in its uncharacteristically even curtain across his face.

Merlin damn and blast it all.

Severus refrained from scowling, but only just. At least she was only smiling at him, the expression softening the subtle lines of worry that seemed to be more and more common on her face. Her expression might have even been complimentary, if Severus had been in a mood to view it that way. And blast Minerva in particular.

He must say something. The Great Hall was too public, even though the chances of any student hearing an uncharacteristic word from him over the din were slim. “I take it you have seen previous variations of Miss Summers’ lesson.”

Professor Rosenberg smiled fractionally in return. “You could say that,” she said. “They usually involve knives though, not wands. Sometimes swords.”

He replied with an indistinct grumble, wishing them both in his office, or even their clearing in the Forbidden Forest. Anywhere which would lend itself well to a more unfettered conversation.

The evening’s food appeared abruptly on the table, providing ample distraction for the both of them.

The meal progressed in what passed for companionable silence, but Severus found himself casting about for potential excuses and opportunities to talk to Professor Rosenberg in a less guarded setting. They had much that needed to be said.
It did not take a great deal of insight to determine that some new crisis was afoot when, upon venturing out of his quarters long before breakfast was set to begin, Severus had come upon Minerva, Pomona, and Filius clustered together in the Entrance Hall. Once he was spotted, the three, clearly upset Heads of House descending on him, the fourth.

That boded not well.

“Severus, may we speak in your office?” Minerva said, brusque and obviously angry, though for the life of him, he could think of no obvious reason why such ire would be directed at him. In fact, he still had more than a few things to discuss with her on the subject of proper professional boundaries, no matter the fact that he was the youngest, by far, of the four Heads of House, and had taken classes as a student from all three of the others.

Biting back a defensive retort, Severus gestured back down the staircase without a word, and fell in step behind the trio as they filed passed. The few students who remained in the hallways scattered hastily as they passed. Upon reaching his office, Severus ushered the other three professors into the room. Without a word, his sconces leapt back into life, lighting the room and repowering the various wards he maintained on all of his personal spaces.

No one was talking. Severus looked at each Head of House in turn, eyes sharp with thinly veiled suspicion. This was all quite irregular, and he resented the feeling of being ambushed for a second day in a row. He could only assume that one of his students had transgressed in some particularly egregious manner.

“Oh, don’t look so paranoid, Severus,” Minerva said at length, her voice still clipped and irritated. “We’re only here because we know as well as you do that your wards are far better than those in the faculty lounge.”

A fair point, though still not an explanation. Severus relaxed ever so slightly, and asked, “Why the need for such secrecy?”

Minerva’s face was stormy. It was Filius who spoke up, “Has Dolores given any of your students detention this term?”

That gave Severus pause. What had that odious woman done now? He stepped over to his desk, opened one of the drawers, and pulled out a ledger. All of the Heads of House had one like it. It was linked to the school’s enchanted hourglasses, and tracked merits, demerits, and detentions. “Yes;” he said, tracing his finger down the neat rows of names. “Pucey. Why?”

“Did she assign him lines?” Pomona pressed, looking distressed.

If someone did not explain this situation soon, and too his liking, Severus was going to evict them all from his office. A quick glance at the notes section of the ledger provided him with an immediate answer though. “No,” he said, reading the accompanying text. “He was set to removing artistic embellishments from the current Defense Against the Dark Arts textbooks.” He closed the book and drummed his fingers once, then twice on the cover. “Though considering their starting point, I fail to see how their content could have worsened, no matter the nature of the unauthorized illustrations.”

Filius snorted, but there was no other reaction to Severus’ dry comment. That was slightly unexpected. If there was anything the four of them could agree upon, it was that Dolores Umbridge’s DADA class was essentially useless.
Minerva cleared her throat. “Dolores has a quill which carves anything it writes into the hand of the author,” she said, tense with barely suppressed anger. “As best we can tell, she has only used it on one student so far, but I strongly doubt it will end there.”

After a long moment of silence, Severus responded. “That is illegal,” he said, voice flat. And so it was, to the best of his knowledge.

“‘Yes, we know that,’” Minerva said, looking fit to explode. “And Albus knows that, but when we confronted her about it last night, we were accused of disloyalty.”

“Disloyalty?” Severus pressed, not liking the direction this was heading in the slightest.

“To the Ministry,” she clarified. “The implication was clear. If any of us,” she gestured to the other Heads, including Severus in the sweep of her hand, “Try to interfere, she will retaliate, presumably with the Ministry’s blessing.”

Severus slowly drummed his fingers once more on the ledger’s cover. “She does not have the authority,” he said.

“She heavily implied that she will,” Minerva replied. “Soon.” The last was said from between clenched teeth.

“What are we to do?” said Pomona, wringing her hands in obvious distress.

Severus considered them all for a moment. A desperate opportunity presented itself. “There is one person against whom Fudge would hesitate to retaliate,” he said, carefully.

Pomona’s brow furrowed, and Filius looked just as confused. “Who?” he asked.

Minerva looked more hopeful. “Professor Rosenberg,” she answered. “Yes, she would be willing to help, wouldn’t she?”

“Let me speak to her,” said Severus. A chance to get some of her own back from Dolores Umbridge? Oh yes, Professor Rosenberg would be very interested in that opportunity. And he was more than interested in laying the offer at her feet. “This requires subtlety.”

“Are you sure?” Filius asked tentatively. “Not that she would want to help, but can she? She is wandless after all.” His tone was apologetic.

Severus could not particularly fault Filius for a bias he himself still stumbled over from time to time. Besides, Professor Rosenberg had not been particularly free with her spell work in front of the entire student body, much less the faculty, furthering the misapprehension that she was magically weak or unskilled. So the question was somewhat fair, even if it did prompt the smallest of sardonic quirks to Severus’ lips. “She is more than capable,” he said. “And even better, who would suspect her?” Now if he could simply rein in her enthusiasm to something manageable, so as to avoid another debacle like the near miss with Argus. This might actually prove… entertaining.

“Let us know if there is anything we can do to help,” Pomona said, patting Severus on the arm. His lips thinned at the contact, but he did not otherwise react. “Now, I think we four need to find our way upstairs.”

“And not in one another’s company,” Filius continued, with a thoughtful nod. “Mustn’t appear to be in collusion, after all.” He and Pomona left Severus’ office with bobbing heads and meaningful glances, Filius heading in the direction of the stairs, while Pomona turned towards her own House’s common room.
Severus found the whole charade a bit ridiculous. If they had wanted to avoid being associated in
this conspiracy, they shouldn’t have paraded down to his office together in an angry herd.

Minerva remained behind in his office, staring sightlessly at some point beyond his fireplace.

“Which student was it?” Severus asked at length.

“Harry Potter,” Minerva replied, dangerous glint back in her eyes. “Apparently she did not like him
suggesting that You Know Who had returned during her class.”

That boy was hard enough to protect even within the school’s protective wards.

Her expression turned more speculative. “Mr. Potter was very reticent about revealing the details
of the whole affair,” she said. “It was your Professor Rosenberg who drew my attention to the
situation.”

“She is not my…” Severus started to snap, but Minerva waved him off.

“Never mind that,” she said lightly, abruptly changing topic with a frankly appraising look. “You
are looking very put together today.”

The last thing in the world Severus needed in that exact moment was a Gryffindor who was clearly
set on playing matchmaker. And bedamn her anyway, if he had put the smallest of efforts into his
grooming this morning, he failed to see what business it was of hers.

“Get out,” he snapped, glowering ferociously.

And she did, but not without a self-satisfied, very cat-like smile.

Severus fumed silently at her retreat, glowering pointlessly at his office door, long after it had
closed behind Minerva. Finally, he set aside his annoyance with the Head of Gryffindor for another
time, and bent his thoughts towards this unexpected crisis and the hidden opportunity it presented.

He needed to speak to Professor Rosenberg, away from prying eyes and ears. Severus suddenly
deeplly regretted that their responsibilities at the start of term had precluded returning to their
clearing in the Forbidden Forest to continue their magical bouts. She was still in danger. He had
made more than sure of that with his continuing reports to the Dark Lord. And while she was
obviously making aggressive use of the collections in the school’s library, theory was only useful
to a point. She needed more practical experience.

She needed to be safe.

_She would be safer, if she were to leave_, a coldly practical voice in the back of Severus’ mind
remarked. _She would be safer if she had never met you._

But she had met him, had intentionally entwined herself in the problems of the wizarding world,
and no matter what decision Professor Rosenberg had reached regarding him personally, duty
would hold her at the school for the time being. Where she could learn and prepare. Where he
could better protect her.

_Because I am already doing such an impeccable job protecting Potter…_

In the end, Severus determined that a brief note, suitably vague and unsigned in the event of
interception, could be easily slipped into Professor Rosenberg’s omnipresent satchel during
breakfast. He quickly penned the missive and tucked it in an inner pocket of his robes. With a
glance at his clock, which indicated that breakfast was rapidly approaching, he finally quit his office.

The early morning meeting with the other Heads of House had delayed him enough that Severus found himself walking in the direction of the Great Hall with a large number of students, all of them heading to breakfast as well. They gave him a wide berth, though members of his own House tended to make the gesture out of respect rather than fear. It took very little dissembling to appear aloof and distracted, but he did share a few nods with some Slytherin students in passing. He should make another appearance in their common room soon. Successfully keeping tabs on his students required an element of randomness and surprise, lest they have the chance to conceal any ongoing schemes or contraband in advance.

He joined the growing throng in the Entrance Hall, and continued on into the Great Hall. He pressed through the crowd, skirting along the outer wall that neighbored the Slytherin table. The entire enterprise was a reminder of why he typically timed his arrival for the morning meal in order to avoid the last minute rush.

He broke free from the mob at last, and scaled the steps up the dais to the faculty table. Looking up, he caught sight of Professor Rosenberg, talking animatedly to Minerva along the back wall. Severus slowed to a halt.

Professor Rosenberg was wearing a robe.

It wasn’t that her usual, Muggle attire was unflattering. It simply differed from more typical witches’ attire. Her penchant for trousers and bared arms suited her perfectly, and yet, the sight of her in robes arrested Severus in his tracks.

Her outfit wasn’t particularly outrageous. It was fashionably cut, with a flowing over robe draped and pinned flatteringly on top of a more tailored gown, cinched at her waist and laced snugly down her arms. The fabric was dyed in contrasting shades of dark blue, with embroidered accents in silver and green. In truth, these garments were far less revealing and form fitting than her usual attire, and yet, to Severus, the end effect was stunning.

An unexpected touch on his elbow abruptly brought Severus back to himself. He was embarrassed to realize that he had been staring, frozen at the top of the dais’ short staircase. He stepped to the side, turning to make some kind of an excuse to whomever he had been blocking. Filius smiled benignly up at him, and gave his elbow another, seemingly-fond pat as he passed. The whole interlude was so jarring that Severus could find no appropriate words, and so, he simply stood in silence as Filius walked in the direction of his own seat, sharing pleasantries with other professors along the way.

Gathering his composure, Severus walked to the far end of the table. Breakfast had already arrived, despite the fact that half of the Great Hall had yet to take their seats. He sat down, eyes pointedly fixed forward, and discretely slipped his short missive into a place of prominence in Professor Rosenberg’s satchel, where she had left it unattended, leaning against her chair. That task accomplished, he then started ladling food onto his plate in concentrated silence.

A second helping of potatoes was unceremoniously dumped on his plate. Severus glared over at Pomona at this gross transgression of etiquette. “You need feeding up, Severus,” Pomona said in as stern a voice as she could probably manage. “You’re far too thin.”

*Of all the presumptuous…*

Severus’ eyes suddenly narrowed. Filius’ amused reaction to his earlier lapse… Pomona’s odd
solicitousness… Was this coincidence, or was it…?

Severus turned and glared at Minerva.

She was still speaking with Professor Rosenberg, seemingly oblivious to him.

Perhaps he was being unduly paranoid. Or perhaps the Weasley twins had dumped something in the school’s aquifer again. He would have to check. Later.

Even that thought was driven away though, when his morning post arrived, borne by the most nondescript of tawny owls. Severus slipped the heavily warded, no doubt encrypted, letter into his robes, to be read in a more secure location. The slip of paper lay heavily against his chest, filling Severus with a creeping sense of dread. He would have to meet with Albus, as soon as possible.

Direct messages from the Dark Lord were never to be taken lightly.
Chapter 23

Willow didn’t have anywhere in particular to be after breakfast, and so she found herself setting up shop in the little office that was attached to the classroom she shared with Severus. The smell of fresh paint from her new wards had long since faded, and besides, the room had a big false window which was enchanted to give her underground space a sunny, pleasant view of the school’s courtyard. It made for a nice change of pace on a morning when Willow was apparently all about changes of pace.

As she had promised Buffy, Willow was trying out one of her new, wand witchy outfits today. She had picked out the dark blue robes, much to Minerva’s delight at breakfast. Willow had to admit, they were awfully comfortable, even if the trailing sleeves of the over robe took a little getting used to. At least she hadn’t dragged them through a serving plate. Yet.

Willow set her bag on the side of the desk and opened it to grab the little shell-sculpture from Xander. Instead, what she spotted first was a folded piece of parchment, prominently tucked between the pages of one of her library books.

She plucked it out of the book, knowing who it was from even before she saw Severus’ angular, familiar writing.

My office, after supper.

Well, that was super vague. Was she supposed to eat the letter now? Would it self-destruct? Probably not, but the thought made her smile a little, even though her stomach was doing disconcerting little flippy things. What did he want to talk about? She tried to set that line of thought aside for the time being, or else she really would psych herself out.

So, meet after dinner, in Severus’ office, because… reasons. Check. In the same spirit of secrecy with which the letter had been delivered, Willow walked over to her office’s small fireplace, tossed in a couple of logs from the small wood rack, and called up a small flame. Once it was burning merrily, she tossed the paper into the fire. It rapidly blackened around the edges, curling up into an unreadable, charred mass as she watched.

When more logs appeared in the rack, Willow tossed in a couple extras as well, liking the crackle of the fire and the warmth it provided in the habitually chilly castle. Then, she walked down behind her imposing wooden desk and got to work.

Xander’s comedically awful shell sculpture joined a trio of candles, two framed photographs of the gang, and a little mug she had commandeered to hold a few pens and pencils. The office itself was still very Spartan; the room’s only other decorations were her painted runes on the walls and a little ornate bowl of silvery powder sitting on the fireplace’s mantle. Her additions helped a little though, and she spent a minute fussing with how they were arranged on the corner of her mostly barren desk. Maybe she could get a plant or something from Professor Sprout. Something pretty and low maintenance, which preferably wouldn’t bite.

Finally satisfied, Willow then picked up a book from the most recent batch she had checked out from the school’s library: From Jinx to Curse: Dueling Spells for Attack and Defense. Among other, more personal things, Buffy’s visit had made Willow really think about the potential duration of her stay at Hogwarts. It would probably take several lifetimes to learn all of the information contained in every book in the school’s collections, and Willow didn’t have anywhere near that amount of time. What she could do, however, was start making copies for later reference,
focusing on the rarest materials contained in the library’s restricted section.

Willow placed the book on her desk, and then stacked the Sourcebook Giles had given her on top of it. The Sourcebook looked like a plain, leather bound tome at first glance. It was the second glance where things got a little weird. Its blank pages had an odd, translucent appearance, and no ink or pencil lead could leave a mark on them. Even the cover felt a little weirdly soft, like it wasn’t entirely tangible. The first page of the Sourcebook was far more solid, and its silvery surface rippled like disturbed water when touched.

Opening the Sourcebook to that swirling page, Willow placed her right hand on it, fingers splayed wide, and said, “Replicate.” The shifting silver pulsed once, then twice, and then darkened to matte black. Satisfied, Willow closed the cover and sat down in the high backed, leather seat behind her desk. Once the Sourcebook finished its job, her Template, and every other one owned by the Council, would be able to access the contents of the text.

She had already copied four other books, checking them out in a large enough stack that Madam Pince had given her quite a look. Willow had just smiled and shrugged at the librarian with as casual an expression of nonchalance as she could muster. She knew that, as an instructor, she was within her rights to check out anything she liked, and as long as she returned the books in good condition, and mixed in a reasonable number of innocuous texts, she shouldn’t draw too much untoward attention to her activities. It felt icky, sneaking around like this, but she had no idea how limited her time at Hogwarts might be, and the information contained in these books might prove vital in defeating Voldemort and any number of future big bads or other apocalyptic threats.

The back cover of the Sourcebook had already sunk ever so slightly into the library book. It would eventually pass all the way through it, duplicating texts and images as it went, until it sat on her desk and From Jinx to Curse rested on top, completely copied into the Council’s vast holdings.

The process usually took a little less than an hour, so Willow needed something else to occupy her time and mind. She pulled out Severus’ copy of the Death Eaters’ Auror reports, the first book she had copied with her Sourcebook, and turned to the page where she had placed her bookmark. She had left off reading about Travers, Anton (no relationship to the former, unlamented head of the Council of Watchers) the night before. She started to read again, pulling her journal and a pen out of her bag by feel and leaving them in easy reaching distance in case she needed to write down anything particularly noteworthy. Before long, she was lost in research and thought, the soft crackling of the fire and the rustle of turning pages the only sound for several hours.

~*~*~*~

Four copied books and several entries on different Death Eaters later, Willow heard a rustle and a muted crash outside of her office door. She rolled her neck to one side, then the other, feeling her neck crack and pop after hours of reading. Heaving a long sigh, she placed a bookmark in the bound reports, closed the cover, and went to her office door. Some student was probably lost and blundering around in the dark.

When she opened her door to check, Willow almost tripped over another tray of food. She must have been late to lunch again. She really needed to not make this into a habit, but sometimes when she got into research mode, the hours just slipped by. She toed the tray further to one side and stepped out onto the landing of the little staircase.

She didn’t see anyone in the room. A quick ‘feel’ didn’t reveal anything either, though there were some students gathered in the hallway beyond her door. Maybe that was what she had just heard.

With a frown and a small shrug to herself, Willow picked up the tray of food and returned to her
office to eat and continue reading. Instead of sandwiches and soup, this time her elfin benefactors had delivered a large pasty with a full pitcher of water, a cup, and a small stack of freshly baked cookies.

The food was all very tasty, and Willow took care to keep from getting crumbs on any of her books as she ate. She really needed a clock for her office though. She didn’t want to miss dinner too. Did the school keep any basic equipment stored away for new professors? Maybe Severus would know where she could find one.

The Aurors’ reports were fascinating, in a horrible kind of way. She could only imagine how messy the justice system could get in a world where shape shifting, truth serum, memory altering charms, and mind control were all fairly common things. She didn’t know how anyone had gotten caught during Voldemort’s last uprising, much less found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. She supposed it was because some of the Death Eaters saw arrest and imprisonment in their leader’s name as some kind of mark of their dedication to the cause. They were also the worst of the lot: violent, obsessed, and all-around bat-poop crazy.

She was working on putting names with faces. The images in the reports were all about a decade and a half out of date, but Willow felt pretty certain that if she spotted, for example, Draco’s father in a crowd, she would recognize him.

Then again, a lot could change in fifteen years. Willow wished she had newer photographs for reference. Perhaps Severus could help her out with that too.

~*~*~*~

Willow found herself hovering outside of Severus’ office, hovering nervously and fiddling with her laced sleeves. The outfit still didn’t feel like clothes, more like a costume she was just wearing for the day. Oh, they fit perfectly, so that wasn’t the problem. Self-lacing and auto-adjusting clothes were definitely things Willow could get used to. She guessed her discomfort was because she still felt kind of like a fraud, dressing up like a wand witch, even though she wasn’t one.

Plus, you know, there was the whole Severus thing…

Willow finally reached up and knocked on the heavy, wooden door, feeling more than a little ridiculous about her hesitance. At the responding, muffled, “Enter,” Willow opened the door and stepped inside.

Severus was sitting at his desk, face even stormier than it had been during dinner. Which was really saying something, because he had been in a real snit at the evening meal. Willow remained standing in the office’s entrance, hovering and unsure as the door banged shut behind her. When the silence stretched out just a little too long for comfort, Willow finally said, “I got your note,” which was stupid and obvious, but somebody had to speak before she just blurted out something even more embarrassing and awkward.

Like a compliment on whatever he was suddenly doing with his hair.

Or an invitation to go on whatever constituted a casual first date to a wand wizard.

Severus finally gestured toward the chair across from his desk, returning to his previous, armrest strangling position when Willow took him up on the offer. Willow could sense his anxiety and anger, like a palpable presence in the air between them. She picked at her skirts as she sat in the chair, not sure what to do or say.
“I had initially requested your presence to discuss discreetly neutralizing an enchanted object,” Severus finally said. “While that matter still needs attending, another, more pressing concern has arisen.”

Well, that didn’t sound promising. But it gave Willow something tangible to focus on, rather than her mixed up emotions. “So, let’s deal with the little problem first, and then tackle the big one,” she suggested. “What kind of enchanted object?”

Severus’ eyes looked particularly flat as he spoke. “A quill. It inscribes written words into the hand of the writer.”

“Like a tattoo? Or are we talking slicing and dicing?”

“The latter,” Severus said, expression stony.

Willow wrinkled up her nose in faint disgust. “That sounds like a pretty mean-spirited prank,” she said, assuming that this must have something to do with a student stunt gone horribly wrong.

“And so it would be,” Severus said, eyebrows dropping dangerously into an angry scowl. It was kind of disconcerting how he could do that, shift facial expressions drastically, while his eyes remained unchanged and unreadable. “If it was a mere prank. Dolores Umbridge is using the device during detentions. She is assigning students lines with it.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed dangerously. If Frog Face wanted to torment Willow, that was one thing. She could take it. Carving up little kids’ hands though, that was just… evil. A sudden memory, of Harry Potter’s bandaged hand and a hurried conversation with Minerva during class change, came to mind. “That’s what was wrong with Harry’s hand during Buffy’s class?” she said, more thinking aloud to herself than actually asking the question.

Severus answered her anyway. “Indeed.”

“Remind me again why you stopped me from setting her on fire at the welcome banquet?” Willow asked, joking perhaps a little less than she should have been.

Severus favored her with one of his rare, tiny smiles, thin, lopsided, and sardonic, even though his eyes remained flat. “As amusing as that would have been to witness, the situation required a bit more finesse,” he said. “It still does.”

“Why?” Willow asked. “I mean, that’s gotta be all sorts of illegal. Right? Why doesn’t Dumbledore fire her?”

“The Ministry placed her here to keep an eye on us,” Severus said. “We strongly suspect that any attempt to ouster her would result in little more than our own collective sacking and replacement with more likeminded individuals.”

That took a moment to digest. “Ugh,” Willow said, trying and failing to come up with anything more eloquent. “Just… ugh.”

“Indeed.”

“So, what do we do?”

“We find a way to sabotage her quill,” he replied. “Discretely.”

“And when she comes up with something even nastier?” Willow said, feeling frustrated and
powerless. It was a rare sensation for her anymore, and she didn’t like it one bit.

Severus’ guarded mask dropped just a little, revealing a bit of the same weariness she felt in his dark eyes. “Then we counter her again. And again if we have to, as long as the threat remains,” he said. “But to ensure that we are here to continue to fight, we must never be caught.”

Willow wasn’t entirely convinced they were still discussing Umbridge. “You know, fighting demons is a whole lot more straight forward,” she said, sounding pretty dejected, even to her own ears.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “I imagine it would be.”

Willow thought for a long moment, thankful for Severus’ continuing silence while she turned their problem over in her mind. “Do you have some magnetite?” she finally said, and idea coming to her.

“Some,” Severus said after a short pause of his own. “It is only rarely used in potion work, but I can have more delivered within a few days.” His current scowl was of the ‘confused, but too proud to admit it’ variety.

“Magnetite can be used to create anti-magic zones,” Willow said, in response to his unspoken question. “We could charm a bunch of magnetite, and then grind it up into a powder. Mix it into a regular old lotion or ointment in a high enough concentration, apply it to your hands, and the quill’s spell should fizzle.” She wrinkled her brow in thought. “I think.”

“We could experiment,” he offered in a carefully neutral voice. So careful that Willow looked up to scrutinize him more closely. “My supply would suffice while the larger order is in transit.”

Willow brightened a little at that. “We’ll also have to figure out how to conceal the powder. She’s bound to notice if students start showing up at her detentions with glittery hands.”

“Perhaps the concentrations will not need to be so high,” Severus said, the tiniest bit of genuine interest bleeding into his voice. “Especially if we can augment the effects with other reagents.”

“Maybe sage?” Willow suggested, searching her memory for other magic-repelling substances.

Severus made a thoughtful little sound in the back of his throat. “Or valerian flowers,” he suggested at length. “I maintain fairly comprehensive stores. We should have adequate material for experimentation, and further orders can be quickly filled if we need access to anything unusual for bulk brewing.” He was already looking over the rows and rows of jarred reagents that lined his office, but Willow knew full well that they only represented a fraction of his stores. “We could start immediately, if we so desired.”

Willow chewed the corner of her lower lip for a moment. “Do we?” she asked.

“Do we what?” Severus replied, a little distractedly.

“So desire,” she finished. It wasn’t like her schedule was extra packed lately, and… well… thwarting Umbridge’s child abuse-y brand of punishment seemed a bit more pressing than finalizing lesson plans for a class a good week and a half away.

Severus blinked in what for him passed as obvious surprise, paused, and then settled into his blank mask again. “I have no other plans this evening. My classroom is more than adequately stocked for our needs.” He stopped for a moment, watching her with guarded, opaque eyes.

Willow squelched the impulse to twist her hands together, but she had less control over the
squirmy, fluttery sensation in the pit of her stomach. Invitations for collaborative research? A tiny thread of hope, flitting and hiding in the concealing shadows of his aura? This went way beyond coffee.

*Is this a nerd date? I think he’s asking me on a nerd date.*

“Okay,” she finally said, firmly telling the butterflies in her stomach to cut it out. “I’ll need to get some things from my rooms first.” She really did too, not that buying herself a moment to breathe and collect her thoughts wasn’t of secondary concern.

Severus himself seemed hesitant as well, as if he had not seen this situation coming, and now, with it in hand, was even more unsure how to proceed. “It will take me a short time to gather the most likely reagents and equipment into the classroom,” he said.

“So… meet you there in what, fifteen minutes?” Willow asked. She was surprised at how calm her voice sounded when inside, she just felt like squirming.

Severus nodded. “That would be adequate.”

Willow started to rise, but then remembered something. “What’s the bigger problem you mentioned?”

And just like that, whatever ease might have been in Severus’ demeanor evaporated. “The Dark Lord has ordered you removed from Hogwarts,” he finally said. “He wishes to make an example of you.”

Willow couldn’t help the sardonic twist to her lips. “Of course he does.”

Severus scowled at her again. “You should take this threat more seriously,” he said, sounding genuinely upset, even if the emotion was smothered under stiff formality.

“Oh, I am,” she said. “I just kind of figured this was coming, after you said he was ‘interested’ in me, back at the Order meeting.” That didn’t seem to appease Severus much, so Willow dove back into the real problem, “So, how’s he gonna witch-nap me? He doesn’t sound like the windowless white van kind of guy.”

“I am to remain ignorant,” Severus said, grimacing with more transparent emotion than he had shown all evening. “Though I will attempt to remedy that. He must be offering one of the other Death Eaters favor and standing by giving them this task. I suspect a parent of one of our students.”

Great, a student. Yet another target she’d feel icky about blasting. “Other than being extra careful around them, which I was planning on being anyway, what do you recommend?” Willow asked.

Severus studied her face for a long moment. “I doubt any of them might try to hex you openly, but do not accept any gifts from students, Slytherin or otherwise. They are more than capable of cursing or poisoning a wide variety of items.” He paused for a moment, then continued, “Also, Hogwarts is warded against travel by Apparition and Portkey, which will make abducting you more challenging as long as you remain on the school grounds.”

“So, I’m stuck here,” Willow said, failing to keep a sour note out of her voice. It wasn’t that she had been planning on popping back to the Council every weekend, but the option had still been available. Sort of.

“That would be the safest course of action,” Severus said, this scowl variant letting Willow know he was preparing to argue with her.
“No, I know. I just…” she didn’t quite know where to go with that, so she just sighed. “It never calms down enough to get boring here, huh?”

“We do try,” Severus said, expression and tone of voice both very, very dry.

“Mmm hmm,” Willow said noncommittally, but inside she was smothering an amused smile. “Okay, meet you in your classroom in fifteen,” she said, standing up from her chair.

Severus rose as well, his manners almost courtly, even though there remained a little glint of humor in his dark eyes.

Willow beat as hasty a retreat as she could manage without looking like she was fleeing the scene of a crime. Her quarters weren’t that far away, but once she was safely behind lock and key (or Euryale), she let herself freak out for just a moment.

It was only just a moment though, because she actually did need the Template and a couple spell-related odds and ends, just in case she ended up needing chalk or a candle or something. She also stopped by the bathroom to tie her hair up out of the way. The over robe was definitely going over the back of a chair before they started playing with potions, but dragging the trailing ends of her hair through a bubbling cauldron of experimental anti-magical goo also sounded like a really bad idea.

Then she slung her newly repacked satchel over her shoulder and ventured back out into the hallways, headed for Severus’ classroom.

She found him standing next to a daunting array of jars, bottles, and boxes on his desk, doing something with an odd frame-like device. It sported little hinged arms radiating from a central hoop, into which he seemed to be affixing something.

Willow dropped her bag on one of the student desks in the front row of the room, and draped her over robe on the table next to it. Tapping the blue ties at each wrist signaled the self-lacing spells to release, and she started rolling up her sleeves. “Whatcha doing?” she asked, walking the rest of the way up to Severus, sharp curiosity precluding any nervousness.

“Flower petals make adequate substitutes for human skin under experimental conditions,” he said, eyes never leaving the many-armed contraption. “At least for preliminary tests.” Something about that statement made him pause in his work and look at her out of the corner of his eye.

Willow finished rolling up her second sleeve, deciding that she was probably happier not knowing what kinds of experiments Severus had performed previously which might have required human skin, or its proxies. “Probably a better idea than diving right into using ourselves as guinea pigs,” she agreed, moving around the desk so they were facing one another.

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“‘My thoughts exactly,’” Severus said, looking back down at his delicate work. From her new vantage, Willow could see that he was bending a few of the frame’s arms, those which sported little alligator clips, into the center of the main ring and attaching them to a single pink petal.

A low whistling sound behind her drew Willow’s attention to the shelves and countertops lining the classroom. There, balanced on a cast iron trivet over a little floating flame, was a teapot, just starting to let off steam. Two white teacups sat next to it on saucers, elegant in their plain simplicity.

Willow stared at them. “You made tea,” she said, inanely.

“I find it helps me focus, when I plan to work late,” he said. His voice was even, but Willow felt
him eyeing her covertly again.

“Does having tea together have the same connotation here as going out for coffee does in America?” The question slipped out before Willow could stop herself. And now she was blushing. Great.

Thankfully, Severus only looked at her with perhaps a little mild confusion. “I do not follow.”

“Never mind,” Willow said hastily. “Tea’s good.” She turned her attention to the selection of items. Sure enough, she saw sage and valerian flowers in jars, mixed in with less familiar things. Something called wiggentree was common, with different containers for bark, leaves, sap, and berries. There were books too, heavy, and leather-bound, and musty like only magical tomes seemed to manage. She stopped when she found the magnetite, piled in a little heap next to a red, stone bowl. “Are your mortal and pestle enchanted? Because magnetite is awfully hard, and if we anti-magic it up first, that could really derail things.”

“There is a spell on the corundum, to ease the processing of particularly hard reagents,” he supplied. “If it will not affect your casting, I suggest grinding the magnetite first.”

That was easy enough. “Can do,” Willow said, placing a single lump of the mineral in the mortar and picking up the pestle. “Do you have a jar for this? And maybe a funnel, so I won’t dump the powder everywhere?” she asked, looking up at Severus.

He was standing across from her, face as blank as she had ever seen it, his right hand frozen midair where he had released the buttons of his left cuff. With a tiny, fleeting scowl, he started to redo the buttons of his sleeve, looking fixedly down at his task.

It didn’t take a genius to guess what had just gone through his mind.

Willow started to grind up the lump of magnetite. The charm on the pestle was subtle, but good. It took a lot less force than expected, and the rock seemed to crumble under the slightest pressure. It gave her something to do, now that eye contact seemed maybe a little too personal. “I already know it’s there,” she said quietly. “It’s okay, do whatever.”

She kept her eyes on her work, grinding the magnetite into a fine, charcoal-colored dust. Willow was completely sincere in her offer. She hadn’t seen the spell embedded into Severus’ arm, but seeing it couldn’t be as bad as feeling it, which she already did pretty much all the time on some level. And she had to admit to a little curiosity, not that she was going to push the subject, because it didn’t take a great deal of empathy to recognize the cripplingly massive sore spot she was gently prodding.

As casually as she could manage, Willow dropped another lump of rock into the mortar, and kept grinding, keeping an eye on Severus as subtly as she could in her peripheral vision. He stood still as a statue for a moment longer, and then, he also shrugged out of his over robe, folding it loosely on the countertop behind them and rolling up his fitted black sleeves and white undershirt to his elbows.

Willow looked up then, watching him closely. When he extracted his wand from his other sleeve and placed it carefully on the desk, she caught a glimpse of a skull with a snake coiling out of its mouth. It looked like a tattoo, but there was a slightly raised texture to it, like scarification or maybe some kind of a brand. She recognized it suddenly, from her research on the Death Eaters. It was Voldemort’s mark, the Dark Mark, burned directly into living flesh. Maybe she lacked the cultural perspective to really understand all of its connotations, but the thought of anyone branding another human like property made her more than uncomfortable enough.
When he pulled an empty jar and a small, tapered scoop from one of the storage cabinets and
moved to hand it to her, she didn’t hesitate to put down the pestle and take them with a little smile
of thanks, perfectly aware that he was intentionally making the offer with his marked, bared arm.
She was no dummy, and this was clearly a test of how she would react.

“Thanks,” she said, situating the scoop over the jar’s opening with one hand, and shaking the
powdered magnetite into it with the other. She looked up, finding Severus watching her with an
uncharacteristically unguarded expression on his face, not that she was doing a good job of figure it
out. He almost looked lost. “What are you thinking about trying first?”

She watched him bury that cast adrift expression under a more controlled mask. It made something
in her chest twist. “A modification of an Integumentum Potion may prove useful,” he said,
glancing over the collection of reagents on the desk. “It reverses surficial spells. We need to extend
the duration of its effects though; untreated wiggentree sap desiccates quickly when exposed to
heat and air.”

“What’s the base?” Willow asked, starting to crush another piece of magnetite with the pestle
again. “Because that might be tricky if we have to suspend everything in, I don’t know, ethanol, but
an oil-based potion might last the length of a reasonable detention.” She paused for a moment,
staring unseeing for a moment at her pile of partially ground up rock fragments, then added sourly,
“One an unreasonable one.”

Severus picked up a book from the stack on his desk, and flipped to a page that had been marked
with a wide, green ribbon. He turned it around and slid it across the table, where she could read it
easily. “Here are the instructions for brewing the standard potion,” he said, tapping his finger on
the right hand page, where a large, ornately illustrated ‘I’ highlighted the word Integumentum. “Let
us see what your magnetite and sage can do to improve it…”

~*~*~*~

“At least this one smells better,” Willow said, taking a careful sip of tea from the little, white
tea cup. “It’ll be easier to pass it off as some kind of normal lotion if it doesn’t smell like burnt
hair.”

“While I agree with your assessment, I am more concerned with the efficacy of the potion itself,”
Severus said, smearing the yellow-tinged salve on their latest, suspended flower petal with a
slender, metal spatula. “Undesirable odors can be masked after the fact.”

Which, okay, point, but still. “Well, the petal isn’t catching fire this time either,” Willow pointed
out. Which was good news, because the poor flower Severus had brought for that task was starting
to look decidedly plucked. They’d have to fetch another one if they didn’t have a successful trial
soon. “Or shriveled up, or turned that fuchsia color that freaked you out so much…”

“We shall see,” Severus said, finishing coating the petal with their latest concoction and then
turning over an hourglass on his desk to measure the time.

They both watched the little petal in silence as the sand drained between the chambers of the
hourglass.

Luckily, the flower petal was just sitting there this time, bypassing all of the disturbing side effects
of some of their previous magic-repelling ointments. Willow didn’t want to get too excited though,
because the other trials that hadn’t maimed the petal had all been too weak to repel a simple cutting
jinx. However, she was feeling pretty good about this version of the potion. Probably because it
was getting really late, and if this round didn’t work, she was kind of at a loss as to what to try next.
And she suspected that, in spite of his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of all things potiony, Severus was is much the same boat as her.

Severus also picked up his teacup and took a sip, eyes riveted to their little experiment. He had seemed to relax by increments as the night had worn on. Maybe it was the lack of sleep talking, but Willow was actually feeling pretty good herself. Nothing like a little application of the scientific method to soothe her frazzled nerves. Willow looked at Severus out of the corner of her eye, wondering what he thought about the evening. At that moment, he seemed wholly absorbed with the sand running through the hourglass. Time was almost up.

When the last grain of sand fell into the lower chamber of the hourglass, they looked at one another. Severus raised a questioning eyebrow, to which Willow shrugged and said, “Might as well.”

Severus picked up his wand, and, with a thin-lipped look as if bracing for failure, traced the tip from left to right across the petal.

Nothing.

He cocked his head ever so slightly to one side, repeating the motion a bit more emphatically.

Still nothing.

Willow stepped forward to get a better look. The little pink petal, other than being covered in gooey ointment, looked completely unharmed. “That seems pretty promising,” she remarked.

When Severus only made an indistinct sound in the back of his throat in response, Willow looked over at him to see what the problem was, just in time to see him slather a line of the goop across the back of one hand with the little, metal spatula.

That made her stand up straight in surprise. “What are you doing?” she asked, not even bothering to keep the alarmed squeak out of her voice.

“Testing the ointment on a human subject,” Severus replied, holding the hand with the potion flat and still as he reached for his wand. “I would assume that was obvious.”

Willow stepped closer to him and tried to grab his hand, which he pulled emphatically out of reach. Not a difficult task, considering how tall he was in comparison to her. “You’re insane. You know that right?” Willow said, scowling up at him rather than trying to hop up to grab his hand and looking like an idiot. “What if your hand rots off now?”

“I highly doubt that will happen, considering the reagents and treatments involved,” he said, picking up his wand and turning his body so that the offending hand remained out of her reach.

“And if you’re wrong?” Willow insisted, trying to crane around to see whether he had a smoking stump at the end of his arm yet. “Goddess, your Ministry can’t have something like OSHA, or else this place would have been shut down years ago.”

“I do not know what an osha is, and I am not wrong,” Severus said, moving the tip of his wand across the treated patch of skin. “Besides, I have a quick-acting, all-purpose cleansing and dispelling tincture ready if something goes amiss.” He nodded towards a little glass vial on the desk, which contained a small amount of clear liquid.

“Why didn’t we make more of that in the first place?” she asked. “You know what? So not the point. You were just going to dump one kind of anti-magic potion on top of another and hope you
wouldn’t accidentally form a freaking singularity on the back of your hand?”

“The tincture is reactive, not protective, and its effects last for mere seconds.” Severus held up his hand, looking at it critically. “It would have been inappropriate for the task at hand, though incidentally, some of the ingredients are the same,” he said, voice dispassionate. “You fret too much. Better it be my hand than a student’s.”

That was less easy to argue with. “Give me that,” Willow said, finally succeeding in grabbing his hand in hers. He didn’t resist this time, and she turned his hand over, careful to avoid touching the ointment herself, and looked over his handiwork. He wasn’t cut, which was a good sign, nor was the skin on his hand looking red or irritated. “It’d serve you right if this stuff ends up being carcinogenic,” she said caustically, but there was a catch in her voice at the end of the sentence. His hand was warm, especially where his calloused fingertips brushed against the inside of her wrist…

Severus carefully pulled his hand from her grasp. “Also highly unlikely,” he said quietly. “Though I… appreciate your concern.”

And if that wasn’t the most stilted, choked sentence in the history of ever, Willow didn’t know what was. She looked up to search his face, but he was already turning away, reaching for a drawer of his desk, out of which he pulled a length of white cloth.

Still avoiding her gaze, he started winding it around his hand, trapping the ointment inside against his skin. “I will monitor myself for any delayed reactions, and will present myself to the infirmary if anything unexpected occurs,” he said, by way of an explanation. “If not, I will brew and distribute a larger batch to the other Heads of Houses tomorrow.”

“Technically, I think it’s already tomorrow,” Willow said, joking lightly to cover the sudden reappearance of butterflies in her stomach. There weren’t any clocks in the classroom she could see, but she was definitely getting the fuzzy, I-lost-my-verbal-filter feeling that she associated with staying up well past midnight.

It was barely more than a slight quirking of one side of his lips, but Severus did smile at her comment. “You may be correct,” he agreed, picking up jars from the desk and starting to return them to their shelves.

Willow couldn’t see any particular pattern to Severus’ reagent organization, but she was sure there was one, so she concentrated on picking up her own stuff instead of making an inadvertent mess of his system. She shoved the Template back in her bag, and then started collecting up her stack of loose-leaf notes into a neat stack. “This was fun,” she said, piling the papers into the bag as well. “I mean, not the secretly sabotaging detention torture part. The hanging out and talking magic part.” She could feel the heat in her cheeks, but it was true and there wasn’t any point in denying it.

Severus had moved the many-armed frame to a distant corner of the classroom, goo-covered petal still suspended in place. His back was to Willow, when she looked up from placing her multi-colored pens back into the little, fabric loops inside her satchel. He was silent a long moment, and then said, “I would be open to continuing our dueling practice.”

“That would be… great,” Willow said, fiddling with the straps on her bag. Still not something as light as coffee, and with a higher probability of getting suddenly, surprisingly intense, considering their track record, but even so, “Really great.”

Severus removed another small armload of canisters to the shelves, placing them meticulously at seeming random. As Willow finished packing up her belongings, she was taken by surprise by an
enormous yawn. “Oh,” she said, through a second, smaller yawn. “Sorry.”

“You should retire,” Severus said, eyes scanning the remaining detritus of their experiment.

Willow slung her bag over her shoulder. Part of her wanted to stay, but she really was tired. Like, worried she might sleep all the way through her late afternoon class tired. “If you’re sure,” she said, waffling over what she should do. She hated to just leave him here with the rest of their mess to clean.

“Sleep, Willow,” he said gently.

Nodding, she picked up her over robe, draping it over one arm rather than putting it back on. With a mumbled “Good night,” she ventured out into the shockingly dark hallways, calling forth a little ball of light to lead the way to her quarters.

It wasn’t until she was nestled in her bed, under the rippling stained glass window, that her sleepy mind alighted on something unusual.

Severus had called her Willow.
Draco looked as if he wanted to run screaming from his first real wandless magic lesson. Oh, he was hiding it fairly well, but Severus had been acquainted with the boy for years. Draco was sitting in a circle with the others, holding hands with an equally uncomfortable-looking Neville Longbottom on his left and a seemingly unconcerned Professor Rosenberg on his right. She was guiding the students, and one additional caretaker, through manipulations of simple, wandless light spells.

Severus was lurking in the back of the Applied Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, watching the proceedings with thinly veiled interest. Their most recent class, this one led by Severus and combining nonverbal casting and shield spells from previous classes, had ended twenty minutes prior, and Severus had simply failed to quit the classroom along with the majority of their students. His presence had earned suspicious looks from Potter and his friends, which bothered Severus not at all.

Conversely, his presence seemed to steady Draco, who probably thought he had an ally at his back. The thought felt something like a betrayal. Severus was more convinced than ever that Draco was the student tasked with helping kidnap Professor Rosenberg. He had watched his Slytherins throughout the lecture and the practical portion of his class. They were all behaving a little oddly, but Draco had been pointedly ignoring Professor Rosenberg. Perhaps a little too pointedly. And now he was sitting quietly, even if he looked physically ill, as the wandless magic lesson continued.

His reaction was hardly surprising. Wandless magic flew directly in the face of Death Eater propaganda. When pureblood supremacists’ explanations for Muggle-borns’ existence sometimes included accusations of theft of magical talent and wands, how might one explain wandless magic? Especially this shared casting, which had taken Severus himself by surprise upon his first meeting with Professor Rosenberg.

He supposed that they were lucky that Draco hadn’t attacked anyone. Or fainted dead away, convinced that Professor Rosenberg was somehow draining his magic.

The thought made Severus pause. Certain corners of the wizarding world had been calling for blood-status registrations off and on for centuries, driven by such whispered rumors. They persisted, despite all evidence that theft of magical talent was impossible. If there was a way for one wand wizard to steal the power of another, even using the darkest of magics, Severus did not know it.

Severus suddenly remembered pieces of previous conversations with Professor Rosenberg in a new light. Her ‘borrowing’ of energy to perform healing spells. The limitations of wandless magical power, unless a practitioner found a way to tap into ‘other sources.’

He looked back down the rows of desks and chairs, to the circle of students sitting on the front floor of the classroom. Professor Rosenberg had divided the initial, large ball of light into smaller clones, distributed around the circle, presumably under each student’s direct control. She was all warm smiles and gentle encouragement. And yet, she was capable of great darkness. A casual observer would never suspect, but she had admitted as much to him.

It was something to investigate.

Later.
The wandless lesson progressed from learning to make the spheres of conjured light move, to changing their size and color, to a more theoretical discussion of something called wavelengths, especially with regards to warding away light-sensitive demonic groups, including vampires. Severus watched the proceedings with keen interest, perfectly willing to allow himself to fade into the background of the classroom, unnoticed and largely forgotten by the students. Most of the students, at least. Argus kept throwing odd glances in Severus’ direction, and Draco seemed to keep at least one eye on Severus throughout the entire class, seeking guidance or simply reassurance. Severus provided the occasional sneer or nod, as seemed most appropriate at the time, while simultaneously attempting to ignore his suspicions and emotions regarding Draco’s motivations and Lucius’ ambitions.

The flow of discussion included a fascinating blend of familiar magical theory and completely foreign concepts. By the time the lesson came to a close, Severus had filed away several new techniques for his own wandless practice. Before long, Professor Rosenberg was herding the students out of the classroom with admonishments to practice their light spells before their next class, to be held at the same time, the following week.

Draco needed little encouragement to leave, collecting his belongings and quitting the classroom with unseemly haste. Argus followed soon after, even if he seemed loath to do so. The other students lingered, asking questions and chattering excitedly amongst themselves. Ms. Granger in particular seemed to most readily recognize the inconsistencies with existing wand theories, and was apparently planning to camp out in the classroom until Professor Rosenberg answered each and every one of her questions in exhaustive detail.

Not that he couldn’t sympathize with their resident overachiever in this particular instance, but Severus had questions of his own for Professor Rosenberg, ones that were best broached away from prying student ears. Fortunately, simply reminding the group of his presence seemed to do the trick. In a few short minutes of silent, strategically positioned looming, the last of the students, even the stubbornly intrepid Ms. Granger, remembered that they had other places to be.

“You could have just shouted, ‘Boo!’ at them, you know,” Professor Rosenberg said after the classroom door closed behind the last straggler. She sounded amused rather than annoyed though.

Severus glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, refusing to dignify her suggestion with a response. “The Council of Watchers is requesting that I demonstrate the brewing of Wolfsbane Potion for them,” he said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Oh,” Professor Rosenberg said, packing up her class notes. “Are they coming here, or are you going there?” she asked, obviously trying to sound collected and professional, but not quite managing to hide the hopeful note in her voice.

“I will be traveling to London on Saturday,” he said. “Is there anything you wish delivered to your colleagues?”

Professor Rosenberg seemed a little surprised by the question, and gave it a moment’s thought. “Maybe some letters.” She finally said. “I haven’t been owling much, what with the whole attempted mail theft thing. Not that I think Argus is going along with Umbridge’s plans anymore, but you know…” she trailed off with a small grimace and a shrug.

She looked and sounded quite dejected, but Severus supposed he should be grateful that she wasn’t suggesting that she join him. She was safer here, under Albus’ eye and behind Hogwarts’ wards. “I will deliver them. Is there anything I might… retrieve for you?” he finally asked, awkwardly.

“That’s okay, but thanks for offering.” Professor Rosenberg smiled, even if the expression was
obviously forced. “Just tell everyone I said hi.”

He had upset her. He had suspected this might be her reaction, given her closeness with her colleagues and current inability to leave the grounds of Hogwarts to visit them. Fortunately, Severus had come prepared with a distraction. “If we exercise some discretion, we should be able to arrange a time to train before I go,” he said, still somewhat hesitant, despite his earlier confidence in this course of action. “Tomorrow, perhaps?”

Professor Rosenberg was chewing on her lower lip, fussing over the organization of her varied writing utensils in her bag. Severus, face now expressionless, was fully convinced he had erred in some way. He started to mentally dissect their brief conversation to determine what had gone wrong.

“Sounds good” Professor Rosenberg finally said, giving herself a little shake. It took a moment for Severus to realize that she was not rejecting his invitation. “In the same clearing in the forest again?”

Thoroughly wrong footed at that point, Severus retreated into stilted formality. “After supper, if that is still acceptable to you.”

She nodded.

And with that, Severus excused himself and withdrew from the room, as hastily as his students had before him.

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The moment seemed to stretch into an eternity. Professor Rosenberg intercepted the spell and started to unravel it with her incomprehensible method of magical defense. However, instead of dispelling it completely, Severus felt his construct collapse into a tangled snarl of unpredictable energy. He froze, wand hand still extended in the wake of his spell, mind casting about for some way to stop the badly bungled hex.

In those brief, panicked seconds, he was able to conjure nothing more helpful than stunned, horrified curiosity.

The partially dismantled hex slammed directly into the Professor Rosenberg’s equally surprised face. She was thrown to the ground with a sharp cry amid a torrent of blue sparks.

Severus half-straightened from his dueling stance, wand dropping from the ready, sudden fear sinking icy claws deep into his chest.

Professor Rosenberg remained sprawled in the grass and fallen autumn leaves of their little clearing for a long, agonizing moment before raising her hand to her face. “Okay, ow,” she said at length, sitting up gingerly. When she pulled her hand away from her eyes, her fingers trailed a thin streamer of viscous fluid. She looked at the translucent, green mess with disgusted surprise. “Also, gross,” she added, trying to wipe more of the liquid away with her other hand. The attempt only seemed to make the slime flow all the more freely from her eyes.

Even though he was very rarely the cause of such failed conjurations, Severus was a veritable veteran when it came to disposing of mishandled, misguided spells and potions. Thin-lipped in mounting irritation, though whether his ire was aimed primarily at the watcher or himself was still up for debate, he quickly reached her side and carefully pressed a clean absorbancy cloth from one of his pockets against Professor Rosenberg’s streaming eyes. “Hold that,” he said, momentarily
relieved when his command was met only with grimacing obedience.

Kneeling down in the grass, Severus tried a variety of counterspells, banishments, and healing charms with little effect. If anything, the few looks under the cloth he had allowed himself seemed to indicate that the flow was increasing in volume. It was a very real possibility that the charm on his absorbancy cloth would not survive the encounter. One corner was already starting to turn black, indicating that the cloth was reaching its capacity. “You should have been able to counter that spell,” he said, mouth twisting in distaste. It was true. All his observations and experiments indicated that Professor Rosenberg should have been more than capable of defending herself from such a minor stinging hex. There was no reason why he should feel guilty about her slip in concentration. None at all.

Professor Rosenberg’s wry bark of laughter was muffled by the cloth. “Yeah, I probably should have,” she said dryly. “So, I’m assuming this isn’t what was supposed to happen?”

“No,” he said tersely.

“I can’t feel an active spell anymore, or else I could probably stop it.” She was worrying her lower lip between her teeth. “I don’t know why it’s still going. Can you fix this?” Her flippant tone fell a little flat; she was obviously worried.

Severus never had been terribly skilled at soothing people with comforting words, but he was a master at diversion. “If by fix, you mean will I be able to return you to your previous state of disarray—“

“Hey!”

“—Then yes.”

Severus might not be able to see Professor Rosenberg’s glare through the absorbancy cloth, but he could still feel it. He wondered if it would be more judicious to reign in his tongue. “You know, you’re not half as funny as you think you are,” she said, sounding sullen, but then her lips, visible under the folded cloth, tilted into a half-smile.

“Perhaps,” he said blandly, but since she was currently unable to see him, he allowed himself the smallest of genuine smiles as well. Setting his wand on the ground next to him, he sighed and pulled a small metal flask from one of his pockets. The potion it contained was expensive to create and arduous to brew, but he was out of other, reasonable options. “Are you under the effects of any medical charms?” he asked, removing the flask’s lid.

“I… what?” she asked, cocking her head up at him blindly, the cloth still pressed firmly to her eyes.

He sighed in renewed irritation. For someone with such obvious natural intelligence and talent, she could be remarkably obtuse at times. “I suspect something within your tear ducts has been inadvertently transfigured. I am about to administer a potion that will unravel any spells upon and reverse any recent magical alterations to your anatomy. Do you use any spells or potions to regulate a health condition?”

“Uh… no,” she said slowly. “You guys use spells for that?”

“Yes.” Severus scowled to himself. He should have known. For all her wandless prowess, she was still very much a Muggle. “Are you wearing or carrying any ensorcelled items?” he asked further.

She sounded amused now. “Not just now, no.”
That made things simple enough.

Severus set the flask aside for a moment and unbuttoned his cuffs. He hesitated for a moment, the instinct for concealment still strong, but then rolled up his sleeves to mid-forearm, partially exposing the Dark Mark. There seemed little point in hiding it now, not when she had already seen the accursed thing, and he did not relish the idea of sporting crusted green slime on his robes for the rest of the day. “Tilt your head back,” Severus said, brusquely brushing Professor Rosenberg’s hands away from the cloth. Where it was not stained a glistening emerald green, the cloth was rapidly turning a forbidding black. He had witnessed the catastrophic failure of a spent absorbancy charm exactly once. He had every intention of keeping the experience singular.

Then, still careful of his trailing sleeves, he peeled the absorbancy cloth away from Professor Rosenberg’s face with one hand, revealing less of a disastrous mess than he had been expecting. The cloth had soaked up the worst of the viscous fluid, but even as he watched, her eyes continued to well.

He placed the spent absorbancy cloth on the ground next to him. “Attempt not to blink,” he instructed, and then, without waiting for her acknowledgement, started pouring the potion slowly into her left eye. She gasped and sputtered a bit, but to her credit, she did manage to keep both of her eyes open as he upended the flask over one eye, and then the other. The potion flushed the majority of the goo away, dissolving it into wisps of dissipating energy. More importantly, the potion would also be acting to reverse any recent transfigurations, even if the initiating magic was no longer active, which he strongly suspected might be the root of their current problem. He then set the empty flask aside and looked closely at her eyes.

They weren’t weeping slime anymore. Whatever cosmetics she used must be strictly physical in nature, as any beautifying charms, which were so common among wand witches, would have destroyed by his potion as well. Her appearance had not changed in the slightest, apart from being somewhat drenched with the remnants of the now-inert potion. “Hold still,” he said, picking up his wand again. “Tergeo.”

The spell required a delicate hand so as to not dry out her eyes as well. His wand began siphoning away the spent remnants of the potion from her face. There was a stray, soaked lock of hair that clung to her forehead. A turn of his wand dried the tendril and he moved his free hand to gently brush the strand aside.

The intimacy of the moment struck Severus half way through the gesture, and he froze in place, suddenly unsure of how, or even if, to proceed.

She was staring up at him, and her cheeks seemed a little more pink than usual. “You’re kind of bossy when you’re worried,” she said, smiling slightly. “Thanks for the save.”

Severus pulled his hand away from her face, at a loss as to how he should react. Finally, he decided on nodding abruptly and standing.

“Was that the general dispelling potion you mentioned while we were brewing up our anti-magic goo?” she finally asked.

“Yes,” he said tersely, brushing away bits of grass and leaves from his robes.

“Huh,” Professor Rosenberg said, still looking a little flushed. She levered herself up from the ground as well. “I get what you mean now, about it being reactive.” She poked the spent absorbancy cloth with the toe of her shoe, grimacing. “Your hanky looks like it’s just about had enough.”
Severus looked down at his absorbancy cloth (even in his own mind, he would not sink so low as to refer to it as a ‘hanky’) with distaste. “I will dispose of it later,” he said, flicking his wand at the emerald and black disaster, neatly encapsulating it. He then picked it up carefully and placed it into one of his pockets, trusting the holding spell to keep it from seeping anything unforgivable into his robes.

“Sorry about that,” Professor Rosenberg said, looking sheepish. “Can I buy you a replacement somewhere?”

“I purchase them in bulk,” Severus said. “I am far more concerned with the potential for disaster if that is the result of your lack of focus.” She truly should have been able to counter his spell. Perhaps if he repeated that to himself enough, the lingering traces of guilt would disappear.

Professor Rosenberg glowered up at him. “Yes, thank you for your input,” she said. Her sarcasm took on a defensive edge. “I’m a little distracted, okay?”

“Indeed. And why is that?” Severus asked, unconsciously tensing in anticipation of her answer.

She was chewing on her lip again. It was a common nervous habit of hers, he had noticed. She was taking far too long to answer; perhaps he had misinterpreted her seeming ease earlier.

“You should check out the Council Archives while you’re in London,” Professor Rosenberg said abruptly.

Severus eyed her cautiously. “I strongly suspect I will not have the time. Brewing Wolfsbane Potion is an extremely involved process.”

“Okay, but just in case you do, it’s definitely worth a look…” Professor Rosenberg’s voice trailed off, then she forged onward, as a new thought apparently occurred to her. “Oh, and Sophia stress bakes!” At Severus’ confused expression, she explained. “She’s one of the lab techs, so if you’re stuck up late, check out the break room between labs 4 and 5. It’s always full of yummy cookies and muffins and stuff…”

Ah, she was missing her colleagues again. Severus found himself feeling hesitantly interested in meeting these people, who could prompt such strong attachment from Professor Rosenberg. As for his own role in the situation, Severus was unsure how best to proceed. He had very little experience socializing under benign rather than overtly political, volatile circumstances. “I will attempt to visit this… break room.”

“Good,” she said, absent-mindedly rubbing her eyes.

When she started to cautiously prod her cheeks and eyelids with her fingertips, Severus became more concerned. “Is something still amiss with your eyes?” he asked, perfectly willing to be distracted from the matter at hand. His potion should have reversed any damage, but with her unpredictable, wandless magic in the mix, taking chances seemed ill advised.

“No,” she said, pressing her eyes tightly closed and giving her head a little shake. “Just psychosomatic ookieness. Sorry.”

Severus looked at her closely for a moment longer, silently wondering when he had started even partially understanding her mangled English. At least she was no longer fussing over her eyes and seemed to have recovered from the collapsed hex.

“Perhaps we should shift to discussing a different area of magic?” he suggested. He calculated that the offer would not be taken to be overly solicitous; they had been trading offensive and defensive
spells for the better part of the evening.

Professor Rosenberg favored him with a wry, lopsided smile. “Sure,” she said, furrowing her brow for a moment in thought. “We’ve never talked about transportation magic before.”

That covered a broad range of topics. “Transportation, meaning travel by broom…” he started to suggest, but paused at her wide grin.

“Sorry, just… brooms. Guess I should have expected that,” she said, green eyes dancing with poorly concealed mirth. “But I meant more like… What was it called? Apparition? And also the fireplace thing. And port-whatevers.”

Severus could not fathom the source of her amusement, but he could hardly take it personally when it was well known, at least among certain circles, that he eschewed brooms when flight was necessary. “Portkeys are objects enchanted to facilitate transportation to a set location,” he said, starting with her most egregious error. “They can be set to activate at preselected times, or upon physical contact, and their creation is supposed to be strictly controlled by the Ministry.”

“Okay, but how?” Professor Rosenberg pressed. “Are we talking about folding space? Or like, controlled wormholes? And what are their limitations? I mean, how far can you go? Minerva said something about not being able to teleport on the school grounds. Or maybe that was just Apparition. But you can definitely still use the fireplace. How does that all work?”

In truth, it was not an area of magic that Severus had studied in great detail. Like many potion brewers, he had made a brief effort to unravel the recipe for Floo powder, before dismissing the endeavor as a fool’s errand. It’s brewing was almost certainly tied to a specific location, and unless someone was able to prize that detail out of the Wildsmith heirs, the Floo Pow company would retain its (highly lucrative) monopoly on the reagent. Even so, he had uncovered a few details of the process. “Portkeys and the Floo Network both utilize,” he paused, trying to determine the best way to explain it, “Tunnels to transport the spell caster. These tunnels are temporary constructions made during the formation of Portkeys, but can be made permanent, when connecting a fireplace to the Floo Network.”

“Tunnels?” Professor Rosenberg repeated. “That sounds kind of wormhole-y to me.”

“I am unfamiliar with the word,” Severus admitted, somewhat sourly. He disliked admitting ignorance of any kind, even when it was perfectly understandable. “However, I can say that the… tunnels… do not exist in this world, strictly speaking, and time flows at a different rate in them, allowing travel at a much higher speed than would be possible here.”

“Sounds like a wormhole,” she said, making a face. “No wonder my magic went kerplooey when Minerva tried to take me through one.”

He had not heard that detail previously. “You were unable to use the Floo?”

“Oh, I could use it all right,” she said, her grimace becoming more pronounced. “I just never want to do it again. It spat me out the other end, looking and feeling like death by static shock.”

Severus could not think of any other example of a person reacting negatively to travel via the Floo Network. Portkey? Yes. Side-along apparition? Sometimes, and to a lesser degree, but not Floo. “What caused such a reaction?” he asked.

“Different dimensions have different types of ambient magic, and I’m pretty sensitive to that,” she said with a shrug. “And wormholes are kind of… well, I guess I’d explain them as dimensional
shortcuts. Or maybe mini, artificial dimensions. Anyway, jerking me back and forth between dimensions, with no chance to prepare or adjust, doesn’t tend to work out so well.”

With very little effort, Severus could think of at least a dozen ways such a weakness could be exploited. The thought evoked a dark scowl. “Does anyone else know of this… problem?”

“Minerva,” Professor Rosenberg answered, looking chagrined. “She was the one who took me to Diagon Alley through the Floo Network.” She paused for a moment, then said. “I don’t know who else saw me, or might have known what they saw. Minerva hustled me into a store and got me fixed up, but I was kind of out of it there for a bit. A marching band could have paraded by, and I probably wouldn’t have noticed.”

That was… not ideal. “Is there anything which can be done to mitigate these effects?”

“No idea,” she said, looking sour. “I don’t teleport like that. Instead of manipulating wormholes, I kind of fold space so where I am and where I want to be overlap. No pesky extra dimensions in the middle to muck things up. Is that how Apparition works? It didn’t feel the same, but it also wasn’t a horrible stretching electrical vortex either.”

“No,” Severus said, still trying to understand the full implications of her words. “If Portkeys and the Floo Network work by diverting a witch or wizard through another… dimension,” he said, trying to use her terminology, “Apparition passes through nothing.”

“Nothing,” Professor Rosenberg repeated, sounding dubious.

Severus made a frustrated gesture with his hands. “We do not fold space, not as you described. Disapparition is akin to writing yourself out of one location, and Apparition is then writing yourself back into another. For a brief time, between starting and ending points, you are nowhere.”

“That sounds more than a little freaksome. I mean, what happens if you get interrupted while… writing?”

“Splinching is not uncommon,” Severus said, then elaborated when the term clearly evoked no recognition in her, “It occurs when not all of the witch or wizard arrives at their destination. An error in transcription, if you will.”

“Oh,” she said. “Ew.”

He could not disagree with that crude assessment. Nearly all witches and wizards splinched themselves at least once while learning the spell, if they could manage it at all. For some, the experience was traumatic enough to put them off of Apparition entirely. “It is caused by a lapse in focus. Distance is a contributing factor as well. The further away your destination, the longer you spend nowhere, and the more likely it is that a loss of focus, even a major one, will occur.”

Professor Rosenberg was starting to look frankly horrified. “I am so teleporting myself from here on out. My way either works, or it doesn’t. And if it doesn’t, the spell just fizzles. No splinching.”


“Yes. The further away your target, the more energy it takes to fold the space in between.” She gave him a little, self-deprecating half-smile. “I ’ported myself and two slayers from London to Beijing once. Total emergency situation, or else I wouldn’t have even tried. They were totally fine, but I slept for two days afterwards, and then ended up eating half my body weight over the third day, just to recover. Still sounds like it beats ‘splinching’ though.”
Apparating over such a distance was unheard of. “What does such a spell require?” he asked, utterly failing to keep the sharp interest out of his voice.

“Whoa there, Speed Racer,” she said, looking more than a little amused. “You’re still drawing from your own energy reserves. I mean, you’re pretty strong, but without learning how to tap into something external, I’d give you a two foot range. Max. And that’s with a long nap afterwards.”

Severus couldn’t help but bristle a little at her teasing tone, but he was not so foolish as to question her assessment. He needed to learn to walk before he could run, and the few wandless castings he had attempted to date had been a mere toddling in comparison to some of the spells Professor Rosenberg had mentioned in passing. “Then, perhaps a demonstration?” he suggested, with somewhat ill grace.

Professor Rosenberg looked off into the woods, squinting a little speculatively. “You said something about wards…?” she prompted, and he realized that she was looking towards the heavily enchanted boundary of the school’s grounds. He wondered, suddenly, if she could actually see the spells at work.

“From your description, they may not affect your method of travel,” Severus said. “There is also no retaliatory aspect of the warding spells. At worst, they would simply block your way.”

“Well, let’s see about that,” she said, voice fading from her normal tones to something unnaturally hollow. Her eyes started to glow and her hair danced in a breeze only it seemed to feel. The sight made Severus’ breath catch.

And with a sudden flare of light, she was gone.

Severus looked around the darkening forest, but Professor Rosenberg was nowhere to be seen. From her description, the process should have been instantaneous, so where had she gone? The clearing remained stubbornly empty.

Had something gone wrong?

“Your wards tingled a little.”

Severus whirled around, tense and startled, to find Professor Rosenberg, back to her usual red hair and green eyes. She was standing in the exact place she had vacated just moments before, but now she was holding a little pot of red ink.

A very familiar inkpot with a rather ornate silver stopper, worked into the shape of a stylized, simmering cauldron.

She smiled impishly, and offered the inkpot to Severus.

Severus scowled, knowing for a fact that he had left it in its usual place on his office desk. He took a certain professional pride in the efficacy of his personal wards, and yet once again, Professor Rosenberg seemed to be taking delight in brushing aside his spellwork. “Insufferable,” he said, tucking the inkpot into one of his many pockets. Despite himself, he was also impressed, and slightly amused, by her antics.

“Sometimes,” she agreed, grinning widely.

Severus started to say something suitably sarcastic when a tiny chime, muffled by several layers of overlying fabric, sounded from one of the breast pockets of his waistcoat. Lips thin in irritation at the interruption, he pulled out a medallion, which had been charmed to mimic the clock in his
office. The little alarm quieted at his touch, and he scowled in earnest this time. “I have an appointment with Albus,” he said, by way of an explanation.

Professor Rosenberg’s playful mien faded into a more serious expression. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

Severus waved away her concern, face carefully neutral. “I am to deliver the completed anti-magic ointment to him.” It was not the only reason he had requested a meeting with Albus, but it was the only one he cared to share with Professor Rosenberg.

“Okay,” she said, drawing the word out a little, turning it into a cautious question.

Severus sincerely hoped that this was yet another example of her disconcerting perception where he was concerned, and not a flaw in his ability to dissemble. “No doubt he has more to discuss with me than our potion,” he said, being intentionally vague.

No doubt, even if Albus did not know it yet.

“If you say so,” Professor Rosenberg said. “Hey, before you go,” she pointed at the medallion which was still in Severus’ hand, “Where can I get a clock for my office? Accidentally working through lunch is starting to be a habit.”

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“I am not sure that Minerva will appreciate your implication, Severus,” Albus said, looking at the row of jars on his desk. Each pot of anti-magic ointment was sealed with a cork stopper, freshly inscribed with a letter corresponding with a House name. The jar marked with a G was easily three times the size of the others.

“I imply nothing,” Severus said, tone bland. “You know as well as I do that I should have put the entire batch in one container and reserved it for Potter alone.” He took a seat, opposite the Headmaster, and raised a challenging eyebrow.

Albus’ eyes were dancing, even though his face was somber. “Perhaps you are right,” he said. Potter’s rabble rousing must be playing into one or more of the Headmaster’s plots, to receive that kind of a reaction. Severus, for numerous reasons, would have preferred a more subtle form of resistance.

Severus snorted in derision. “If you feel it necessary, I am sure you can distribute the ointment in a way which will protect Minerva’s tender sensibilities.” The sarcasm in his voice was palpable. After all, he doubted that Minerva would react poorly to the potion, no matter its portioning, as long as it did its job. She was, after all, fairly pragmatic. For a Gryffindor.

Albus waved away the insincere offer. “And what of our other problem?” he asked. “Have you determined which of your students might be targeting Professor Rosenberg?”

“I am nearly certain that Draco has been assigned the task,” Severus said, firmly suppressing a flare of unfocused anger and desperation. If he wanted to keep Professor Rosenberg safe, he needed to approach this issue logically, not fly into a rage, no matter how attractive that option might seem. “Lucius has the ambition and standing to successfully sue for a high profile mission on behalf of his son.”

Albus was wearing a distant expression, eyes unfocused in thought. “I do not disagree with your assessment, but what are the chances he is acting alone?” he asked.
“Officially?” Severus asked, turning over the list of names in his head. Some represented distant possibilities. Others... well, Draco hardly left the dormitories without Gregory and Vincent shadowing him. “If Lucius is making a bid for more favor, Draco alone would be given the task,” he concluded aloud. The logic seemed sound. Had he not encouraged Draco’s participation in Professor Rosenberg’s wandless lessons for this very reason? The stray thought made Severus feel vaguely ill. “Whether he see’s fit to engage aid from his housemates, or has been ordered to avoid doing so, remains an open question.”

“I am sure you are right,” Albus said, distractedly. “And you have already warned Professor Rosenberg, I assume?” Despite the upturned tone of that last statement, it was not really a question.

“Yes,” Severus said. “She continues to be dismissive of the threat posed to her.” He was attempting to remain dispassionate, but it was trying, especially here in Albus’ office, where he allowed himself to let down his guards. He was not insensate to the fact that he would like nothing better than to wrap Professor Rosenberg in protective charms and stash her somewhere heavily warded and Unplottable. Maintaining anything resembling objectivity in the midst of his increasingly turbulent emotions was becoming more challenging by the day.

“She is in less danger here than she might be elsewhere,” Albus said. His words might be interpreted to be comforting, but his gaze had sharpened over the rims of his half-moon spectacles.

Severus looked at him coldly. “While the school’s wards do mitigate what can be done, they are not impenetrable. At least she has started training with me again.”

“Well, we shall have to keep a close eye on her,” Albus said, stroking his long beard. “The Council would probably take it amiss if we were to lose her.”

Lose her…

Severus scrutinized the Headmaster for a long time before speaking further. He had told Albus once that he would do anything for the man’s help. Absolutely anything. He had held to that for many years now, which made what he had to say all the harder to voice. “If it comes to it, I will not stand by and let this one come to harm,” Severus finally said, mentally prepared to offer defenses, excuses, even threats if necessary.

“Even if doing so would expose your true allegiances?” Albus asked, his words smooth and casual, in contrast to the seriousness of their content.

“Even then.”

“Even if I were to order you to do so?”

Severus’ fingers bit into the wood of his armrests and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Albus just raised a hand quellingly. “Then I will never ask.” When Severus’ responded with silent disbelief, he continued. “Every man has a line in the sand across which he will not tread, Severus. Even you. Now that I know it, I can account for it in the future.”

That was not the response Severus had been expecting. He studied Albus with narrowed eyes, attempting to identify the catch or price. Amazingly, none seemed to be forthcoming. “Where is your line?” Severus finally asked, giving voice to something he had silently pondered for a long, long time.

Albus’ smile was gentle, even if his words were not. “When I find it, I will let you know.”
Chapter 25

With Severus gone to London to brew some kind of werewolf stabilizing potion (and to deliver a bundle of her letters to Giles, even if that part was probably a secondary priority) Willow didn’t have much interest in facing dinner with no buffer to counteract Umbridge’s company. So much for her new, spiffy clock keeping her honest on the schedule front. At least she had figured out how to turn off the chime, which had tried insistently tolling to chase her off to the evening meal.

No thanks.

Severus had suggested she ask Argus about a clock after their last sparring session, and the next thing Willow had known, she was being hustled through a shockingly well-stocked, if cluttered, storeroom on the third floor by the Hogwarts caretaker.

Willow had been painfully uncomfortable during Argus’ ingratiating attempts to please her with increasingly ornate clocks. His gratitude for discovering his wandless magical aptitude was misplaced, at best, and the specter of her role in his altered memory haunted her still. She managed to tone down his enthusiasm somewhat, but still found herself the recipient of not only a simple, if beautifully crafted, clock, but also an abacus, charmed to help her calculate grades, a small bookshelf, which was now situated under her office’s false window, a funny kind of radio, which only picked up wand wizarding channels, and a bunch of other things Argus insisted she needed.

She had thought that would be all, but new items kept arriving on her classroom’s doorstep: a cauldron with various tools to prepare reagents, a set of silver-tipped quills, a double-chambered trash bin with one side for regular trash and the other outfitted with some kind of magical incinerator, in case she needed something thoroughly destroyed. Her little office was rapidly filling up, but she could not, for the life of her, figure out a way to turn away the flood of items without hurting Argus’ feelings, something she just couldn’t bring herself to do.

And so, her little bookshelf started to fill up with more than just her latest library books, and Willow resigned herself to playing host to a large number of enchanted items she had very little intention of actually using.

At least her reading material was interesting. She had her Sourcebook working away on another tome of dark magic, and was reading something a bit lighter – a treatise on transfiguration theory. Willow had actually noticed that, in a pinch, turning a pencil into a stake took a lot more energy than turning a torn hoodie into a bag. She didn’t do that kind of magic very often, but when she did, she hadn’t been able to find any underlying pattern to explain the different energy requirements of what seemed, on the surface, like very similar spells.

Even though the book was specifically written about wand magic, Willow had a sneaking suspicion that it could translate reasonably well to her own spells, if she could logic her way through the more confusing parts. What she was reading hung pretty well with her own observations, even if she still didn’t have a good grasp of the ‘whys.’ It didn’t have to do with composition, or molecular structure, or starting mass, or anything else rooted in obvious science. Instead, the author classified everything by its quintessence, whatever they meant by that. There had to be rules, but Willow couldn’t make heads or tails of them. Maybe Minerva could explain it, or at least suggest another book to help clear things up.

Still no word yet on why a raven was like a writing desk though…

When she reached the end of the chapter on the ethics of transfiguring animals into inanimate
objects, and vice versa, Willow set down her pen. Far be it from her to complain about so much
uninterrupted research time, but she had been at it for hours. She rolled her head from side to side,
shrugging her shoulders to try to stretch away the stiffness there, and looked at her clock again.
Sure enough, she had completely missed dinner. Maybe her mysterious house-elf benefactors had
made a visit.

Willow rose from her desk and went to check the door of her office. Sure enough, a tray of food
was waiting there for her. She picked it up and carried it back to her desk, awkwardly sliding the
heavily laden tray next to the transfiguration book and her notes.

Someone had been feeling a little ambitious this evening. Instead of something simple, like the
sandwiches or soup she was expecting, the evening’s offerings included an herb roasted chicken
breast, mashed potatoes, a pile of steaming vegetables, a chunk of hearty-looking bread, and not
one, but two desserts: a small bowl of bread pudding and a ridiculously fancy little petit four on a
tiny white doily.

It all smelled amazing. Willow turned up the volume dial on her radio so she could actually make
out the words. The tiny voice was singing about cauldrons of love, which had to be an innuendo of
one kind or another. There was a cheery fire burning away in her office’s fireplace. As lonely,
isolating dinners went, she supposed that this one wasn’t half bad.

Trying to stifle a stab of homesickness, Willow sat down to her meal. The food really was
excellent. One of these days, she’d manage to catch a house-elf and tell them so. Doing so
shouldn’t have been this difficult for her to manage though. Normally she could sense nearby
people, or you know, whatever, with little effort, but the castle was brimming with so many
overlapping spells that she was noticing that the magical ‘noise’ tended to drown individual
energies out unless she really concentrated.

As delicious as the main course was, Willow ended up leaving quite a bit of it on her plate to make
sure she had room for the desserts. The bread pudding was simple, but really tasty, with chocolate
chips and a cinnamony sauce, but the petit four was something else. It almost looked too pretty to
eat, with little decorative curlicues of chocolate and delicate, artistic piping swirled on the sides.

It was small enough to eat in one big bite, but Willow just took a little nibble instead, wanting to
savor it. The flavor was as amazing as its appearance, but the spreading feeling of lassitude doused
her enjoyment in sudden panic.

_Potion!_

Willow spat out the half-chewed bit of dessert on the fancy doily, heart rate suddenly racing even
as her mind started to feel fuzzier and fuzzier.

_No. No, no, no, no, no, no…_

Biting into the little confection had broken whatever ward had hidden its magic from her senses.
Willow shook her head to try to clear it, and psychically attacked the spell, even as her tongue
started to feel numb and puffy.

_You know, I should really go for a walk._

The thought was tempting, but also clearly not her own. Willow squeezed her eyes shut in
concentration. Compulsion then.

_No, nope. Not happening._
Willow was managing to draw out the potion, gathering it like bile in the back of her throat. She staggered to the side of her desk, grabbing for her fancy new trashcan.

*The grounds are so pretty at sunset. I bet I could walk in the woods for hours before someone noticed I was gone.*

She coughed wetly, gagging up the remnants of the magic, made physically manifest, and tried not to think too hard about the oily, black residue speckling the inside of the waste basket. Nasty as the whole process was, it was working. The little voice telling her to run out past Hogwart’s protective shields was lessening, and as Willow’s own thoughts and feelings fully asserted themselves, her initial surge of fear was being rapidly replaced by anger and the jittery, twitchy feeling she always got after a good scare or some other flavor of close call.

Willow reached for the napkin on her tray, then scowled at it, and opted to wipe her mouth on her sleeve with a shaking hand. She didn’t particularly trust anything from that tray anymore, but she also didn’t trust any attempts of hers to recognize further spells without simultaneously compromising them. The wards on that little dessert had been subtle. Very subtle. And anyone that slick could also put in a little self-destruct feature into their magical construct. Assuming her initial bite hadn’t already set a chain reaction of spellwork into motion. In any case, she didn’t want to mess up any remaining evidence that might help catch her attempted poisoner.

She looked down at her arm, where a long, black smear marred the sleeve of her blouse. At least she wasn’t wearing one of her expensive, new witchy robes today. Did condensed dark magic puke stain? Probably. Her mouth still felt fuzzy, but obviously not from wiping it on her now-probably-ruined sleeve.

*Why did her mouth still feel fuzzy?*

The tempting pull of compulsion was gone, and her thoughts were rapidly clearing up, but her tongue still felt thick and tingly. Had she missed something? That was a terrifying thought. Some poisons, especially magical ones, didn’t need more than a minute or two to do their job. How long had she been coughing up black magic goo into her trashcan? She could feel her hair stirring on its own, and the few wisps she could see dancing in her peripheral vision were darkening rapidly.

Willow shoved aside the surge of instinctive, unthinking fear and tried to work through her situation logically. She couldn’t feel any residual spell affecting her. Maybe some kind of mundane poison had also been in the tainted dessert? She couldn’t sense anything with her magic, even while her regular senses were telling her that the tingling, itchy sensation was spreading. Had something inside her mouth already been altered, before she had managed to dispel the potion’s magic? That had been Severus’ explanation for her inexplicable gooey eyes during their last sparring match. She hadn’t been able to sense anything then either, much less fix it. Thankfully, Severus had known how to reverse the whole mess.

Severus would probably know what to do this time as well, but he was in London, mixing up potions for the Council.

Willow’s first instinct was to head for the Council herself, but that would be a hefty distance to teleport when she wasn’t entirely convinced that anyone there could do a better job than she already had. Besides, she wasn’t supposed to leave the school grounds, for now very obvious reasons, and someone here would probably be better equipped to deal with whatever was going on with her.

Willow alighted on the most obvious answer, grabbed the doily holding the remnants of the petit four, and reached out with her magic. Her little clock was now pointing well past dinner, so taking
what she hoped was a safe bet, Willow fixed her destination in mind as best she could and simply… shifted.

Right into Albus Dumbledore’s office.

The man himself was standing next to one of his overflowing bookshelves, hands clasped behind his back, face uncharacteristically rigid as he looked over his shoulder at her, the only sign she had caught him by surprise.

Willow must look bug-eyed and inhuman just then, considering her still-dark hair. Plus, she remembered that she wasn’t supposed to be able to teleport on the school grounds, much less into the Headmaster’s heavily warded office.

Oh well.

She tried to compose herself, but the tingling in her mouth seemed like it was getting more pronounced, and Willow was rapidly losing a battle against freaking right the heck out. She placed the crumpled doily and its incriminating evidence on the Headmaster’s desk. “Someone just tried to poison me,” she said, her voice sounding thick and slurred to her own ears. “I thought I got it all out, but,” she gestured vaguely towards herself, trying to convey the entirety of the problem without so many words, since talking wasn’t working out so well at the moment.

Dumbledore was suddenly at her side, glittering eyes sharp with real concern. “I’m sure Poppy will set you aright in no time,” he said, stealing an arm around her shoulders.

Poppy. As in Poppy Pomfrey. As in the school’s resident healer. Yeah, probably a smarter move than popping into Dumbledore’s office. Whoops. Maybe she wasn’t thinking as clearly as she had thought. Willow nodded her head, allowing the contact, and found herself being gently, but firmly hustled out of the Headmaster’s office.

Willow tried to keep her composure as she was whisked through hallways and down staircases. Dumbledore was better at the charade than she, nodding and smiling with practiced calm when they passed groups of students, and oh great, there was Umbridge with her judge-y clipboard. Wonderful.

But in very little time, she found herself being spirited into the school’s large, meticulously clean infirmary. Willow was barely holding on to her composure, even though the tingling numbness had stopped spreading. Dumbledore’s deceptively strong grip steered her unerringly towards a white, neatly-made bed. He gently urged her to sit, and once she was sort of settled, he disappeared around a fabric screen, in the direction of Poppy’s medicinal stores, if Willow’s vague memories of the place were correct.

Fortunately, Willow didn’t have to wait long before two sets of hurried footsteps heralded Dumbledore’s return with Poppy by his side.

“Well,” Poppy said, drawing her wand. “Let’s see what we have here.”

Willow forced herself to sit passively as Poppy ran her wand, trailing a faint magical warmth, first over the mangled petit four on the little white doily, which Dumbledore produced from somewhere, then over Willow’s face, throat, and stomach. Poppy’s no-nonsense expression was doing a pretty poor job of concealing her concern, right up until she asked to look inside Willow’s mouth. There she paused in her inspection, scowling faintly.

“I can’t find a trace of potion,” Poppy finally admitted, “But you are having a strong allergic
reaction to something else in the food.” She straightened, giving Willow a critical look. “Probably the red icing, which was made with witch’s ganglion.”

Willow’s instinctive gag had nothing to do with the numbness in her mouth.


Only somewhat comforted, Willow watched the healer bustle away. A plain, old allergic reaction. The diagnosis was so mundane that Willow hadn’t even stopped to consider it. If she could just have a second to concentrate, she could probably coax away at least some of the inflammation from her much abused mouth. Feeling more than a little silly, Willow looked back at Dumbledore, pointedly trying not to think about anaphylaxis and airway restrictions.

The Headmaster had been quiet throughout Poppy’s barrage of diagnostic spells. Now, he gestured towards the little dessert remnants on the bedside table. “That is a very powerful potion, meant to mimic the Imperius curse, if I am not mistaken.”

Willow opened her mouth to answer him, but her tongue now felt like a lump, so she just shrugged. She had read about that curse, but there were many ways to spell a person into acting against their better judgment, and she wasn’t sure how far the real similarities went.

Dumbledore just looked at her speculatively for a moment. “Did the potion attempt to compel you into some undesirable action?” he asked.

Yes and no questions, Willow could handle at the moment. She nodded her head.

“And did you act on that compulsion?”

She shook her head no.

“Good, good,” Dumbledore said, half to himself. “Ah, yes, and here comes your antidote now.”

Sure enough, Poppy reappeared around the dividing screen, carrying a small, clear jar, filled with a blue liquid, and a ludicrously large spoon. When the healer started peel away the potion’s wax seal, Willow extended a hand in mute request. No offense meant to anyone present, but she had just been almost poisoned and was feeling a little iffy about swallowing down anything else without at least checking it out first.

Poppy huffed a little, but both she and Dumbledore looked more amused than offended. “The only other person who ever double checks my potions is Severus,” the healer said, handing the bottle over to Willow. “And even he couldn’t find fault with this one,” she finished with a smile.

Willow looked at the label, and immediately saw what Poppy meant. The spidery text was immediately recognizable to her, even without the signature at the end. ‘For severe allergic reactions. Oral or topical. S. Snape.’

She gave the contents of the bottle a little magical peek anyway, and finding nothing untoward, handed it back to Poppy, who proceeded to uncork it and pour the blue liquid until the enormous spoon was full to the brim. Willow took the spoon, eyed it one last time, and then took a ginger sip.

At Willow’s shudder, Poppy smiled encouragingly and said, “Better to just swallow it down and not think too much about the taste.”

She wasn’t wrong. The potion tasted like where mint went to die.
Fortunately, it was also doing the trick. Willow’s face stopped tingling almost immediately. Her tongue no longer felt like a dead weight in her mouth. She closed her eyes and breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

When she opened her eyes again, she looked over to Dumbledore, who had been hanging to the back, giving Poppy room to work, and answered the questions she knew he was waiting on her recovery to ask. “It wanted me to go outside of the school’s wards. It wasn’t very specific about where, or else I would be there. Now.”

_Ambushing whoever pulled this stunt._

“Yes, I imagine you would,” Dumbledore said, as if to himself. “And with that in mind, I believe that I should start my own search.”

“I’ll come with you,” Willow said, sliding off the edge of the infirmary bed.

“Absolutely not,” Poppy said firmly. “You will stay here, under observation, until we are completely sure you are no longer under the potion’s effects.”

Willow felt herself straightening her shoulders, bristling at the healer’s commanding tone. “But-“ she started to argue, but was cut short.

“And that your allergic reaction is under control. And that there aren’t any other nasty surprises hidden in that potion that we might have missed,” Poppy said, plowing over Willow’s objections with a very stern voice.

That made Willow pause for a moment. She was, like, eighty-five percent sure that she wasn’t being affected by another charm or mundane poison. Maybe ninety. And there were bad guys who needed catching.

“While I do appreciate the offer, it is unnecessary,” Dumbledore said, then turned his gaze to Poppy. “I will return within the hour.” With that, and another quick nod, he turned and walked out of the room, leaving Willow standing there, feeling awkward and just a little bit annoyed at being left behind.

A gentle, but firm touch on her elbow pulled Willow’s attention away from the far door of the hospital wing, which had just closed behind the Headmaster. It was Poppy, of course. She was looking critically at the black smear down Willow’s right sleeve. “What is this?” she asked, concern wrinkling her brow.

_Oh yeah. Gross._

“Concentrated dark magic,” Willow said, trying to think about how best to explain. “There wasn’t a faster way to get it out of my system, so I made it corporeal and threw it up.”

Nasty as the confession was, she didn’t think it warranted the blank, confused look Poppy was directing her way. “I should take a sample,” the healer finally said.

Willow plucked at her sleeve, wondering if Poppy would let her leave the infirmary to get a change of clothes if she solemnly swore that she’d come straight back afterwards. “There’s more in the trashcan in my office,” she said.

_Her office…_
Her Sourcebook was still on her desk, working on copying *Secrets of the Darkest Arts*. What if someone broke in? She hadn’t warded her office that heavily after all.

“I have to go,” she said, starting to hyperventilate a little. “I have to get something from my office.”

Absolutely not,” Poppy said, refusing to let go of her arm. “You are going to stay in bed. I can send a house-elf to fetch whatever it is you need.”

Because letting some elf-thing paw through her stuff sounded so much better. “No. Look, I’ll come right back,” she said, prying at the healer’s surprisingly strong grip on her elbow. “Let me go,” she finally said in frustration.

“Please, Miss Rosenberg,” Poppy said, still clinging stubbornly to Willow’s elbow. “I am authorized to restrain patients if I must.”

Restrain me? A cold pulse of anger shot through Willow at that. “I’d like to see you try,” she pronounced in a cold, precise tone, and oh no, her voice had that low-pitched, echo-y quality that was a very, very bad sign.

Still, something in her face must have gotten the point across though, because Poppy abruptly released Willow’s elbow and took a startled step backwards.

Restrain me?

No, bad Willow.

She also took a step back, blinking furiously as if that would clear the threatening blackness from her eyes more quickly. “Sorry,” she mumbled, feeling guilty and still a little angry, all at the same time. “But no really, I’ll be right back. I promise.” And with that, she twisted space and shifted again.

Her desk remained untouched. Willow breathed a sigh of relief. She shuffled her work back into her bag, noticing as she did so that the Sourcebook had finished copying the library book. The tray of remaining food, she left alone. If Poppy wanted to poke through it, she could send ‘house-elves’ to fetch it themselves.

Willow shouldered her bag and eyed her door. Her wards hummed a little in resonance with her teleportation spell, but nothing indicated that the door itself had been opened. She quit the room then, walking quickly in the direction of her own quarters.

After she had stashed her Sourcebook and Template, as well as the bound Aurors reports, in her heavily warded cubby, Willow gathered together some pajamas, a couple toiletries, and the book on Transfiguration she had been reading before all of this had started.

Then, resigned to spending the rest of the evening trapped in bed, Willow trudged back upstairs. She passed a few students along the way, and couldn’t help side-eying a cluster of Slytherins, who were gathered at the base of the staircase that led out of the dungeons. She didn’t immediately recognize any of them, but when she had passed them and nodded in their direction, they had all had similar expressions of practiced innocence, which almost always meant that somebody was up to no good in Willow’s book.

Perhaps she just had a dirty, suspicious mind, but then again, nearly getting poisoned and maybe kidnapped would do that to a witch.

She found Poppy in a state of near panic when she finally made it back to the infirmary, overnight bundle in hand. Feeling guilty again about going all black-eyed and teleporting out from under the healer’s nose, Willow allowed herself to be herded back towards her bed. She meekly changed into
her baggy pajama bottoms and purple t-shirt behind the privacy screen and submitted to being fussily tucked into the bed, like a little girl.

Poppy had then spirited away Willow’s black-goo-stained shirt, but otherwise gave her only patient a wide berth.

Dumbledore reappeared about half a chapter on Transfiguration theory later. Apparently he had searched the school’s perimeter, but had not discovered anything obviously out of place.

Willow was disappointed, but not really surprised.

The evening stretched on interminably, punctuated only by the occasional student, seeking bandages or potions for minor injuries.

Despite the unfamiliar surroundings, not to mention her badly damaged peace of mind, Willow finally did fall asleep, the Transfiguration book page down and forgotten across her belly.
Severus stepped out of the swirling, green flames of the Floo Network and into the office of the Head of the Council of Watchers. He glanced around himself, taking in the details of his surroundings. The furniture was finely crafted, if obviously of Muggle design, in coordinating hardwoods and leathers. Severus noted the rows and rows of bookshelves flanked by a clusters of seating areas and tables, but then he concentrated the majority of his attention on two people, a man and a woman, seated at a centrally situated, ornately carved desk.

“Professor Snape?” the man asked, rising from his seat and walking around the edge of the desk. When Severus nodded fractionally in response, the watcher extended his hand. “Rupert Giles.”

Severus took the proffered hand and shook it, eyeing the Head of the Council of Watchers with meticulously concealed interest. Professor Rosenberg had mentioned Mr. Giles in passing, and her words made it very obvious that this man was less of a supervisor and more of a mentor, perhaps even a father figure, to her.

Severus could believe it, now. Mr. Giles’ eyes, behind wire-rimmed glasses, were deceptively mild, but Severus’ most subtle attempt to read the thoughts behind them met with as little success as they ever had with Professor Rosenberg.

Reaching into his robes, Severus retrieved a small bundle of papers and offered them to Mr. Giles. “Professor Rosenberg sends her regards, and her regrets,” he said, when the Council’s Head took the proffered letters.

“Thank you,” Mr. Giles said, thin smile fading from strictly professional to something momentarily more genuine. “And this is Dr. Elizabeth Pierson, our acting head of the Council’s science division,” Mr. Giles said, indicating the thin woman with a gray braid and brown eyes who stood behind him.

She also proffered a hand.

Severus shook it as well. “Dr. Pierson,” he said.

The woman had no mental shielding at all, but a cursory look into the surface of her mind revealed a keen, purely academic interest in the potion Severus was here to brew. She was also a Muggle. Truly a Muggle, without even a hint of wandless magical talent that Severus could sense.

The revelation was somewhat surprising, and Severus found himself uncertain of how to converse with the woman. Watchers represented rare exemptions from the Statute of Secrecy, a stipulation of the Treaty of Carthage, but the letter of that law was hardly the only, or even the main, reason why Severus tended to avoid interactions with Muggles.

Nevertheless, he was aware that his actions here were being weighed, and he did not wish to be found wanting. He attempted to dredge up long-disused knowledge on the subject, and asked, “In what discipline have you attained mastery?” referring to the woman’s honorific.

Dr. Pierson’s eyebrows rose a little. “Biochemistry,” she answered after a brief pause. “I was a professor at Dartmouth, before the Council recruited me. We never did decide what to call my current area of research. Xenobiochemistry? Necrochemistry?”

Apparently this was some kind of a longstanding joke between Dr. Pierson and Mr. Giles, because the Council’s Head smiled briefly, then said, by way of explaining the opaque terminology to
Severus, “Elizabeth’s team has been researching differences between human and demonic responses to various chemical compounds.”

That was unexpectedly intriguing. “You are attempting to poison demons,” he stated, bluntly.

“And sometimes, to heal them,” Dr. Pierson said, looking at Severus speculatively. “I have to say, we are all quite looking forward to your demonstration today. Thank you again, for allowing us to take samples and record the process.”

In truth, Severus only had the most vague of concepts what ‘video recording’ entailed, and was still questioning the wisdom in allowing it. However, he elected to respond with a suitably neutral, “I look forward to reading your results.” And indeed, he found that he truly was. He wondered what this Muggle, with her technology and strictly physical expertise in chemical compounds, would make of a potion.

“And speaking of which, let us show you to the laboratory space you will be using,” Mr. Giles, who had briefly retreated to his desk, interjected. Severus noted that he had placed Professor Rosenberg’s letters under a small, bronze paperweight that shimmered with an obvious enchantment. “We hope you will find it adequate for your needs,” Mr. Giles said, turning back to face Severus and Dr. Pierson.

Severus, still guarding his words closely, simply nodded his assent and gestured for the two watchers to lead the way.

The building was decorated in much the same manner as Mr. Giles’ office, with plush carpets and ornate, wooden furniture. Severus particularly noted the paintings and prints, dozens of portraits and painted scenery, all eerily motionless in their frames. The watchers provided brief comments from time to time, breaking up their walk with interesting asides: names of displayed artifacts, explanations of plaques, and histories behind portraits. Severus stored each bit of information away for later reference, in case they became important to know at a later date.

Severus was led down several corridors, into a contraption that carried passengers between floors, and out onto a covered pathway that twisted through a high-walled garden. The plants, Severus noted with approval, seemed to have been selected for their alchemical uses, though the end result was also aesthetically pleasing. The walkway ended at the entrance of a second building, whose glass doors gently slid open with a faint swish, but no discernable magic, as they neared.

This building differed markedly from the first. The outer walls were constructed, floor to ceiling, with large windows, held in place by metal frames. Gone were the rich, Muggle furnishings, and in their place were clean white walls and smooth tiled floors. Everything smelled strongly of astringent cleaners. The lights were bright, almost harsh, and the few pieces of furniture seemed to be made of polished metal. Everything had a sterile, utilitarian design. Severus doubted that a mote of dust or a drop of spilled reagent could hide for long in such an environment.

He suspected that was the entire point.

Another conveyance took them to the building’s topmost floor, if the numbered buttons inside it were to be believed. After another very brief walk, they reached a heavy, white door with slotted panel next to the handle. Mr. Giles inserted a small, rectangular card into the device and, when the light above the entranceway changed from red to green, Severus was directed to enter. Inside, the small room was lined with smooth, metal shelves above and small hooks supporting rows of jackets below.

The watchers paused to hang their previous jackets on two of the hooks. Severus made no move to
join them when they replaced their initial attire with matching, white garments. He assumed that if he was expected to change into this odd uniform, someone would have mentioned.

When Mr. Giles finished buttoning the white coat, he gestured toward another door, leading out of this odd foyer. “This way,” he said.

It did not, as Severus was halfway expecting, open into the building’s roof. He had stipulated that the brewing of Wolfsbane Potion required access to moonlight, after all. What was provided instead was much more elaborate.

The laboratory was quite large. Black tables lined the room, familiar fixtures like sinks and drying racks arranged in between blinking, whirring pieces of inexplicable, Muggle machinery. There were cabinets, filled with row after row of jars and canisters, some containing familiar potion ingredients and others labeled with seemingly nonsensical combinations of letters and numbers. The end effect of the juxtaposition was jarring, and yet, the bulk of Severus’ attention was drawn to the center of the room, where several people were gathered around two heavy tables, a large white panel supported on a rolling frame, and a sturdy, wrought iron brazier. They were all standing on a square of textured metal, separated from the surrounding, white-tiled floor by some kind of rubbery framing. Above it all was an enormous window in the ceiling, equivalent in size and shape to the panel in the floor. It was split in half by metal and rubber framework of its own, in a way that reminded Severus of the sliding doorway on the first floor.

Mr. Giles and Dr. Pierson were walking forward, greeting the small throng of people surrounding the tables. Severus turned his attention away from the unusual ceiling, and looked over the crowd. At first, he assumed that everyone there must be a watcher, but once he looked past the uniform white coats, Severus realized that a few members of the Order were present as well. Arthur Weasley spared him a quick nod, but was otherwise absorbed in conversation with a young, female watcher with a shock of green-dyed hair. The two of them were fixated on some kind of mechanical contraption, supported by three telescoping legs.

Remus Lupin had been cornered by two watchers, who seemed to be subjecting the werewolf to some variety of examination. One was pressing a small implement against Lupin’s temple, while the other was moving a small device – not a wand, though it did emit light – back and forth in front of the werewolf’s eyes.

Severus did not have names to go with any of the remaining faces, though he did think he might recognize one of the watchers from their initial meeting at number 12, Grimmauld Place.

Mr. Giles was greeting one of the older watcher’s in the room, an ancient-looking woman with a deeply lined face and piercing, dark eyes. When Severus neared, Mr. Giles turned to introduce them. “Professor Snape, this is Takeshi Matsu. This is her laboratory.”

The woman inclined her head in greeting, a gesture that Severus returned. He knew that he was being even more reticent than usual, guarding his words closely so as to avoid any major political gaffes, but there were limits to that strategy. “Thank you for the use of your space,” Severus said, painfully aware that the courtesy sounded stilted and forced coming from him.

Something about his words made the woman smile though, crinkling her wrinkled face even further. “The pleasure is all ours,” she said, patting Mr. Giles on the arm in a way that appeared to be a dismissal, even if the man was, presumably, her superior. “I believe that we are set up to meet your requirements.”

Back on more comfortable footing, Severus looked up again, to the unusual window in the laboratory’s ceiling. “The potion requires direct exposure to moonlight. Does your…?” he paused,
feeling certain that the unusual ceiling had a more specific name, but he could not remember it. 
“Window,” he finally said, scowling slightly to himself, “open?”

“Indeed, it does,” Ms. Takeshi said, stepping forward and craning her own eyes to the look at the 
window critically. “And the platform is on a hydraulic lift, so we can raise the whole work station 
to the roof, if needed. This is a hybrid facility,” she said, seemingly oblivious to the fact that 
Severus was not completely able to follow her terminology. “And while our scientific instruments 
don’t need access to the wind or sky, some of our magical methods do.”

Severus studied her out of the corner of his eye. “You are a witch?” he asked.

Ms. Takeshi turned to look at him, and Severus refrained from using Occlumency in case she 
would sense the attempt. “At times,” she said, smiling in a way that let Severus know that she was 
being intentionally vague.

He suspected that he was being baited in some way, and so, after suppressing a narrow-eyed glance 
in favor of a more neutral expression, he turned his attention back to the brewing area that had been 
prepared for him. Someone had hung a clock on the white panel, its glowing, blocky numbers 
reminding him that he did not have an excess of time before he needed to start processing reagents 
if he was to be ready for nightfall.

Without waiting for prompting or permission, Severus took the final few steps to the closest table, 
drawing his shrunken brewing kit from a deep pocket inside his robes. He set it down and drew his 
wand, quickly returning the carrying case to its original size. The minor spell was met with a brief 
cessation in conversation, but the absence of droning chatter was soon replaced with a new racket, 
as a few of the younger watchers scrambled to retrieve chairs and stools from elsewhere in the 
laboratory, arranging them on the platform.

Severus flicked the latch on his potions case open with one thumb, and then folded it open on the 
worktable. He reached into the magically expanded interior and pulled a handle upward, revealing 
a narrow, wooden cabinet with thick doors on large, iron hinges. Those he swung open, revealing 
rows of padded shelves and drawers. Severus opened the largest drawer at the base of the cabinet, 
and carried it around the table to the brazier. The fire pan, held aloft on sturdy iron legs, was empty, awaiting fuel and a flame. Five arms rose from 
the edges of the pan, bending inward slightly to support a ring. Severus placed his cauldron on the 
ring, rattling it slightly in its cradle to test the stability of the structure. When the support proved to 
be adequate, he returned to the far side of the table and started to unpack numerous containers of 
potion ingredients, his knife, a set of scales and weights, a long-handled silver spoon, a few other 
miscellaneous implements for processing reagents, a copy of Damocles’ text regarding the brewing 
of Wolfsbane Potion (highly annotated), and two absorbancy cloths, in the event of an untoward 
mishap.

Once he had arranged the jars and bundles of ingredients to his liking, Severus looked back up at 
the rest of the people in the room. Most everyone had settled into two loose rows of chairs and 
stools. Several people had small books in hand, Muggle writing implements held at the ready. 
Someone had written times for sundown, moonrise, and other celestial events that were important 
to account for during the potion brewing. That list was unnecessary, Severus had memorized the 
relevant times in preparation for this task, but it demonstrated a meticulous attention to his previous 
instructions that he could appreciate.

Arthur and the green-haired watcher continued to fuss over the three-legged machine. From this 
angle, Severus could see a small lens, set in a recess in the device. Perhaps it was the video camera 
that had been mentioned in his final communication with the Council. It looked like no camera
with which he was familiar, but then again, it was of Muggle design.

Brewing before an audience was, obviously, not a new experience for Severus. Granted, he essentially never brewed a potion of this complexity for his students, but having eyes upon him while he worked was nothing new. If he was able to brew the Elixir of Thanatoselos for the Dark Lord himself, Severus could make Wolfsbane Potion for a group of mere Muggle watchers.

Severus opened the Potions book to a page marked with a slender, green ribbon. He traced his fingers along the first several lines of instructions, more out of habit than from a real need to refresh his memory on the opening steps of brewing Wolfsbane Potion, and looked back up at the presumed video camera.

“Let us begin.”

~*~*~*~

“Does something about the magic require the use of a hand-held fan, or would an electric fan suffice?” Nathan Rubuntja asked.

Severus flicked a glance at the young watcher. Ms. Takeshi had referred to him as a ‘lab tech.’ Severus supposed that he would refer to such a person as an apprentice. “The range of acceptable temperatures during this phase of the potion’s preparation is extremely narrow.” Severus glanced at said temperature, reported on a small dial, temporarily affixed to the side of his cauldron. Satisfied with its readings, he continued fanning the small, controlled flames beneath his cauldron as he spoke. “Given the natural moisture and density variations in the fuel, I would not trust a steady source of air to adequately control fluctuations in temperature.”

Noting the color of said flame, Severus picked up a few strips of willow bark, dusted in finely ground moonstones, and tossed them into the fire. As he fanned the flames again, they cracked with purple sparks, but took on a more appropriate, magenta hue.

This was the most taxing stage of brewing the Wolfsbane Potion, not because it was complicated, but because it required meticulous and sustained attention to detail at a point in the early hours of morning when standard stimulants no longer produced adequate results and the mind started to wander. And so, when the watchers had asked if it would be an acceptable time to ask questions, Severus had acquiesced, if only as a method for keeping his mind alert.

Rubuntja nodded to himself, writing in his book of notes.

“Is white willow necessary, or would any species of *Salix* suffice?” Dr. Pierson asked.

“To my knowledge, the efficacy of many standard mineralogical and botanical substitutions has not yet been rigorously tested.” Severus said, pointedly not looking at Lupin, who had remained in attendance long after Severus had expected. “The potential ramifications for misbrewing the potion are too serious to the limited pool of potential test subjects to encourage much experimentation.”

Severus checked the cauldron’s temperature again. It was well within the requisite range, as was the color of the flame. The potion’s hue and scent were both acceptable as well.

A small gust of wind whistled across the roof of the building. They had used the laboratory’s ‘hydraulic lift’ hours ago, at moonrise. Severus had brought to mind a stabilizing spell, half-expecting that the process would be jostle the entire platform, envisioning a contraption of wheels and gears, perhaps powered by water. But the transition, accompanied with a low hiss and whine of machinery, had been surprisingly smooth.
Severus ceased his fanning, but while the wind ruffled the notes of the watching Council members, it diverted around the area immediately surrounding the cauldron and brazier. Ms. Takeshi’s enchantment seemed to be working, as promised. This one task, he had reluctantly agreed to hand over to the Council’s resident weather witch. She had finally made that admission regarding her skillset, along with the offer to handle any meteorological complications during the evening’s brewing. After what was, for Severus, a restrained lecture on the alchemical dangers of stray raindrops or disrupted flames, he had acquiesced to her aid with as much grace as he could muster, when faced with her coolly raised eyebrow and the affronted silence he had started to note from the gathered watchers. Even so, he had kept his own wand in hand, ready to cast, in the event that her spells had failed.

They had not.

Severus’ wand now sat on the table behind him, well within easy reach, but momentarily disregarded after Ms. Takeshi had demonstrated her competence in weather management to his satisfaction.

He had to admit, brewing potions with skilled aid on hand had its benefits. It had certainly eased this step of the process. The watchers had also offered food and drink when the dinner hour had passed, though Severus had been forced to decline. He could not leave the potion unmonitored, even for the few minutes it might take to consume a quick meal. He had noticed the signs expressly forbidding food and drink in the laboratory, and would not impose on Ms. Takeshi’s hospitality. It was a small matter, he had eaten a hearty (by his reckoning) midday meal in preparation for the long hours of brewing ahead.

Besides, there was a powerful stimulant – not the standard Wideye Potion, but a stronger version of his own devising – waiting in one of his pockets. He had taken one dose at midnight. Once the sun rose, he would allow himself a second. By the time he allowed himself a third, he would be grateful of an empty stomach.

“What ramifications?” Dr. Pierson asked, eyes distant and narrowed in thought. “Other than simple failure to control the lycanthropic state.”

Severus placed another strip of willow bark in the fire. “Several werewolves have died from taking improperly prepared Wolfsbane Potion,” he said flatly. “At least one entered a irreversible state of violent madness, decoupled from the physical transformation. I can send copies of the case studies, but most of those incidents stemmed from substituting less expensive or transfigured reagents.”

Dr. Pierson scowled to herself, obviously deep in thought, and tapped her writing utensil against the page where she had been writing.

Severus finally allowed himself a brief glance at Lupin, attempting to discretely determine how the werewolf was reacting to the direction these questions were taking. Lycanthropes had difficulty finding employment of any kind, much less in fields lucrative enough to easily cover the cost of monthly doses of Wolfsbane Potion. If not for the ludicrously generous stipend granted Hogwarts Potions masters for stocking their personal and educational laboratories, as well as Albus’ vested interest in ignoring any misappropriation of those school funds with regards to Order business, Lupin himself would most likely have to rely on the physical restraints used to contain many werewolves during the full moon.

Lupin was watching Severus with the oddest expression on his face. Despite their personal history, and Severus’ associated animosity, the werewolf was always scrupulously polite. Now, he looked even more melancholy and uncomfortable than usual, shoulders hunched and rounded.
The cauldron’s fire sparked and hissed, drawing Severus’ attention back to the task at hand. Finding nothing amiss – one of the slivers of willow bark must have been slightly wet – he continued to fan the flames.

“One hour until sunrise,” said the middle-aged watcher who had seemingly appointed himself Severus’ timekeeper for the evening. His name was Leon Gutierrez. Severus was carefully committing any names he heard to memory. Names were oftentimes important. Severus would need to recall them, when he reported back to Albus.

Severus looked at the listed times and glowing clock, hanging on the white board, and found that the watcher’s announcement was accurate. He rose from the stool, stiff from sitting in one position for so long, and put down the folding, wood-slat fan. He picked up his silver mixing spoon from its drying stand. Turning back to the potion, he stirred it briefly and then lifted the spoon from the liquid to watch how it dripped, judging its viscosity. It was nearly within the requisite parameters.

Severus wiped the spoon clean with an absorbancy cloth and returned it to its stand. Then, retrieving his fan, he returned himself to the stool next to the brazier. Only half an hour more, and then he could move on to the next phase in the potion’s preparation.

The watchers had quieted while he had risen to check the potion, a courtesy he wished his usual students would emulate.

The green-haired watcher, Severus was fairly certain that he had heard the others call her Mia, was making some kind of modification to the recording device. Arthur had said something about ‘batteries’ before he had retired. Apparently the lure of Muggle machinery could only hold his attention until nightfall. Severus supposed Arthur returned to his wife in the evenings. He wondered what arrangements the others had made. Mr. Giles had mentioned something about dormitories…

“Next question,” he said, grasping at the offered method for keeping his thoughts on task.

“You said that the moonseed must be collected during the new moon,” Aaron Burchfield asked. Severus was fairly certain he knew all the attending watchers’ names, save three, at this point. “Is it dried in the interim, or do you preserve it to remain fresh somehow?”

“The seeds are dried. Hogwarts’ herbologist maintains a desiccation cabinet for such tasks,” Severus replied, glancing again at the clock. Twenty-five more minutes until he would ask Gutierrez to lower the platform and return them to the laboratory’s floor. Fifty-five until he would allow himself another dose of stimulant.

It occurred to Severus that these Muggle watchers and wandless witches and wizards represented the most competent, least vexing batch of ‘students’ he had ever been tasked with teaching.

The irony was not lost on him.

“Does this type of potion have to be administered orally, or can it be delivered intravenously?” Dr. Pierson asked.

The inside of Severus’ left arm prickled. He refrained from scratching it.

After three doses of stimulant, Severus’ vision was starting to be noticeably impaired. The overly-white laboratory lights appeared as if through a prism, rainbow-trimmed and vaguely unreal. Fortunately, the Wolfsbane Potion was nearly complete.
A new group of watchers had been waiting on them in the laboratory when Severus had requested they lower the platform. Lupin had finally retired, chased away by one of the apprentices, who seemed convinced that he needed to be well-rested, so as to not bias some kind of tests the werewolf had promised to take later. A few of the watchers had left as well, but most of them had made use of the neighboring ‘break room’ to take brief naps before returning. Dr. Pierson had been the first back. Her clothing was visibly rumpled, but she had come armed with clear eyes and more questions.

“I wonder if some kind of a…” she twisted her hands oddly, as if unscrewing some imaginary device in her hands. “A shrinking spell, or containment spell? The type you have on your equipment case. If that could be placed upon a dart.”

The woman seemed determined to convert the Wolfsbane Potion into a weapon, though perhaps that was an unfair term. The watcher seemed to want to have something on hand to stop rampaging werewolves without actually killing them, dosages for more standard tranquilizers being somewhat difficult to properly calculate in the midst of pitched combat.

“That would still require greatly strengthening the potion itself, so as to overcome the need to build up a concentration in the werewolf’s body over the course of the week preceding the full moon,” Severus replied. He was, in point of fact, currently measuring out those very seven doses and decanting them into leaded glass jars. He had already portioned out corresponding allotments of powdered silver, desiccated moonseeds, and finely diced pieces of dried valerian root, blended together in smaller vials.

Once he finished pouring out the requisite number of doses, Severus turned to find Ms. Takeshi, who had not slept and yet seemed to be only minutely tired herself, waiting. Severus placed his measuring devices next to the cauldron. “The remainder should be adequate to your needs,” he said, and gestured toward the dish of mixed, dry components as well. “Five parts liquid should be combined with one part dried reagents immediately before use for maximum efficacy.”

Ms. Takeshi, who had donned thin, luridly blue gloves for some reason, stepped forward to peer over the lip of the still-warm cauldron. She nodded, and said, “This will be more than enough,” before whisking his cauldron and the plate of dried ingredients onto a sturdy, metal cart supported on four wheeled legs. “Our thanks,” she said, by way of a brisk farewell.

“I should,” Dr. Pierson pointed to a small group of watchers, gathered to one corner of the laboratory. She had identified them as members of her own ‘research team,’ apprentices in her Muggle branch of science.

Severus nodded, and said, “I will owl you the relevant case studies, later this week.” Or Irma would, once he found the time to assemble a list of the requisite books and journals that covered incidents associated with misbrewed Wolfsbane Potion.

“Thank you,” she said, and patted him on the arm, an almost maternal gesture that Severus normally would have twitched away from had his mind not been so dulled by the many hours without sleep and the flagging effects of the stimulant. Without another word, Dr. Pierson shuffled away towards her cluster of assistants, failing to conceal the tired drag in her own steps.

Severus stood alone for a moment, watching the sudden activity across the laboratory unfold. Ms. Takeshi was doling out very small samples of potion, mixing it meticulously for small groupings of watchers, who had arranged themselves into clusters around the lab. They seemed to be centered around specific groupings of instruments, or, in at least one case, carefully arranged feathers and herbs, meticulously laid out in geometric patterns within a ring of lit candles. One such clustering of watchers, on the far side of the room, had gathered around Remus Lupin, who had manage to
reappear without Severus noticing.

The werewolf’s presence reminded Severus of the task at hand. He turned back to the rows of jars. Two he set aside, while the remainder were stoppered and placed in neat rows alongside a parchment with detailed instructions, identical in every regard to the same ones he had provided for Lupin every month since his recent employment at Hogwarts. Then, Severus retrieved a goblet from his brewing kit and decanted the contents of the last two jars into it, first the liquid components, then the powdered reagents. Wisps of bluish smoke rose from the completed potion, a final signal that it had been brewed successfully.

Severus glanced up at the ‘video camera,’ which was still pointed at him, tiny green light blinking on and off at regular intervals. He supposed that someone would be along to deal with it soon enough. Brewing, and presumably his promise to undergo ‘recording,’ complete, he stepped out of the device’s apparent range of vision and carried the goblet to the far side of the laboratory, where two watchers were attaching small circles of pliable, white material all over Lupin’s head and neck. The discs adhered readily to both skin and hair, and were linked to a glowing panel of some sort by a sizable bundle of ropes or wires. Lupin looked ridiculous, and seemed to realize it, meeting Severus’ pointedly bland expression with a wry, resigned half-smile.

“Severus,” Lupin said in greeting, obviously trying not to move overmuch as another circle was affixed over his left temple.

“Remus,” Severus responded, tone of voice as flat as he could make it.

“Sorry, just one more…” mumbled the watcher on Lupin’s right, a young man with dark skin and closely cropped hair. He must have come in with the most recent additions, Severus did not recognize him from earlier. “There,” the watcher said, running one last wire back to a pad against Lupin’s neck and securing it with a quiet click. “Excuse me.” He ducked around Severus, paying the Potions master barely any heed, and joined his colleague in front of the glowing screen.

For all the serious demeanors of the two watchers, who were now deeply interested in the words and charts that had appeared on their glowing panel, the end effect of all their labor seemed absolutely ludicrous. Lupin looked as if he had become the victim of a small army of multi-headed leaches. Severus restrained himself to only a single raised eyebrow as he handed the werewolf the goblet of potion.

The expression must have been eloquent enough though, because Lupin explained, “They want to see how the potion affects…” he paused for a moment, obviously grasping for the correct terminology or concept, “the currents of my mind, I suppose.”

Severus was having difficulty imagining any set of circumstances that would induce him to suffer such an indignity. However, it was an interesting concept, and one Severus might be inclined to discuss further with someone other than Remus Lupin. Perhaps Professor Rosenberg could explain this odd crown of wires more fully.

Severus glanced to the side, but the two watchers were fussing over their machinery, seemingly oblivious to the conversation behind them.

“I have left you instructions with the other six doses,” Severus said, not wishing to prolong the conversation any further.

“Thank you,” Lupin said, as he always did. This time though, it was not just perfunctory courtesy and thinly veiled relief to be avoiding the worst effects of his monthly transformation. He seemed oddly fervent.
Severus, unsure how to react to this change in tone, simply eyed the werewolf.

Lupin raised a hand, as if to run a hand through his hair, but remembered himself, or at least the network of wires, and dropped it into his lap instead. “Reading about how complicated it is to brew Wolfsbane Potion is one thing. Actually seeing it done…” he trailed off.

He was trying to compliment Severus, or he was at least attempting to acknowledge the time, expertise, and effort that went into the task.

Severus stared at Lupin, caught somewhere between distrust that this wasn’t some kind of trap and a quickly-squelched desire to preen, because yes, Merlin burn him for not noticing previously, brewing this potion every month did take a great deal of time and knowledge and skill. He deserved recognition for that fact. He deserved…

Nothing.

He deserved nothing. Everything he could do and everything he could make was owed, back pay for the terrible choices he had made, the lives he had ruined.

Still, that knowledge was a bitter draught to swallow at times.

Severus couldn’t keep a sneer from his face, but refrained from saying anything biting that the watchers might overhear, something along the lines of ‘If it keeps you from eating anyone this month, I will count it as time well spent.’

Lupin looked confused and more than a little taken aback at Severus’ reaction.

Part of Severus wished that Lupin would stop thanking him at all. Would curse at him, hate him. Lupin didn’t know why Severus had come to work for the Order, didn’t know that Lily and James Potter’s blood was on Severus’ hands. Sometimes the weight of that secret was crushing.

“Have Dr. Pierson alert me if this exercise proves fruitful,” he said, instead of ‘Hate me, damn you.’

Without waiting for a response, Severus stalked away, back to the central grouping of tables, where the implements and other remnants of his brewing waited, requiring his attention. He was entirely too tired and too compromised by excessive stimulant use to handle his current emotions with anything resembling equanimity, but he could lose himself in stoppering each little jar and cleaning out his cauldron, which the watchers’ had returned, along with his now-empty dish.

“Matsu tells me that was a particularly impressive example of potion brewing,” a man’s voice cut across Severus’ concentrated solitude as he was securing his immaculately clean cauldron in his brewing kit. He looked up to see the speaker, but of course it was Mr. Giles, here, presumably, to escort Severus back to the fireplace in the Council Head’s office.

Severus did not let his gaze waver, though he found himself scowling at this man’s praise as well.

“Nothing for Wolfsbane Potion is unusually complex,” he said as neutrally as possible, because it was true and because he did not want someone at the Council to try making it unassisted, and bungle the whole endeavor. He closed the padded drawer that contained his cauldron and closed the packed cabinet doors of his now fully-packed supply case.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment. The stimulant might have tricked his body into wakefulness, but his thoughts were becoming more scattered by the minute. He was forgetting something. Something foolish and sentimental. “Professor Rosenberg mentioned an apprentice, a… lab tech. Who bakes, when she is under stress.”
He became concerned that he had erred somehow, when Mr. Giles stared at him in seeming incomprehension. Then, sudden understanding dawned on the man’s face. “I take it Willow is missing Sophia’s orange cranberry muffins?” the Council Head asked, with a fond smile. “I believe we can get something together for her.”

“How is Arabella faring?” Albus asked, after Severus stepped from the green flames and into the Headmaster’s office.

Severus looked at Albus for a dull moment, longing for his quarters and sleep, but understanding the need for this debriefing. “I did not see her in person, but Mr. Giles requested that I give you this.” He pulled a thick envelope from his robes and handed it to Albus. A second bundle of papers remained in his pocket, destined for Professor Rosenberg. “She is settling in with a group of other wandless trainees in Devon. The address is written on the envelope.”

Albus took the letter, report really, and nodded to himself. “We should gift her with an owl,” he said, mostly to himself. “Sit, sit,” he said, gesturing to the chairs in front of his desk. “I take it there were no problems with your brewing?”

Severus sank into one of the chairs, briefly closing his weary eyes against the lights and riotous colors of the room. “Obviously,” he said.

That was met with a longer silence than expected. Severus opened his eyes again and glanced at Albus.

The Headmaster had a grave expression on his face.

It could not be a good sign that Albus had waited until Severus had taken a seat. “What happened?” he asked, bracing for some kind of terrible news.

“Professor Rosenberg is fine,” Albus said.

Severus felt something cold crystallize in the pit of his stomach. Albus raised a hand in a calming gesture, no doubt attempting to stave off questions. “What. Happened?” Severus repeated, frustrated anger in his voice more than a little tinged with fear. There was a wide range of conditions that Albus might classify as ‘fine.’

“I promise you Severus, she is perfectly unharmed, but someone did give her food laced with a potion yesterday.” Albus gave him a quelling look when Severus’ expression darkened. “We both know how you would have reacted, had I sent word before your brewing was complete.” Albus smiled ever so slightly. “Yes, I have saved the remaining food for you to examine later, and no, she does not need an antidote from you, though I would be interested in knowing how she managed to purge the potion from her system without one. Truly though, she is well.”

Albus’ high handedness was not appreciated. “Where is she?” Severus asked, only suppressing a powerful urge to tear out of the office so long as Albus discontinued his games.

“The hospital wing,” Albus replied, apparently sensing the high probability of a mutiny if he withheld that information. “I had Poppy detain her, in case we need to make her convalescence seem more severe. Poppy reports that Professor Rosenberg has nearly reached the end of her patience with the ruse though. I suspect that she might appreciate being rescued.”

Severus was fairly certain that he was being teased, but he was not about to stay long enough to rise to the bait.
Chapter 27

The boom of a heavy, wooden door slamming open echoed through the infirmary.

Willow peered around the corner of her curtain, which divided off her bed in the hospital wing. Was it possible to recognize a door slam?

It was. The door-slammer was Severus.

Oh thank the Goddess.

Willow had been just about convinced that she was going of die of boredom. Literally die. Just lie down on the floor, slip into a boredom-induced vegetative state, and shuffle right off this mortal coil. It might have been different if Poppy had let her pitch in around the Infirmary, help a little with the students who were coming in with bumps and bruises, but the school’s healer seemed dead set on keeping Willow corralled in her little hospital bed. Willow was trying to be cool about the whole thing, having already freaked out the healer with black-haired, impossible-teleportation once, but she really did feel fine, and this was going way beyond ridiculous, ‘Dumbledore’s orders’ or not.

Severus spotted her almost immediately, but was waylaid, to his obvious irritation, by Poppy.

Willow grimaced a little when she saw Poppy hand him a large vial, filled with dark goo. It had to be her black magic barf. Gross.

Whatever, he was a Potions master. He probably thought it was the most interesting thing ever.

Right, just like he probably also found her purple butterfly pajamas particularly alluring.

Severus finally finished up whatever he was saying to Poppy and headed her direction. Willow crossed her arms across her chest, feeling defensive and then silly for reacting that way in the first place.

As he neared, Willow noticed that Severus wasn’t looking so great himself. He looked like he hadn’t slept since she had seen him last, which, considering what he had been up to, might actually be the case. “Are you okay?” she asked, forehead wrinkled in worry.

Severus just stared at her for a moment. “I am told that I am supposed to be asking you that.” He sounded sarcastic and dismissive, and his aura was a churning mess of worry and self-recrimination. Willow suddenly remembered that yeah, there was one student in the infirmary just then, even though she was pretty sure he was sleeping. Whoops, better buckle in for some dissembling.

“I’m totally fine,” she said, eyes sliding sideways to give Poppy, who was bustling around the far end of the room, an annoyed look. “Kind of hoping to get out of here, though.”

“The Headmaster requested that I determine whether you are sufficiently recovered from your severe, debilitating illness,” Severus said, emphasizing the words with oily, false concern.

Wait? What?

She hadn’t had that bad of a reaction. What was he… Oh. Ohhhh… Poppy had said that Dumbledore wanted her to stay in the hospital wing. Maybe his motive wasn’t actually an
overreaction to her potion-ing and was more an attempt to fake out the potion-er. That would have been good to know earlier. Too bad nobody had bothered to tell her.

Severus had half-drawn his wand from the cuff of his sleeve, and was looking at her as if awaiting permission to continue. When she shrugged her acquiescence, he performed much the same kind of wand-based, tingly scan that Poppy had done the day before, apparently with similar results. Despite the flat, almost disdainful expression on his face, Severus’ shoulders slumped slightly in what looked, given his aura at least, like relief. “I can see no reason why you need to continue loitering here, monopolizing Madam Pomfrey’s space and resources,” he said.

He really did have his complete-jerk-act down. Willow refrained from rolling her eyes. “Sounds great, tell Poppy that,” she said instead.

Willow peered around Severus to check. The one student, a boy from Hufflepuff, was curled up on his side, mouth open and softly snoring in sleep. Willow backed further behind her curtain partition, well out of sight, and raised a barrier around them to block eavesdropping. It seemed kind of excessive, but then again, she had also thought that constantly checking her food for poisons or potions was paranoid. “I blew off dinner yesterday, and somebody slipped a potion-laced dessert onto the tray of food the House-Elves dropped off at my office.” She wrinkled up her nose in remembered disgust. “So I got it out of my system as best I could, told Dumbledore, who dumped me on Poppy, who dumped me on you.” She picked at the hem of her t-shirt, feeling both sheepish and defensive. “I guess I also had an allergic reaction to the icing.”

She was kind of expecting some kind of tirade about not being careful enough, or not taking his warnings seriously, or something, but Severus was just looking at her, dark eyes searching her face.

“I really am ok,” she repeated, stomach feeling kind of flippy under such intense scrutiny. “And no offense, but you look like you’re about to keel over. Why aren’t you in bed right now?”

Severus didn’t quite smile, that barest quirking of one side of his lips didn’t count, but he did raise one eyebrow mockingly.

Willow rolled her eyes. “The only reason I didn’t just leave is that Poppy would have freaked.”

“Your forbearance in preserving her peace of mind is noted.”

“I could still set something on fire to cover my escape.”

“Your colleagues send their regards.” Severus’ abrupt change of topic drew Willow up short. He drew a sealed manila folder and a white, clamshell box out of a pocket that couldn’t have been large enough to contain them. “And these.”

Willow took the box and folder, but couldn’t help looking at the pocket from which they had come. “Do you have some kind of pocket dimension in your, uh… pocket?” she asked.

“Undetectable Expansion Charms are strictly regulated by the Ministry,” Severus said, blandly.

Willow gave him a slightly exasperated look, because that was distinctly not a ‘No,’ but looked down at the items he had handed her instead of commenting further. The large envelope had the seal of the Council of Watchers printed on one corner, so that had to be letters from Giles. The box was a little more mysterious though, so she opened it curiously. Inside, she found four of Sophia’s cranberry orange muffins with several more chocolate chip cookies, crammed around the muffins in every available space. “Oh,” she said in a small, choked voice. “Oh great, now she was having to stifle a sniffle. Real mature. “Thank you,” she said, closing the box for later and hugging
these little pieces of home to her chest.

“And now, I have every intention of retiring to my quarters, and not emerging until breakfast tomorrow,” Severus said. “Until then, Professor Rosenberg.”

He really did sound like a Jane Austen character sometimes. “Until then, Professor Snape,” she mimicked with a wide, genuine smile.

~*~*~*~

Willow hadn’t had all that much formal instruction on how to be a teacher back at the Academies. She’d kind of had to learn on the job, the couple of times they had tapped her for instruction in the past. She’d tried to read teaching books, attend webinars, gather tips and tricks from experienced teachers, whatever it took to not suck as an instructor. Teenaged slayers weren’t always the easiest of students to keep on task.

She was pretty certain that nowhere in her patchwork assembly of experience and education had anyone mentioned how you were supposed to teach a class in which you were pretty certain one or more of your students had just tried to maybe-kidnap, maybe-kill you.

The Sunnydale school system had probably held in-service days on just this situation, Willow was sure of it.

She wasn’t even sure which student had tried to poison her. Truthfully, she didn’t really have proof that it had been a student either. For all she knew, some random Death Eater could have snuck any old unlucky person the same compulsion candy she had been given and used them as a cat’s paw. It wasn’t impossible.

Unless it was.

She really needed to research the potion in question.

But if it was possible, then Willow didn’t just need to worry about the students she knew had Death Eaters for parents. She had to worry about absolutely everyone.

Maybe not everyone, everyone. Surely the other professors knew how to resist compulsion, like she had done.

Except Poppy had been confused and surprised that she had been able to shake off the potion’s effects without an antidote.

So, who the heck had antidotes for this kind of stuff on hand? Poppy, obviously. Almost definitely Severus. Maybe Dumbledore?

She couldn’t think of anyone else.

So, basically everyone.

Which was just great.

Pretty heavy thoughts, for a dark cubby, just around the corner from the entrance of her classroom. And class was going to start soon, there wasn’t any way around that. Willow had ended up staying up late last night, thinking about… well… everything, and had finally decided to shuffle around her subject for the day. She wasn’t feeling up to anything too involved at the moment, not when she was probably going to be hair triggered and magically twitchy. So wards and other protection
spells were out, and demonic taxonomies were in. This class was a little more research-y than lecture-y or magic-y, and besides, she could talk about the topic in her sleep.

Willow finally took a deep breath, shouldered her bag, and walked around the corner in the direction of her classroom. The class wasn’t going to teach itself, and it wasn’t like anybody was going to try to jump her in front of a room full of other students.

Probably.

With that less than heartening thought, Willow pushed open the door of her classroom, thinking herself mentally prepared for just about anything.

She immediately found that no, she was not.

*What the freaking poo?*

Dolores Flipping Umbridge was waiting at the front of the classroom, clipboard in hand.

Willow tried to keep from scowling and stomping down the staircase to the front of the room. She wasn’t certain she had succeeded though, Umbridge’s expression became even more haughty and superior as Willow approached.

They stared at each other for a moment, but then Willow smiled, wide and vapid and cheerful as she could fake it. “Is there something I can help you with, Professor Umbridge?” she asked, wishing for all the world that she hadn’t cornered Severus after lunch and asked him to go ahead to the library and get things ready before their class. She really could have used some back up, right here, right now.

“Why, no my dear. What a thing to ask,” Umbridge said with a breathless little giggle. “I am here to observe you.”

“Observe me?” Willow asked, and it didn’t take much dissembling to sound confused.

“The Ministry is very concerned about the quality of the education being provided here,” Umbridge said, apparently not caring that there was a classroom full of students listening in. “I will be observing classes and personally reporting back on each instructors’ fitness to teach. And while only a scant number of students seem interested in your questionable magical methods, I thought I would start with you. After all, you seem to have attracted some of our more… troublesome students.”

Willow’s smile had taken on a rictus appearance, showing far too many teeth. She wanted to tell Frog Face exactly where she could stick her demeaning simpers and child-torture fetish, but she knew she should rein in that impulse and think about the bigger picture. “Sounds great,” she said cheerfully, knowing she sounded deranged and struggling to find the motivation to care very much. “I’d love to share some teaching tips with you about how we do things at the Council of Watchers.” That purposeful misinterpretation of Umbridge’s insult left the woman momentarily gaping in indignation. Willow took advantage of the brief respite to turn back to her students, who were eyeing them both with expressions ranging from intrigue to alarm. “And slaying demons. And using this flow chart,” she pulled a stack of papers out of her satchel, “To figure out the best way to slay demons.”

Willow started handing out the pages, pointedly ignoring Umbridge, who, if the scratching sound was to be believed, had started writing something on her clipboard. As she moved around the classroom, she noticed that Argus was missing, and hey, here was Draco, who was looking at her
like she was a particularly dangerous, distasteful ghost.

It was going to be a long class.

~*_*_~

“Where did you receive your education?” Umbridge asked, giving Willow a prim, superior look.

Willow was pretty certain that Frog Face didn’t mean her couple of semesters at UC Sunnydale, nor the evening school classes she had taken at Case Western, squeezed in around dealing with the usual demonic shenanigans on the Cleveland Hellmouth. “I’ve been with the Council of Watchers since high school,” which was sort of true and really not, but Giles had been a watcher, and she had been learning from his books, and she knew how ‘I am self-taught’ sounded.

Then again, why did she even care what this awful hag wrote in her report?

Oh yeah, the piercingly significant look that Severus had given her when she had arrived in the library, students and ‘observer’ in tow.

He was lurking at the entrance of the Restricted Section, keeping a close eye on their class. Their students were spread throughout the library, looking up their assigned demons. Willow had picked out several different species, some which would be easy to find in the school’s libraries, some that would be kind of hard, and a few that would be really difficult, maybe impossible. They were supposed to use their flow charts, and the library’s collections, to figure out physical descriptions (humanoid-reptilian, humanoid-mammalian, gelatinous, etc.), dispositions (usually good, usually evil, neutral, etc.), and weaknesses (sunlight, silver, human voices, etc.) of each demon. It was a good assignment.

It was.

Too bad it left plenty of downtime for Umbridge to butt in and ask obnoxious questions.

Umbridge had seemed disconcertingly pleased with the idea that she was teaching students how to kill ‘non-wizard, part-humans.’ Which one, ignored the part of the assignment where Willow wanted them to learn which demons weren’t necessarily evil, and two, demonstrated a real lack of understanding on Umbridge’s part regarding demonic reproduction.

“Does your Council provide equivalents to O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s?” Umbridge said, sounding dubious and slightly scornful.

Willow vaguely recognized those terms. Minerva had mentioned the wizarding standardized tests during one of their conversations about the school. “I made a fifteen twenty on my S.A.T.,” Willow said, without any further explanation. Two could play at this game.

Umbridge gave her a hard glare, obviously not understanding the score or the acronym.

Willow smiled at her with a cheerful edge.

Umbridge scribbled something down on her clipboard.

Gosh, this was a barrel of fun.

“Professor Rosenberg?” said a voice behind Willow. She turned around to find Hermione Granger hugging a huge tome against her chest.
“What’s up?” Willow asked, trying to make her smile encouraging rather than a desperate plea for a lengthy distraction.

The girl looked back and forth between Willow and Frog Face, before squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin. “I’m having a little trouble with classifying Ok’tun demons,” she finally said. “Most of them are obviously reptilian, but this book mentions a sub-population with…”

“Sensory whiskers,” Willow finished, with a far more genuine smile. It was a good catch, a little wrinkle in the Council’s current taxonomy, which she had wondered her students would catch. “Which is more of a mammal-y thing. But look,” she started to reach for the book in Hermione’s arms.

Frog Face cleared her throat meaningfully.

Hermione’s eyes widened at Willow’s sudden, angry scowl, which was smoothed away as she turned to smile back at Umbridge. “Yes?” she asked, with the same cheery, fake pleasantness.

“I have more questions,” Umbridge said, with cloying, venomous sweetness.

“I’m sure you do,” Willow said, with a grin that made her cheeks hurt. “But isn’t it going to be kind of hard to write a teaching review for me if you don’t get to watch me, you know, actually teaching?”

That question, presented in what Willow hoped sounded like vapid innocence, was met with a narrow-eyed glare, but Frog Face just waved her hand in imperious dismissal.

Willow turned back to Hermione, who was watching the entire transaction with wide-eyed attention. “Here,” Willow said, finally taking the girl’s book and flipping it around to see what she had been reading. “Ah, okay. Pergannon is a good general reference, but Applewhite and Embry talk in more detail about Ok’tun anatomy. Here, I’ll show you,” she handed the book back to Hermione and headed towards a row of books that Willow’s own explorations had revealed contained the better quality demonic texts. “And five points to Gryffindor,” she said, putting hasty distance between herself and Frog Face. “For attention to detail.”

Willow managed to find excuses to mingle with her students for the rest of the class period. Oh, Frog Face still swooped in from time to time with questions that ranged from insultingly simplistic to jargon-laced and incomprehensible. She’d been talking to the students too. Willow wasn’t sure if she wanted to know what the students were saying, especially Draco, who was definitely acting extra weird.

In order to appease the hovering Madam Pince, Willow made the students spend the last ten minutes of class cleaning up the library, re-shelving books and scrolls, returning chairs to their usual positions. Apparently that was boring enough that Umbridge finally excused herself, much to most everyone’s relief. Maybe the students didn’t know exactly what was going on, but they weren’t stupid either. Between Willow acting like a manically cheerful caricature of herself, Severus aggressively fading into the background, and Umbridge being… well… herself, it didn’t take geniuses to figure out that something was up. And some of their students were quite bright.

When the last of their student finally left with instructions to finish their work before their next class meeting, Willow looked around the library. Madam Pince was still around, somewhere, and a few other students, young-looking enough that they had to be first years, were scattered across several tables, obviously working on homework. Severus was still there too, and she needed to talk to him. Really, really needed to, and she’d just about reached the ragged end of her meager acting abilities, and…
“The order of leaded vials you requested has arrived,” Severus said. “It is currently taking up valuable space on my desk.”

Willow hadn’t asked him to order any vials. She rolled her eyes at the fabricated rudeness, and suppressed a grateful smile at the obvious, at least to her, invitation. “I have time to pick them up before dinner,” she said. “But only if we head that way now.”

“If you insist,” he replied, sounding bored and annoyed, even if his face was studiously blank.

The walk to Severus’ office wasn’t so long, but by the time they reached it, Willow was almost vibrating with suppressed nervous energy. When the door closed behind them both, and Severus’ wards leapt back into place, Willow rounded on him.

“What the heck was that?” she asked, giving in to an hour’s worth of pent up freak out.

Severus gave her a significant look, walking across the room to his desk. “You gave her very little fuel to burn,” he said, and seemed to find something about his rows and rows of jarred reagents very interesting. “How much warning did she give you?”

“For what, that she was going to be crashing my class?” At Severus’ assenting nod, she answered, “None. I walked into our classroom, and there she was.”

“She will have little on which to hang a complaint,” Severus said. “You cannot rely on luck a second time though. Prepare at least two more, strictly theoretical lessons, and be ready to present them at a moment’s notice.”

Willow felt like she was losing track of the thread of the conversation. It didn’t take telepathy to see the gears spinning in Severus’ mind, but he was only voicing maybe half of those whirring thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“You taught no applied magic today,” Severus said, looking at her speculatively. “As her own class is purposefully, entirely theoretical, I’m sure she found little to protest.”

Willow knew that at least part of the reason she was teaching the class she was had to do with Dumbledore thinking Umbridge’s class was a load of hooey. Even though she could see how that painted a target on her back with Frog Face, it stung that Severus thought she had intentionally taught a crummy class. “I mean, okay, I moved an easy topic to today, because hello, working through some issues here, but that stuff is important too,” Willow said defensively. “Knowing when to blast something is at least as important as knowing how to.”

“I am not disagreeing, However, Fudge is becoming more paranoid by the day. He is seeing threats to his power around every corner, especially here in Hogwarts.”

Willow goggled at that a little. She had known that the Minister of Magic was refusing to believe that Voldemort had returned, but this was taking that denial to a whole other level. “He thinks we’re, what? Running a junior-league insurgency camp here?”

“As I said, we were lucky this time,” he said. Willow got a little hung up on the ‘we’ part of that sentence, but Severus continued without noticing her distraction. “Had she visited during one of your more practical lessons, she would have been compelled to protect the Ministry’s interests. I suspect she was hoping to log more complaints from the students,” Severus said, staring again at his shelves, or maybe through them. “She found little to record there either, none spoke against you.”

That was more than a little startling. “Why not?” Willow asked, genuinely confused. She would
have figured that some of the Slytherins, at the very least, would have had some choice words for Umbridge’s reports.

Severus gave her a sardonic look. “I cornered Mr. Malfoy in the library and suggested that you would be somewhat difficult to capture, should you be ignominiously sacked and shipped back to London.”

It took her a moment, but Willow did eventually realize that she was gaping like a fish. Well, there was her proof about Draco’s involvement, she supposed. “Uh, thanks?” she finally said.

“It served our purposes,” Severus said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. “Though I doubt it would truly come to that. Your connection to the Council of Watchers, and their treaties and agreements with the Ministry of Magic, protect you more than the rest of us. That you have proven to be less biddable than expected is hardly grounds to challenge those magically binding contracts.”

Willow wasn’t sure exactly how to feel about that. On the one hand, it meant that she’d most likely still be around to help when the poop really hit the fan. On the other, she was suddenly imagining herself, stuck alone at Hogwarts after the rest of the faculty had been fired and replaced, surrounded by an Orwellian hellscape of Frog Face clones. “Do you think she’s figured out that we sabotaged her torture pen?” Willow finally asked. “Is that what this was all about?”

“Doubtful,” Severus said, flatly. “At least, the other Heads of House have not yet reported back to me that they have had need to use our potion.”

Willow rolled that tidbit over in her mind. “I guess that’s good,” she finally said. Good that they hadn’t been discovered. Good that Frog Face hadn’t been trying to slice up little kids’ hands over the last few days. That was some messed up definition of ‘good.’ “She mentioned that she would be assessing everybody. She was just starting with me,” Willow added, finally sitting down in one of Severus’ office chairs.

“That does logically follow,” Severus said, continuing to loom next to his bookshelf. Apparently coming to some conclusion, he started plucking a few small containers off of his shelves.

“Are you going to change up your Potions class?” Willow asked, thinking ahead to her own lesson plans. She had several lessons that weren’t exactly combat-focused, making them good options in case Frog Face made another unannounced appearance. “When Umbridge drops in on you.”

“No,” Severus said, placing four vials and one lumpy rock-looking thing in a neat, even row in front of her. “My curriculum has always followed the Ministry’s recommended O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. guidelines.”

Willow noted that the vials were not empty, which meant that Severus wasn’t just providing her with props to further their current ruse.

At her questioning look, Severus explained. “Dispelling Distillation, which is the potion I used on your eyes,” he said, touching the stopper of the first vial with the tip of his index finger. Then, tapping each stopper in turn, he continued, “Concentrated Murtlap Essence, to blunt pain and slow bleeding; Blood-Replenishing Potion, for the obvious, Essence of Rue, for recovery after poisoning; and a bezoar, if the Rue and your own methods are insufficient.”

That all sounded super useful, and probably had taken a slew of hours to brew. Except for the bezoar, which really needed instructions. Was she supposed to gag down the rock? Hold it in her mouth? Grind it up and snort it? Questions aside, Willow was grateful, but she still wasn’t sure
why he was suddenly…

“Take these, so that you are better prepared in my absence.”

Oh. “That wasn’t your fault,” Willow said.

The flat look he gave her spoke volumes.

Well, at least that explained the odd, guilty flashes she had been sensing from him lately. But that was silly. They had both known that she was being targeted. And everything had turned out okay.

So far.

He wasn’t wrong about needing to prepare for a next time though, probably sooner than later.

Willow picked up the first vial in line, the Dispelling Distillation. It had a tiny ‘DD’ inscribed in the stopper. “Any special instructions for these?” she asked, looking closely at the tiny vial.

“All of them may be consumed,” Severus said, which answered Willow’s question about the lumpy bezoar. Yuck. “The Dispelling Distillation and the Murtlap Essence may also be used topically.” When Willow moved to gingerly replace the container on the desk, Severus added, “The vials are also enchanted against breaking.”

“Don’t you need this stuff too?” Willow asked.

“I have more.”

Right, dumb question.

Willow slipped the first of the vials into a zippered pocket inside her bag and then reached for the others. It gave her something to do while she sorted out her thoughts. Severus was trying to protect her, or more accurately, he was trying to give her the tools to protect herself. It had been a pretty long time since anyone other than her closest friends had worried too much about shielding the Council’s magical B.F.G. from much of anything.

“How about you stop blaming yourself, and in return, I’ll try to not need any of these,” Willow said, tucking the bezoar next to the small vials. She supposed she should have put it in plastic baggie or something, but if she was so bad off she needed to swallow the thing, she figured that a little lint would be the least of her worries.

With her mini pharmacopeia safely secured, Willow looked back up at Severus.

“The other professors need to be warned about Professor Umbridge’s pending visitations,” he said, obviously ignoring her previous comment.

Willow refrained from sighing. He wasn’t wrong though.

If she wanted to catch Minerva and Hagrid and everybody else, she supposed she needed to go to dinner…

Where she would then have to sit next to Umbridge for an entire meal…

Eating alone in her office and risking another poisoning attempt was starting to sound better by the second.
Willow hung out in the Entrance Hall while the students filed into the Great Hall for dinner. Finally, she spotted Minerva coming down the main staircase, a pinched expression on her face and a folded newspaper under her arm. Willow managed to make her way through the throng of students and waylaid the Transfiguration professor at the base of the stairs.

“Do you have a second?” she asked.

Something in Willow’s expression must have tipped off Minerva that not-great things were afoot, because she nodded without a word and gestured for Willow to follow her. They made their way to the little staff room, which was just off of the Entrance Hall. Fortunately, they found it empty.

“Now,” Minerva said, placing her newspaper on one of the room’s small tables, “What seems to be the problem.”

Willow glanced at the door. The room wasn’t warded half so well as Severus’ office, but then again, it wasn’t like she was about to talk about something that the whole school would know about soon enough. “Professor Umbridge came to my class today and spent the whole period asking questions about my credentials and experience and stuff,” she finally said. “Apparently she’s going to be observing everyone and reporting what she finds back to the Ministry.”

Minerva’s pinched frown grew thinner and thinner as Willow spoke.

“Severus is off ambushing Pomona and Filius to tell them about it, too,” Willow continued. “He said you were all worried that she was going to try firing a bunch of you, so we wanted give everybody a heads up.”

Minerva was quiet for a long moment, before finally saying, “You’re sitting in my seat at dinner this evening.”

At Willow’s quizzical expression in response to the non sequitur, Minerva picked up the newspaper and offering it to Willow. “You need to read this,” she said. “And I think you’ve more than earned a bit of a break.”

Willow took the paper and opened her mouth to argue that it was okay, she could deal with Frog Face, but the words “Are you sure?” came out of her mouth instead. “She’s pretty awful at mealtimes,” she felt obligated to add.

“I think I can survive her for one evening,” Minerva said dryly.

Willow felt a little guilty for not mustering up more of a protest, but if Minerva was set on throwing herself under the bus, Willow wasn’t so much of a martyr as to turn her down. “Thanks,” she mumbled, looking down at the newspaper in her hands.

A black and white photograph of Frog Face stared up at her, beady eyes sharp over a prim, little smile that only seemed to widen the longer Willow stared at it. The headline read ‘Ministry Seeks Educational Reform: Dolores Umbridge Appointed First Ever High Inquisitor.’

Willow looked back up at Minerva, expression dark. “Inquisitor?” she asked, because wow, was that job title full up to the teeth with unfortunate implications.

“Read that tonight, and I’ll show you how to subscribe to The Daily Prophet after dinner,” Minerva said sourly. “I think we’ll all want to keep abreast of this story.”

Willow grimaced. She suspected Minerva was right.
Severus piled his various discoveries on one of the Slytherin Common Room’s low, marble-topped end tables. The students were still at breakfast. The few he had encountered upon entering the Slytherin dormitories had been ordered to take themselves elsewhere. No doubt they were upstairs, spreading the word that their Head of House was performing one of his unannounced inspections.

Minerva had criticized this practice several times as a heavy-handed invasion of his students’ privacy, but Severus’ experiences, as both a student in Slytherin and its Head of House, had convinced him of its necessity. Besides, he was fully convinced that the school would see a substantial drop in generalized chaos if Gryffindor Tower was given a little more oversight and a little less privacy.

Considering the stack of contraband he had assembled, this visit was long overdue. The mostly harmless items, some bearing the Zonko’s label, a few adorned with a large W logo he did not immediately recognize, were of minor concern. Dungbombs and Fanged Frisbees were strictly forbidden, but beyond antagonizing Argus to distraction, they were of minimal concern. However, there were a few items that required some explanation on the parts of their owners: unlicensed medical potions, unsanctioned books from the restricted section of the library, and personal items that had been augmented with any number of Dark spells.

Theodore Nott had apparently brewed quite the little cache of potions in his spare time. Each one was a standard potion assigned to first and second year students, and each was bottled in a familiar style of vial with an equally familiar label, ready to receive student names. Severus had noted that a few of his more hopeless cases had suddenly started to produce suspiciously competent potions. He supposed he had Nott to thank for that. He would have to talk to the boy, and take measures to curb this little enterprise, but the matter would require some finesse. Theodore’s father was a Death Eater, and Severus was under not-so-subtle instructions to favor the children of the Dark Lord’s inner circle above all others.

The questionably outdated book on human anatomy and… other topics… in one of the girls’ rooms would also need to be handled delicately. Fortunately, Poppy tended to undertake that particular type of instruction, thank Merlin.

And then, of course, there was the box of expensive chocolates Severus had retrieved from Draco’s trunk.

Knowing perfectly well that the dormitories were quite empty, Severus turned his back on the pile of contraband and looked out through the Common Room’s long windows at their view of the lakebed. He had always found the shifting green light, both from the room’s flickering sconces and filtered through the water above, soothing. As a student, the view had served as a near-constant reminder that Hogwarts was just about as far from Spinner’s End as a wizard could reasonably get.

Severus watched a small school of silvery, long-tailed fish weave in and out of the water weeds that lined the windows. Apparently Albus has put Professor Rosenberg into quarters with a similar view, somewhere around the curve of the school’s foundation, well out of sight. Severus found himself wondering what she thought of it.

The sound of muffled footsteps and chatter heralded his students’ return. Severus turned to face the door, crossing his arms and smoothing away any emotion from his face.

His students filed slowly into the Common Room. None of them appeared surprised to see him.
looming there. Some were nervous, some preemptively belligerent, and some even smug and anticipatory, but none were surprised.

“If there are items on this table,” Severus pointedly glance down at the pile of contraband, and then looked back at the crowd of silent students, “That you feel have been confiscated in error, you have two days in which to convince me of my… mistake.” He lingered over the final word, letting his flat gaze fall on the owners of the most egregious of the illicit items.

None of them rose to his bait. Severus arched a single brow and waited a moment longer. When the silence had the chance to become slightly uncomfortable, he drew his wand and made the items disappear from the table.

“I believe you have classes to attend,” he said, tucking his wand into his sleeve again. “Including my own.”

In truth, he would most likely end up returning over half of these items, short several dark enchantments of course. He knew this, the students knew this, but that was not, in the end, the point. His students simply needed a reminder that someone was watching. Perhaps they would think twice about bringing further contraband into the Slytherin dormitories, perhaps they would take better care in concealing their activities in the future. Either eventuality would mean that an important lesson had been learned.

Amidst the new flurry of activity and muffled whispering, Severus quit the room.

Umbridge’s visit to Severus’ fifth year potions class had proceeded exactly as he had expected. Mainly in that she had been tedious, disruptive, and infuriating by turns. Even so, he was not particularly concerned about the report she was no doubt penning for Fudge. If Umbridge had been expecting seditious flourishes in his classroom, Severus had given her very little catalyst for that particular potion.

She had posed a few questions of possible import, amongst the requests for his credentials and grating insinuations about his previous requests to move from Potions to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“Have the other Heads of House or the Headmaster requested unusual potions from you recently?”

That he had answered with a casual, blatant lie. He suspected, from the sharpness of Umbridge’s tone, that someone must have used the magic repelling ointment he had concocted with Professor Rosenberg. He would ask Minerva if Potter had been called to detention again, as soon as a reasonably discreet moment presented itself.

“What is your opinion of Professor Rosenberg?”

An interesting question, and one that he felt it necessary to answer truthfully. He maintained a small quantity of the truth serum, but its use was strictly regulated by the Ministry. No doubt Umbridge would be able to procure such documents, if she decided to start interrogating the students and faculty in earnest. Fortunately, Severus also maintained a rather sizable stockpile of the antidote, but he kept that minor fact to himself.

“What is your opinion of Professor Rosenberg?”

Severus had suggested that she must be the best the Council of Watchers had to offer while simultaneously insinuating that their best was not actually very good at all. He had noticed that a
few of his students, particularly the Gryffindors who were also enrolled in the class with Professor Rosenberg, had appeared indignant at his answers to this line of questioning. Thankfully, none of them actually voiced their protests of his slander, a rare, unexpected outbreak of discretion on their part.

Eventually, Umbridge had taken her clipboard and her assorted sniffs and throat clearing interruptions and had left him to continue his classes in comparative peace. No doubt, she was simply off to find her next scheduled target.

No, Severus was not particularly concerned about his own performance during the afternoon’s questioning. He was sure he had gleaned more from Umbridge’s visit than she had from his careful misdirection.

He was far more concerned with the increasingly complex web of lies, half-truths, and carefully selected moments of brief honesty he was spinning. If he dropped even one thread, everything else might unravel, pulling all his plots and plans and deceptions out of his hands. That could not be borne.

A series of knocks on his office door drew Severus out of his troubling ruminations. His morning visitation to the Slytherin dorms had, as expected, resulted in a slow, but steady, trickle of students through his office, each armed with the most persuasive litany of excuses they had been able to muster over the last few hours.

At least none of them had attempted tears as of yet. He simply could not abide poorly executed, fake tears.

“Enter,” he said, pitched precisely to carry through wood and ward. He wondered, vaguely, who this next visitor would be and what story they had concocted.

It was Draco.

Of course it was.

Severus sat back in his chair and watched the boy close the door.

Draco lacked Severus’ own skill in concealing the barest hint of emotion, but decorum could cover many sins, and in that, the Malfoy heir had been well trained. Had he known the boy less well, Severus might not have noticed the hesitance in Draco’s mannerisms.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Severus said, expression intentionally mild as he gestured towards one of the chairs in front of his desk. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

The tips of Draco’s ears had turned ever so slightly pink. Even so, he took the proffered seat with a reasonable facsimile of ease.

“I believe that you confiscated a box of chocolates from my dormitory,” Draco said, his usual lazy drawl blunted a bit with deference.

Severus looked at him blandly. “You would be correct,” he said, letting the conversation play itself out, curious to see what excuses the boy would make.

“They were a gift from my father,” Draco said. His hands were clasped, politely in his lap, but the boy’s exceedingly pale complexion betrayed him once again. His fingers were reddening under the pressure of nervously clenched fingers.
Severus had expected something more elaborate, had the boy been left to his own devices when concocting an excuse. Which was, in and of itself, a message.

As was Draco’s thinly buried fear.

Lucius would not have evoked this reaction. Whatever else Severus thought of the man, Lucius loved his son, and the feeling was fully returned. There was only one person who was in a position to both order and terrify the younger Malfoy. The Dark Lord must be taking a very direct hand in this conspiracy.

Severus deeply buried a sharp pang of regret and rose from his chair. The items he had confiscated from his students were arranged on a single shelf behind his desk. He retrieved the ornate confectioner’s box and, without a word, placed it on the desk in front of Draco.

The boy looked surprised. Perhaps he had been preparing for a confrontation.

Severus slid back into his chair. “You may want to make use of the incinerator in the Potions classroom,” he said. When Draco opened his mouth, to object or to express feigned confusion, Severus continued dryly. “I believe you will find the flavor has been somewhat compromised by the combined compulsion and neutralization potions.” Draco closed his mouth with an abrupt click of teeth. “And the Headmaster is currently investigating a very similar chocolate, which recently made its way into Professor Rosenberg’s supper.”

Draco’s complexion had taken on a sickly, gray appearance. “Professor…” he started to say, but his voice cracked and died abruptly when Severus raised a single eyebrow.

“To whom did you think she would go for aid, when she first felt the pull of compulsion?” which was not entirely accurate, if he properly understood how Professor Rosenberg had rid herself of the potion’s effects, but adequately conveyed the point Severus wished to impress upon the boy. Flawed as Draco’s execution had been, it had still been too close for Severus’ liking. Far too close.

“I hope you know,” Severus said, studiously ignoring the acids that were starting to churn in his stomach, “That my door is always open to students of my House who find themselves in need of aid or counsel.”

Merlin, he meant it too. He knew his duty, but a deeply buried part of him wished that for once, Draco would see to the heart of what Severus meant and not what he said. It was irrational, he could not truly fault the boy for failing to see through a deception that had fooled the most powerful Dark wizards of their time, but these deceptions in particular sat uncomfortably on Severus’ scarred conscience. Perhaps his students were not innocent, but they were trapped in a web of their parents making, not their own. And all Severus could do was work to bind them tighter, playing the role of the perfect spider.

Draco opened his mouth, and, apparently thinking better of whatever he had been planning to say, shut it again and nodded his head jerkily. He was still pale, and his eyes were starting to look more than a little wild, like a cornered animal. Severus waited a moment, in case the boy decided to speak, but as the silence lengthened, he could only assume that the boy was under orders not to discuss this mission with anyone.

Severus refrained from employing Legilimency; he had no stomach for pressing Draco further. In the end, the chocolates were harmless now that Severus had doused them in a counter-potion. He and Albus knew with absolute certainty which student they needed to keep under careful watch in the near future.
Severus reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a small bronze key. He slid it across the desk to a now bewildered Draco. “In the event you have need of my incinerator,” Severus said by way of an explanation. “I expect it to be returned by breakfast.”

Draco looked a little surprised and more than a little distrustful, but he took the key quickly, not needing to be told twice. He nodded his head, stumbled unthinkingly through the pleasantries of excusing himself, and rose to leave Severus’ office.

Severus stood as well. “And Draco,” he said, voice flat and controlled. When the boy turned to look over his shoulder, expression somewhat more composed, Severus continued. “Do try to not be caught. Explanations might prove awkward, especially because this conversation never happened.”

~*~*~*~

Snip.

Snip.

Snip.

Greenhouse five was only used by advanced N.E.W.T. level students, and while they could sometimes be found working on assignments and research projects at this late hour, the miserable weather had persuaded most everyone to stay within the warm, dry comforts of the castle.

Most everyone that is, except of course for Severus.

Snip.

Snip.

Snip.

Severus set down his shears for a moment and rotated the potted devil’s backbone to better access the next section of thick leaves, lined with rows of tiny plantlets. Trimming them all was time-consuming, delicate work, and he could already start to feel the first trickles of sweat tracking down his back. A warming charm held Greenhouse five at a constant 40 degrees Celsius, which was perfect for the tropical plants grown here, but less ideal for Death Eaters who preferred to keep their Dark Marks hidden under concealing layers on fabric.

A personal cooling charm might have taken care of the discomfort, but mixing temperature-controlling spells was risky, and Pomona’s spells, much like Pomona herself, tended to come down on the side of the plants,’ rather than the witch or wizard’s, comfort.

Severus picked up his shears again, and reached for the next leaf to be trimmed with his other hand.

Snip.

The dull roll of thunder and the whistling of wind between the greenhouses became momentarily louder against the constant drum of raindrops against the glass-paned roof. Severus looked briefly over his shoulder to see who was about to disturb his work and found Pomona pushing a cart loaded with large, bulging baskets, through the greenhouse door. She let the door slam closed behind her and removed her hat, which had been thoroughly drenched in the storm. After hanging the patched scrap of felted wool on the handle of the cart, she ran her hands across her eyes and cheeks to clear away some of the rainwater, and then noticed Severus watching her.

“Miserable weather,” Pomona said with a cheerful smile that belied her words. She ran her hands
through her hair, trying to shake out some of the water with very little success. “I thought I might see you this evening.” She glanced meaningfully towards the section of counter space Severus was occupying, then back at him expectantly.

Severus gave her a slight nod. “The weather was fortuitous,” he said, neutrally, unsure how else to respond to this obvious attempt at small talk. Pomona knew as well as he that devil’s backbone plantlets were only rarely used in potions, but the reagent was most potent if harvested during thunderstorms. In truth, he distinctly remembered her teaching him about the plant in his sixth year as a student.

“For you perhaps,” Pomona said, but again, her cheerful demeanor took away any sting from her words. “It’s forcing me to get these beauties inside before I originally intended. Can’t have our feast decorations ruined by a little hail.” And then, with a soft huff of effort, she pushed her cart again into motion.

Severus made a disinterested noise of vague acknowledgement. Pomona moved down the neighboring row of long tables, close enough for Severus to see the vividly orange pumpkins filling the large baskets. He supposed the Hallowe’en festivities were only a scant few days away. If she cleaved to old habits, Pomona would have her Hufflepuffs carving pumpkins in their common room, an excuse many of them seized upon to avoid completing their homework.

It was the least of the reasons why Severus hated this particular holiday.

Feeling certain he had met the minimum necessary requirements of polite discourse, Severus turned back to his work.

*Snip.*

*Snip.*

*Snip.*

Unfortunately, Pomona apparently was not quite done with him.

“The first Quidditch game of the season is soon,” she said, stopping at a set of warded, stasis shelves she used to preserve harvested fruits and vegetables she wished to remain unmolested by the student body. “Slytherin versus Gryffindor is always an exciting game.”

Severus made another noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. He had never been especially fond of the sport, and his own House’s Quidditch record had slipped in recent years. Added to which, Minerva was generally insufferable whenever Gryffindor was winning, which they had been, ever since Potter had proven himself some kind of flying prodigy. And so, much to Severus’ irritation, he found himself attending every Slytherin game as a showing of support for his House, every Gryffindor game to keep an eye on Potter and his penchant for airborne mayhem, and every Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff game to make his observation of Potter less immediately obvious. It required a certain pretense of personal investment that Severus found tedious.

Honestly, he had been a little disappointed that Umbridge had reformed the Quidditch teams so quickly after abruptly disbanding them. He did wish that he better understood the woman’s motivations though. It seemed like such a petty exercise of the new powers the Ministry was granting her over Hogwarts’ students and faculty. To the best of his knowledge, every club or team that had been affected by Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four had been reinstated.

It was something else to investigate, in his copious free time.
Pomona continued unloading her pumpkins onto the long shelves, arranging them in staggered lines, three rows deep. The baskets, large as they were, must also have had extension charms on them, considering the improbable number of pumpkins they had already disgorged. She made a thoughtful humming sound, and then said, “I don’t suppose you’ve invited Professor Rosenberg to watch the match?”

Skkkrtrtt.

Severus carefully set down the shears and stared at the damaged plant for a long moment. He pointedly did not look at Pomona, not trusting his own temper in that moment. That she had intruded upon his evening could be borne. This was, after all, her domain and he was here only on her continued sufferance. This insistence on meddling in his personal affairs was another matter entirely.

After what was, he realized, an overlong silence, Severus discretely slipped the severed leaf into a pocket for later disposal and responded flatly, “I am sure she is aware that as a member of the faculty, she is welcome to attend all school events.”

Pomona snorted. “You never were an unintelligent boy, Severus,” she said, puffing slightly with the effort of moving a particularly large pumpkin onto the shelf. “Don’t pretend to be one now.”

Severus just stared at her.

The Dark Lord has risen. He was amassing his power, increasing his influence with every passing day. Severus could see the signs of his touch everywhere. Professor Rosenberg’s poisoning at Draco Malfoy’s hands was only the tip of the dragon’s tail. Fudge was a stuffed robe, but someone was stoking his growing paranoia. The campaign to discredit Albus, the placement of one Dolores Umbridge in Hogwarts, the fixation on Sirius Black as a scapegoat for the increasing number of disappearances and attacks.

War was coming.

And Severus’ fellow Heads of House apparently had nothing better to do with their spare time than to pry into his personal affairs.

Personal affairs, which he dared not let be made public, lest those few people he truly cared for be placed in even more danger than they already found themselves.

Not trusting his rapidly fraying temper, nor the simmering fear underlying it, Severus turned back to the long work bench. His shears and other pruning tools disappeared into various pockets. He then shoved the half-harvested plant back between its untouched compatriots.

Opportune weather be damned, Severus picked up his quarter-filled jar and turned on his heel to leave the greenhouse.

“Severus?” Pomona called after him, voice concerned, but Severus ignored her and stalked out into the driving rain.

Severus pulled his wand from his sleeve, and with a circular, overhead sweep, cast a quick barrier against the weather. He was therefore only slightly bedraggled when he reached the door of his Potions storeroom and found Albus waiting there.
The Headmaster eyed the jar in Severus’ hands and nodded towards the door. “Do continue,” he said, and stepped aside.

Severus might have snarled at the interruption, except for the deep worry lines creasing the Albus’ brow. He didn’t need Legilimency to know that one or another of the Headmaster’s plans had gone awry, perhaps fatally so. It took Severus only a scant few moments to let himself into the storeroom, slot the mostly empty jar back into its place on a shelf, and return to the hallway. He made a small gesture in the direction of his better-warded office, assuming that whatever Albus wanted to discuss, it was best not to be overheard.

Albus just shook his head at the silent offer. “I have a few documents in my office I need you to review,” he said evenly.

Severus just nodded and fell in step with Albus.

The walk was interminable, but at least Albus knew Severus well enough to not keep him in suspense for long once they were safely within the Headmaster’s office. “Emmeline Vance has failed to send me her last two reports,” Albus said.

That gave Severus pause. Mrs. Vance was one of the Order’s highest-placed members within the Ministry. “She has gone missing?”

“Perhaps,” Albus said, picking up a stack of papers from his desk. “I had Arthur check on her yesterday.” He handed Severus the first few pages from the sheaf in his hands.

Severus looked down at the folded papers, scowling faintly. Arthur’s report was long and rather rambling. His paid sabbatical from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office had only been approved contingent on twice monthly meetings with agents of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to report on his observations of the vampire slayers. Arthur’s most recent visit had provided him with the opportunity to stop by Mrs. Vance’s office for afternoon tea. The person he had met looked like Mrs. Vance in the smallest of detail, but she was awkward and distant, and when Arthur had dropped a few coded signals that he was visiting her on Order business, Mrs. Vance had not responded with the correct phrases.

“Polyjuice or Imperio?” Severus asked, starting to read the letter a second time, looking for any minute detail or shade of meaning he might have missed in the first pass.

“Arthur lacked the means to determine that on such short notice.” Albus extended the other envelopes to Severus, who took them distractedly, still reading. “Normally, I would ask Wilhelmina to start slipping counter-potions into Emmeline’s tea, but she is still in Devon.”

Encouraging Albus’ network of Squibs to approach the Council for wandless magic training still struck Severus as a good long-term plan, but it had robbed the Order of its eyes and ears across a frankly astounding cross section of the magical and Muggle worlds. Wilhelmina Wallace had worked as a janitor in the Ministry’s offices before she had presented herself at the Council of Watchers’ headquarters for wandless magic testing.

Severus handed the letter back to Albus, and asked, “Do we know the identities of any others?” And there would be others, either controlled or replaced in key positions throughout the Ministry.

At that, Albus handed over the rest of the papers. “Elphias has been tracking legislation and cases within the Wizengamot for me,” he said.

Severus looked at the sheaf of papers. Sure enough, they contained pages and pages detailing how
members of the Wizengamot voted on numerous cases. He scowled, not immediately seeing a pattern amidst the rows and rows of yea and nay votes, other than the fact that the record started in mid-July, shortly after Albus had attempted to alert the Ministry to the Dark Lord’s return and had subsequently been removed from the Wizengamot by Fudge.

“I count at least ten members who have suddenly changed their stances on several issues related to Muggle protections and blood status,” Albus said.

Ten did not initially sound like a large number, but it would be more than enough to tip the scales against the more progressive members of the Wizengamot.

“I will make a few discreet queries,” Severus said, continuing to flip through the pages and pages of votes, a cold, hard sensation spreading through his chest. There was true danger here, hidden in the lines of banal text. The Dark Lord’s initial rise to power had started in much the same fashion. Many of the Dark Lord’s followers were scattered or imprisoned and his public support was lessened by years of absence, but once the Ministry was thoroughly infiltrated, that would all change. Then the disappearances would start, the public attacks on wizards and Muggles alike, the torture and the murders and the other atrocities.

Severus closed his eyes, but it did little to blot out his darkening thoughts.

It was all starting again, and he would be expected to play his part. It had been years since he had been called upon to question a prisoner for information or simply the Dark Lord’s entertainment, but Severus supposed that you never really forgot how to do it.

It was all starting again, and history was going to repeat itself, and Severus would be asked to torture allies and innocents, and Lily was dead, and Willow would die, and Minerva, and Albus, and everyone else in the Order, and every last one of his students, and Lily’s boy, and why did he expect anything else, when everything he touched turned to blood and ashes?

Severus’ eyes snapped open when a hand came to rest on his shoulder.

He looked down at it, mostly to avoid meeting Albus’ gaze.

The wizened fingers squeezed his shoulder, deceptively strong despite all appearances of advanced age.

“Not this time,” Albus said, his voice quiet, but firm.

Severus reached up to shove Albus’ hand away, rejecting the promise and the comfort it was meant to represent, but he stopped, his own hand hovering above Albus’ in indecision.

*Not this time.*

It was the barest acknowledgement that yes, Albus had made a similar promise before, and yes, he had failed. As Severus had failed. But it would not happen again.

He did remove Albus’ hand from his shoulder then, but the gesture held only his usual distaste for physical contact. He took a ragged breath and met Albus’ eyes.

“Not this time,” Severus repeated.

It was well after midnight when Severus returned to the school’s dungeons, exhausted beyond all
endurance. He had stayed in Albus’ office, poring over the Wizengamot’s voting records himself and writing a few letters to attempt to gather information on the Death Eaters’ growing network in the Ministry.

His first letter was on its way to Lucius, complimenting the man on his political acumen, which seemed to be bringing key members of the Ministry into line. Between the polite flattery and innocuous comments on Draco’s progress at school, Severus had asked whether whoever was behind the Educational Decrees might be receptive to abolishing the Muggle Studies course at Hogwarts. He had lamented that even though the course was essentially useless, he feared that such a significant change to the curriculum would not find broad enough support.

Severus needed names, and a list of anyone who might be open to purging Muggle Studies from the Hogwarts curriculum would be a good place to start. Especially if any of those names belonged to politicians who had previously been known for their tolerance towards Muggles and Muggle-borns. If this suggestion actually ended up bearing inadvertent fruit, Albus had stated he would help Charity land on her feet. She was, in all fairness, a better Muggle Studies instructor than Hogwarts had employed in some time.

He had penned a second letter to Demetria Mulciber. While not a Death Eater herself, she certainly held similar political views and knew Severus only as her imprisoned husband’s childhood acquaintance and the current Head of Slytherin House. She lived relatively quietly in Wiltshire, supported by her family’s fortune, and yet somehow always seemed to have an unusually detailed knowledge of the gossip in and around the Ministry. Severus wrote to her about an unnamed Hogwarts student who was interested in pursuing a political career, a cover story that had the added benefit of being completely true. He had asked Mrs. Mulciber if she knew of any Wizengamot assistantships that might be conveniently coming available some time in the next few months for a soon-to-be graduated Slytherin student with impeccable breeding and marginal grades.

Whether Severus actually shared any of the ensuing information with Cassius Warrington was another matter. The Ministry would soon be a very dangerous place to be employed, no matter a witch or wizard’s allegiances in the coming conflict, and he was loathe to put any student into harm’s way when it could be avoided. Besides, he suspected that Warrington’s parents would take offense at any perceived career aid their son might receive from a half-blood. In truth, Severus just wanted to know who might be getting sacked over the next few months by, for example, a supervisor with an abruptly changed attitude about the relative value of blood status and work ethic.

He would send more letters over the next few days, but he had to be meticulously careful about selecting recipients and crafting questions that would garner the information he needed while also seeming to act within what was expected of him.

The storm was still raging outside, thunder loud enough to still be heard even this far underground. When Severus finally reached his quarters and stepped through his door, the sudden silence was almost a physical relief. He suspected that the similar sound dampening charms throughout the castle would be the only reason anyone slept this evening.

The sconces in his sitting room lit as Severus passed. He had started to shed his over robe when he spotted a large jar sitting on his worktable. He had not left it there himself, but the House Elves would occasionally deliver personal packages. Severus could not remember ordering any reagents that were due to be delivered today, but he was also tired and distracted enough that he might be forgetting such a trivial detail. He dropped the robe across the back of his couch and walked over to see what was in the jar.
It was full of devil’s backbone plantlets.

Severus picked up the jar and eyed it, unsure what to make of it. Pomona must have completed the task for him. Knowing her, this was a small gesture of apology.

Perhaps not so small, the contents of the jar represented a few hours worth of delicate work.

Severus replaced the jar on the table and told himself that he would deal with it in the morning. He knew, even as he thought it, that he was lying to himself. After his no doubt inadequate period of rest, the day’s crises would still be awaiting him in the morning. No doubt there would also be a few new ones to add to his list. Pomona’s interference and subsequent conciliatory gesture made Severus feel… something. He was simply too inundated with more pressing concerns to sort out exactly what.
“I’m not going to make your door zap students,” Willow said with forced patience, pretending that she didn’t notice the responding look of disappointment on Argus’ face.

Not that she could entirely blame the curmudgeonly old caretaker. If students were constantly breaking into her office and stealing her stuff, she’d be pretty cranky too.

Argus had hung around after her latest wandless lesson, hovering awkwardly until all of the students had left. When he had asked if he could speak to Willow about a private matter, Severus too had exited the room, but not until after a shared glower between the two men that had gone on just long enough for Willow to know that something important was being communicated, but not long enough for her to figure out what it was.

Weird.

Whatever, at least his ensuing request hadn’t been too outrageous. Helping to foil adolescent breaking and entering was just about normal for any given Tuesday back at the Council’s Academies.

It was an interesting puzzle though. She needed a simple spell, one a barely trained wandless wizard like Argus could easily cast, but also one that would resist slightly more advanced attempts to dispel it.

Willow crossed her arms and tilted her head to one side, squinting speculatively at Argus’ office door. She could just make out the faint threads of a locking spell, woven around the keyhole. It was probably another cheaply enchanted piece of mass produced junk, something marketed to Squibs and functionally the next best thing to worthless. Gross.

“Can I see your key?” she asked, the outlines of a plan coming together in her mind. It’d be twisty and sideways, but she figured it had at least half of a chance of working until Argus was a little better trained and able to take on more complicated spells himself.

Argus, who had been hovering behind Willow, clutching Mrs. Norris to his chest, awkwardly shifted the cat to one arm and dug around in one of his overcoat’s deep pockets. He produced a large ring of keys and flicked to a simple iron one. He handed it to her and grumbled, “Locking spell on it doesn’t work anyhow.”

Willow took the ring and slotted the correct key into the lock. The wispy threads of magic encircling it wove together with those already surrounding the lock, releasing the weak spell. She bent down and touched the tip of her index finger to the key and sent a pulse of energy into the construct. The spell itself was still pretty pathetic, but her addition would make it just a little easier to sense and a little harder to dispel. Diversion set, she straightened and handed the key back to Argus.

He took it with a badly concealed glower of disappointment. Willow couldn’t help but respond with a small smile. He had obviously hoped to get to cast something himself. “Don’t worry, that’s just a distraction,” she said, and pointed at the approximate center of the heavy, wooden door. “Put your hand here.”

When Argus shuffled forward and did what she asked with a dubious, if hopeful, expression on his face, Willow hovered her own hand over his, just like she did in her regular wandless lessons.
“We’re going to cast an enlarging spell on the door. Ready?” When Argus nodded, she said, “Excresco,” and let a trickle of energy flow through her hand.

Argus’ eyebrows shot up and he turned to stare at the door with slightly open-mouthed awe. When the heavy wood creaked, pushing against its stone frame, Willow ended the spell.

“That should be pretty jammed. See if you can open it,” she told Argus.

He gently placed Mrs. Norris on the floor and tried the lock. Willow could hear the bolt click open, but the door wouldn’t budge, even when Argus threw a rough shoulder against it. He turned back to look at Willow, grinning in his rictus, disturbing kind of way. Even so, his enthusiasm was weirdly infectious, and Willow ended up smiling back. “Here, put your hand back up and I’ll show you how to reverse the spell too,” she said.

They practiced the spell a few more times, until Argus was able to manage a stuttering version of it on his own. Since they were both headed to dinner soon, Willow suggested he grab a practice log from the Great Hall’s huge fireplace. The constant swelling and shrinking of the door was already going to put enough wear on the wood without him accidentally overdoing it and splitting the ancient timbers.

Argus agreed with an awkward bob that might have been meant to be a bow. He then bent to awkwardly scoop up Mrs. Norris, who was edging closer to Willow with the obvious intention of rubbing against her legs. The dusty gray cat was even purring, and the raspy rattle of it sounded as out of practice as her master’s similar expressions.

Willow stood in the abandoned hallway, watching the caretaker and his familiar retreat in the direction of the Great Hall. Come to think of it, wasn’t it kind of weird that no one had ever noticed that even though Argus couldn’t use a wand, he still had a familiar?

Did wand witches and wizards even have familiars?

She bet Minerva would know.

Anyway, Willow supposed she’d have to follow him, even if it meant she’d spend the meal dodging Umbridge’s hateful jibes and moping over the floating jack-o-lanterns that Pomona and Filius had started putting up in the Great Hall, ahead of the Halloween feast on Saturday. While festive pieces of nifty spellwork, they only served to remind Willow that she would be missing out on the holiday back home.

At least Severus would be there too, even if he had been inexplicably grumpier than usual the last few days. They could just be cranky and morose together.

~*~*~*~

The owl, being an owl, didn’t even make a rustle of wings in warning before it dropped the large package in front of Willow. The wrapped bundle hit the staff table with enough force to make the dishes rattle. Willow managed to suppress a startled squeak, but her involuntary clench of fingers did loudly crumple up the edges of her copy of The Daily Prophet.

Willow lowered the newspaper and scowled up at the retreating owl. She hadn’t been expecting anything. Most packages seem to be delivered around lunchtime, not during dinner, and it wasn’t like she had been getting much mail lately anyway.

That was something else she had Frog Face to thank for.
What with the pink-clad hag continuing to try to intercept Willow’s letters and hack her wards, and Dumbledore’s vague comments about false messages he had sent out under her name, Willow had taken to writing more in her Diary and less on stationary. That had actually been Giles’ suggestion, in the letter Severus had carried back from his trip to London. When her Sourcebook wasn’t working on copying a new volume on dark magic, it was updating her entries for Giles and Buffy to read. They responded, using similar tomes back in the Council’s holdings. It was more secure with regards to Umbridge, but it kind of put a damper on their communications, knowing that anyone else in the Council with access to a Template could read their correspondence. Plus, Willow sometimes felt a little squidgey using such a powerful magical artifact like witchy e-mail. Taken all together, her post deliveries had dwindled away into little more than increasingly disturbing newspapers.

The bird swooped up near the ceiling, where a swarm of floating jack-o-lanterns currently decorated the ceiling of the Great Hall. As Willow watched, the bird landed on one of the pumpkins and then turned its head around to stare back at her. She hadn’t used to think that owls were creepy, but between their judge-y eyes and Linda Blair necks, she was starting to have a few not-so-charitable thoughts about the whole order of birds.

Feeling both Severus’ and Umbridge’s eyes on her, Willow took a moment to smooth out the pages of The Daily Prophet and fold it back into something resembling order. Right now, she needed to focus on her mysterious delivery instead of wallowing in her feelings of isolation. Severus, she would most likely bring up to speed on whatever this was later. Frog Face could just stew in it.

Newspaper coolly deposited next to her plate, Willow tried her best to continue appearing nonchalant and turned her attention to her unexpected delivery. The package was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied up with heavy twine. She could feel a tingle of a defensive spell on the paper in particular. There was also an envelope tucked under the string. Willow reached for it first, sensing only the barest glimmer of what was most likely an encryption spell. It was addressed to her, obviously, and the return address was the Council of Watchers headquarters. Interest piqued, Willow ran a finger under the envelope’s flap and opened it.

The note inside was printed on heavy, white cardstock. The letters were a jumbled mess until Willow’s curious fingers grazed them, at which point they swirled into legible text.

*This message will self-destruct.* ~Andrew

Andrew? That was weird. Last she’d heard, he had been trying to wheedle his way into one of the laboratory manager’s positions. What did he want?

Knowing Andrew, the self-destruct thing wasn’t him trying to be cute. Or it wasn’t only him trying to be cute. He might be most skilled at summoning, but he had also gotten pretty good at other branches of magic since joining the Council. Willow scotched back her chair and picked up the package. At Severus’ ever so slightly raised eyebrow, she shrugged a single shoulder, which hopefully wasn’t too noticeable to anyone else. Then she scooped up her newspaper and the mystery package, shouldered the strap of her satchel, and exiting the hall through the side door of the dais.

Once she was out of sight of her co-workers and students, Willow picked up her pace. She was at the stairs to the basement when the first tingle of heat and magic started crawling over the package. Clamping down on the spell, she started to trot in the direction of her rooms. Reaching her destination at a dead run, she blurted out her password to Euryale, shouldered the door open and dropped to her knees on the stone floor as the portrait swung closed behind her.

She tore at the paper, muttering violent imprecations at Andrew. Anyone else in the Council,
anyone else, Willow would have expected to encrypt or ensorcell the contents of this package, but Andrew did love his theatrics. Willow had slowed down the self destruct spell, but at this point it was faster to just strip it off of the wrapping paper and drop it, momentarily, on the stone floor rather than completely unmake the enchantment. After double checking that the stack of books and papers wasn’t also going to go up in smoke, Willow levitated up the smoldering paper and, containing any bits of falling ash with an encapsulation spell, walked it over to the trash bin in her small office. She let the stupid thing burn up there, and stomped back over to Andrew’s not-so-little care package, hoping that whatever it was ended up being worth all of the trouble.

Willow picked up the stack and tipped it on its side to inspect the spines of the books. “What the literal bat poo?” she muttered to herself as she walked to her living area. The topmost book was battered and the spine had been taped back together more than once, but Willow could still read the title: Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Monstrous Manual.

She dropped the books and papers on the coffee table and tried to squelch her annoyance. Andrew could be… well… Andrew, but she seriously doubted that even he would send her a flammable suggestion to expand her social circle using his favorite role playing game.

Surely not.

Probably.

Willow sighed and picked up a longer letter, which sat atop the stack. She sat down on her couch to read it.

Willow,

I know what you’re going to think, but I’ve been talking to the Order guys here in London, and I’ve been reading the books you’ve been copying, and I think I have some information that might help you.

VOLDEMORT IS A LICH!!

Or maybe a demilich. Mr. Giles and half of the watchers in the Archives think I’m nuts, but just read through this stuff. I really think I’m onto something here.

Andrew

P.S. Don’t worry about sending the monster manual back any time soon. It’s 2nd edition, and I’m using 5th now.

Well that was… something else.

Trying to take the letter at face value, Willow didn’t think she’d ever heard of a lich before, but the word did sound vaguely familiar. She set aside Andrew’s note and picked up the next few papers in the stack. They were copies of a Wikipedia page, of all things.

Apparently a lich was a kind of undead magic user. The article covered examples of famous liches in fiction, from books to games to TV shows. Nothing mentioned real world liches, but then again, Wikipedia wasn’t exactly the best source of knowledge for the occult. Willow kept reading. Liches were pretty common in sword and sorcery type fantasy stories. They had been mortal, but had used dark magic to extend their lives. They stored their souls in phylacteries, which made them particularly hard to kill. They often commanded lesser undead. They almost always retained spectacular magical powers, even in undeath.
Willow paused, backed up, and reread part of the entry.

They stored their souls in phylacteries…

_Huh._

Harry had a chunk of Voldemort’s soul stuck in his forehead. Was that what had caught Andrew’s attention?

She set aside the article and picked up the D&D book. There was a post-it note between the pages, and sure enough, it marked the entry on liches. When she mostly found more of the same (undead, magic, phylacteries, blah blah blah), Willow dug into the rest of the stack, looking for a more reasonable source. She found a few short stories, a video game tie in novel called *Arthas*, and several articles photocopied from something called Dragon Magazine.

Andrew had scattered post-its and little sticky arrows highlighting text throughout the pages. Liches could only be killed if their phylactery was destroyed first. Demiliches could split their souls up between multiple phylacteries. Becoming a lich usually involved a ritual that included some kind of awful act as a catalyst, especially murdering an innocent. If a lich’s body was killed, but its phylactery wasn’t destroyed too, its soul just hung around until its body healed, or even reconstituted, if the damage was extensive enough.

It did sound promising, except for one itsy, bitsy problem. Tiny. Barely worth mentioning… All of the sources were fictional.

The closest she got to a semi-legitimate, primary source was a Watcher’s Academy thesis on Koschei the Deathless, a figure in Russian folklore that may or may not have been based on a real person who had lived (or not) for an apparently absurd amount of time around the 12th century. The text was full of ‘maybes’ and ‘hypotheticals’ and ‘perchances,’ all of which boiled down to nobody knowing if this Koschei person had been really real. Most of the slayers at the time had been called in either north Africa or southeast Asia, and most of the Council’s other attention had been pretty wrapped up with the whole Crusades thing.

According to legend though, Koschei got to be ‘the Deathless’ by sticking his soul in a needle, which he then hid in an egg, which he then hid inside whatever animal could most conveniently run, fly, or swim away. Besides conjuring up images of the worst ever set of matryoshka dolls, the process did sound vaguely lich-ish, with the addition that maybe living things, not just inanimate objects, could serve as phylacteries.

Maybe. Assuming that the Koschei folklore had any basis in fact.

That was a pretty big maybe.

Willow put the spiral bound copy of the thesis back on her coffee table and stared at it. She could see why Giles might have blown off Andrew with this lead. It was just so very… Andrew, but at the same time, plenty of other myths had real world roots. Witches and wizards were real, if not exactly like they appeared in the movies. And vampires, and werewolves, and demons, and trolls, and heck, even dragons. Maybe liches were too, and they were just so rare that even the Council didn’t have many records of them.

Willow rubbed her eyes and scrunched up her nose in a grimace. Her Template was tucked away safely in her bedroom, under lock and curse. She was going to need to do some research before she brought any of this to the attention of the Order. Surely she could find something in the Council’s
records that wasn’t from a D&D manual.

~*~*~*~

“It’s a storytelling game, and people pretend to be different characters, and there are weird dice, and… You know what, never mind. Just, I know this sounds crazy, but it sorta, kinda fits with what we know, right?” Willow knew that she was stammering a little, could feel the heat rising in her checks, but she tried to square her shoulders and keep going. “Voldemort left behind a chunk-o-soul at a dark magic murder scene, now he can’t be perma-killed. Or, at least his body can’t. That sounds lich-y to me. And yeah, my sources are complete hooey, but they’re drawing from folklore that might be only semi-hooey, and nobody else has found a better explanation.”

She knew she sounded defensive, but she was going way, way out on a limb here in front of her… whatever the heck Severus was to her. If this didn’t pan out into something useful, Willow was going to strangle Andrew.

At least Severus seemed to be taking her seriously. So far.

He was sitting at his desk, the slightly battered copy of Andrew’s *Monstrous Manual* open to the page on liches in front of him. He had already read through the entry once, and was now going through it a second time.

Willow sat down across from Severus and tried very hard not to put her face down on the surface of the desk in embarrassment. She had probably just made a total jerk of herself. Liches probably weren’t even real. They called the genre fantasy for a reason. Somebody had probably just dreamed them up, like three eyed ravens or functional bikini armor.

But what if she hadn’t, and this was the clue they needed to take Voldemort down?

But what if she had?

“Is it possible to remove a soul fragment from a phylactery without damaging the vessel?” Severus finally asked, his voice flat and guarded.

Willow cringed a little. Vessel, as in Harry. Yeah, that was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? “I don’t know,” she had to admit. “I’ve done a little soul transference magic, but only complete souls, and only involving vampires. Not sure how well that translates.”

Severus was looking at her as if she had sprouted horns.

“What?” she asked defensively.

“Witches and wizards who dabble in soul magic tend to end up either in Azkaban or in the Department of Mysteries, as specimens, not Unspeakables,” Severus finally said.

“What’s an Unspeakable?” Willow asked, and then smiled sardonically. “And if you say it can’t be spoken, I’ll do something unspeakable to your office.”

“They perform research for the Ministry,” Severus said distractedly, failing to acknowledge the joke. He flipped further into the D&D manual, glancing at other entries. “Their work is considered particularly dangerous and is therefore kept largely secret.”

“The Council historically hasn’t had the best of luck with secret government labs,” Willow said, putting both elbows on the table lacing her fingers together under her chin. Severus snorted at her comment, but did not look up from the pages of the book. His hair had fallen forward and was
partially obscuring his eyes. Willow had to suppress a momentary urge to reach over and brush it out of his face.

Severus started to say something, and looked up to catch her staring at him.

Willow jerked her eyes away, glancing down at Andrew’s stupid book. “Sorry, what?” she asked, then looked up again when the silence stretched out a little too long.

“This entry on werewolves is questionable at best,” Severus said, but while his words were inflectionless, his eyes were sharp and searching.

Willow rolled her eyes, thankful for the excuse to distract herself. “I told you, it’s a game. Totally made up. Fictional. Purest, distilled bull poop,” she said. “But it’s mostly all based on folklore, so maybe there’s a kernel of truth somewhere in there. That’s why I wanted to run this past you and Dumbledore. Where is he, anyway?”

Severus continued staring at her for a moment longer before he finally answered. “Albus only rarely tells us the details of his activities.”

She actually had gotten that impression about the Order in general and Severus’ relationship with Dumbledore in particular. The old Council had been all about compartmentalization too, keeping slayers in the dark about all sorts of stuff. “Kind of hard to make the right call in the heat of the moment if you don’t have all the facts,” she finally said, turned up note at the end making the statement more of a question.

Severus was looking at her as if she was a particularly complex puzzle. It made Willow want to squirm. “What I do not know cannot be reft from my mind,” he finally said.

Willow hadn’t really considered it in that light. The thought was just… Ugh.

“He’s really that powerful?” she asked, not even bothering to mention Voldemort by name. They both knew who she meant. “I mean, you’re shields are pretty darned good,” she finished lamely. Which was totally an understatement, his mind was always locked down tighter than the Disney vault, but again, it got her point across just fine.

And now he was giving her a withering look. He really stunk at taking compliments. “He is,” Severus said without further embellishment.

A deep sense of foreboding prickled down the back of Willow’s neck. “Should I have not…” she started to ask, but stopped, not wanting to make is sound like she didn’t trust Severus, because that wasn’t why her stomach felt like it had dropped through the floor. “I mean, is this…” she gestured at the pile of books and papers scattered on his desk, but stopped again when Severus’ expression darkened. And great, now she had offended him. “You know what I mean,” she finally snapped, exasperated at his weird touchiness.

“Rarely,” he said, voice flat, but then his dark eyes narrowed as if a sudden thought had occurred to him. “You are concerned,” he said, accusatorially.

“Um, duh?” Willow said, still scowling defensively. “I’m worried. I’m a worrier. You having to plan your life around a super-powered, murder-y, magico-supremacist poking around in your brain is worrisome, and I don’t want to put you in even more danger, especially with some stupid lead that’s probably a dead end.”

Severus looked dumbfounded. Okay, no. He looked like nothing at all. His face was scrupulously blank, but his aura was a mess.
Willow half-expected to feel the mental brush of telepathy. Occlumency. Whatever. But Severus abruptly broke eye contact and looked down at the pages of the book again. “There are methods for obscuring, even extracting, particularly sensitive memories,” he said, his voice even and emotionless again. “I employ them all before going into the Dark Lord’s presence.” He gestured at the pile of books. “Our discussions certainly merit such protections.”

That… wasn’t actually very comforting. How was she supposed to react to that? ‘Are you okay?’ ‘Do you need a hug?’ ‘Sorry about the repeated, gross violation of your brain?’

Willow thought she knew Severus well enough at this point to predict that he wouldn’t react well to anything that even hinted at pity. Besides, he didn’t need pity.

He needed vengeance.

Willow closed her eyes and took a long, centering breath in through her nose and out through her mouth, putting that unwelcome little voice back in its box in the back of her mind. Yeah, fine, maybe what Voldemort really needed was a good, old-fashioned butt-kicking, but letting herself off of her self imposed leash to dish one out probably wasn’t the best idea. That path led to all sorts of badness. Could she actually beat Voldemort in a dark magic thrown down? Maybe. Maybe not. She didn’t know. She’d never met the guy. He sounded like next order bad news. But she did know that an out-of-control, black-eyed Willow was an equal opportunity danger to herself and others.

When she opened her eyes, Severus was watching her, impassive expression at odds with the intense focus of his eyes. She winced a little to herself and looked down at the book again. “I need better search terms,” she finally said, desperately trying to distract herself with the whole reason she had come to Severus in the first place.

“Search terms,” Severus repeated flatly, his intonation not quite making the words into an actual question. Because that might be too close to admitting ignorance on a topic out loud.

“Uh, reference terms?” Willow said, because oh yeah, no Google in wand land. When that met with an equally blank stare, she tried to think back to the antiquated card catalogues the Council had still used in the Archives when she had first arrived in London. “Keywords? No? Okay look, my Template is only as good as the words I give it. I tell it to look up everything about liches, I get bupkis. I look up phylacteries, I get… well… a whole lot of unrelated stuff about sacred texts and nothing about liches. I look up soul, I get too many things to reasonably read. And yeah, I’ve been trying to whittle it down with stuff like soul plus container, soul plus fragment, that kind of thing, but I thought, we sometimes use different words for the same kind of magic. You know, teleport versus Apparate, that kind of thing? So, what do you guys call this type of magic?”

And there went her mouth again. Self-diversion now well in hand, Willow refrained from nervously chewing on the corner of her lip in the ensuing silence. Severus was scowling at her, but she thought it was because he was giving the matter serious thought and not because he had decided that she had finally run mad. Maybe. “Albus may know. I do not,” he finally admitted begrudgingly.

That wasn’t exactly surprising, but it was disappointing. Plan B then. “So, where do we start?”

“Start,” Severus again echoed in the same flat tone of voice.

Willow smiled a little, because ha. Echo. But ok, fair, she wasn’t exactly being super clear.
“Research. Where do we start researching? The library isn’t exactly following any rules of cataloguing I’ve been able to figure out, especially in the restricted section.”

Severus cast a sideways glance at the grading she had interrupted when she’d shown up way after dinner, D&D manuals in hand, but just when Willow started to get a sinking feeling of completely disproportionate disappointment at his impending rejection, he instead rose to his feet. “I am not otherwise disposed at the moment.”

That was obviously a bald-faced lie, even if it was delivered with practiced ease. He really was ridiculously good at that. Lying. Maybe that should have concerned Willow. Instead, all she could feel was relieved, because a good poker face was probably the only thing that had kept him alive so far. Well, that and a fair dollop of magical skill.

Willow pointedly did not look at the stack of half-graded student papers. “Aren’t you?” she asked, eyebrows raised in half question, half tease.

“Not with anything of any import,” Severus said drily.

She couldn’t suppress a little snort of laughter, because yeah, tenuous as Andrew’s suggestion might be, maybe grading wasn’t exactly a priority if the alternative was possibly finding the way to save the world from a maybe-undead, definitely-genocidal maniac. “Okay then, let’s get this wild goose chase on the road.”

He responded with that slight quirking of his lips that might, might constitute a smile. “Indeed.”

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